Space and governance: Three decades in international and Hungarian territorial governance

Tér és kormányzás: A nemzetközi és a magyar területi kormányzás három évtizede

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ABSTRACT: While the spatial dimension has remained indispensable in governance over the past decades, it must also be acknowledged that competing models coexist, and that the once-dominant neoliberal, decentralized governance model no longer does. Hungary provides a salient example of this shift, where further profound transformations are expected. Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine the evolution of territorial governance trends in an international comparative perspective and to contrast them with Hungarian developments from 1990 to the present. Based primarily on a literature review, the paper pays particular attention not only to reforms affecting constitutional and institutional frameworks, but also to changes in the operational mechanisms of public administration.

The structure of the study is as follows. First, it reconstructs the chronological trajectory of territorial reforms affecting both subnational and local levels. Second, it identifies successive functional reform paradigms in public administration, notably New Public Management (NPM) and Post-NPM approaches. Third, it classifies governance responses to the challenges of urban regions, encompassing smart urban governance approaches and multi-level governance as a framework for maintaining the sovereign state's governing capacity, and interpretations of efficiency-oriented governance frameworks. The third chapter examines Hungarian reforms in detail, highlighting their alignment with international trends as well as their specificities, including the various manifestations of post-2010 centralization, state-building, and the expansion of public ownership.

The analysis leads to the conclusion that, as a result of reforms implemented after 2010, Hungary has shifted from the category of decentralized states into that of unitary and highly centralized systems, where local authorities are comparatively weak. It is clearly demonstrable that most elements of local autonomy have been significantly eroded. The central state does not support either horizontal cooperation or vertical coordination across levels of governance, and policy network adaptation has remained limited. The constitutional reforms were launched under the banner of building an efficient and cost-effective state; however, neither comprehensive nor partial evaluations of their outcomes have been produced by the government. The idea of the "good state" has remained largely rhetorical.

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It may further be argued that Hungarian public administration has moved away from both the Weberian state model and the trajectory of Europeanisation. The findings support the theoretical proposition that the success or failure of reforms correlates with the broader social, economic, and cultural environment of a given country: in this case with delayed development and historical traditions. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that the Hungarian "deviation" is not merely a transient or isolated national exception.

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KULCSSZAVAK: államszervezet; területi kormányzás; helyi önkormányzat; decentralizáció; post-NPM

ABSZTRAKT: Míg a kormányzás területi dimenziója az elmúlt évtizedekben is megkerülhetetlen kihívás maradt, el kell ismerni, hogy egymással versengő modellek léteznek párhuzamosan, és a korábban domináns neoliberális, decentralizált kormányzási modell már nem tölti be e meghatározó szerepét. E folyamatok közepette a tanulmány célja, hogy nemzetközi összehasonlító perspektívában vizsgálja a területi kormányzási trendek fejlődését. A cikk a hazai és nemzetközi szakirodalom alapján – elsősorban a főbb iskolákra és reformokra fókuszálva – mutatja be az utóbbi három évtizedet jellemző irányzatokat a területi kormányzás fejlődésében. Először, rekonstruálja a szubnacionális és helyi szinteket érintő területi reformokat. Másodszor, azonosítja a közigazgatás egymást követő funkcionális reformparadigmáit: az Új Közmenedzsment (New Public Management) és az Új Közmenedzsment utáni (poszt-New Public Management) megközelítéseket. Harmadszor, rendszerezi a városi térségek kihívásaira adott kormányzási válaszokat, valamint a többszintű kormányzás különböző változatait, mint az állam kormányzóképességének fenntartását szolgáló keretet. A harmadik fejezet részletesen elemzi a magyarországi reformokat, kiemelve azok nemzetközi trendekhez fűződő viszonyát és sajátosságait.

A tanulmány arra a következtetésre jut, hogy – különösen a 2010 után bekövetkezett átalakítások nyomán – a magyar területi kormányzás szerkezetében és hatékonyságában is levált az európai fősodorról. A centralizált államszerkezet nem képes sem a governance, sem pedig a partnerség és szubszidiaritás elveit, illetve gyakorlatát érvényesíteni. Az eredmények alátámasztják azt az elméleti feltevést, hogy a reformok sikere vagy kudarca összefügg az adott ország tágabb társadalmi, gazdasági és kulturális környezetével – jelen esetben a megkésett fejlődéssel és a történelmi hagyományokkal. Ugyanakkor azt is el kell ismerni, hogy a magyar „eltérés" nem átmeneti vagy elszigetelt nemzeti kivétel.

Introduction

We dedicate this study to the 40th anniversary of *Tér és Társadalom* ("Space and Society"). Since its foundation, the journal has provided a forum for scholarship on governance and institutions that adopts a spatial perspective, seeking to explore the interrelations between territorial inequalities, territorial development, and the models, structures and concrete practices of governance. The authors have also repeatedly contributed to the journal, particularly when issues in territorial governance came into focus that were considered relevant to spatial processes:

the rise of local societal self-awareness, the institutional needs of regional development policy, the emergence of regional thinking, the search for forms and spaces of cooperation between cities and their surroundings, local economic development, local public services, the COVID-19 pandemic and resilience, and accelerating centralisation.

The period marking the journal's anniversary also appears to be a turbulent one. This is not only because the results of the Hungarian parliamentary elections in April 2026 may bring reforms in the model of political governance, but also because the "transforming world order" has already, in many respects, eroded the fundamental principles, values, and theories that have long shaped territorial governance over the past decade. The dynamics of territorial governance are more fluid than those of governmental and representative systems, and adjustments occur frequently; however, the current challenges may induce deeper structural transformations. The direction in which the Hungarian system will evolve depends simultaneously on domestic political developments and broader international trends and conditions.

The spatial dimension of governance remains indispensable; however, it must also be acknowledged that competing governance models exist. The neoliberal, decentralized governance model, once considered mainstream, no longer occupies the dominant position it held three decades ago. Hungary provides a pertinent example of this shift. This study aims to examine the evolution of territorial governance trends and to confront them with Hungarian developments. The choice of topic and timing are closely linked, as at the time of writing, there is a high probability that the Hungarian system of territorial governance will face another wave of reforms, largely irrespective of the parliamentary balance of power that will emerge.

Our primary aim is to situate the Hungarian territorial governance system within broader international trends; accordingly, the analysis begins in the 1990s, while also addressing earlier international developments into which post-transition Hungary became integrated.

The study is based primarily on a review of the relevant scholarly literature, complemented by the authors' several decades of empirical research experience in Hungary, much of which has been published in this journal. We are grateful for this opportunity and express our hope that both the journal and the authors' collaboration will continue in the future.

