



## Cities against authoritarianism? Polish and Hungarian capitals facing centralistic pressure

Wirginia Aksztejn, György Hajnal, Marta Lackowska & Krisztián Kádár

To cite this article: Wirginia Aksztejn, György Hajnal, Marta Lackowska & Krisztián Kádár (09 Dec 2024): Cities against authoritarianism? Polish and Hungarian capitals facing centralistic pressure, Urban Research & Practice, DOI: [10.1080/17535069.2024.2437416](https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2024.2437416)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2024.2437416>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 09 Dec 2024.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)







[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

# Cities against authoritarianism? Polish and Hungarian capitals facing centralistic pressure

Wirginia Aksztejn <sup>a</sup>, György Hajnal <sup>b,c</sup>, Marta Lackowska <sup>a</sup>  
and Krisztián Kádár <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies, Department of Local Development and Policy, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland; <sup>b</sup>Institute of Social and Political Sciences, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary; <sup>c</sup>HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

## ABSTRACT

The paper provides a new taxonomy of local government reactions to the recentralization policies of authoritarian central governments. By studying the capitals of two Central European countries recently undergoing an illiberal turn – Budapest and Warsaw – we have extended the list of reaction types previously identified in the literature. Moreover, the comparative nature of the research has highlighted the internal diversity of reaction types and allowed us to hypothesize on the sources of the differences between Hungary and Poland. These differences are rooted in the initial level of decentralization, municipal networking and the political and legal framework.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 April 2024

Accepted 28 November 2024

## KEYWORDS


Recentralization;  
authoritarianism; reactions  
of local governments;  
Hungary; Poland

## 1. Introduction

The literature on the distribution of power, resources and responsibilities between central government and local governments (LGs) points to two contradictory trends. While researchers have observed the emancipation of cities (Barber 2013, in a populist context; Katz and Nowak 2017) and a broad trend towards decentralization and subsidiarity, especially in the European context (Kuhlmann, Dumas, and Heuberger 2022, Chapter 4), there are also recentralization trends, sometimes triggered by functional pressures, crises or the search for greater efficiency. However, these are sometimes pursued by emerging authoritarian regimes (see Sześciło 2019 for pragmatically and ideologically motivated instances of recentralization).

Our research joins the nascent and limited strand of work focusing on the recent phenomenon of illiberal recentralization. Prior research on ‘subnational autocratization’ (Stenberg, Rocco, and Farole 2022) or ‘subnational illiberalism’ (Begadze 2022) has focused on the authoritarian central government and mainly describes the motives, drivers and instruments of illiberal (re)centralization. Some authors have proposed broader conceptual categories of recentralization measures which has made an

**CONTACT** Wirginia Aksztejn  [wa.aksztejn@uw.edu.pl](mailto:wa.aksztejn@uw.edu.pl)

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2024.2437416>

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

important contribution that can play a role in future comparative work and theory building (Aksztejn et al. 2022; Begadze 2022; Stenberg, Rocco, and Farole 2022). They have also identified factors influencing recentralization and its impact (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022; Stenberg, Rocco, and Farole 2022).

Although initial research has suggested that LGs are not necessarily entirely passive objects of recentralization (Aksztejn et al. 2022; Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2023; Uster and Cohen 2022), there has been very little literature on that topic and systematic research on local responses to such practices is almost entirely lacking. However, LGs may exhibit considerable agency in responding to such measures, potentially affecting the eventual outcomes of recentralization or the sustainability of the illiberal turn at the national level. This idea is rooted in the concept of a city as a political actor (Atkinson and Rossignolo 2008; Bagnasco and Galés 2000), and the resulting rescaling concept (Brenner 2004).

Our research joins the above stream of research on the ongoing, visible, and long-lasting conflict between illiberal central governments and liberal democratic city governments. This conflict is evident at the levels of ideology, politics, and policies alike. It arises from the efforts of illiberal central governments to restrict local autonomies and the resistance of liberal democratic city governments to this encroachment. This research problem statement, which posits that both parties are engaging in strategic and conscious behavior, is supported not only by the literature review presented in the next section but also by the empirical findings. We aim to address this dynamics by conducting an exploratory study of the reactions of two liberal-governed capital cities subjected to illiberal recentralization. Therefore, we have generated hypotheses on the factors influencing these reactions. Empirically, we have focused on two countries characterized by advanced, though somewhat different, conditions of illiberal recentralization, that is, Hungary and Poland. Our narrower focus has been on their capitals, namely, Budapest and Warsaw, as embedded cases. Our main research question is: how did the liberally governed cities of Budapest and Warsaw react to the recentralization policies of central governments? Our topic implies that we have treated both cities as political actors constructing their political relations in the domestic arena and beyond, which brings us close to the de-territorial concept of rescaling (Brenner 2004; Swyngedouw 2004). Moreover, we focus on governmental actions and the interplay between central and local level of politico-administrative power. Therefore we analyse only actions undertaken by democratically elected urban authorities (mayors and the councillors), and do not take into account activities of various non-governmental urban actors (like NGOs).

## **2. Recentralization and municipal reactions – a review**

The interplay between central institutions and territorial units has been examined by many scholars (Chandler 2005; Copus, Roberts, and Wall 2017; Corry and Stoker 2000; Griffith 1966; John 1990; Page and Goldsmith 1987, 2010; Rhodes 1981). The Janus face of LGs – an extension of the state's apparatus or independent political beings with democratic mandate to represent local communities – opened the floor for discussion on their political, administrative and financial autonomy. Empirically, till the beginning of the 21st century, decentralization was the prevailing trend in Europe – both among

well-developed Western democracies and new ones. The research conducted by Ladner et al. (2019) has led to the development of numerical indicators designed to assess the discretion exercised by LGs. Their Local Autonomy Index (LAI) captured multiple, cross-country comparable aspects of local discretion, becoming a source for benchmarking and monitoring the level of decentralization. Considering the aforementioned background, recentralization can be considered a relatively new phenomenon. Following the 2008 financial crisis, some European countries have seen a resurgence of the state, resulting in a growing trend toward political and fiscal recentralization (see Perulli 2013 for Italy, Muro 2015 for Spain, and Hlepas 2016 for Greece). Yet, it is oversimplistic to explain the phenomenon of recentralization only through the lens of the 2008 crisis and its aftermath. The prime examples of contemporary recentralization, especially in Europe, happen to be in two countries – Hungary and Poland (Ladner et al. 2019) – with some of the most radical examples of the illiberal turn (Pirro and Stanley 2021).

