

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN THE V4 COUNTRIES – IN THE LIGHT OF THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The Visegrád countries have similar administrative systems, therefore the major characteristics of their development policies are similar, but several differences can be observed. These similarities and differences are analysed by this paper. Poland has a regionalized system and a partially merged 1st tier municipal model. Therefore, local development has a significant role. Hungarian, Czech and Slovakian local development policies are limited by the fragmented spatial and municipal systems, however the Slovakian regions have a strong development characteristic. Centralization tendencies can be observed but their intensities are different. The Hungarian model is significantly impacted by the strong centralization of the last ten years. Similar structures evolved among the local development policies of the 1st tier municipalities: the detailed development policies can be observed among the larger, mainly urban municipalities, the local development policies of the smaller, rural municipalities are based on the personal cooperation and neighbourhood activities. The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the local development policies, their focus has been transformed partially, but the structure of the local policies did not change significantly, the differentiated structure remained untouched.

Key words: local development; local policies; municipal systems; centralization; Visegrád countries.

1 INTRODUCTION

The significance of the development policies has increased in the last decades. They have been strengthened by globalization and by enhancing global

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competition (Pike et al. 2017). The relationship between the different tiers of development policies is a complex phenomenon which has transformed in the last decades. Different approaches on interpretation of development policies have evolved and these approaches are linked to the different models of multilevel governance. It is emphasized by Hooghe and Marks, that multilevel governance can be interpreted as a by-product of the administrative transformation of the last decades, because the rise of supranational government (especially in the European continent but even in Northern America) and the increasing role of the subnational units: regional bodies mainly, but partly the 1st tier municipalities as well (Hooghe and Marks 2001). Local and regional development have different interpretations. First, there is a narrow interpretation based on the approach that only the development policies and initiatives working from *within* the region can be interpreted as local and regional. This narrow interpretation is the concept of the so-called *regional development governance*. The broad interpretation is based on the approach that the concept of local and regional development covers all initiatives which have impact and effect on a given local and regional unit. Therefore, even those programs are interpreted as regional development which tackle development problems from *outside* the region. In Europe, so-called external development aid or official development assistance is significantly co-funded by the European Union, especially in the new Member States (Bruszt and Palestini 2016). As the Visegrád Countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) belong to the new Member States and the role of the external, especially EU co-funded aids have significant role in the national, regional and local development policies (Nyikos and Kondor 2019), the approach of this paper is based on the *broad approach* of local development policies. Even though, analysis will focus on the locally decided development issues and on the opportunities for local governments in the field of development policies.

2 METHODS

This paper is based on the *institutional approach*; mainly, therefore the analysis focuses on the regulation and the institutional framework primarily. The effect of legal regulation on the local development issues and the on the local financing are included in this institutional approach. In some part even the soft law documents (mainly policy papers, plans etc.) are examined.

Local financing is an important element of the research because the financial resources are required for the realization of the local development projects. Although, there is a possibility to build local development policies on the personal cooperation of the members of – a mainly smaller – community only, the majority of the local development projects are based on financial support (Niezgoda and Czernek, 2008). Therefore, the major economic data on development resources and on municipal revenues and expenses will be analysed. The data from the national and European official statistics, especially the national statistics offices and mainly from the Eurostat - especially the COFOG database and the data on national accounts - were used a source for the study. The data on the expenditures and frameworks of the European Structural and Investment Funds (hereinafter: ESIF) are based on the open database of the European Commission.²

² The database can be downloaded at <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/countries>.

Several findings are based on an empirical analysis of Polish and Hungarian municipalities derived from semi structured interviews in the Capital Municipality of Budapest (Hungary) and Town Municipality of Lublin (Poland). The interviews were conducted in October 2020, the first results of the interviews were published in the article of Hoffman and Balázs (Hoffman and Balázs 2022).

3 FRAMEWORK OF THE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN THE V4 COUNTRIES

3.1 Institutional models of local development policies in Europe

The institutional framework of the local development policies is determined by various factors, and different models can be distinguished. The interpretations are mainly based on the approaches to public administration. The local development policies have multi-dimensional nature because they are related to the vertical coordination of the administrative systems, especially the share of powers and duties between the different governance levels (Piattoni 2010). The vertical coordination between the different tiers of development policies is important, the cooperation with the private sector (including the NGOs) is a significant issue, as well (Danson et al. 2000; Gherhes 2020).

Centralized, decentralized and federal models are distinguished as a vertical classification of the regional development models (Danson et al. 2000). The centralized model is based on the determinative role of the *central government* and its agencies. However, local and regional governments have significant competences; most of the policy-making responsibilities – especially the preparation and approval of the major plans and the management of the allocation of the development funds – are centralized (Hoffman 2018). The decentralized model of regional development is based on the determinative role of regional governments. Therefore, this model is closely related to *regionalisation* (Loughlin et al. 2011). *Federal states* could be interpreted as an independent regime of regional development. The member states of the federation – which have statehood – have wide development responsibilities. Federal governments have limited responsibilities in development and planning issues (Diller et al. 2019).