Trends and shifts in territorial governance systems

During the decades marked by the acceleration of globalization, a broad professional and political consensus emerged at the level of major international organizations that national (member state) systems of governance should be

"developed" along the neoliberal principles and models characteristic of advanced Western, particularly Western European, democracies. Global organizations such as the World Bank, the OECD, and the United Nations, together with the Council of Europe and the European Union, promoted – under the rubric of "good governance – the principles and practices of representative and participatory democracy, the rule of law, and governmental effectiveness. These frameworks generally emphasized decision-making close to citizens, transparency, openness, and multi-sectoral and multi-level partnerships. Such principles are intrinsically linked to support for decentralized governance. However, the definition of decentralization varies from legal, political, fiscal, and geographical approaches, generally accepting the main message to transfer power to the bottom. The general model has been articulated in the European Charter of Local Self-Government (CE 1985), as well as in the reports, declarations, and recommendations of the UN, the World Bank, and the OECD (e.g., Gold Report 2009; UN-Habitat 2007, 2012; OECD 2016, 2017). Decentralized systems of local government enjoying a degree of autonomy have been widely regarded as both more democratic and more efficient. However, the frequent shortcomings of externally driven reforms highlight the importance of social, economic, and cultural context (Litvack, Junaid, Bird 1998) and the limitations of applying uniform models across diverse settings (Hutchcroft 2001).

In Europe, alongside democratic governance and fundamental rights standards, increasingly sophisticated regulatory frameworks and cooperation mechanisms have been developed to foster convergence among the policy-making and administrative institutions of governance systems (Hughes, Sasse, Gordon 2004). At the same time, these mechanisms have had a more limited impact on reform processes in new democracies, largely because considerations of suitability and applicability have often been neglected (Nemec, de Vries 2012). The academic field has also struggled to provide analytically coherent conceptual and methodological frameworks for examining international convergence in public administration, its mechanisms, and its outcomes (Bauer, Ege, Schomaker 2018), sometimes confusing the top-down-led territorial, deconcentrated state administration and the bottom-up elected self-governments.

As a conceptual starting point, we can use as general frames of comparison the following policy documents: At the local level of governance, the European Charter of Local Self-Government remains a cornerstone, the implementation of which is monitored by the Council of Europe with varying degrees of success. Achieving consensus has proven even more difficult with regard to the intermediate (regional) level of governance. The draft of the European Charter of Regional Self-Government, initiated by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, was never submitted to the Council of Europe for adoption, reflecting national governments' reluctance to support regionalization; instead, a White Paper on multi-level governance was endorsed as a set of principles for interplay between European, national and subnational governments.

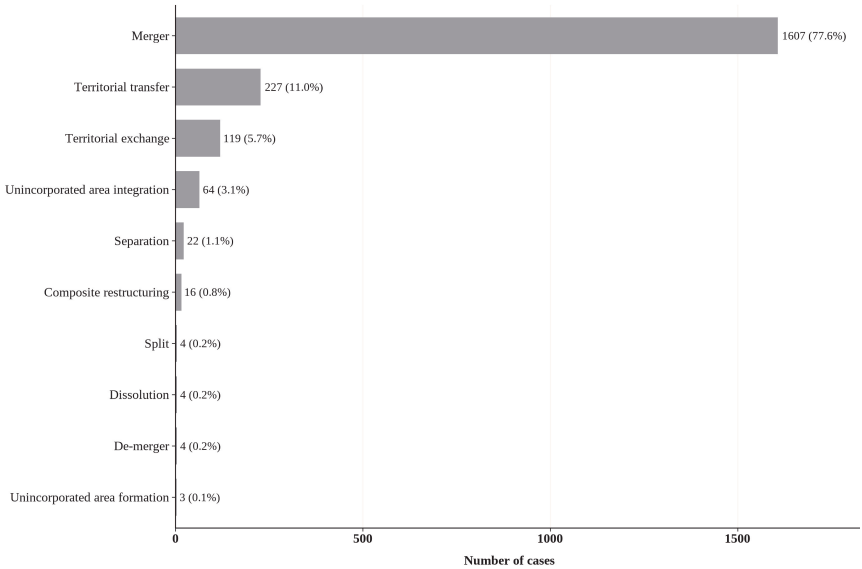
Local-level governance reforms

In the older member states of the European Union, systems of local self-government have a longer historical trajectory than in the post-socialist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. The predominant direction of reforms has been decentralization, typically underpinned by spatial restructuring and the intention to achieve more rational territorial decision-making (Baldersheim, Rose 2010). In the 1960s and 1970s, reforms primarily affected the local (municipal) level, while from the 1980s onwards, transformations increasingly targeted the intermediate (subnational) tier. In most Western European countries, capacity and resource expansion was taking place, through the creation of larger, more scale-efficient local and territorial units (Gaulé 2010; Loughlin, Hendriks, Lidström 2011).

The relationship between municipal size (territorial structure), assigned responsibilities (functional profile), and administrative capacity has driven successive waves of territorial reforms across numerous European countries since the 1950s and 1960s. The requirement of "territorial viability" is closely linked to the long-standing concept of local self-government, according to which local authorities must possess a critical mass of competences, alongside adequate fiscal capacity and administrative resources, in order to exercise genuine autonomy (Kuhlmann, Heuberger, Dumas 2021). Addressing suboptimal systems based on very small municipalities has followed two principal trajectories. One group of states has opted for so-called up-scaling, implementing territorial consolidation through municipal mergers and thereby creating integrated, large-scale local government units. Another group, by contrast, treats historically evolved municipal structures as a political value and seeks to ensure the viability of the local level through various forms of inter-municipal cooperation (IMC), complemented by additional supportive mechanisms – an approach commonly described as trans-scaling reform (Kuhlmann, Wollmann 2013; Swianiewicz 2010).

A second wave of territorial reforms began in the mid-1990s and was further reinforced by the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, although s reforms have often been politically sensitive (Swianiewicz 2015). This new phase of rationalization affected more than 10 countries across Europe, while similar processes of municipal amalgamation also occurred in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (Callanan, Murphy, Quinlivan 2014; Swianiewicz 2015). Notably, contemporary restructuring of local governance systems tends to follow two main approaches: the more common top-down, single-step model, in which mergers are mandated by central government decree; and, less frequently, a more participatory model, in which municipalities themselves may propose amalgamations (Swianiewicz et al. 2022). Among the many forms of municipal spatial changes, mergers have been the most widespread with regard to 35 European countries over the last decade (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Territorial alterations by type, 2015–2024
Területi változások típusok szerint, 2015–2024