As Bauer (2023, 1) notes, populist, illiberal or outright authoritarian forces ‘feel vindicated to “aggrandize” executive power and dismantle institutional counterweights capable of frustrating their ambitions’. It has already been argued that politico-administrative centralization in general (Hajnal and Boda 2021) and the de-autonomization of LGs (Begadze 2022; Drapalova 2023; O’Dwyer and Stenberg 2022) is a key element of such illiberal transformations. More recently, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have added impetus to this dynamic. Hajnal and Kovács (2020), Hajnal et al. (2021), Griffith 1966), Stenberg, Rocco, and Farole (2022), Batory (2022), and Guasti and Bustikova (2022) have described how emerging autocracies have used the pandemic to advance their transformation agendas far beyond typical and justified levels.

Understanding how municipal strategies under conditions of illiberal transformation work, has relevance extending far beyond the realm of local government studies, LGs and larger, more powerful and opposition-led governments can play a crucial role in shaping the internal dynamics and even the sustainability of authoritarian regimes. The underlying mechanisms include providing opposition forces with the opportunity to demonstrate to the electorate their capacity to govern, and the vision and values that shape their policies. This can provide them with critical material and communication resources (for a broader overview, see Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2023). Therefore, understanding the responses of opposition-led LGs is a key area in studying competitive authoritarian contexts. The issue is increasingly present on other continents, that is, both Americas and Pacific Asia (Dickovick 2011; Stenberg, Rocco, and Farole 2022), which highlights the global empirical relevance of the topic. Based on the Israeli context, Uster and Cohen (2022) concluded that LGs have limited options for overt resistance. This has mainly been restrained to a kind of ‘do-it-yourself’ strategy, that is, circumventing central arrangements in various quasi-legal ways. Aksztejn et al. (2022) developed a broader and more elaborate classification of municipal responses, based on Polish cities’ experience. The resulting types were anchored in the dimensions of LAI (Ladner et al. 2019) and four levels of politics and policymaking: functional, behavioural, legal, and discursive (Hausner 2007). More recently, researchers have paid increasing attention to liberal-governed capitals facing illiberal and centralizing national governments. While Drapalova (2023) compared the recentralization that hit Budapest,

Prague and Warsaw, Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi (2023) focused on the capital cities' reactions – more specifically, their trans-nationalization efforts – in the cases of Budapest and Istanbul. They concluded that 'the opposition's conscious formation of links with global actors and liberal international institutions' (ibid., p. 3) has provided opposition-led LGs with important symbolic, political and material resources to continue their operations under the harsh conditions of illiberal recentralization.

Recent research on municipal reactions to illiberal recentralization has resulted in important but in some ways incomplete results. Our research has contributed to this by exploring, classifying and comparing the responses of liberal-run capital cities to illiberal recentralization policies of national governments.

### **3. Context: a tale of two recentralizations**

Hungary and Poland share many similarities, ranging from their common East – Central European historical and post-communist heritage to their socio-economic development. Both countries are members of the so-called V4 group. In addition, the contextual features in both countries are similar. They experienced an illiberal turn at the national level (Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Pirro and Stanley 2021; Sześciło 2019). During the study period (2019–2023 in Hungary, and 2015–2023 in Poland) the capitals of both countries were governed by party coalitions politically opposed to the central government and its illiberal agenda. These opposition-led political formations acted as the main challengers to the illiberal incumbents at the national level. This shows that our two cases have highlighted the importance of central – local relations in understanding the stability and dynamics of illiberal regimes.

Central governments in both countries have pursued radical recentralization practices. According to Ladner et al. (2019), Hajnal and Boda, Griffith (1966), Hungary and Poland together with Malta appear to be the EU member states with the greatest loss of local autonomy between 2005 and 2019. However, the intensity of these changes is different in the two countries. In Hungary, the loss of autonomy has reached almost 20% points. Meanwhile, in Poland, it is four times smaller. This difference in recentralization pressures has allowed us to expect different local responses in the two states, what – in the realm of an identified literature gap – is the core of our interest.

#### **3.1. Budapest, Hungary**

After the systemic change of 1989/1990, in Hungary, an excessively high level of legal and political autonomy was introduced at the local level. However, the lack of the two-thirds legislative majority needed to reshape local governance from the early 1990s until 2010 prevented comprehensive corrections being made. The main factors contributing to subnational dysfunction included an intensive proliferation of small LGs, and county-level self-governments lacking substantive responsibilities. This has created a vacuum and paved the way for increased central government intervention. In addition, LGs were increasingly underfunded in relation to the number of tasks they performed (Pálné Kovács et al. 2016), leading to ever-increasing municipal debt.

The current phase of local government transformation began with the inauguration of the second Viktor Orbán government in 2010. This government had a legislative

supermajority that allowed it to fundamentally rewrite all the fundamental laws and adopt a new constitution. Far-reaching recentralization reforms were completed by 2014. Since then, there has been a trend toward even greater recentralization, spiced up with political favouritism (Reszkető, Váradi, and Hajnal 2022). Local functions, including primary and secondary education, outpatient health care and hospitals, various public utilities and many essential administrative services were largely taken over by the central government (Dobos 2021). The consolidation of municipal debt and the practice of case-by-case, discretionary state approval of municipal borrowing created overwhelming financial control over LGs (Finta et al. 2021).