In Europe local governments manage the so-called local public issues. First, the *local development as a municipal task* should be reviewed. In common law systems, the *monist model* of municipal tasks has evolved. Originally the traditional Anglo-Saxon municipal systems were based on the *ultra vires* principle, these tasks were interpreted as municipal tasks defined or recognized by the legislation. There was a distinction between obligatory and voluntary municipal tasks. (Arden et al. 2008). However, the regulation transformed in these countries, and the general powers of the municipalities were recognized by the majority, the model has not changed (Goldsmith and Page 2010). The traditional continental local governance was based on the general powers of the municipalities traditionally. However, the scope and the constitutional protection of the general powers are different, but this basis resulted in the distinction between municipal tasks and transferred state (central government) tasks, and among municipal tasks voluntary and obligatory tasks can be distinguished (Nagy et al. 2019). According to the regional development regime of the given country, the development issues belong to obligatory municipal tasks

mainly. In the states following the centralized development model the municipalities have additional obligatory tasks, their development competencies belong to the voluntary municipal tasks usually (Hoffman 2018).

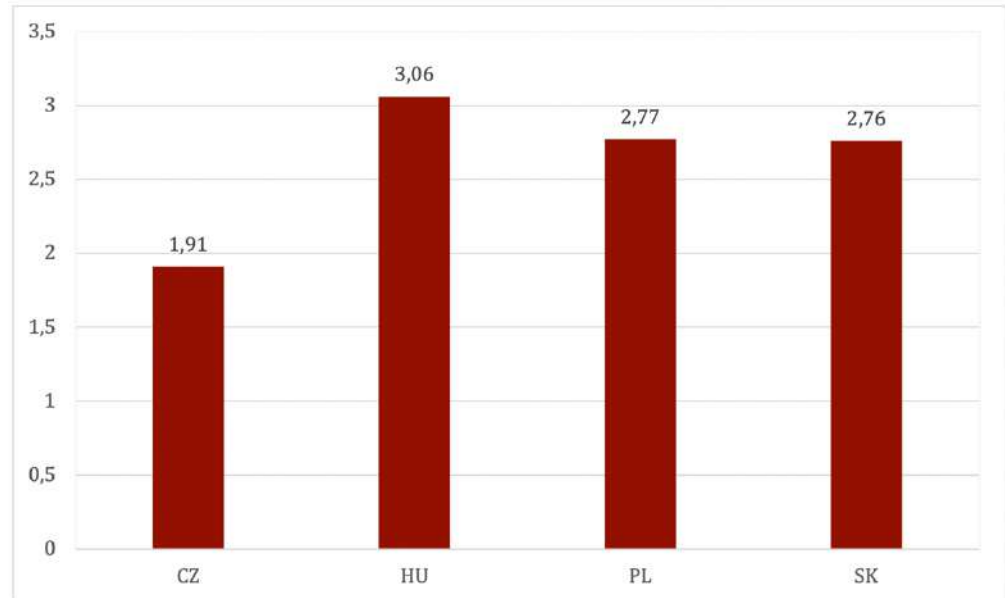
3.2 Municipal systems and development issues in the V4 countries

The Visegrád Countries (V4) – Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – have common social, historical and economic roots. There are differences, for example, Poland is larger than the other three countries, after the fall of Communism, similar municipal systems evolved. During the Democratic Transition decentralized municipal systems were established but several differences occurred as well. Based on traditions and on the larger territory and on the Europeanization of public administration, a regional reform was passed in Poland in 1998. A three-tier system was introduced, and the development issues became obligatory tasks of the 3rd tier of local governments, the regional units, the so-called voivodeships (*województwo*). However, the 1st municipalities, the communes (*gmina*) have important competencies in basic public services, the public service performance is strongly based on the two regional tiers, on the districts (*powiat*) (and towns with district status) and on the voivodeships (Karpiuk and Kostrubiec 2017). Like the Polish regionalization reforms, the Slovakian administrative system was reformed between 1996 and 2005. A slight regionalization was passed, and a two-tier system (communes – villages and towns – and regions) was introduced. The fragmentation of the 1st tier remained, but the new, eight regions (*kraj*) received important regional planning and development obligatory tasks. These regions are smaller – related to the EU classification NUTS-3 – regional units, therefore, those tasks which should be performed at NUTS-2 level belong to the competencies of the central government. Because of the very fragmented 1st tier municipal system, the Slovakian system can be interpreted as a region-centred model (Klimovský and Nemeč 2021). Czechia and Hungary have a strongly fragmented communal system. The Czech system is based on the public service provision of the 14 Czech regions (*kraj*) which are NUTS-3 units and on the eminent role of the town municipalities, which have responsibilities for the service provision of their surroundings. (Radvan et al. 2021). Therefore, eight regional development regions were established in Czechia which have regional development councils. These councils are based on the cooperation of the municipal and central government, and they can be interpreted as special, atypical central government bodies. The formal autonomy of the twenty Hungarian county governments (*megye*) remained untouched but after the reforms of 2011/12 the counties lost their public service provision roles. Instead, they received several additional development tasks, especially participation in the regional planning activities of the central government agencies. Hungary has a special situation among the V4 countries. The provision of the human public services was significantly nationalized after 2011 (Hoffman et al. 2016). In Czechia the regional development tasks are primarily managed by the regional development agencies of the central government. Hungary has a more centralized model; the regional development tasks are mainly centrally managed by the regional (county) directorates of the Hungarian State Treasury (Hoffman 2018a). It should be emphasized that despite the regionalized Slovakian and Polish system, the regional development systems of these countries are strongly centralized, the municipal development plays a supplementary role in the development policies only (Lux 2018).