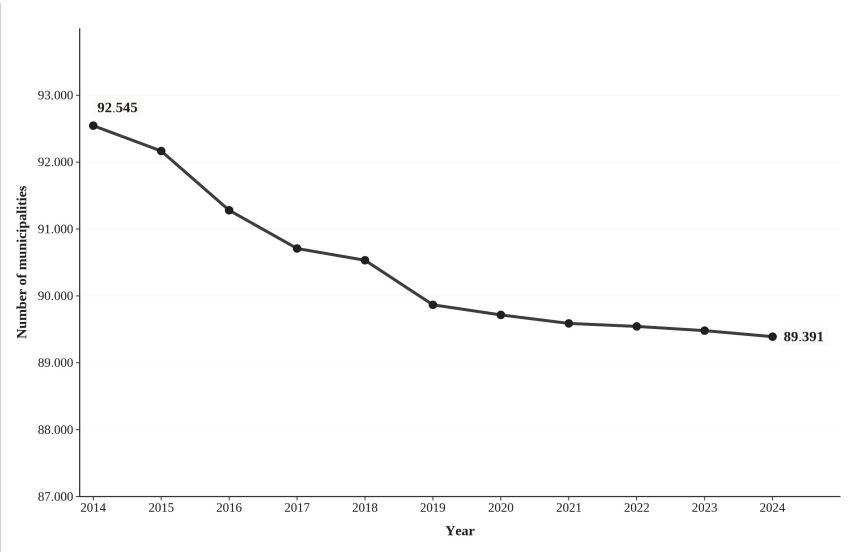


Source: Rodionova et al. (2026, 11.)

From a governance perspective, a reduced number of local units may generate several advantages, including the elimination of overlapping jurisdictions, improved service quality and efficiency, enhanced fiscal capacity, the possibility of employing professional administrative staff, and the decentralization (or devolution) of additional public functions to the local level. The latter is particularly significant in relation to the provision of public services at the city-regional scale, the reduction of territorial disparities, the mitigation of spillover effects, and the identification of optimal scales for economic development (Callanan, Murphy, Quinlivan 2014).

In certain countries, territorial reforms implemented after 2000 led to a comprehensive restructuring of local governance units (Figure 2). In Denmark, for example, the number of municipalities decreased by one-third, while their average population increased by approximately 50%. In Albania and Ireland, reforms went even further, effectively eliminating the local tier and replacing it with an intermediate level (Hansen 2019; Swianiewicz et al. 2022). In Eastern Germany, top-down reforms resulted in an average reduction of 62.8% in the number of local governments, producing a comparable degree of territorial concentration at the district level. Comprehensive evaluations have assessed these reforms as broadly positive in several respects (Ebinger, Kuhlmann, Bogumil 2019).

Figure 2: Number of municipalities across 35 European countries, 2014–2024
A községek száma 35 európai országban, 2014–2024



Note: The number of municipalities as of January 1st of each year.
Source: Rodionova et al. (2026, 12.)

In countries where small-scale municipal systems persist (such as the Czech Republic, Italy, and Hungary), inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) has become widespread as a mean of generating collective benefits through resource-sharing among localities, in contrast to state subsidies aimed at equalization (Bel, Warner 2015; Hulst, Montfort 2007). At the same time, scholars have highlighted several potential risks associated with IMC arrangements that alter local governance structures, including the lengthening of service delivery chains, information asymmetries, moral hazard, democratic deficits, and a lack of transparency, as well as the excessive complexity of service provision systems (Dafflon 2013).

Territorial-level governance reforms

Alongside reforms at the local level, the period of regionalization in Europe proved particularly turbulent, driven by diverse influences and motivations (Keating 2004; Pálné Kovács 2019). In certain countries, regionalization unfolded as a fundamentally political and power-related process, shaped by the influence of groups directly affected by territorial reorganization (Keating 2014). In Western and Southern Europe, the strengthening of regional autonomy rooted in ethnic and national identities became a defining feature. In contrast, in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, the primary motivation before EU accession was access to cohesion funds. Subsequently, however, concerns related

to national minorities, as well as central government distrust toward emerging territorial political elites, increasingly fuelled centralizing tendencies (Scott 2009). With the notable exception of Poland, strong intermediate levels of governance did not emerge in the new EU member states. The pressures of adaptation to EU public policies (Hughes, Sasse, Gordon 2004) did not constitute a sustained driver of regional decentralization, while additional factors also contributed to the limited success of regional reform efforts (Saarts 2019). At the same time, it should be noted that certain territorial reforms did gradually strengthen intermediate levels, for example, in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The inconsistent and largely unsuccessful trajectory of regionalization was also influenced by EU administrative practices, which were not particularly conducive to building closer institutional relationships with regions and, in some respects, reinforced the centralizing tendencies of national governments (Piattoni, Polverari 2016).

The role of intermediate (subnational) levels is closely linked to the position of local governments; their relationship is not a zero-sum game. On the contrary, stronger regional self-governments can contribute to the strengthening of local autonomy, as the two levels are not hierarchically subordinated but rather operate in a partnership-based relationship (Ladner et al. 2019).

While territorial reforms up to the 1990s brought about significant structural changes at the intermediate level (Hooghe et al. 2016; Rodríguez-Pose, Muštra 2022), over the past two decades, administrative boundaries have generally remained unchanged. Instead, more flexible, less structural approaches have become prevalent, relying on functional public policy instruments rather than formal territorial restructuring of competencies, such as their differentiated distribution, and the introduction of stricter quality standards.

Functional reforms in local governance

In most countries, territorial governance systems have undergone not revolutionary but rather corrective reforms (Reynaert et al. 2005). Uniform, public-law-based institutional models have increasingly been replaced by new mechanisms and organizational solutions, including asymmetric, context-specific arrangements operating across diverse geographical scales. Alongside public-law decentralization, authority has also become more dispersed in horizontal dimension. Under the influence of the globally promoted neoliberal governance paradigm, the vertical division of power has been complemented by a reconfigured horizontal logic, in which the objective is no longer limited to the separation and mutual checks of branches of government, but extends to the inclusion of new actors and sectors not vested with formal public authority within central and territorial/local decision-making arenas. This shift has been closely associated with the philosophy of New Public Management (NPM), which has generated new institutional arrangements and operational mechanisms within local governments.

The starting point of NPM reforms was the assumption that the perceived inefficiencies of the bureaucratic state could be addressed through the application of private-sector and market-based instruments. Emerging in Anglo-Saxon countries in the 1970s, this approach rapidly spread worldwide, giving rise to various subtypes in line with horizontal decentralization and increased intersectoral rapprochement (Horváth M. 2005). Governance failures prompted a radical reconfiguration of the boundaries between the public and private sectors, with expectations of improved efficiency and effectiveness tied to the adoption of business management techniques and the involvement of private capital. Whereas the bureaucratic state derived its legitimacy primarily from democratic procedures, performance outputs, effectiveness became central criteria of evaluation in this new era (Peters 2010).

