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Összefoglalás: A tanulmány célja, hogy hozzájáruljon ahhoz a tudományos diskurzushoz, ami a középszintű kormányzatok fejlesztéspolitikai közvetítő, koordináló szerepéről szól, elsősorban a rurális térségekre fókuszálva. Meg kell különböztetni a vidéki térségek helyi kormányzatainak hatalmi pozícióját az urbanus, erős hálózatokba rendeződő városi térségektől, amelyek képesek önmagukat kormányozni különböző vezetési modellek mentén. A vidéki térségek kormányzatai és szereplői aszimmetrikus hatalmi viszonyok közepette működnek és rászorulnak a „felsőbb” szintek segítségére. A tanulmány a vonatkozó szakirodalmi elemzésen túl tartalmaz empirikus elemeket is empirikus kutatások bázisán, amelyek 2018-ban országosan és 2019-2020-ban Baranya megyében folytak, azt illusztrálva, hogy a megyei önkormányzatok gyenge társadalmi, adminisztratív, politikai kapacitása akadályozza ennek a szerepnek a betöltését, és miért lenne fontos erősíteni a középszintek érdekképviselői, koordinációs szerepét (Pálné, 2019; NKFIH no. 132294). A magyar megyék a történelem során számos funkciót közvetítettek a felső és alsó szintek felé, annak függvényében, hogy a centralizált vagy decentralizált kormányzási modell vált az adott időszakban uralkodóvá. A közelmúltban a megyékhez került a regionális fejlesztési feladatok ellátása, a vidéki önkormányzatok azonban kevésbé tudtak profitálni az új szerepkörből. Annak ellenére, hogy Baranya a magyar megyék sorában az egyik legszegényebb, választott önkormányzata alkalmatlannak bizonyult a régió felzárkózásának elősegítésére. A tanulmány inkább elméleti megközelítésre vállalkozik, mint közpolitikai elemzésre, de a következtetések fejezetben megfogalmaz bizonyos javaslatokat a jövőbeni új-decentralizációs reformok irányaira vonatkozóan.

Kulcsszavak: megyei kormányzás, fejlesztéspolitika, vidékfejlesztés, centralizáció és decentralizáció, Magyarország

1. Introduction, methodology and theoretical frames

1.1 The aim and methodology of the paper

The paper's intention is to emphasize that regionalization as a “popular” territorial reform in Europe has not led to effective decentralization everywhere, especially in the centralized, unitary countries like Hungary. Although there are manifold reasons for this, and the consequences are less visible in urbanized areas, catching up processes in rural areas were hindered by the lack of meso-level governments.

The paper is based mostly on desk research emphasising that the literature on regionalism, rural/urban networks, and regional development policies, governance levels and geographical spaces is very rich, therefore it is impossible to summarize even the main approaches and epochs. The literature review will introduce the reform failures in CEE and Hungary focusing on the specific features of rural areas that receive less scientific attention as compared with urban-networks, national minority aspects, and MLG connections. After a short introduction of the historical preliminaries, the paper will offer a more detailed discussion of Hungarian county self-governments and their paradoxical role in recent regional policy based on the former experiences and studies of the author and using some elements of ongoing empirical research. The Hungarian case showcases well the challenge of why rural development and its governance still matter. It is not enough to reinstate the need for place-based or community-based development policy and governance. The integration of localities into the entire system of vertical governance through the intermediary role of the meso-level appears unavoidable. Hungarian county governments are the weakest chain in the governance structure, given their inability to carve out a niche in a highly centralized government system in order to assist rural communities to compete for EU and domestic subsidies and provide better living conditions for local society.

1.2 Theoretical and policy approaches: a literature review

The terms of rural development, rural spaces, rural economic, societal and power dimensions have undergone dramatic changes generating diverse policy and scientific reflections. Many scholars have

studied the changing nature of the “rural” through different analytical frames in the last decades (Mardsen 1989; Mardsen et al., 1993; Clocke et al., 2006; Halfacree et al., 2002; Silva, Figueiredo, 2013). An extensive body of empirical research and public policy studies have focused on the development aspects of rurality, motivated by European agricultural and cohesion policies strongly connected with power/governance aspects (Torre, Traversac, 2011; Torre, 2022; Pike et al., 2006, 2011; Kovach, Kucherova, 2006).

Regionalism is also discussed from various approaches (Keating, 2014): motivated by identity movements such as ethno-regionalism, the quest for an appropriate scale of competitiveness, and innovation, the need for social, economic cohesion or simply more efficient public administration. The geographical restructuring of the government system has reshaped the duality of urban/rural power dimensions (Faguet, 2018). Urban spaces and actors do not need any assistance from regional governments above them, the relationship between larger cities/urbanized districts and older meso-level governments is characterized by rivalry rather than cooperation (Brenner, 2004). Keating distinguishes two main spatial actors under the term „regional government”, namely, metropolitan agglomerations and medium-level governments covering mainly rural territories (Keating, 2014). The „Europe of regions” has become one of the most popular slogans in the literature on multilevel governance regarding regions as privileged actors in European integration, especially in the domain of cohesion policy. The dual landscape of regionalism has been present in the new name of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy of the European Commission since 2012.