Similarly, it should be emphasized that the role of the ESIF is very significant in these countries. During the 2014-2020 EU budgeting cycle the V4 countries

received significant EU funding: according to the Eurostat data on national accounts, the sum of received ESIF fundings were 1.91-3.06% of their GDPs (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: YEARLY ESIF FUNDS FROM EU (2014-2020) IN THE SHARE OF THE AVERAGE OF 2014-2020 GDP (CURRENT MARKET PRICES) (%)³



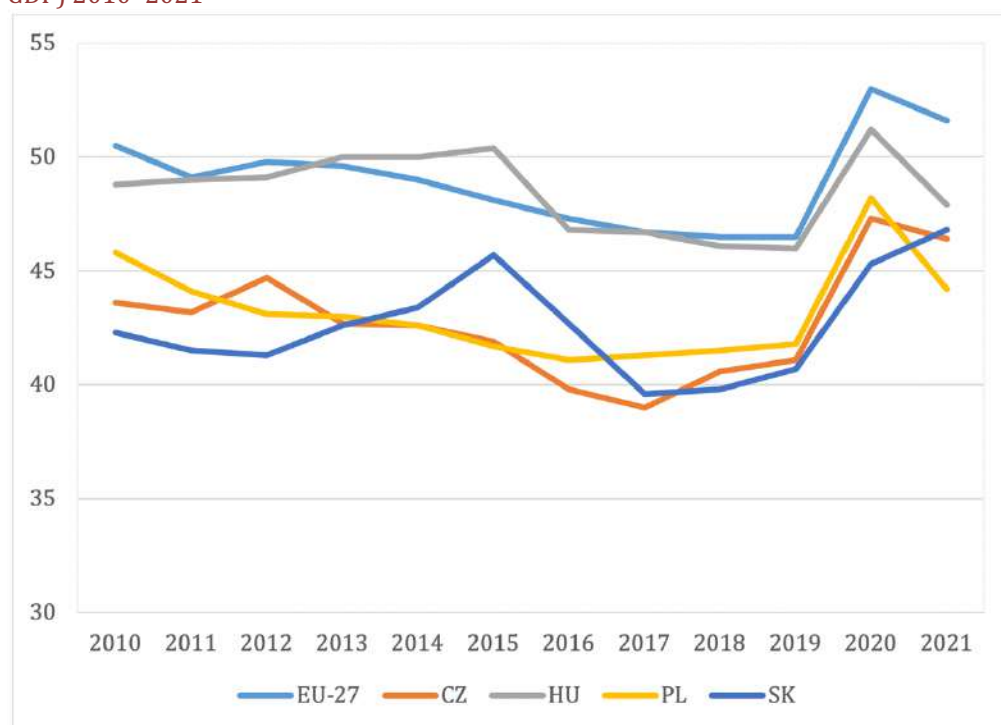
Therefore, the role of the EU policies, especially the EU cohesion policy have significant impact on the local development policies of the V4 countries as well. This high share of EU funded development activities combined with the centralized national management of the ESI Funds show that the central governments and their agencies have an outstanding impact on these policies.

Another important issue of the development policies is the role of the public sector in the national economy. There are different approaches of government spending among modern economies. The continental pattern is followed by these countries (Stiglitz 2020) but there are several differences. First of all, during the EU Accession, especially due to the actions regarding the planned accessions to the Eurozone, different taxation and government spending reforms were passed. However, it is common that the general government expenditures were between 40 and 50 percent of the GDP after the economic crisis of 2008/2009 (the highest was in Hungary and the lowest was in Slovakia). The quite significant differences were related to the above-mentioned reforms or the lack or limited impact of these reforms. Similarly, during the 2010s the economic growth was not followed by the increase of the government spending of these countries: the share of the general government expenditure decreased during the last decade (Fisher 2015). The economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions related to the pandemic had a significant impact on these countries. A 'COVID-peak' can be observed: the government revenues declined because of the economic restrictions but the expenditures increased because of the health and social issues related to the treatment of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the share of the government expenditures increased significantly in 2020. Because of these special circumstances, the year 2020 could be interpreted as an 'excited state'. In 2021 the mass vaccination started and after the spring