In the so-called post-NPM period, several core elements of the previous paradigm have persisted. The concept of public governance emerged in the new millennium as a purported successor to NPM, placing greater emphasis on citizen participation (Holtkamp 2010). The closely related New Public Governance (NPG) paradigm foregrounds policy networks and the increasingly multi-actor nature of public service delivery and policymaking processes (Osborne 2010). At the same time, the decentralization and devolution processes of the past quarter century have also drawn attention to the continued importance of strong state and central coordination, particularly in response to emerging management challenges and the limitations of political and societal steering. The concept of meta-governance – understood as the governance of governance (Peters 2010) – highlights that governments do not exercise control exclusively through direct intervention, but rather by combining and coordinating different modes of governance (market, hierarchy, networks) to pursue policy objectives (Gjaltema, Biesbroek, Termeer 2020). Nevertheless, central authorities may subsequently reverse elements of decentralization and reassert direct control, as has occurred in several countries.

Both post-NPM approaches and the so-called neo-Weberian state share the feature that certain private-sector elements continue to shape evolving patterns of public service provision. However, the strengthening of governmental roles is not universal but characterizes specific groups of countries (Horváth M. 2016). The Netherlands, Hungary, Croatia, Norway, Sweden, and Spain have reinforced public service-oriented logics (Schwab, Bouckaert, Kuhlmann 2017). At the same time, pluralization remains evident: competitive tendering and outsourcing continue to be widely used, particularly in Northern European countries, while post-socialist states, including Hungary, have also relied on the involvement of the non-profit sector and religious organizations.

The revitalization of public service logic has also been promoted within the municipal sector across Europe (re-municipalization). According to a comparative international study, the number of companies and enterprises owned wholly or with majority by the municipalities, has increased significantly

among urban local governments (van Genugten, van Thiel, Voorn 2020). However, this trend has also generated new governance challenges, both at the level of local authorities responsible for service provision and from the perspective of the state, which exercises legal oversight and control over public finances.

Governance models are closely related to the economic and social challenges of their respective historical periods. During phases of economic expansion, central governments tend to adopt a more accommodating stance toward decentralization actors. In contrast, periods of crisis have, in many countries, intensified skepticism toward decentralized governance models and prompted shifts toward centralization (Drechsler 2009). The increasing salience of security concerns has likewise triggered centralizing reflexes (Göymen, Sazak 2014), as evidenced during the COVID-19 crisis. Long-term comparative analyses suggest that the reduction of local and regional governmental authority is characteristic of regime shifts moving from democratic toward more authoritarian forms of governance (Hooghe et al. 2016).

The urban challenge

While the idea of regionalization appears to be weakening overall, new dilemmas have emerged regarding the "geography" of spatial governance, most notably in relation to urban areas. Accelerated urbanization driven by globalization has been accompanied by the dynamic growth in both the population and the economic weight of large cities. Cities exist in strong and mutually dependent relationships with their hinterlands; however, the fragmented structure of local authorities governing these territories has necessitated the coordination of their functions since the late nineteenth century.

The post-NPM paradigm, alongside direct government intervention, has called for a plurality of actors, flexible territorial scales, and adaptive governance spaces (Lynn 2010). It has become increasingly evident that the new spatiality of the economy, as well as competition among territorial units, is contingent upon governance performance and the quality of infrastructure, which largely falls within the competence of the public sector[1]. The search for the optimal scale of economic development has led to the delineation of so-called functional urban areas (FUAs) (OECD 2012, 2020), encompassing metropolitan agglomerations. In many countries, public policies acknowledging this new geographical scale of economic development have supported the spread of the concept of "soft spaces" (Faragó 2006; Salamin 2025). Consequently, the networked nature of contemporary economic processes has generated a renewed wave of institutionalization on the administrative side, combining top-down interventions with forms of cooperation initiated by local governments (Somlyódyné Pfeil 2008).

Metropolitan governance has thus emerged as a key mechanism of economic development policy, grounded in strategic territorial planning and operating as a governance mechanism in its own right. The rise of spatial

planning reflects the partial retreat of states from traditional land-use planning (Somlyódyné Pfeil 2014), although they continue to retain decisive authority by shaping spatial structures (rescaling) and legitimizing autonomous self-governing units (Brenner 2004; Somlyódyné Pfeil 2011). The significance of this field is underscored by the OECD's analysis of 275 FUAs, which identified distinct types of metropolitan governance arrangements, including single-tier, inter-municipal partnership-based, two-tier, and informally fragmented single-tier models (Ahrend, Gamper, Schumann 2014). Similarly, Tosics (2008) classified European metropolitan areas according to their relationship with administrative regions and within the framework of multi-level governance.

In parallel, the urban dimension has been progressively strengthened within the regional and cohesion policy of the European Union. As early as 1997, the policy initiative "Towards an Urban Agenda in the EU" was launched (EC 1997), followed by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) in 1999 (EC 1999), which emphasized the need for partnerships between urban and rural areas. The Pact of Amsterdam (Urban Agenda 2016) further highlighted the importance of effective urban governance based on citizen participation, as well as the role of strategic urban planning. In terms of content, this agenda closely parallels the United Nations' New Urban Agenda (UN 2017), developed almost simultaneously with EU initiatives.

In this context, during the last two programming periods, the EU has introduced two key instruments to foster cooperation within urban areas: Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). ITI has been successfully applied in 19 member states, including the Czech Republic, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Slovakia, and Poland (Czischke, Pascariu 2015). The EU has also conducted large-scale research on the institutionalization and spatial planning practices of metropolitan areas in member states (ESPON 2021). According to these findings, in Central and Eastern Europe – particularly in Romania, the Czech Republic, and Poland – policy-driven metropolitan governance models have been established through national-level initiatives. In Poland, strongly influenced by EU funding allocation mechanisms, significant spatial planning competencies have been assigned to functional urban areas (Kociuba 2018; Mikula 2020). Hungary, by contrast, belongs to a group of member states where development of management capacities has been concentrated primarily in capital cities (Casavola et al. 2025). It must be highlighted that, at the global level, a clear mismatch can be observed: the rapid expansion of metropolitan areas has not been accompanied by the development of adequate governance structures, and FUAs are often governed in an ad hoc manner without comprehensive development strategies (Armondi 2020).

The breakthrough in information and communication technologies (ICT) in the mid-1990s introduced a new set of complex challenges for territorial governance. The first generation of smart cities that emerged in response was

technology-driven and focused primarily on digital, data-based, and decision-supporting services. In the subsequent phase, the concept of the "intelligent city" evolved, in which technological innovations became integrated into urban management under the direction of city authorities (Sallai 2018). Third-generation smart cities are increasingly characterized as "community-driven," in which service organizations involve the active participation of local residents, elevating urban governance to a new level (Pereira et al. 2018).