Regions have become key spaces of governance over the last decades after economics and regional economics pointed to the necessity of the mobilization of indigenous driving forces, to achieve economies of scale in regional economic clusters, innovation, certain infrastructures, and services. However, regions show a diverse picture in terms of their size, content, and power. Highly urbanized regions accumulating economic and human resources, and high-level infrastructure are able to govern their territory (Jewson, MacGregor, 1997; MacLeod, 2011). The governance of urban territories is a more frequent subject of interest in development policy, due primarily to the territorial function and secondly, to the economic development potential of cities and thirdly, to their leadership role (Sotarauta et al., 2017).

Rural areas, particularly those with an overly fragmented settlement structure and lacking stronger urban intermediate centres, require support and the extension of their weak capacities as well as stronger political representation towards the central power through the role of meso-level governments. In the lack of a competitive economic basis in rural and underdeveloped urban regions, it is necessary to mobilize non-mobile local assets, and knowledge through governmental measures (Torre, Traversac, 2011; Dalton, 2019).

The post-soviet Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries encountered manifold, parallel challenges in the 1990s. Besides establishing a democratic political system, the new democracies faced considerable difficulties in building a territorial public administrative model that also matched the rational requirements of governance efficiency. The term ‘territorial choice’ (Baldersheim, Rose, 2010), refers to the rescaling of territorial administration in the spirit of both rationalization and decentralization (Swianiewicz, 2011) in line with the territorial reform trends and patterns in Europe (Ladner et al., 2019).

CEE countries had to adapt the governance requirements of European cohesion policy also by setting up special regional development institutions as a precondition of accessing subsidies (Hughes et al., 2004). The territorial harmonization of the two (public administration and development management) systems was not successful in every case given the difficulties of replacing/supplanting the traditional public administrative units by new, larger ones (i.e., the NUTS2 regions). The reforms implemented on the surface mostly reshaped the geographical map but not the power ambitions and political values of the governing elite (Lazareviciute and Verheijen, 2000; Brusis, 2014; O’Dwyer, 2006). The legacies of past cultures and centralized power mechanisms have survived (Scott, 2009), resulting in double losses in democratic representation and policy efficiency. The geographical borders of the newly created meso-levels or NUTS units were unstable, the coexistence of different medium tiers and administrative borders and their frequent modification point to a lack of internal cohesion or tradition. The EU Commission showed no preference for a regionalized cohesion policy at the time of the enlargement. EU institutions

accepted the efforts of CEE central governments to preserve their power (Smyrl, 1997). The centralized management of cohesion policy remained a dominant feature in the post-accession period in all CEE countries except Poland.

There is substantial literature and a wealth of policy reports on how the partnership principle inspired various governance systems to involve different stakeholders in decision-making and planning (Kelleher et al., 1999; EP, 2008), but concerns were also voiced about a potential democratic deficit triggered by the displacement of “old-fashioned” elected governments, the exclusion of direct representation, transparency, etc. (Olsson, 2003; Pálné, 2015). Medium tiers have become fragmented from an organizational point of view, and several state administrative offices, corporative bodies and other mixed formations have complemented or supplanted the elected self-governments (Herodes, 2011; Pálné, 2009b; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013) everywhere in Europe referring to the principle of partnership. The policy-level advantages of partnership crucially depend on the overall political environment, the quality of civil society and the organizational situation of economic interests as partners. Putnam’s landmark work underlined the importance of social capital as a key resource of development policy contributing to the success of development policy and management when civil society is embedded in a proper context of public institutional actors, culture, economy, etc. (Putnam et al., 1993). It is no coincidence that CEE countries in particular show structural deficiencies in their territorial government system and a declining efficiency of cohesion policy and EU resource absorption (Bachtler et al., 2017).

Overall, we can claim that EU membership, and subsidies have lost their role as a driving force in regional decentralization (Piattoni, Polverari, 2016; Loewen, 2018; Dyba, 2018). A lack of meso-level government, especially in predominantly rural countries where the weakness of cities hinders the integration of municipalities in their regions and their representation towards the centre of power. The weakening role of territorial levels leads to democratic deficiency, as political science literature claims, as a consequence of so-called secondary order elections. The lack of power and capacity relegates county politics to a ‘secondary’ rank, similarly to the secondary role of municipal elections (Jerome and Lewis-Back, 1999; Rodden and Wibbels, 2010). As observed in the case of other countries, power can jump up and down between the levels through rescaling (Swyngedouw, 2000), de/centralization are rather two ends of the continuum than a dichotomy, and there is a dynamic movement on the spectrum (Dardanelli, 2021). Inarguably, decentralization has remained the dominant and enduring worldwide trend until today despite crises and declines in the last years (Lago, 2021). Unfortunately, the CEE countries, especially Hungary, were not able to follow the mainstream of territorial governance models.