³ Based on the data of the Eurostat national accounts 2014–2020 and on the <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/countries>.

wave (the 3rd wave) of COVID-19 the restrictions became gentler and the economic growth in Europe – and in the Visegrád Countries – increased. After the ‘excited state’ of 2020, 2021 can be considered as a ‘relaxation’. Slovakia was an exception: it was hit strongly by the 3rd wave of COVID, therefore, the government expenditures remained relatively high in 2021. Therefore, the share of the government expenditures has been increased. The situation in Hungary was partly similar: the 3rd wave of the COVID-19 was the most serious (Gręndziska et al. 2022), therefore, the ‘relaxation’ of the COVID-19 ‘peak’ of government expenditure was not as radical as in Poland and in Czechia (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 2: GENERAL GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES (V4 AND EU-27, IN THE SHARE OF GDP) 2010–2021



Source: Eurostat.

4 LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN THE V4 COUNTRIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

4.1 Common patterns

The local development systems of the Visegrád countries have several common patterns. First of all, the municipal systems are similar: they are based on the continental approach of local governance (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019). However, the service provision roles are different in these countries, because of the reforms of the 2010s, centralization tendencies can be observed. The V4 countries had a similar service provision pattern after the Democratic Transition. The reorganized local government bodies were mainly responsible for the performance of the human public services and the local public utilities. This common pattern has been transformed, especially after the economic crisis of 2008/2009 (Silva 2020). The centralization of the public services and regional development has been the most radical in Hungary (Gárdos-Orosz 2021): the provision of public education institutes (except the kindergartens), specialized

(residential) social care and child protection services, specialized outpatient care and hospitals and several cultural services have been nationalized (Szente 2013). The centralization of the public service provision is a tendency in Czechia, Poland and Slovakia, but it is based on gentler reforms, which are especially linked to the transformation of the municipal finances and to the strengthening of the legal supervision of the central government agencies (Radvan 2020; Kostrubiec 2021; Janas and Janošková 2022).

However, there are differences in spatial structure of these countries, especially Poland can be considered as an exception, but it should be emphasized that the Czech, the Hungarian and the Slovakian municipal systems are strongly fragmented. In Poland a concentration passed, but the number of the first-tier municipalities is relatively high and even small communities are defined as independent municipal units. Therefore, different *local development models* can be distinguished. As it has been mentioned, the local development tasks belong mainly to the competences of the regional (2nd or in Poland 3rd tier) municipalities. Because of the general powers municipal system, the municipalities could have so-called facultative tasks: the municipalities can perform those local public affairs which do not belong to the competences of the central government and its agencies. It is emphasized that development issues are important for local leaders (Kukovič 2017). The performance of the local development issues as facultative tasks is an eminent element of the local development policies. Performance of the facultative tasks has different patterns in different municipalities. Because of the fragmented municipal system of the Visegrád countries and the relatively limited resources of most of the first-tier local governments, mainly *urban municipalities* have detailed and well elaborated local development regimes. There are differences on the interpretation of the urban municipalities of the Visegrád countries, but it could be emphasized that in these countries the municipalities with more than 100 000 inhabitants can be interpreted as large communities. These municipalities have significant human and financial resources, the local revenues are higher in these units (Schmidt 2021). A common pattern of these urban development policies is the new focus which evolved in the last decade: the development of smart cities. The smart city projects in Central and Eastern Europe are mainly focusing on public utilities, on public transport and on development of the local economy. As it will be analysed later, there are differences, especially in the field of human public services (Ibănescu et al. 2020; Haček 2020). The medium-sized municipalities – which are mainly town municipalities in these countries – have similar local development strategies, however, these strategies have limited financial resources, and these tasks mainly focus on the development of the local small and medium enterprises and on local community development issues. It should be emphasized, that those smaller municipalities which can be interpreted as tourism destinations, have well-organized and elaborated development policies, which focus on the development of the ‘local brand’. Small municipalities – especially in rural areas – even have local development policies, but they focus on involvement of the local human capacities and on personal cooperation of local stakeholders and small communities (Hoffman and Fazekas 2019). This pattern can be observed by the examination of other facultative tasks, for example cross-border cooperation: the activities of the smaller municipalities focus on the personal cooperation and personal capacities not on financial resources (Kukovič and Haček 2018).