Municipal financial autonomy was further limited by the strict earmarking of central grants. LGs' ability to raise their own revenues, such as by levying local taxes has been severely limited. Central government transfers became subject to case-by-case, admittedly politically based decisions (Vasvári and Longauer 2024). In addition, many measures imposed considerable costs on LGs. This was the case with the price cap on municipally run public utilities (Hajnal et al. 2023). Curiously, the government introduced a tax scheme that burdens wealthier LGs, that is, the so-called 'solidarity contribution'. During the pandemic, funding for LGs was further restricted, forcing them to cut services and suspend operations for various facilities (Hajnal, Jeziorska, and Kovács 2021).

In the consecutive waves of radical recentralization throughout the post-2010 years, LGs were not consulted (Szente 2013). The voice of LGs in national politics received a fundamental blow in 2014, when the possibility of local politicians becoming members of Parliament was eliminated. After the electoral successes of opposition and independent political formations in the 2019 local elections (Kovarek and Littvay 2022), discrimination by the central government based on political colour has increased sharply (see also Council of Europe 2013, 2020; Griffith 1966; Ladner et al. 2019).

Budapest stands out from the Hungarian settlement structure in several ways. 17.4% (Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2023a) of the country's population lives in the capital while only 2% live in the second-largest city. 37% (Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2023b) of the GDP is generated here, and its services have a nationwide scope. Accordingly, Budapest is subject to special administrative status. There is a lower, district-level tier with 23 units as elected local self-government. These are, peculiarly, not in a subordinate relationship with the capital. The upper, metropolitan tier has both regional and municipal functions. Since 1990, this structure has created a – frequently politically coloured – competition between the metropolitan and the district-level self-governments, making it increasingly difficult to integrate city management.

The 2019 local elections brought a spectacular turnaround in national-level politics. In the capital, Gergely Karácsony – a key candidate with prime ministerial ambitions at the 2018 and 2022 national elections – was elected mayor of Budapest. The alliance of opposition parties won in 14 of the capital's 23 districts, while the governing party FIDESZ-MPP lost ten districts. Several other large cities have also become strongholds of opposition politics (Kovarek and Littvay 2022).

Since then, politically selective recentralization measures have started to hit the larger cities and especially the capital. These included cutting Budapest's revenue sources and cancelling previously planned, typically social development projects. In parallel with the depletion of budgetary revenues, the government's shifting of the burden of

expenditures to Budapest – especially with the tripling of the so-called solidarity tax – has pushed the city to the brink of bankruptcy. In addition, the Orbán government has been fighting hard to weaken the political support of Karácsony and other district mayors.

### **3.2. Warsaw, Poland**

From the beginning of the democratic transition in the 1990s, Poland was one of the region's most advanced countries in terms of decentralization. Municipal councils were democratically elected for the first time in 1990. Eight years later, a complex, three-tier local and regional government system was developed. These subsequent reforms have made Poland a frontrunner in local autonomy (Ladner et al. 2019). The introduction of the direct election of mayors in 2002 has greatly reinforced the political position of executive leaders at the municipal level. Until 2015, central – local relations remained relatively stable. There were relatively few recentralization attempts, and these did not exceed what could be considered a usual power struggle between the tiers.

The situation changed in 2015 when Law and Justice (PiS) won the parliamentary elections with an absolute majority of seats and political support from the president with the same party background. The right-wing government started implementing a centralizing agenda which included limiting LGs' discretion over local tasks, obstructive use of oversight powers, marginalization of platforms of dialogue and consultation such as the Joint Central Government and Territorial Self-Government Commission, the selective use of the subsidiarity principle, and above all various forms of evoking financial vulnerability (Aksztejn et al. 2022; Lackowska et al. 2023). Curbing LGs' discretion involved many policy areas such as education, water management and spatial planning. Financial weakening included national-level fiscal reforms. This substantially limited municipal income, burdening local governments with a disproportional share in the costs of reforming and managing the education system. Compensation for the lost income deepened the dependency of LGs on the state's special funds and nurtured clientelism. Unclear criteria for redistribution of centrally managed funds, such as the Fund for Local Government Roads enabled rewarding like-minded or more submissive LG at the expense of others. Notwithstanding the lack of transparency, replacing revenues with earmarked funds alone curtailed an essential aspect of financial autonomy.

Recentralization in Poland can be seen as ideologically motivated and a subfield of a broader pattern of democratic regression. The central government has sought to subordinate and control other key actors, such as the judiciary, including the Constitutional Tribunal, and the mass media by politicizing the public mass media and territorial governments. Resistance from territorial governments has been met with a strongly denigrating communication that, while not direct recentralization, undermines trust in LGs and seeks to legitimize recentralization.

Nevertheless, the process of dismantling local governance was not complete. As Sześciło (2020, 176) observed: 'the Polish case is characterized by a "creeping", sectoral recentralization. (...) Local and regional self-government went through the "stress test" of illiberal democracy weakened, but not demolished'.

With more than 1.86 million inhabitants, Warsaw is the largest city in Poland representing 4.9% of the Polish population. In economic terms, the capital region generates approximately 17.3% of the Polish GDP.<sup>1</sup> Although the second largest city, Cracow, is more than two times smaller with 0.8 million inhabitants, there are 38 cities with more than 100 thousand inhabitants. Administratively, Warsaw is a city (municipality) with the status of a county, meaning it combines functions and budgets at the municipal and county level. However, this arrangement is not specific to the capital, but functions in 65 other large Polish cities. Sub-municipal decentralization is rather weak and there are 18 districts with directly elected councils but limited powers. Therefore, it is the city council and, above all, the mayor who holds the political power.