2. The story of territorial governance in Hungary in a nutshell

2.1 Before the systemic change

The author has published articles about the history of the Hungarian territorial government system (Pálné, 2009a, b), and only some relevant elements will be emphasized here. In the course of Hungarian history, counties functioned mostly as the agents of the central state despite elected self-governments representing municipalities and local society. Between 1950–1990, the Soviet-type council system did not allow for autonomous action but the territorial structure allowed for efficient and rational functioning. Municipalities were integrated into rational/ large size districts and the 19 counties were large enough in geographical and strong enough in power terms to coordinate localities whilst acting on behalf of the central government (or the party) in a highly centralized and hegemonic power context. Counties were the extended arms of central government, transmitting the central political will, amongst others, in planning and distribution of development resources in line with the centralized development policy aims, generally at the expense of rural areas and smaller villages.

2.2 Focusing on the local level after the systemic change

The introduced self-governmental model in 1990 indicated a reverse shift in terms of the substance and structure of the former system. The number of local administrative units was doubled to 3,200. The political aim to bring decisions closer to citizens has produced a number of unanticipated side-effects,

such as poor quality, low efficiency and relatively higher costs of the implementation of tasks by smaller settlements sometimes with a lack of compliance with legal requirements.

A further structural element was the radical weakening of hitherto powerful counties, ignoring the difficulties that smaller municipalities would face in performing their self-government functions in the absence of a strong meso-level. County self-governments were tasked with the provision of some public service functions (elderly homes, hospitals, museums, libraries, children's homes etc.), but denied a role in development policy and the allocation of subsidies due to the opposition of municipalities to their 'subordination' to superior governmental tiers. Municipalities showed a low propensity to cooperate with each other, and the majority of cities were not real centres capable of managing their surrounding districts.

2.3 New regions for territorial integration

The codification of the Act on Regional Development in 1996 in the spirit of adaptation to European regional policy was a crucial step toward the revision of the original, 'basic/municipal centric' territorial governance model in Hungary. The dilemma was whether the micro-regional (NUTS4), the county (NUTS3) or the macro-regional (NUTS2) level should be designated as the appropriate scale for regional policy given the absence of any precise concept for the rescaling of the meso. The legislator opted for the integration of each of the three potential territorial tiers (namely small districts, counties and large regions) into the system of regional political institutions. Not only the geographical scales, borders, and seats, but the overall role and place of the new large regions in the governance system was also disputed. The only stable element in the jungle of territorial scales was that counties as democratic, elected units were not allowed 'to return' to power.

Overall, forced or top-down regionalization in development policy following the European cohesion policy model had become an instrument in the hands of central power. After the EU accession of 2004, a huge amount of external funding was allocated for regional development. The management of Structural Funds became the responsibility of the central government and national development agencies, leaving territorial actors with a limited scope of action, assisting rather than controlling the allocation of financial resources. The loss of professional knowledge was among the most severe consequences of the elimination of the former institutional system of regional development, which had previously received a positive evaluation by EU experts as well (Bachtler et al., 2014).

2.4 Strong recentralization since 2010; counties: winners or losers?

The new constitution in 2011 launched a completely new era in political orientation towards a weaker and centrally more controlled model of the local government system, similarly to other public autonomies. The necessity of local government reform was generally accepted both by the political and professional circles. The fragmented structure of municipalities and the weakness of county assemblies resulted in low performance quality and financial problems. The latter led to a crucial financial crisis, accelerated by the global economic and financial crisis erupting in 2008. Self-governments saw serious cuts in terms of functions and finance. In the meantime, the government abandoned the unsuccessful experiments with regionalization and stabilized the counties instead. Counties survived as geographical scales, but not as elected county self-governments.

The Law on Local Self-Governments (2011) completely overhauled the system regarding the role of the municipalities, cities and the counties as well. The management of numerous public service institutions (basic schools, hospitals, middle-schools, elderly homes, cultural institutions, etc.) was taken over by the Central Government and its territorial offices. County assemblies emerged as the main losers, seeing their former mission of operating public services eliminated, while regional development became the primary function of counties as an apparent victory in the long debate on the appropriate role of county self-governments.

As stated by the law, „The county assembly is a territorial self-government, which, according to the law, fulfils tasks of territorial development, rural development, physical planning and coordination”, but it has

been stripped of its previous own competences. As a „compensation”, they received a very vaguely defined mission of regional development, which entails a risk that counties will not be the strongest chain in this policy field either. The model itself raises many doubts on how a representative self-government body can manage development policy in the absence of competences in public services, legal links with municipalities or own resources.

The political/representative frames have also been transformed. The new law on local elections reduced the number of local representatives by 30 per cent, but in the case of counties and larger cities, representative bodies were reduced to less than half of their former size. The amendment indicates a changing political attitude towards the dominance of parties without any ‘territorial’ embeddedness. Non-party organizations were de facto eliminated from the county assemblies (after the election of 2014, only 3 members remained independent out of the 418 representatives elected in the counties.).