4.2 ... and different ways

Although the municipal system of the Visegrád countries can be interpreted similarly, there are several differences. First, as it was mentioned above, *Poland* is the largest Visegrád country, it is larger and have more inhabitants than Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia altogether. The Polish system has its specialties: firstly, the regional municipalities, the voivodeships (*województwo*) have important regional development tasks, however the management of the ESIF is relatively centralized in Poland. Secondly, the first-tier municipalities of Poland are concentrated; they have fewer first-tier municipalities than Slovakia, which has a far smaller population. The regions have important competences in the field of the provision of human public services, the regions are the general maintainer of hospitals, specialized social care institutions and several public education institutions. Similarly, the 2nd tier municipalities, the districts (*powiat*) and the cities with district rights (*miasto na prawach powiatu* – which can be interpreted as urban municipalities) have even important service provision tasks. The development of human public services is more important in Poland. Although the human public services are significant tasks of the urban municipalities, only the minority of the Polish smart city programs focusing on these services: especially the education and partly the social care (only in Poznań) have been involved in these projects (Masik et al. 2020). The villages were merged into concentrated municipal units, into communities (*gmina*). However, the villages (*sołectwo*) could not be interpreted as independent municipalities, they have elements of self-governance: therefore, they can be distinguished as sub-municipal units. From 2010 – based on the Act on Village Found (*Ustawa o Funduszu Sołectkim*) the (merged) communities, as first-tier municipalities are encouraged to establish village funds and support their sub-municipal units. The local development aid was supported by the central budget. Although the immediate reaction to this act was moderate, in 2015 almost two-third of the rural municipalities had introduced this system (Swianiewicz 2018).

In *Slovakia* the regions (*kraj*) have several obligatory (statutory) tasks in the field of development policies (Janas and Janošková 2022). Because of the fragmented 1st tier municipal system – which is based on the fragmented spatial structure and on the principle of ‘one settlement – one municipality’ – the 1st tier development policies are mainly focusing on enhancing the cooperation of the inhabitants. There are of course exceptions: the capital city of Slovakia, Bratislava and its agglomeration is defined as a region (*kraj*), therefore, it has significant development responsibilities. The larger municipalities have similarly detailed development strategies, which are mainly focusing on the development of the local economy. Because of the wide powers of the regions, especially in the field of human public services, the development of these services is an important issue, as well (Klimovský and Nemeč 2021).

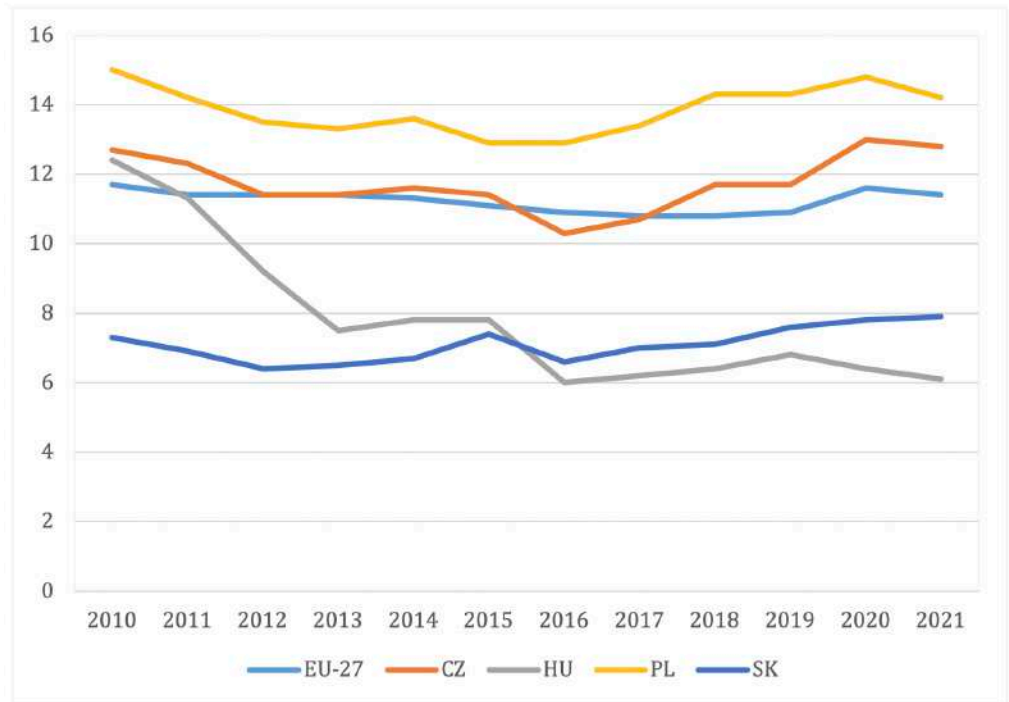
Czechia has a similarly fragmented municipal system, however the regions (*kraj*) have less development competencies, they are important public service providers. The specialty of the Czech system, that the Czech public administration can be considered as a *town-centered system*. Because of the fragmented 1st tier municipal systems, the significant share of the municipal services is performed by the town municipalities, which provide these tasks for their surroundings, as well (Radvan et al. 2021).