Warsaw has been governed by elected Civic Platform, that is, PO – the largest opposition party in the 2015–2023 period – politicians since 2006. The current mayor, Rafał Trzaskowski, has been in office since 2018 when he defeated the PiS candidate with a broad margin. Also in the city council, PiS only gained 30% of the seats. A heavy-weight opposition politician experienced at both national and European levels, Trzaskowski has been a member and vice-president of PO since 2020. He was PO's candidate in the 2020 presidential election and is a serious candidate for the next election in 2025.

The capital city does not monopolize resistance to centralistic pressure. Polish cities often act together, both in well-established associations of cities and in newly created municipal groupings with an obvious character of political opposition to the central government. Nevertheless, the critical role of Warsaw is undeniable, because Trzaskowski is the Chairman of the Political Council of the Self-Government Movement 'Yes! for Poland' and the Council of the Union of Polish Metropolises.

## **4. Research questions, data and method**

### **4.1. The research question and the rationale for the case selection**

In this study, we used a comparative case study design, focusing on Hungary and Poland and their capital cities of Budapest and Warsaw as embedded cases. Similar to prior research on LG reactions reviewed earlier, this method is aligned with the nascent character of research in this field and the explorative and hypothesis-generating ambition of our research (Yin 2013, pp. 1–15).

Similar to Drapalova (2023), we have viewed our cases as instances of subnational, liberal and pro-democratic opposition to an authoritarian and populist central government. The timeframe of the investigation began with the confrontation between the liberal city government and the illiberal national government. This took place in Budapest in 2019 and in Warsaw in 2015 and ends in the summer of 2023.

The primary rationale for case selection has been based on the logic of influential cases (Seawright, Gerring 2008). Our cases are influential because, first, the central governments in both countries have pursued a resolutely committed and long-term illiberal recentralization agenda. Second, we selected municipal units where, given the political colour and the practical and symbolic significance of the capital status, recentralization pressures are likely to be strongest and where responses – enabled by the various demographic, political, economic and cultural local resources – are



likely to be the most innovative, diverse and powerful. The leadership of both LGs act as an important challenge to the illiberal transformation agenda in the arena of national-level politics, raising the stakes even further. This is consistent with the exploratory nature of our study because it allows us to expect the greatest empirical richness of responses to recentralization pressures. In addition to this, we have relied on another rationale for case selection. Since the two cases share many similarities, among them – both countries being members of the EU and the Visegrad Group, we can formulate hypotheses about the possible factors underlying the comparative patterns we find.

Meanwhile, we are aware of the two main differences between the two capitals, that may influence their way of responding to the centralistic pressure. First is the settlement structure and the resulting, historically evolved, path-dependent conditions for inter-municipal cooperation. Budapest is disproportionately strong and large among Hungarian cities, which ironically leads to its vulnerability. In terms of its competencies and capacities, successive administrations governments since 1990 have always tried to – and did – keep the metropolitan municipality in check. Central governments never allowed Budapest to assume a regional role corresponding to its size and weight in socio-economic areas, regional infrastructure and transport. Meanwhile, the district governments ‘poached’ another set of competencies and capacities that a metropolitan government should typically control. Another structural constraint has accompanied this deliberate political disenfranchisement, that is, that even the second-largest city is an order of magnitude smaller than Budapest means a lack of comparable peers and partners among other cities. This has made inter-municipal cooperation difficult if not impossible. Political, institutional and cultural factors have constantly re-created and reinforced these systemic tensions. The situation in Poland is quite different. Being in (almost) the same league as several other large cities, that is, four cities between 800 and 500 thousands inhabitants, and six more cities between 500 and 290 thousands inhabitants, Warsaw has many natural city allies. Coherent and effective municipality networks and alliances characterize the Polish scene and have direct access to the national Parliament. This can make Polish LGs a substantially more powerful actor than in Hungary.

The second factor is the influence of the central government. Hungary’s illiberal rulers enjoyed a solid legislative majority throughout the observed period, enabling them to change any law – including the constitution itself – on the fly. Coupled with the progressive weakening of checks and balances such as the Constitutional Court, this has given the central government virtually unlimited power to change the legal – structural framework of local governance. This has rendered many types of responses infeasible or ineffective and triggers the need for more radical steps, such as political mobilization or outright disobedience. The Polish central government has never gained such unrestricted room for manoeuvre. The core conflict has been channelled much more into existing institutional platforms. Moreover, as quantitative research has shown, the reduction in local autonomy in Poland was substantially smaller than in Hungary (Ladner 2024) and was known as ‘fragmented’ recentralization (Lackowska et al. 2023).

Therefore, we have focused on the capitals, but we are aware that this focus may limit the generalizability of our findings to other, less resource-rich LGs.

*As noted earlier our research question is:* how did the liberally governed cities of Budapest and Warsaw react to recentralization policies during 2019–2023 in Hungary, and 2015–2023 in Poland? We have used the term ‘reactions’ in a broad sense, to refer to LGs’ formally enacted policies, institutional or behavioural responses, and political or discursive instruments employed to prevent, push back, limit or mitigate the consequences of either the central government’s specific recentralization measures or its more general recentralization policy.

In the following subsections, we have first introduced and justified the descriptive – analytical framework our uses, and then detailed our empirical approach.

#### **4.2. Analytical framework: our initial taxonomy**

Uster and Cohen (2022) proposed two types of municipal responses: ‘voice’ which includes various protest actions, and what they call the ‘do-it-yourself approach (DIY)’. This broadly refers to actions that circumvent central government policies by exploiting loopholes in regulation or enforcement. Aksztejn et al. (2022) proposed a more detailed classification, including lobbying, policy takeover, lawsuits, insubordination, rebellious gestures and campaigning. Musil and Yardımçı-Geyikçi (2023) focused on a single class of responses, that is, ‘transnationalization’. We have used these contributions, and other work exploring some aspects of our phenomenon of interest, as a starting point to develop, apply and test the analytical framework through empirical analysis.