The dominance of the ruling party has been relentlessly strengthening. Since the local election in 2019, all county assemblies have been governed by the ruling party (FIDESZ-KDNP) coalition, with only some larger (so-called free) cities remaining in opposition (Kákai, Pálné, 2020). The opposition in county assemblies is far from united, with internal fragmentation further weakening their position (Table 1). In principle, the stronger ties of county politicians with the central government could promote the representation of county interests despite the looming danger of increasing dependence on the ruling parties and the government, further strengthening centralization.

Tab 1. Membership in the general assemblies of counties by nominating organizations, 2019–2024. Source: Edited by the authors, using www.valasztas.hu

County	General Assembly members	FIDESZ-KDNP	DK	Jobbik	MSZP	Momentum	Mi Hazánk	Opposition coalition *	Other local organisation
Bács-Kiskun	23	16	2	2	-	2	1		
Baranya	18	12	2	2	1	1			
Békés	17	10	2	2	1	1	1		
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	29	18	3	-	-	-	-	8	
Csongrád	19	12	1	2	2	1	1		
Fejér	20	14	2	-	-	2	1		1
Győr-Moson-Sopron	21	15	2	2	-	2	-		
Hajdú-Bihar	24	16	2	3	1	2	-		
Heves	15	9	-	-	-	-	-	6	
Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	18	11	1	3	1	1	1		
Komárom-Esztergom	15	9	-	-	-	-	-	6	
Nógrád	14	10	1	1	1	-	1		
Pest	44	24	7	4	-	9	-		
Somogy	15	9	1	2	-	1	-		2
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	25	18	1	3	2	-	-		1
Tolna	15	10	2	1	1	1	-		
Vas	15	11	1	1	1	1	-		
Veszprém	17	10	2	2	1	1	1		
Zala	15	11	1	2	-	1	-		

A piquant episode of the story of counties is the recent decision for the amendment of the name of counties to 'castle counties' (comitatus). The change of the name is in itself symbolic, reflecting the archaic or historicizing efforts of the government to return to pre-communist Hungarian history. The (royal) castle counties have served as the institutions of the contemporary reigning government (king) since the parallel establishment of the Hungarian state 1000 years ago. The past appears to have made a comeback. While counties have become the mere agents of the central government, elected assemblies are struggling to secure their tiny power. The question is who will integrate and support local communities in such a chanceless situation.

2.5 Counties for rural development, policy frames

As indicated by the figures below (Figure 1), despite EU cohesion policy efforts, the capital city and the western parts of the country have seen increased growth after EU accession, while the predominantly rural regions and counties with tiny villages have been lagging further behind or witnessed accelerating decline. Even more worryingly, the new governance system of development policy would be unable to reverse these processes, were they to constitute a political priority at all.