Today, the smart city paradigm is closely associated with the vision of sustainability and the creation of liveable urban environment, in alignment with the European Union's climate adaptation objectives. A key development is that digital communication and digital literacy have opened new pathways for governance, enhancing transparency and public visibility in decision-making processes. At the same time, significant challenges persist in bridging territorial and generational divides in digital infrastructure and skills (Gyimesi, Somlyódyné Pfeil 2021). According to Nilssen (2019), the contemporary smart city concept integrates technological, organizational, and collaborative forms of experimental innovation. The most innovative actors in this domain are metropolitan regions, which simultaneously face the most complex and large-scale socio-economic and environmental challenges.

Multi-level governance

The role of territorial governments cannot be adequately examined without considering transformations in the system of multi-level governance (MLG). During the 1990s, the EU witnessed the institutional consolidation of regional and local authorities' participation in decision-making (Brucker 2024), the benefits of which have tended to accrue more substantially to countries characterized by decentralized structures, strong regions, and major urban centres (Rodríguez-Pose, Courty 2018). At the global level, political actors and scholars alike have articulated ambitions and theoretical frameworks advocating for an enhanced role of local governments (Barber 2014; Curtis 2016; Vallier, Poth-Mögele, Noupadja 2018). These perspectives are grounded in the recognition that cities and regions – often through their alliances and transnational networks – have become established actors in international relations. In many instances, they represent values and public policy priorities on which nation-state governments themselves may lack internal coherence (Kerley, Liddle, Dunning 2019). The so-called new municipalist movements not only advance novel models of power sharing across governance levels but also seek to serve as exemplars of democratic and participatory innovation in governance (Peters 2017; Raco 2018).

International comparative efforts

Organizations, movements, and schools of thought that regard decentralization as a universally applicable normative value – as well as theoretical approaches in public administration, constitutional law, and political science concerned with local autonomy – have traditionally prioritized the degree of independence enjoyed by local governments within different systems of power (Litvack, Junaid, Bird 1998; Norton 1994). In the absence of methodologies grounded in standardized statistical data, early comparative research largely relied on narrative country descriptions and typologies (Keating 2004; Loughlin, Hendriks, Lidström 2011) as a kind of methodological nationalism.

According to a widely accepted classification drawing on administrative traditions, legal cultures, and political-institutional characteristics, Napoleonic systems are typically unitary, centralized, and characterized by relatively weak local governments. Federal systems are decentralised with strong subnational authorities, while the Nordic countries combine unitary state structures with high levels of decentralization and robust local governments. Finally, in unitary, centralized Anglo-Saxon systems, the position of local governments has tended to weaken (Kuhlmann, Heuberger, Dumas 2021). Within this framework, the Eastern European subgroup of countries comprises unitary but decentralized states – such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia – with comparatively strong local governments. In contrast, the South-Eastern European group of countries includes more centralized unitary states such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Slovenia. Since 2010, Hungary has shifted into the category of unitary and centralized state systems, where local authorities are comparatively weak (Kuhlmann, Dumas, Heuberger 2020).

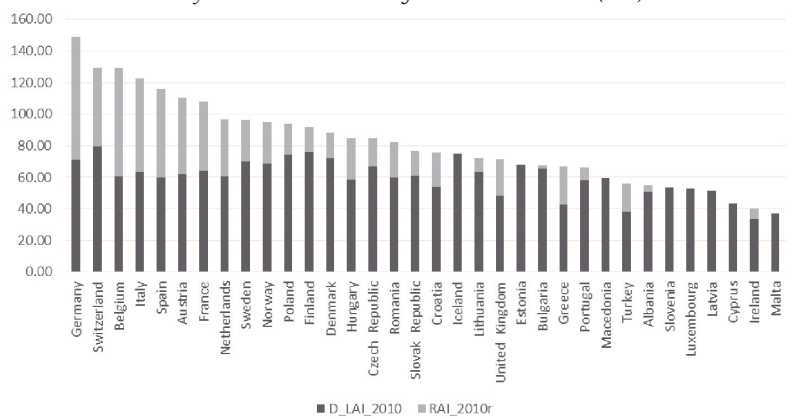
In recent decades, scholars analysing governance systems have experimented with more refined and complex evaluation approaches, not only advancing methodology but also responding to evolving conceptions of governance itself. The paradigm of "good governance" and its associated measurement tools – such as the World Governance Index – are premised on the assumption that a globally applicable model exists to which all systems can and should adapt (Pálné Kovács 2014). More recently, however, perspectives have become more nuanced, moving beyond the previously dominant neoliberal framework. Key questions now include what types of governance arrangements are required to achieve emerging policy objectives (Harbers 2019), and whether decentralization strengthens or, conversely, weakens the state (Faguet, Pöschl 2015). As governance structures grow increasingly complex, the strict separation of competencies across levels and sectors becomes more difficult to sustain in a way that guarantees autonomy. Consequently, measurement, comparison, and modelling must consider not only the extent of autonomy, but also performance and effectiveness.

Although the principle articulated since Oates – "centralize where necessary, decentralize where possible" (Hooghe, Marks 2016, 11.) – remains widely accepted, its practical application poses significant challenges. Territorial units are inherently heterogeneous, necessitating forms of "geocoding" (Harbers 2019) better to capture the spatial embeddedness of local and regional governance.

One of the principal functions of measurement and comparison is to identify temporal trends. The European Commission initiated a project to set up the Local Autonomy Index (LAI), extended to an expanding set of countries, which provides longitudinal insights into the evolution of local government positions. The methodological innovation was to provide comprehensive, so-called self-rule and interactive rule (shared rule) indicators going far beyond the former, mostly financial and legal aspects (EC 2015; Schakel et al. 2018). The Regional Authority Index (RAI) likewise is a significant scholarly and public policy endeavour (Hooghe et al. 2016; Hooghe, Marks 2016; Marks, Hooghe, Schakel 2008; Rodríguez-Pose, Muštra 2022), demonstrating that intermediate levels of governance – regions in particular – can play a decisive role in shaping national governance systems.

The increasingly sophisticated methodologies have demonstrated that – aside from regime transitions – local government autonomy does not exhibit dramatic fluctuations. Instead, the characteristics of local governance tend to co-evolve with broader national political and institutional systems. While post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe displayed common features for an extended period, divergent models have emerged over the past decade, indicating that regime change did not constitute a lasting structural determinant (Ladner et al. 2019, 2025). Within this ranking, Hungary's position has changed particularly markedly (Figure 3).