As Sartori (1970, 64) notes, ‘classifications remain the requisite, if preliminary, condition for any scientific discourse’ and ‘we need taxonomical networks for solving our factfinding and fact-storing problems’ (see also *ibid.* p. 69). In line with Bailey (1994, 2) we have conceptualized classification as ‘the ordering of entities into groups or classes on the basis of their similarity’. Although both terminology and conceptualizations vary to some extent, ‘the term taxonomy [is reserved] for a classification of empirical entities. The basic difference, then, is that a typology is conceptual while a taxonomy is empirical’ (Bailey 1994, 6). The nascent study of local government reactions to illiberal recentralization presents a prime instance of such bottom-up, empirical taxonomical needs. A taxonomy effectively grasping and covering a broad range of LG reactions may bring such conceptual, theoretical and empirical benefits as creating the preconditions for better and fuller descriptions, effective comparisons, the study of relationships and advancements towards conceptual typologies.

The taxonomy forming the initial descriptive – analytical framework of our study is in based on a research synthesis and includes the following categories. Hereinafter, we have referred to this as the initial taxonomy.

- (1) ‘Policy proposals’ are proposals for national-level policy change that LGs or their associations put forward to counteract recentralization or promote decentralization corresponding to the ‘voice’ of Uster and Cohen (2022) and lobbying of Aksztejn et al. (2022).
- (2) ‘Counter-policies’, that is, ‘policy takeover’ by Aksztejn et al. (2022) and ‘DIY’ by Uster and Cohen (2022) are locally elaborated and implemented policies, regulatory measures or public services aimed at the local public that either

counteract the undesirable effects of recentralization or demonstrate how the values and political profile of the LG differ from those of the central government. The broader aim of these policies may thus include building political support for LGs in general or for the LG in question.

- (3) 'Lawsuits' are formal legal proceedings initiated by the LG against the central government to block, restrict or counteract a recentralization measure (Aksztejn et al. 2022).
- (4) 'Disobedience' occurs when an LG openly and demonstratively disobeys legally binding central government legal norms, policies or instructions purporting to implement a recentralization measure. In a broader sense, this form is present when such disobedience, at least in part, exploits loopholes in the regulatory or enforcement framework rather than breaking the law or defying central government requirements or instructions (Aksztejn et al. 2022).
- (5) 'Political mobilization' involves the political mobilization of (local) citizens against specific central government actions or broader central government policies in general. It may involve the initiation of demonstrations, petitions, local or national referendums or other similar activities inspired by the 'voice' of Uster and Cohen (2022), and the rebellious gestures of Aksztejn et al. (2022). It is characterized by a low institutionalization and ad hoc character.
- (6) 'Communicative actions' take place in the public discourse to make/strengthen the LGs' case against the central government on controversial policies or policy areas covering the 'voice' of Uster and Cohen (2022), and the 'campaigning' of Aksztejn et al. (2022).
- (7) 'Transnationalization' is, finally, the conscious creation of 'links with global actors and liberal international institutions' (Musil and Yardımçı-Geyikçi 2023, 3) to acquire symbolic, political and material resources to continue municipal operations.

As a general comment, we note that municipal reactions can vary in many respects, an important one being the degree of focus. At one extreme, some responses may be directed only at a highly specific and often technical recentralization measure. This is typically the case with lawsuits and public referendums. However, at the other extreme, they may target central government policy as such, capitalizing on some deep ideological divide, such as LGBTQ or abortion rights. Such broadly targeted responses are included into our conceptual domain because either their purpose or their intended or actual effect is to build political support for the municipality and, more generally, local autonomy, thus helping it to survive and cope with recentralization.

### **4.3. Data and method**

The key component of our empirical base was semi-structured interviews with key informants (6–7 for each case), including senior local politicians and administrators, and experts and practitioners with unique insights into our topic. To ensure privacy in a politically sensitive context, the identities of interviewees were masked in our analysis.

Our research was complemented by various additional evidence sources. First, we reviewed legal documents, policy papers, academic sources and, relevant news media

sources on capital cities' reactions. The latter included websites of LGs and local government associations, and news and reports published by think tanks and other stakeholders. Also, we drew upon evidence from our research and consultancy projects, covering the study period, including: (1) participant observation conducted by one of the authors, who has 10 years of experience in advising local governments in Budapest and elsewhere on public services, policies and organizational issues, and (2) interviews conducted with informants in the capitals and other LGs covering patterns of municipal reactions and conveying information relevant to our research. This comprised a total of eight interviews conducted in Hungary and 34 interviews in Poland. Given that they were conducted and analysed before our comparative study of the two capitals, we were able to draw from this knowledge, which supported the effectiveness of the interviews for this research.

Our initial taxonomy described in the previous sub-section was developed from prior research and theorizing on LG reactions, but our empirical work was performed inductively. Therefore, the first step of our analysis was to classify empirical cases of LG responses into the initial taxonomy to see whether empirical instances of responses could be used to populate our classificatory scheme. The second analytical purpose was to identify classes of reactions that did not fit into the initial taxonomy. Therefore, we identified and grouped these reactions into new categories, resulting in a new, extended taxonomy.

The role and importance of different classes of capital cities' responses are likely to vary both within and between cases. Given the exploratory and qualitative nature of our research, we had no systematic way of assessing the weight of different responses. However, it is possible to highlight certain classes as being of marginal importance and others as being of critical importance. We have done this based on the findings of our key informants and the analyses published in the news media and academic sources. We have also provided examples for each response class to show the phenomenological representativeness and empirical richness of the analytical categories.