The *Hungarian* local development system was transformed radically during the last decade. As it was mentioned earlier, the counties lost their service provision tasks, and their development tasks are very limited, they have only supporting competences. The regional development has been strongly centralized, the management tasks belong to the responsibilities of the central government and its agencies. The 1st tier municipal system is fragmented, like in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and the tasks of these municipalities have been strongly centralized, and several tasks related to the maintenance of human public service providers and even public utilities were nationalized or at least concentrated. However, the municipalities were not merged, administration of the small – rural – municipalities are concentrated by the establishment of joint municipal offices (Hoffman et al. 2016). The municipal revenues were partly concentrated after 2010. Therefore, the opportunities to establish local development policies are very limited in Hungary. If they establish these policies then they depend on the central government actions strongly, because their financial resources are mainly provided by the central government and its agencies, primarily from funds which are co-funded by the ESI Funds (Hoffman 2018a; Pálné Kovács 2019).

4.3 The impact of the COVID-19 on local development policies

First, it should be emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-economic crisis, which was caused partly by the epidemic restrictions, are a situation that is clearly pointing in the direction of strengthening the centralization trends. In crisis situations, centralization steps and these administrative reforms traditionally took precedence over decentralization (Kostrubiec 2021). However, the centralization trend was dominant during the legislation of the last year, different tendencies can be observed. Municipalities can be the ‘trash cans’ of public administration: former central government competencies are decentralized because their performance could be unpopular (Hoffman and Balázs 2022). The local development policies of the Visegrád countries were influenced by this duality. First, the *municipal revenues* have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Because these revenues depend on the economic output, these revenues were decreased by the recession caused by the pandemic. Secondly, the *municipal expenditures* increased during the pandemic. The health care expenditures increased, and similarly the restrictions, the lockdowns caused even social impacts, which should be treated by the social care services. Municipalities had a limited framework for local development policies and local development policies focused on the treatment of the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like the general government expenditures, the share of the local government expenditures in the national economies increased in 2020, during the 1st and 2nd wave of COVID-19, a ‘pandemic peak’ can be seen in the statistics. However, the year 2021 was mainly a ‘relaxation’ after the excited state of 2020: this relaxation can be observed in Czechia, Poland and Slovakia. Hungary and Slovakia could be interpreted as exceptions: Hungary was an exception because of the municipal financial reform (which will be analysed later) a ‘COVID-peak’ cannot be observed and the mass testing during the 2nd and 3rd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted higher municipal expenditures in Slovakia. In Hungary the ‘COVID-peak’ was very slight and in Slovakia no peak in municipal spendings can be observed (see Figure 3).

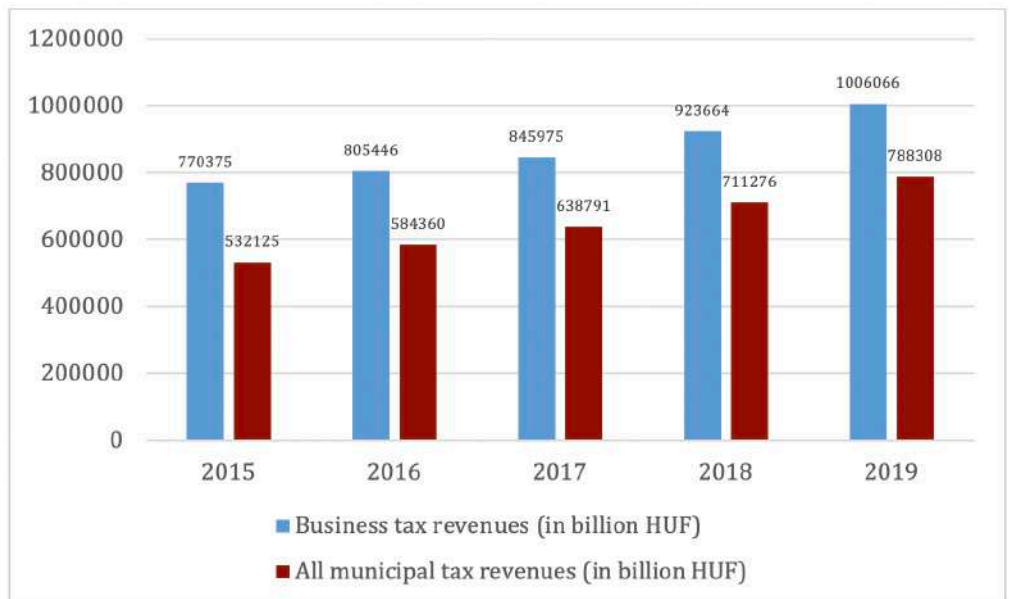
FIGURE 3: LOCAL GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES (V4 AND EU-27 IN THE SHARE OF GDP, 2010–2021)



Source: Eurostat.