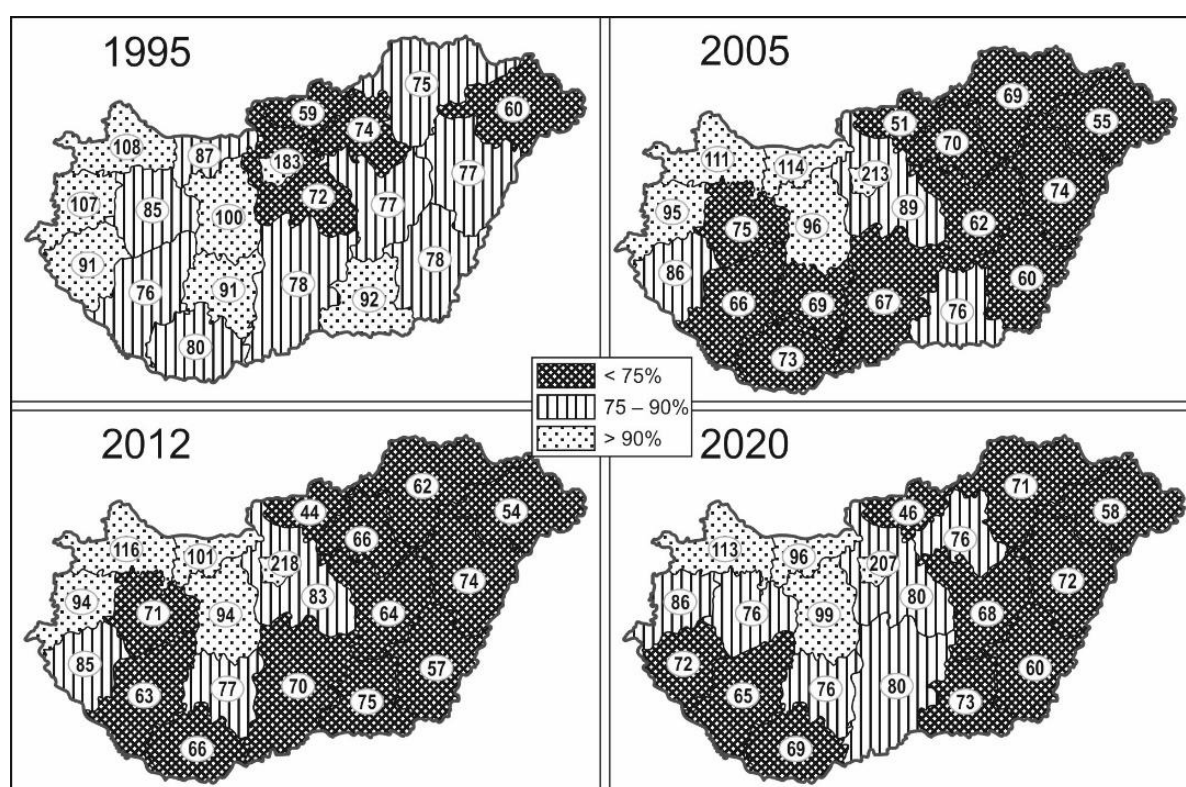


Fig 1. GDP per capita as a percentage of the national average, 1995–2020. Source: National Statistical Office: <http://statinfo.ksh.hu/Statinfo/>

The law on regional development was amended in 2013. Accordingly, macro-regions (NUTS2) and the whole development council system were abolished, eliminating regionalism and even the principle of partnership. As it has been mentioned earlier, this amendment aimed at strengthening county self-governments and specified the competences of county assemblies in the law on regional development. Despite the apparently lengthy list of competences, these are vaguely defined (planning, coordinating, participating etc.), because their real policy impact depends on the available financial instruments, and the scope of action of counties.

The main paradox in this context is the complete centralization of the management of EU funds at the central government level, while county self-governments were granted only formal authorization for participation in development policy. Even the managing authority of the Territorial Operative Programme

(TOP), with a definite spatial equalization objective, is settled in the central government within the Prime Minister's Office. The formal decision-making mechanism provides a co-decision-making position for county assemblies together with the managing authority, but in reality, county self-governments were not even designated as intermediary bodies functioning according to the EU regulation. Their competences are limited to providing assistance with planning, calls for tenders and evaluation, the ranking of applications, and taking the 'final decision' on projects, which latter is a simple formality as it requires the approval of the central managing authority. It is not surprising therefore that rural interests are underrepresented in resource allocation. Policy analyses (Balogh, 2015; Finta, 2022) show that resources are not allocated where they are most needed, and mid-term evaluation documents on EU cohesion policy also indicate that the distribution of funds and the original plans focusing on rural, lagging areas do not match (Figure 2).