## **5. Reactions of the capital cities to recentralization pressure**

### ***5.1. Going to the wall: empirical findings from Budapest***

Most of the initial reaction categories were well populated with empirical instances. However, for two of the six pre-existing categories – policy proposals and disobedience – we were only able to find empirical references in evidence outside our core interview materials, that is, in news media and document analysis. This indicates a lower level of importance attached to them.

Policy proposals were almost absent. This may be related to several contextual features. First, local politicians are prohibited from playing any role in national politics. Other institutional forums for central – local coordination, however scarce and weak, were gradually abolished too. Therefore, LGs technically have no way of making policy proposals at the national level. As one senior politician put it, 'such issues are not put on the table because there is no table' [metropolitan politician]. Local government proposals do appear in the news media, but we see them more as part of their political communication than as formal policy proposals.

Counter-policies have been used widely, as highlighted by almost all interviewees. The most important area is ‘greening’ the city. ‘We have a pretty intense green policy; this is where we can most effectively present an antithesis to the government. The government’s approach is to wipe out all green areas and build over them. The issue of “motorists versus cyclists” has also become a purely political one. This is another area where the government has been put on the defensive here in the county’ [metropolitan politician]. Policy responses to the coronavirus pandemic were another important counter-policy area. ‘We organized shopping for people in quarantine and testing of the elderly, relying on NGOs and volunteers. This is not only a public service, but also a political struggle. This is also political action. To say that what we have [at the national level] in terms of vaccination and testing policy is weak is to criticize the government’, [metropolitan politician]. Sometimes these counter-policies have important cultural or symbolic elements, as when the city government replaced – in part – the subsidies for independent theatres that had been cut by the central government. Such measures communicate that the city’s cultural identity is being upheld by the municipality, countering illiberal attempts to dismantle it.

Lawsuits against government actions are a recent phenomenon, beginning in 2023. District governments have refrained from such highly confrontational steps, and only the metropolitan municipality has taken such steps. The lawsuits are typically reactions to governmental measures, the financial or policy stakes of which are huge. In the most visible cases the conflict centres on tax-like financial burdens imposed by the central government, as in the case of the lawsuit on the so-called ‘solidarity contribution’ (HGV 2023; Tamás 2023), or on central governmental measures limiting LG’s ability to raise revenues, as it was the case with the price cap on utility services run by the municipality (Tamás 2023). In other less publicized cases, the lawsuits react to central governmental expropriations of LG property or measures limiting LG control over local policy issues. The outcomes of these lawsuits were still pending at the time of the field research: ‘I cannot foretell the outcome [of these lawsuits]. None of the cases have been concluded yet’, as one senior metropolitan politician put it.

Disobedience as such was not mentioned in news media sources only. In one well-publicized case, the metropolitan municipality refused to pay the ‘solidarity tax’ that had previously been increased in a way that specifically targeted only Budapest. However, in response, the government quickly amended a law to allow the Treasury to collect the public debt by direct debit from the payee’s bank account (Népszava 2023). This case signals that – given the government’s ability to change any law in a single instance, coupled with its influence over the judiciary, disobedience has narrow limits. As one senior metropolitan politician put it, ‘Political resistance is more powerful than legal resistance. With a two-thirds majority [in Parliament], they can pass a law for anything. What they can respond to is that the citizens support us and demonstrate in the streets.

The political mobilization of citizens happens at both levels. By far the largest of these initiatives was the ‘Budapest Residents’ Meeting’ in the spring of 2023. This was a list of questions on specific urban policy issues that citizens were asked to answer through a postal questionnaire. Approximately 136,000 citizens responded, and the responses often showed convincing majorities for policy options favoured by the metropolitan government over the central government. The main issue was whether

to allow car traffic on the newly renovated Chain Bridge, where some 70% of respondents supported the metropolitan government's stance (2023). While this highly visible initiative was considered successful by our senior political interviewees, other forms of political mobilization tended to be used on a limited basis only. Other instances of mobilization included organizing petitions for citizens on the streets of a district LG to protest the central takeover of primary health care provision or organizing public demonstrations against the government's development project in a city park. As the vice mayor of Budapest put it in this latter context: 'In such cases, political resistance is more important than legal actions. They can make a law for whatever, possessing a 2/3 majority in Parliament. What they cannot have law against is the citizens supporting us demonstrate, together with us, in the City Park' (Telex 2022).

LGs place great emphasis on communicative actions through various channels, including traditional media channels, and unconventional ones such as social media, banners, public transport vehicles and the like. This is particularly important given that the central government monopolizes two-thirds of the Hungarian print news media market (Valaszonline 2021) and spends orders of magnitude (Telex 2023) more on paid political advertising than any other actor. The metropolitan municipality refused to pay the 'solidarity tax' whereby central actions that affect opposition-led LGs are presented as ones that affect the entire local community. A strong sense of local identity and community is to be created, of which the municipality is an integral part and expression. This communication strategy has been considered successful by politicians at both the metropolitan and district levels.

Transnationalization involves approaching EU institutions (mainly the Commission) to lobby for increased funding opportunities. Such activities take place only at the metropolitan level, but at this level, our senior policy respondents were optimistic about their potential. 'We have managed to have a seat at the table with the government in future negotiations on the use of EU grants', as one of them put it. Applying for direct EU funding plays a greater role at the district level, given its limited size. Second, what respondents called 'city diplomacy' also plays a role. Several metropolitan respondents mentioned the Pact of Free Cities formed with Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw, which successfully lobbied at the EU level for the inclusion of capital cities in negotiations on the use of EU funds.

We now turn to reactions not fitting into our initial taxonomy.