Another common pattern was that the central government did not offer significant help and aid for the local government activities (Nemec and Špaček 2021). The activities of the Hungarian government were the most radical. Major element of the economic restart program was the radical decrease of the most important local tax, the local business tax (see Figure 3). The maximum rate of this tax for enterprises which have less than 4 billion HUF (around 10 million EUR) yearly income was decreased to one percent (from the former two percent). Thus, the maximum rate of tax was halved for most of the taxpayers.

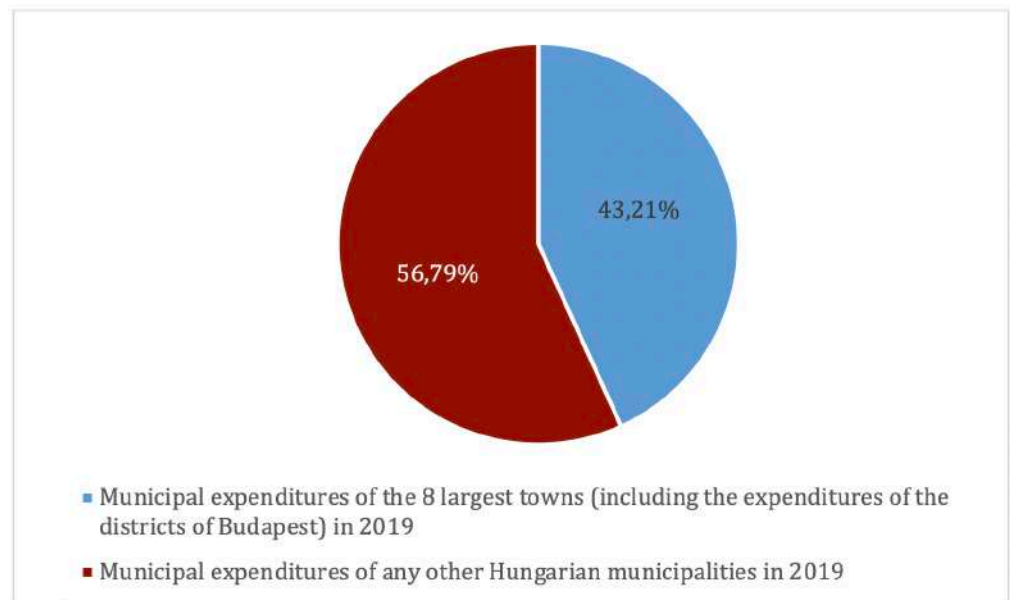
FIGURE 4: MUNICIPAL TAXATION AND ROLE OF THE LOCAL BUSINESS TAX



Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, www.ksh.hu.

This reform impacted mainly the larger municipalities: this tax is strongly concentrated, and this is the main (own) revenue of the urban municipalities (Siket 2021). Urban municipalities have a special political situation in Hungary: the dominance of the FIDESZ among these municipalities are slighter: 10 towns with county rights (out of 25) are led by the opposition mayors and coalitions. 4 towns which have more than 100 000 inhabitants are led by the opposition (out of seven, not including the capital Budapest). The capital, Budapest, which has about 1.7 million inhabitants (about 17-18 percent of the whole Hungarian population) is opposition-lead as well (the mayor of the capital city and 14 district mayors out of 23 belong to the opposition coalition). The municipal expenditures of the 8 largest municipalities cover 43,21% of the whole Hungarian municipal expenditures (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 5: SHARE OF THE MUNICIPAL EXPENDITURES OF THE LARGEST HUNGARIAN MUNICIPALITIES



Source: Eurostat and on the municipal decrees of annual financial accounts.

Similarly, it was common during the time of pandemic that the municipalities tried to introduce special 'COVID-policies' in the Visegrád countries. As I have mentioned above, these COVID-policies were not supported by the central government. However, several 'unpopular' measures – especially stricter regulations on lockdown, shop and market opening times and on mandatory face mask requirements – were 'decentralized' by the central governments of the Visegrád countries. Municipal bodies could make decisions and thus, these unpopular decisions became 'outsourced' to the municipalities, as the above mentioned 'trash cans' of public administrations (Plaček et al. 2020; Czuryk 2021; Hoffman and Balázs 2022). The 'COVID-policies' focused mainly on public service issues: for example, in Slovakia – and partly in Hungary – the mass testing during the first two waves of the COVID were significantly funded by the municipalities (Plaček et al. 2020; Hoffman and Balázs 2022). The 'COVID-policies' of the smaller municipalities have focused on care (especially social care) issues, and on those issues which could be managed by neighbourhood cooperation. Those smaller municipalities which can be considered as tourist destinations, could be interpreted as an exception, because they introduced economic development programs to mitigate the effects of epidemic restrictions (Plaček et al. 2020; Hoffman 2022).