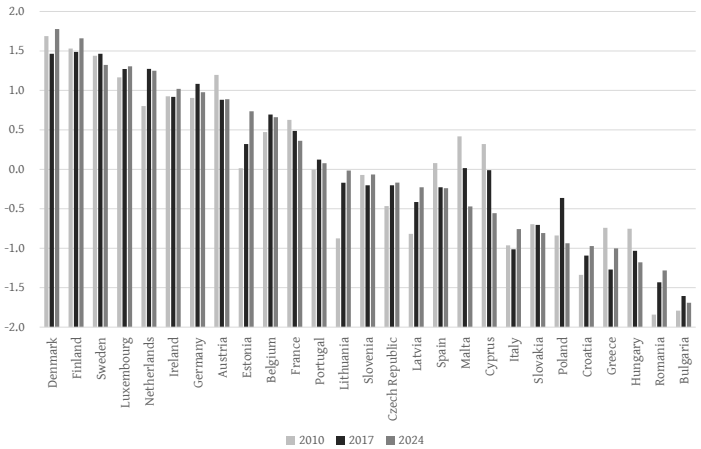
Figure 3: Local Autonomy Index and Regional Authority Index (2010)
A helyi autonómia index és a regionális autoritási index (2010)



Source: Ladner, Keuffer, Baldersheim (2016,70.)

Finally, the work of Charron and colleagues (2024), notably the European Quality of Government Index (EQI), underscores the importance of regional governance alongside national-level performance. Even within identical regulatory frameworks, regions differ substantially in their capacity to contribute to service provision and development outcomes. The data further suggest that the pace of regional development is contingent upon local and regional decision-makers; notably, over the past decade and a half, a decline in performance has been observed only in the case of Hungarian regions (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: European Governance Quality Index
Az európai kormányzási minőség index



Source: edited by Zsuzsanna Zsibók based on Charron, Lapuente, and Bauhr (2024)

The continuously refined methodologies of the aforementioned research programs highlight the evolving expectations placed on territorial governance, treating the autonomy, status, institutional conditions, scope, and quality of functions performed by different levels of government, as well as issues such as corruption, as variables of shifting relative importance. However, the municipal-based comparison means a big methodological challenge (Rodionova et al. 2026). Sectors and governance levels cannot – and arguably should not – be conceptually separated in a strict sense. What matters more is how they are interconnected: rather than autonomy in isolation, it is the nature and quality of intergovernmental interactions that are decisive. Centralization and decentralization are simultaneously present in all systems of governance (Pálné Kovács 2019). Their relative balance is partly determined by questions of functional suitability and institutional capacity, and partly by prevailing political power relations, which do not necessarily favour decentralization. This complex and shifting dynamic is illustrated in the following subchapter through the case of Hungarian local governments.

Trends in territorial governance in Hungary, 1990–2026

The Hungarian territorial governance system has often produced extreme cases compared to international trends over the past nearly four decades. Historical traditions have shaped the position of local governments, the value orientation of the domestic political elite, societal culture, the fluctuating commitment to Western models following regime change and EU accession, and, not least, domestic political shifts. The pronounced swings between decentralization and centralization suggest that local self-government has not taken deep root either in the value system of the political elite or in society at large (Pálné Kovács 2016). The early post-1990 enthusiasm for empowering local communities proved unsustainable, and successive governments have gradually constrained the autonomy of local governments. It is therefore not surprising that the radical centralization after 2010 could unfold with relatively little internal or external resistance.

The evolution of Hungarian territorial governance reforms can be described as a mixture of revolutions and corrections (Reynaert et al. 2005), lacking a stable, long-term development trajectory in terms of either structure or functioning. This raises the question of the extent to which the territorial governance model established in 1990 – subsequently amended and eventually radically reshaped – was grounded in socio-economic realities. Academic interest in local government, as reflected, for example, in articles published in *Tér és Társadalom* ("Space and Society"), illustrates changing trends and emphases over time.

The local government model adopted in 1990 was based on proximity to citizens and local democracy as core values; it therefore prioritized the local level regardless of size and deliberately weakened the subnational level. These two structural features have shaped reform efforts for decades. As discussed in the following sections, pre-2010 corrective reforms aimed largely at integration failed to produce substantial results. Neither microregional associations, nor counties/regions, nor urban districts became stable frameworks for inter-municipal cooperation. This failure opened the way for the centralizing turn after 2010. The Hungarian local government system did not lose its defining position with the adoption of the new Local Government Act, but already with the transformation of the state structure and state philosophy in the Fundamental Law (Balázs 2012; Dobos, Pálné Kovács 2025). Instead of strengthening local governments structurally and financially, state centralization and the transfer of competences to the central level became the main "revolutionary" instruments – again with limited success. Meanwhile, the erosion of local autonomy represents a significant loss from the perspective of the advantages offered by decentralized governance system (Pálné Kovács 2019), leaving little room for network-based governance that transcends administrative boundaries. Legal uncertainty is increasing, and uniform regulatory approaches that limit local discretion are not designed to address local problems (Gajduschek 2016).

Structural adjustments in a fragmented local government system

The model based on the principle of "one municipality – one local government" has left Hungary with a fragmented local government system since 1990. During the period up to 2010, which can be broadly characterized as decentralized, both operational efficiency and service quality remained low. Local authorities, regardless of their size or administrative capacity, were burdened with an increasing number of responsibilities alongside growing underfunding. At the same time, municipal amalgamation was never seriously considered. Instead, within the existing constitutional framework, multi-purpose micro-regional associations were introduced, following the inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) model. Between 2004 and 2010, these associations operated in 162 micro-regions, jointly delivering local public services across six sectors, combined with coordinated development and planning activities. This integrated service delivery model ensured the provision of legally mandated municipal tasks, leading to a significant increase in access (Kovács 2008), as well as improvements in professional standards, human resource development, and infrastructure (Rácz 2008). However, economies of scale did not materialise (Somlyódyné Pfeil 2009), and the model applied a uniform organisational logic across both demographically declining rural areas and urban regions, without adequately reflecting the spatial organising and service provision functions of cities.

From 2013 onwards, the Local Government Act effectively mandated the establishment of joint municipal offices as a quasi-compulsory form of cooperation. However, these entities are not entrusted with public service delivery tasks and lack representative bodies, limiting their broader governance significance. To enhance the efficiency of the fragmented system, legislation has enabled the creation of a single type of legal entity, governed by an association council. Yet these associations possess no inherent competencies; the delegation of tasks remains at the discretion of member municipalities. Financially, their own-source revenues are restricted to user fees, they have no taxing authority, and they rely on modest, annually changing supplementary state subsidies linked to task-based funding, which creates legal uncertainty. Although designed as cooperative and coordinating bodies, they are not authorized to adopt strategic planning documents. Available knowledge on inter-municipal associations is largely limited to statistical data, with little in-depth analysis (Szabó 2024). Reports by the State Audit Office on the legality of their financial management provide some additional insight.

While inter-municipal cooperation should constitute a cornerstone of local government system, the state lacks a coherent, system-level strategy to promote it. In Hungary, such associations are primarily viewed as technical and organizational solutions, typically lacking public visibility and functioning largely as internal administrative arrangements (cf. Kákai, Vető 2019).