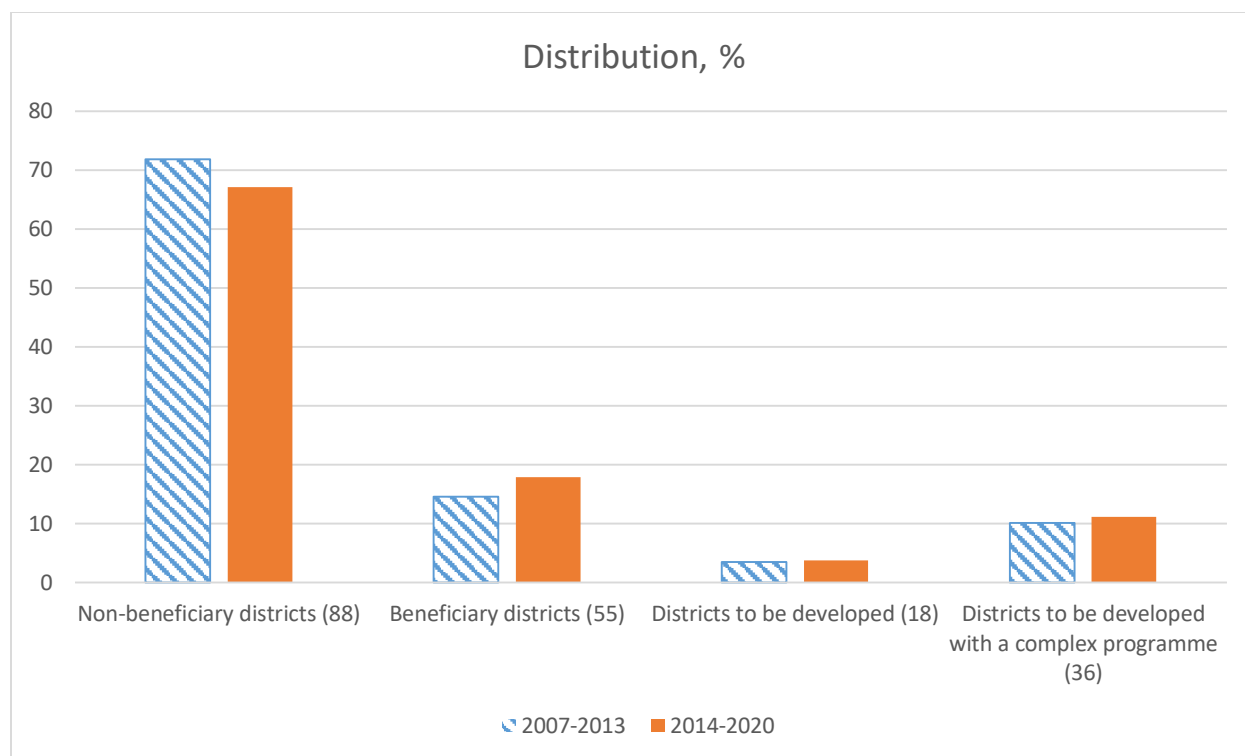


Fig 2. Absorption of Structural and Cohesion Funds in the two programming periods in districts with different levels of development. Source: Finta, 2022, p. 12

There is not so much empirical evidence on how the counties survived the dramatic changes. The chapter below seeks to introduce some empirical findings focusing on the question of why the weakness of meso-level governance is a problem for rural development in fragmented, underdeveloped regions.

3. Some findings of empirical research projects on county activities

3.1 Methodological introduction

Two research projects were conducted countrywide by the author in 2018 (Pálné, 2019) and in 2019–2022 (referred to in the introduction) in a selected county (Baranya). The first empirical research (completed in 2018) focused on the activities of all Hungarian county self-governments based on interviews, official documents, and available information on their official home pages. This task did not appear to be particularly demanding, given that there are only 19 county self-governments in Hungary. However, we encountered difficulties in the collection of information due to the inaccessibility or obsolescence of information on the websites of county self-governments, compelling us to conduct in-situ collection of background information, using original documents (plans, minutes, statistics, etc.).

Furthermore, many of our interviewees (elected members or officials) were not always open, giving sometimes very general answers, citing their involvement in diverse activities, as their tasks and positions are much less precisely defined or standard, and the distinction between obligatory and voluntary tasks is increasingly blurred. The second project completed in 2019–2022 had a broader focus on governance challenges in peripheral areas and some results have already been published (Horeczki, Pálné, 2022; Finta, Dombi, 2021). In this article, we emphasized only the activities of the Baranya County government, more specifically, the management of the territorial operative programme (TOP) based on documents and interviews. Findings to be introduced provide further evidence on the limited role and impact of counties contributing to the further decline of this mostly rural, peripheral county similarly to others in Hungary.

3.2 Organization, leadership

As it has been mentioned before, the radical legal changes after 2010 had profound implications on the size of the bodies as well as the mode of the election. According to our studies on the results of elections, the new membership of county bodies has been recruited from politicians embedded neither in macro (as MPs) nor local politics (as mayors), and not even the indirectly elected presidents of county assemblies are “strong politicians” any more. Formerly, powerful politicians were ousted from the assemblies due to the cancelling of double mandates in the parliament and local/county self-governments. Smaller and politically weaker personalities in the bodies served as the backbone for a new epoch of county governance based on the new mission of county assemblies. The lower prestige of county assemblies is manifest in the list of invited consulting partners also. Although mayors of municipalities and cities, leaders of various county-level state offices and Members of Parliament are invited, this is not the case for non-governmental organizations, which underscores the weak civil embeddedness of county self-governments.

Besides the political aspect of governance, the capacity of administrative organizations and their professional background are evidently important from the point of view of the efficiency of development policy. As of 2010, county self-governments were stripped of almost all of their previous tasks, including e.g., the maintenance of different public service institutions (hospitals, schools, and so on), it was expected that the staff and size of the official apparatuses would drastically decrease, making up only a small fraction of the former apparatuses with 100–150 staff. The optimal size of a potent management organization was not reached anywhere in 2014–2018. The number of skilled managers was higher (around 50) in counties where the county government office established inner units commissioned by project management financed by EU TOP programme budgets, but this solution provides temporal employment only. Several municipalities in some counties however do not involve the county officers, instead they contracted out external project management agencies. This means that county government offices do not possess solid administrative capacities for managing development projects financed by EU funds.

Our research also revealed that the formerly heterogeneous and complex composition of county organizations had become considerably ‘simpler’ and weaker, limiting the scope of action of counties in finding opportunities to support rural development. The scarcity of its financial resources prompted counties to discharge of their former professional management capacities formed in the pre-accession phase by PHARE and other EU programmes.

Ultimately, county self-governments have suffered substantial losses, and the organizational and financial capacities and political resources in their possession do not allow them to acquire considerable influence and power. This essentially stems from the authorization of competences, with fewer tasks requiring fewer resources and organizational capacities. Put differently, county self-governments can surrender themselves to the nationalized meso-level organizational sector, given their meagre chances for rivalry with county deconcentrated state apparatuses multiplied in size and power.