The urban municipalities of the Visegrád countries had different patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the more significant resources, they introduced several development measures. Mainly these development policies focused on the aid for small and medium enterprises. In Poland the larger municipalities introduced tax discounts and they applied reduced prices for renting municipal lands and commercial premises. Several new, special social benefits were introduced mainly by the Polish towns, especially the fees of public services (public transport, kindergartens, schools etc.) were reduced (Kańdula and Przybylska 2021). Local tax reductions and aid for small and medium enterprises were introduced by the Czech and Slovakian larger municipalities, as well. As it was mentioned earlier, in Slovakia most of the municipalities organized mass testing on COVID-19 (Plaček et al. 2020). The Hungarian larger municipalities have a special situation: the similar development issues can be observed, as in Slovakia, but the development policies focused more on the social benefits. During the first wave of the COVID-19 unemployment became quite high in Hungary. After the social benefit reforms of 2011/12, Hungarian unemployment benefit has been provided only for a maximum 90 days which is the shortest period among the Visegrád countries and one of the shortest provision periods in the EU (Hungler 2022). Therefore, special unemployment benefits as municipal social benefits were introduced by the larger Hungarian municipalities in 2020. It should be emphasized that these benefits were introduced by those municipalities which have been led by the opposition parties, and these benefits could be interpreted as 'alternative social policy measures' by which the opposite offered a different social policy approach. As it was mentioned, during 2020 the major municipal own revenues of the Hungarian larger municipalities, the local business tax was significantly reduced by the central government: the development framework of the Hungarian (larger) municipalities became more limited (Hoffman and Balázs 2022; Siket 2021).

5 CONCLUSIONS

The local development policies depend on the municipal systems, the economic environment and on the role of the central government. The Visegrád countries have similar administrative systems, therefore the major characteristics of their development policies are similar. As new Member States of the EU and recipient of ESI Funds, they have a relatively centralized development system. However, the major elements are similar, and several differences can be observed. Poland as the largest Visegrád country has a relatively decentralized model which is based on the regionalization reforms. Czech, Hungarian and Slovakian municipal development systems are more fragmented, and have less competences. The administrative system of Hungary has been radically transformed during the last decade, it was strongly centralized, therefore, the possibilities of municipal development are more limited. Development of human public services is an important local issue, but in Hungary the central public service development policies are preferred by the nationalized public service provision system.

Similar patterns can be observed among the 1st tier municipalities: the detailed development policies can be observed among the larger, mainly urban municipalities, the local development policies of the smaller, rural municipalities are based on the personal cooperation and neighbourhood activities. The tourist destinations can be interpreted as exceptions: they have detailed development strategies based on the improvement of the local brand.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the increase of the municipal spending and in 2020 the decrease of the municipal revenues. The development strategies of the municipalities during the COVID-19 were not supported significantly by the central governments, in Hungary they were even limited by the radical reduction of the most important local taxes. The structure of the local development policies were not transformed by the pandemic and their structure remained the same: the rural municipalities focused on personal cooperation and the larger municipalities introduced special economic aids and social benefits.

It seemed that the economic crisis caused by the epidemic restrictions related to COVID-19 pandemic could be terminated in 2022, but the Russian aggression against Ukraine caused another economic difficulty in these countries and resulted in a new issue which should be considered during the planning of the new development policies: the refugee crisis. Because Poland, Slovakia and Hungary are neighbouring countries of Ukraine and the Czech Republic is close as well, these countries would face a great number of Ukrainian refugees. This issue should be considered among local development policies, as well. However, the first impacts of the Russian-Ukrainian war can be seen, the detailed analysis of its impact on the local development policies could be made later.

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POLITIKE LOKALNEGA RAZVOJA V DRŽAVAH V4 – V LUČI VPLIVA PANDEMIJE COVID-19

Višegrajske države imajo podobne upravne sisteme, zato so glavne značilnosti njihovih razvojnih politik podobne, kljub temu pa je opaziti več razlik. Omenjene podobnosti in razlike so analizirane v tem prispevku. Poljska ima sistem regij in delno združen občinski model prve stopnje, zato ima lokalni razvoj pomembno vlogo. Lokalne razvojne politike Madžarske, Češke in Slovaške omejujejo razdrobljeni prostorski in občinski sistemi, vendar imajo slovaške regije močno razvojno značilnost. Opaziti je mogoče centralizacijske težnje, vendar so njihove intenzivnosti različne. Na madžarski model na primer precej vpliva močna centralizacija v zadnjih desetih letih. Podobne strukture so se razvile med lokalnimi razvojnimi politikami občin prve stopnje: podrobne razvojne politike je mogoče opaziti med večjimi, predvsem mestnimi občinami; lokalne razvojne politike manjših, podeželskih občin pa temeljijo na osebnem sodelovanju in sosedskih dejavnostih. Pandemija COVID-19 je vplivala na lokalne razvojne politike - njihov fokus se je delno preoblikoval, diferencirana struktura lokalnih politik pa se ni bistveno spremenila, ampak je ostala nedotaknjena.

Ključne besede: lokalni razvoj; lokalne politike; občinski sistemi; centralizacija; Višegrajske države.