Functional reforms – Centralization (state takeover) of local government responsibilities

In a decentralized local government model, rationalizing reforms associated with the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm were also introduced in Hungary, albeit with distinctive internal contradictions. Public policy implementation was expected to be characterized by the competition between market-based actors and public organizations, in line with developments observed in Anglo-Saxon countries (Osborne 2010). However, in several Central and Eastern European states – including Hungary – NPM reforms were implemented before the full consolidation of a mature bureaucratic state apparatus, largely as a response to external expectations from international organizations. This accelerated adoption contributed to the hollowing out of the public sector, weakening transparency and accountability, without producing corresponding gains in efficiency (Somlyódyné Pfeil 2019). Local governments were largely unprepared for these reforms, while the central state failed to develop adequate guarantee mechanisms or a coherent contractual legal framework to support their implementation (Horváth M. 2015).

It is therefore not surprising that the 2011 Act on Local Governments of Hungary (Mötv.)[2] was based on a clear rejection of NPM principles, even though some of the capacity gaps in the local government sector could arguably have been mitigated through more gradual or adaptive reforms. Some scholars interpret the post-2011 transformation of public administration as the emergence of a Neo-Weberian State model, associated with a strong, interventionist state (Stumpf 2014). However, the Neo-Weberian label presupposes a public administration culture grounded in cooperation, trust, and a balance between rule of law and managerial efficiency. The current Hungarian public law and governance framework only partially reflects these characteristics, although such an orientation may have been an initial reform objective.

Following 2010, and in line with a new state-building philosophy, public service responsibilities in Hungary were progressively transferred back to the public sector. The state retained the authority to determine the "optimal" and "efficient" organizational form of public service delivery, as articulated in the Government's Public Administration and Public Service Development Strategy (2015). The transfer of public functions into state administrative sub-systems has clearly entailed a loss of local autonomy, undermining municipal discretion and narrowing local policy space. This effect is also captured by the Local Autonomy Index (LAI), which measures the degree of decentralization (Ladner et al. 2019).

On the fiscal side of the established status quo, rules that cause a continuous shrinkage of the financial autonomy of local authorities can be identified. The freely usable revenues of municipalities decreased by one-third between 2015 and 2023, not only due to restrictions on local business tax revenue. At the same

time, the ratio of the aggregate operating revenues of the local government subsystem to current GDP stood at 4.36% at the end of the mentioned period (Bogdán, Koncz, Hegedűs 2025). This resonates with the finding that local government autonomy is fundamentally determined by the way in which state budget support is distributed (Péteri 2020), following the pendulum movement of centralization–decentralization.

Sectoral legislation has progressively expanded the scope of mandatory organizational forms for service provision, thereby limiting local governments' organizational freedom and their ability to adapt to local conditions. At the same time, the legal framework has enabled the development of so-called "service chains" allowing the delegation of public service delivery to a wide range of actors, including state, non-profit, and church-based providers, or even other associations. While this increases flexibility in formal terms, it simultaneously weakens municipalities' control over service provision (Somlyódyné Pfeil 2019). These measures were motivated by the aim of keeping public services within the public sphere (re-nationalization), and by goals of standardization and performance improvement (Horváth M. 2013).

A further unresolved issue is the inherent dual role of local governments, which simultaneously act as purchasers, regulators, and owners of service-providing entities (Horváth M. 2016). An audit covering 1,574 publicly owned enterprises indicates that the number of fully municipally owned companies is estimated at 1,100-1,300, concentrated primarily in the capital, its districts, and larger cities (ÁSZ 2023). Analyses by the State Audit Office also highlight that municipally owned companies pose significant risks in terms of integrity compliance and potential asset loss (ÁSZ 2023, 2024).

When assessing the reforms affecting local governments over the past decade and a half, particularly those involving recentralization and restructuring of public service provision, it is striking that the central government has not published a comprehensive evaluation of whether the now-dominant state administrative subsystem with re-integrated service delivery structures, operates more efficiently or effectively than the previously decentralized system. This absence of systematic evaluation calls into question the validity of the efficiency and quality arguments originally used to justify the reforms.

Changes in the intermediate level of governance

The other structural dilemma present from the outset concerned the size and role of the intermediate level of governance, which has also strongly shaped scholarly interest. Counties, regions, and micro-regional associations that aggregate municipalities appeared as rational, mappable alternatives, and for decades they dominated both academic research on local governments and the formulation of territorial reform concepts. However, alongside institutional lag

and the pressures of external model adoption, competition and rivalry between municipalities, local governments, and territorial tiers gradually became more characteristic than cooperation (Pálné Kovács 1992). This lag, along with the absence of a cooperative governance culture, is also reflected in the trajectory of intermediate-level reforms.

During the transition period, counties – intentionally weakened due to political and emotional motivations – were increasingly seen as being replaced by regions, which appeared to offer more promising territorial units in terms of access to development resources in the run-up to EU accession. While regionalization became a dominant narrative among the so-called "regionalist" scholars clustered around the journal *Tér és Társadalom* ("Space and Society") and was broadly aligned with the European Union's cohesion policy expectations (Horváth 1998), its assumptions were not universally shared. The absence of strong regional identities and historical traditions raised doubts regarding the feasibility of establishing regions as self-governing units, although the 1996 Act on Regional Development already enabled the emergence of development regions (Pálné Kovács 1999).

In most CEE countries, regional decentralization proved to be only a brief episode (Pálné, Mezei 2016). Although the Hungarian territorial development system formally adopted the EU principles of decentralization and partnership, the national management of structural funds remained highly centralized, effectively marginalizing earlier territorial development actors.

Post-2010 reforms not only abandoned the vision of regional self-government, but also – despite appearances – relegated county-level self-governments to the periphery of the territorial state administration. County governments lost their public service institutions, and their development and coordination competences granted under the Act on Local Governments (Mötv.) became largely formal in nature. Territorial planning in Hungary subsequently split into two parallel logics: EU-funded development follows strategy-based programming aligned with EU cohesion policy principles, while national resource allocation operates without functioning territorial governance or coordination mechanisms. In many cases, development interventions are implemented in an ad hoc manner, lacking territorial coherence and based on non-transparent or ex ante unspecified allocation criteria (Salamin 2025; Somlyódyné Pfeil 2020). In this clientelist and centralized development regime, the efficiency and effectiveness of resource use remain questionable, particularly as peripheral regions lack empowered local actors capable of articulating and enforcing their interests (Pálné Kovács, Horeczki 2023).

The concept of joint governance for cities and their functional urban areas has been absent from Hungarian local government legislation since 1990. The legislator has failed to consider the service-providing, development-driving, and retention functions of cities in relation to their wider territorial surroundings

(Somlyódyné Pfeil 2019). Although the Act on Local Governments[3] formally acknowledges the theoretical responsibility of cities and district seats for providing services to their catchment areas, this regulation has not been effectively implemented in practice.