3.3 County planning as an element of development policy

Despite the legal obligation of counties to elaborate plans and development concepts for 'domestic' regional policy, only the EU programmes provide financial guarantees for their implementation, and this fact has a crucial impact on the space of movement of the counties. The Territorial Operative Programme (TOP) under the partnership agreement (2014–2020) implies a clear-cut rupture with all 'own', domestic priorities originating from local initiatives. Following the process of planning, it became evident that due to the strongly hierarchical planning mechanism of the TOP, county self-governments had practically no chance to insert local (municipal, regional) priorities. The hectic, top-down controlled, time-deficient process of the harmonization of priorities among the various levels and actors was a disappointment for county self-governments according to the interviewed leaders and experts. This was also the case in the former 2007–2013 programming period, and this shortcoming persists in the post-2014 cycle. It soon became apparent that the TOP as a 'territorial' planning scheme and the role of 'newly empowered' county self-governments were ill-equipped to handle the territorial characteristics and interests.

County self-governments are formally authorized in special laws to elaborate plans in other policy fields such as environmental protection, economic development, and employment. These 'plans' however do not have a real impact on the public policy of the respective sectors because counties have no other competences and tools beyond planning. We would assume that the pure soft planning role provides an opportunity for the involvement of stakeholders in the preparation of plans, or cooperation among stakeholders during the implementation, but unfortunately, this was not the case according to our research. The case of Baranya County showed that the planning process did not (or was unable to) involve all stakeholders, due to the high number (around 300) of small municipalities with no capacity for coordination. The micro-regional associations of municipalities were also abolished post-2010, despite the capacity of these associations (in 174 NUTS4 units, and the special LEADER action groups) to integrate the interests of rural areas in the previous decades. Having lost their former financial guarantees, these micro-regional co-operations have gradually dissolved. In the absence of transmitting partners, counties were unable to integrate the highly fragmented and diverse landscape of actors. County plans would remain mere formalities in instances when local actors were charged with the implementation of plans, and were lacking systematic central financial support, which typically led to their side-lining. The only plans that are likely to be implemented are those accompanied by central (more precisely: European Union) financial support.

3.4 Programming and project management

The county self-governments undoubtedly showed the highest engagement in the tendering system related to the TOP, which, as highlighted earlier, did not imply real decision-making power. Although the interviewees and the minutes of the different bodies revealed that the recommendations of counties and the allocation of resources among applicants (municipalities, local institutions, business companies) were taken into consideration by the managing authority of the ministry (Prime Minister's Office), the formal decision-making rights, i.e., the right of veto lay with the central level. It should also be noted that the TOP resources with a slightly decentralized distribution only make up one-fifth of overall EU resources. County self-governments were not included in the allocation of the major part of EU resources, not even as partners with a right to express their opinions in frames of other OPs.

The special role of some county administrations is TOP project management commissioned by applicants, mostly municipalities. At a first glance, it appears to be a good practice both in assisting tiny rural municipalities and financing additional capacities within the county administration. However, some doubts were raised about how the conflicting interests (parallel role in the preparation and selection of applications) can be managed, and how the temporal staff of project management as a development agency can be stabilized in the future.

Our research also involved those activities that are not specified by law but are implemented by the county self-governments on a voluntary basis, in function of their own priorities and tools. The collected information confirms the engagement of counties in a wide range of topics: environmental protection,

economic development, culture, international relations, interest representation, sport, and tourism. The picture is even more nuanced if we look at the forms of participation: organization of events, meetings, and forums; preparing different plans, concepts, and officially announced statements; some support of municipal and non-governmental organizations, less typically businesses; editing promotional publications; creation of databases; making cooperation agreements, and so on. The common feature of these activities is that they are non-binding, and thus offer no real legal and financial guarantees either for the palpable impact of the respective activity. The success of these activities however depends on whether or not partners need and accept them.

3.5 County relations, networks, visibility

Investigating the related documents, relations appear to be rather formal, not involving the implementation of any joint actions. The exceptions are transborder and cross-border cooperation projects, which are generated by EU Interreg resources with the only positive effect to provide an opportunity for sometimes even smaller municipalities alongside the borders to participate in international projects. Domestic relations with municipal self-governments are strikingly unbalanced despite their vital importance in the demonstration of county functions. Several factors contribute to the weakness of networking at meso-level. Naturally, the personal attitude and political orientation of county leaders can result in open or closed county policies. The intensity, form and content of relations are also shaped by the settlement structure, the rural or urban character of counties: in areas with a large number of small municipalities (e.g., Baranya), developing direct relations, despite responding to a vital need, is increasingly problematic because of lack of administrative capacities. Paradoxically, where the counties contain viable large settlements, city mayors do not need 'paternalistic parenting'. More frequently, county self-governments are rather rivals than cooperative partners of big county seat cities, as showcased by our case study on the relations of Baranya County and the county seat City of Pécs. Overall, we found county networks to be rather loose both in the formal and informal sense. In all likelihood, this follows from the traditional role of counties in the mediation of central interests, which undermines their popularity among municipal leaders and other actors. Another reason for the decrease or complete lack of attention to county self-governments is the inadequacy of their tools, capacities, and functions. Naturally, this situation can be further exacerbated by the low transparency and visibility of the operation of county self-governments what we noticed during the study of websites.