Given the government-triggered situation of impending financial bankruptcy, it is understandable that according to our interviewees, the most significant reaction to recentralization is financial austerity measures. Budapest applies a diverse and constantly evolving set of such measures. Selling off municipality assets happens mainly at the level of district LGs, as the budget gap at the metropolitan level is far too large to be covered, even temporarily, by such means. Reducing the level of services and abandoning development projects are important tools at both levels. Eliminating allegedly corrupt procurement relationships that led to overpricing and the 'pet projects' of their (FIDESZ-controlled) predecessors – sometimes resulting in heated conflicts with government-friendly individuals, entrepreneurs or government agencies – are expected to bring significant savings to LGs too. However, increases in revenues such as local taxes and service fees are limited due to central regulations limiting such increases.

Another group of reactions are different forms of cooperation with a range of actors that can contribute to the resilience of LGs – in performing their tasks and opposing centralistic pressure as such. Cooperation with NGOs or various churches typically occurs in human services, such as social housing, or testing and assisting the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic. While such cooperations regularly occur irrespective of recentralization measures and LG reactions to them, the mechanism of action triggered by such cooperations may go beyond technical rationality. As one senior politician interviewee put it, in the extremely hostile and conflicted context created by the government’s recentralization measures ‘every voluntary commitment [of the LG] is a political act’ in the sense that such cooperations and joint actions exemplify and communicate a worldview alternative and opposite to that of the government. Moreover, such cooperations – as nearly everything opposition-led LGs do – takes place in an extremely polarized field: ‘The civil society is extremely polarized. We cannot cooperate with pro-government civil society actors’.

Budapest is also trying to actively reach out to citizens, mainly through the participatory budgeting model introduced at the metropolitan level. Similarly to the previous sub-type,

this is a symbol... this is the diagonal opposite of centralization. We do not decide where to build a new city park or a new pedestrian crossing, but we treat citizens as partners and empower them to decide [...] which shows that our view of the relationship between government and citizens is very different from that of FIDESZ.

- explained a metropolitan politician. There are regular attempts to build coalitions among other LGs. An important characteristic of municipal associations is that they often have a specific membership, such as small or medium-sized LGs, and a ‘political colour’. Given this fragmentation, it’s not surprising that the joint statements drawing the public’s attention to the drastic consequences of the government’s recentralization measures have relatively little impact.

Overall, it appears that cooperation with domestic actors occurs regularly, but often for symbolic purposes only. The practical or short-term and direct political impact of this type of response is likely to be limited.

Unofficial negotiations take place at the metropolitan level. Typically, they occur when the central government is confronted with a demand that needs to be addressed in the short term and, therefore, no legislative action is possible. In one case, a foreign head of state visited Budapest, and the government wanted to name a street after the national writer of that country (this being a municipal decision); or when a government-sponsored international sports event required the presence of the mayor of Budapest. In such cases, the metropolitan government was able to extract important concessions in return. ‘There is a trade of favours [between the government and us]’, as a senior politician put it.

## **5.2. Before we reach the wall: empirical findings from Warsaw**

Warsaw has participated in all major joint initiatives of Polish LGs against centralization and its mayor led the political opposition against the ruling party. Therefore, Warsaw provided examples of anti-centralistic reactions in almost all identified

categories. Warsaw joined several policy proposals put forward by LGs' associations such as reform of LGs' finance, and refugee policies in front of the war in Ukraine. Such proposals usually articulate postulates of a broader base of LGs. The most general one was the '21 thesis of LG' (2019) which envisaged far-reaching decentralization. It put forward not only postulates of extending LG's policy scope, such as municipal police and fiscal autonomy but also transforming the upper chamber of the Polish Parliament (the Senate) to a 'local government chamber'. In contrast to the attempts of some Hungarian municipal associations to put forward policy proposals, which did not reach the threshold of perception of the news media, let alone citizens, this political document became the centrepiece of a highly visible political movement known as 'Yes for Poland', triggering nationwide political mobilization among LG politicians.

Counter-policies introduced in Warsaw revolve around issues that mark the ideological divide between the conservative government and more liberal city authorities and their respective electorates. The city's counter-policies are often found in areas insufficiently subsidized by the central government. For example, Warsaw was one of the cities that introduced a municipal *in vitro* programme after the central government stopped funding the procedure in 2016. The city supported NGOs – active in fields such as LGBT+, ethnic minorities and women's rights, and a children's helpline – that ceased receiving central funding. In response to the tightening central stance on abortion practices, all Warsaw-run hospitals issued a widely publicized statement that they would continue to provide all legally available medical assistance to pregnant women, including legal abortion.

Lawsuits against administrative decisions or the National Treasury for the compensation of costs are not a novelty in Polish legislation or legal practice. However, during the term of the PiS government, they became more frequent and widely publicized. Furthermore, financial compensation claims expanded their usual scope. According to a senior local politician, Warsaw not only issues lawsuits for insufficient compensation for all public administration tasks, which has explicit support in the law, but also cooperates within urban organizations in less certain cases. This includes compensation for the costs of reforming the education system discussed in cooperation with nine other cities from the Union of Polish Metropolises.

We found one instance of disobedience. Together with most Polish LGs, Warsaw refused to provide the Polish Post Office with the list of voters in the hastily organized postal elections during the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic. Although transferring the data would have been illegal, the central government insisted on this procedure and asked the LGs to follow it. The LGs' refusal to obey central government instructions and to hand over the data derailed the government's plan for absentee voting. This voting procedure was seen as giving an advantage to the ruling party's candidate in the presidential election.

Communicative actions are a broad and important category of reactions that were mentioned in the interviews and very loudly in the mass media. Some of them narrowly involved correcting misinformation spread by the central government to blacken the city's image. Warsaw has launched several communication campaigns in response to such central government's 'blame games'. One of these examples is an outdoor campaign about the increase in municipal waste disposal fees. Warsaw was also informed about the negative consequences of the so-called 'Polish Deal' economic programme for the city budget using advertising screens on public transport.