Between 1990 and 2004, neither implicit nor explicit urban policy featured meaningfully in development policy. Although elements of urban policy appeared in the 2005 National Spatial Development Concept, and the Hungarian Central Statistical Office regularly revises the delineation of functional urban areas (Tóth 2024), neither public administration system nor territorial development policy systematically incorporates them. The only partial exception is the Budapest metropolitan area, where the Budapest Agglomeration Development Council (BAFT)[4] operates not as a metropolitan governance body, but rather as a territorial development institution with limited effectiveness. Successive governments have repeatedly altered its institutional existence, and although it was re-established with binding legal force in 2022, it remains a delegated body with no substantive powers. Ministries are in the majority within the council, while local governments in the Budapest metropolitan area are formally excluded and represented only through the territorial self-government (Somlyódyné Pfeil 2021).

From the point of view of modern space construction, two additional "intermediate" spatial units should be mentioned. Compared to the general division of Hungary, functional areas have been institutionalized since 1996, the so-called special (priority) development councils. However, the number of these intervention areas, which cross county boundaries or have different perimeters within them, increased from 2 to 6 by 2026. Functional Urban Areas (FUA) are not included in this territorial category, except for Budapest agglomeration (Szegvári 2024). The spatial delimitation of the development councils is a consequence of a central decision; they have weak decision-making empowerment and lack financial room for maneuver.

In recent years, the central government has also established economic development zones as quasi-functional growth areas. The government commissioner serves as the single leader for the development zone; the zone coordination forum attached to it consists exclusively of ministers, other stakeholders can only be involved on an ad hoc basis (cf. the regulation of the Northeast Economic Development Zone). Adapted development programs prepared for these functional areas are equivalent to "umbrella projects based on individual government decisions" [see Government Decree 1072/2020 (III. 5.)]. Consequently, zones do not assume the application of a territorial governance method.

In the last two EU programming periods, unlike more Visegrád countries, Hungary did not adopt the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) model for its urban areas. Planning activities of cities with county rights were conducted separately from their functional hinterlands and from county-level governments. In parallel, the most significant national urban development initiative – the

Modern Cities Programme (2015–2023) – was implemented through ad hoc government decisions on investments in major cities, without integrated territorial planning logic (Somlyódyné Pfeil 2019). The programme lacked transparency and has not been subject to systematic evaluation of its outcomes.

At the beginning of the 2010s, smart city initiatives also emerged in Hungary following EU encouragement (Lados, Horváthné Barsi 2017). Hungarian smart city developments have largely remained within first- and, in some cases, second-generation models (Varró, Szalai 2021), and due to limited political support, genuinely integrated smart city governance frameworks have not yet developed. Only Budapest has shown attempts to move towards an "innovative city" phase; however, its performance remains relatively weak in international comparison (Szendi, Nagy, Sebestyénné Szép 2020).

It seems that so-called soft spaces formally exist in Hungary, which, throughout Europe, are characterized by the ability to manage functional areas in an innovative mode outside the statutory planning system. In their case, spatial planning embodies a multi-jurisdictional governance process that presupposes the creation of governance networks with broad involvement of actors outside the public sector (Allmendinger et al. 2015). In contrast, between 2010 and 2026, a state-controlled development policy (Egedy, Kovács, Kondor 2017) was in operation, which corresponded to increasing centralization, since the central government had a counterinterest in the dispersion of power.

Conclusion

Our study is a literature review that assigns a distinguished role to the publications appearing in *Tér és Társadalom* ("Space and Society"). This approach was chosen as a form of scholarly tribute to a professional forum that has consistently kept spatiality at the centre of its focus for decades, regardless of the shifting position of "space" within contemporary public policy agendas. The series of studies and volumes of the journal showcase the research findings, intellectual orientations, and value frameworks of Hungarian regional science, while also reflecting the sometimes volatile evolution of academic and policy-related intellectual fashions.

Territorial governance is a field that simultaneously requires consideration of macro-level perspectives – such as constitutional, public law, political science, and state-philosophical dimensions – as well as the spatially embedded characteristics of concrete environments. It is particularly fortunate that interdisciplinary workshops exist, especially the Institute for Regional Studies, which publishes *Tér és Társadalom* ("Space and Society"), where scholars from relevant disciplines can collaborate. Over recent decades, the Hungarian regional science community has become integrated into international currents of regional studies, while also playing a key role in providing the professional background for domestic territorial policy.

If the effectiveness of public policy influence is interpreted as shaping the territorial governance system, then our analysis suggests only a moderate impact. International trends in territorial governance have undoubtedly served as reference points in the creation and subsequent reforms of the Hungarian local government system, even if delayed development and strong historical traditions – alongside the structurally embedded characteristics of the settlement network – have remained persistent constraints. Through the dissemination of international trends and empirical research, Hungarian scholarship on territorial governance has fundamentally advocated the establishment of strong local self-government in recent decades, albeit without success.

After 2010, the Hungarian model of local government departed radically from the decentralization trend that has otherwise characterized territorial governance globally. As we have shown, territorial governance structures and the management of public services are subject to continuous reform and correction in all countries; relative stability of constitutional and political frameworks is generally considered a safeguard for the persistence of decentralization, even in periods of centralizing reform. The Hungarian "deviance" is therefore not merely an isolated national exception, and it remains uncertain whether it represents a temporary deviation or a more lasting trajectory. It must be acknowledged that territorial governance systems necessarily reflect the characteristics of national political and constitutional models (Lijphart 1999), including the nature of vertical relations between central and local levels, or – as in the Hungarian case – their relative weakness or absence.

At the same time, responsibility for extreme centralization cannot be attributed exclusively to the central government. The separation of roles among different levels and actors of governance is increasingly difficult to maintain (Peters 2017), while society is still able to distinguish between the performance of central and local governments and typically expresses greater trust in the local level (Rodden, Wibbels 2010). Trends in territorial governance thus emerge from a highly complex system of interacting factors, not isolated from national institutional frameworks, nor from the performance of local actors. The failure of decentralization in Hungary can only be properly understood – and meaningful conclusions drawn – if the activities of all governance levels and actors are analysed in conjunction and in relation to one another, without neglecting broader contextual conditions.

In light of the 2026 electoral results, it can be anticipated that local government system will face further reforms. A comparative reassessment of international models and domestic experiences of local governance is unavoidable. Alongside or instead of structural reforms, a more gradual and rational adjustment of functioning – aligned with concrete operational conditions – may offer a range of possible solutions while still respecting the fundamental objective of returning to decentralization-oriented trajectories in territorial governance.

Notes

1 IMD (2026): World Competitiveness Ranking, Methodology in a Nutshell.
2 Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on Local Governments in Hungary.
3 Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on Local Governments in Hungary, Section 21(1).
4 Act CII of 2023 on Territorial Development, Section 13.

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