The vertical relationship system is more homogeneous and less conflict-laden between county self-governments and the central government. This is no coincidence. As we have noted before, ruling parties have held a majority in the county bodies for almost a decade, and it is common knowledge that it is worth maintaining good relationships with the government in a clientelist model of resource allocation.

Due to the extremely concentrated/polarized political context, we are witnessing an interesting evolution of vertical interest representation. Despite the regulated spatial scheme of the allocation of cohesion resources, the individual constituencies of the Parliament have emerged as the *de facto* territorial development units and the MP is the most influential person as a hub of the lobbying activity within the given county.

As far as the relationship between the people and counties is concerned, it would be illusory to nurture high expectations. The survey conducted in 2018 (Kákai, 2019), sought to detect to what extent inhabitants were familiar with their county and the functions performed by the county self-governments. According to the answers, the picture is not promising: in total, 715 respondents (from the 1500) replied 'do not know' and another 58 refused to answer.

In our survey, in Baranya County in 2020, we questioned the selected local elite (233 persons) about the influence of counties within the multilevel governance system (Tables 2 and 3). The data show that county assemblies do not belong to the well-known and accepted public actors.

Tab 2. Which do you consider to be the most relevant level for the development of your municipality? Please select the most appropriate one (number of respondents to the given question). Source: own survey in Baranya county, Hungary 2020

Most relevant level	Number
Local	77
District	21
County-level	29
National	60
EU	40
No response	6

Tab 3. Which stakeholders contribute most to the development of your municipality? (You may indicate more than one answer). Source: Own survey in Baranya County, 2020

	Mentions it	Does not mention
Inhabitants	44	190
Civil organizations	105	129
Mayor	124	110
Local self-government	180	54
Entrepreneurs	110	124
LEADER local action groups	17	217
Municipal association(s)	24	210
Government	75	159
Political parties	9	225
County general assembly	65	169
County government office	14	220
MP	100	134
Prime Minister	7	227
Other	34	200

4. Conclusions

Hungarian counties as meso-level governments have had a very hectic history but survived every epoch and reform. The trend nowadays shows a strong decline. Reconsidering the essence of the territorial reforms implemented over the last decade, counties emerge as the major losers, which has strong negative consequences for rural areas and the smaller municipalities. Counties are no longer empowered by their 'general competences' (as stated by the requirements of the European Charter of Local Governments), their status as self-governments has become contested. County assemblies are rather 'single issue/sectoral organizations' responsible for development policy, primarily focusing on rural, underdeveloped areas where cities do not fulfil an integrative role. Territorial governments (regions, counties) are expected to fulfil an integrative mission of planning, representing the interests of rural communities, counterbalancing the overall dominance of city centres, assisting municipalities in preparing bids, managing projects, etc. Such 'integrative' missions require comprehensive responsibility, information, embeddedness, political prestige and, of course, administrative, and financial capacity. In the absence of legal empowerment, skilled staff, and administrative capacity, how can county assemblies fulfil this mission? Evidence provided by our studies indicate that counties are not able to integrate the countryside in the lack of power.

The vanishing meso-level contradicts the EU's proclaimed and fundamentally unchanged cohesion policy principles that are likely to persist in the next programming period as well (Bachtler et al., 2017). It is therefore increasingly important to unearth the recent phenomena and their underlying factors that shape the territorial structure of governance. In Hungary, an extremely centralized system of governance is the beneficiary of EU development funds, while counties fulfil the role of regional

stakeholders. We have pointed out that despite the legal mandate of counties, their de facto role has remained modest.

The paper did not touch upon another pillar of territorial governance, namely, cities with their function of organizing space, potentially supplanting traditional territorial governments in countries with a higher level of urbanization. In Hungary, however, cities do not have institutionalized relations with their rural hinterland, and several studies warn that even the interest for cooperation is missing (Somlyódy, 2017). This also raises the concern that rural areas are increasingly left to their own devices.

The Hungarian story has some general implications. Although there are positive examples in CEE (Bucek, 2004; Tatur, 2004; Gorzelak, 2009; Pálné 2009b), European cohesion policy enforced regional reforms only temporarily, before the accession. The centralized management of Structural Funds contributed to the efforts of central governments to dismantle the meso and unfortunately, EU institutions accepted this policy.

The pandemic and more recently, the war and the concomitant the economic and energy crises have prompted further restrictions and central interventions (Bouckaert et al., 2020). The responses of metropolitan areas, agglomerations and rural areas to the crises are highly variable and their resilience cannot be based on one-size-fits-all solutions (Ženka et al., 2019). How rural areas can strengthen their resilience without territorial cooperation through the assistance of meso-level governments is an open question. The most highly urbanized areas of Western Europe have built their governance models around networks of cities (Thompson, 2020) and regions formed by strong economic clusters, but CEE countries do not have the same options. Further research is needed to identify what kind of territorial governance models are suitable for the highly diverse rural landscape located far from the urban centres.

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