The other sub-type of communicative actions was more ideologically motivated and has demonstrated the city's different views on important social issues. An example of this subtype was support for the Women's Strike sparked by the tightening of abortion laws. In 2020, the city authorities supported the protests by expressing solidarity with the protesters and allowing their employees to participate in the marches during working hours. In addition, Warsaw wanted to rename the main roundabout in the city centre where the protesters had gathered, which was named after Roman Dmowski, a far-right politician. These plans were met with an immediate response at the central level, that is, a new law limiting the discretion of local authorities to rename streets named after important historical figures and events. Our informants indicated 12 city council resolutions out of 61 issued during the present term of 2018–2024 made in reaction to such recentralization measures as the financial drainage of Warsaw, expropriation of land belonging to the city, and controversial government's decisions on the refugee crisis or anti-European policies.

Transnationalization is specific to Warsaw because the political activity of other cities on the international scene is considerably more limited. Due to his previous career in the Polish Foreign Ministry, Trzaskowski is a mayor who is extremely active and visible on the international political scene. As one interviewee put it, 'I wouldn't call it para diplomacy. It is regular diplomacy'. The mayor of Warsaw was a face of the refugee crisis during the war in Ukraine. His visits to the US and Brussels resulted in financial flows directed to Warsaw. These funds enabled the organization of a complex refugee policy without adequate support from the central government, that is, transnationalization resulted in counter-policy.

Another example Warsaw's transnationalization activities is the Pact of Free Cities, launched in December 2019 by the mayors of Warsaw, Budapest, Prague and Bratislava. In December 2020, the mayors of Warsaw and Budapest sent a letter to the President of the European Commission, in which they presented a common position in connection with the planned veto of governments on the European Union budget and the issue of European funds. It illustrates international lobbying to the supranational institution, bypassing the national level.

In addition to the pre-identified categories of responses, our research revealed new ways of protecting local autonomy.

Our informants mentioned LG networking as an essential strategy, although LGs are aware of their limits in the face of the central powers. The cooperation of Polish LG mainly in cities has a long tradition and seems to have intensified after PiS came to power. Some LGs organizations, such as the Association of Polish Cities, recorded a significant increase in the number of members from approximately 300 in 2014 to over 350 in 2022. In others such as the Union of Polish Metropolises, the cooperation tightened, as evidenced by the growing number of joint statements during the second term of the PiS government, when their number doubled. Several new associations have also been formed. The largest of them, 'Yes! For Poland', has national-level political aspirations too, as evidenced by its recent accession to the joint lists of opposition candidates for the Senate. Warsaw plays an active role in the organizations mentioned above, albeit with an awareness of their limitations in the face of systemic illiberal changes at the national level. As expressed in the interviews, '...legal changes at the national level really weakened the state system (...)' in a way that territorial

governments are losing their effective influence on the policy-making process. And yet, “We operate within territorial governments” corporations (...), and we try to speak with one voice’.

Interestingly, due to the politicization of relations between the capital and the central government, Warsaw’s participation in joint initiatives can be seen as both an asset and a liability. On the one hand, Warsaw can mobilize other actors: ‘When Warsaw is on board, there is the critical mass’. On the other hand, mentioning Warsaw can easily trigger a negative reaction from the central government. Paragraphs about Warsaw are often deleted from joint statements of one of the local government associations to avoid hurting the interests of other member cities.

Additionally, interviewees mentioned less conflicting adaptation strategies, the most important of which were financial austerity measures. These include prudent borrowing policies and cancelling large development projects rather than cuts in sectoral policies. In our initial understanding, these were not political reactions to recentralization pressure, but a way of coping with the given situation. However, taking care of the good financial standing of the city was mentioned as a precondition for taking other, more confrontational actions or taking over centrally abandoned policies. As framed by a senior city official

Let’s not fool ourselves. Warsaw was wealthy and inherited low debt from the previous administration, so we could afford to do more. (...) Also, we had more potential to step into the central government’s role, which other LGs couldn’t do because of the short financial blanket.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

These findings suggest that the capitals are engaged in an unequal struggle for power with the authoritarian central government, and they are doing so in a variety of ways. We can formulate several conclusions about the patterns of this struggle. First, LGs’ responses not only populate the initial taxonomy we have established but also turn out to be significantly more diverse than that. Second, while the repertoires of responses in the two capitals are mostly similar, there appear to be important differences in the weight, role and details of particular actions. Third, we have found that the municipal reactions that do not fit into our initial taxonomy can be organized in large and significant clusters that complement it in important ways.

In terms of the similarities across the two cases, the role of counter-policies is significant in both cases, allowing the LGs to contrast their values and visions with those of the illiberal central government. Similarly, communicative actions play an important role in both cities’ repertoires. However, in Warsaw, the role of ideological rather than pragmatic communication is more significant. The role of transnationalization is also similar. Approaching EU institutions is crucial for obtaining financial resources and more effectively negotiating positions vis-à-vis the national government. Meanwhile, approaching other international actors has a more symbolic and longer-term effect.

In terms of the differences between the two cases, policy proposals by the capital cities or the associations in which they participate seemed to play a minimal role in Budapest. This is potentially related to the minimal scope for coordinated action

between Budapest and other LGs, the lack of institutional forums and, consequently, the minimal expected impact of such proposals. The Polish pattern contrasts sharply with this, where highly political municipality associations such as ‘Yes! for Poland’ played a visible and instrumental role in shaping public discourse at the national level. To use the metaphor of one of our interviewees, in Hungary, there is no table on which to place the proposals, and Polish cities not only still have the table but are also able to make additional ones themselves.

Court cases initiated by the capitals exist in both cities, but their role is partially different. In Budapest, there are (very) few but politically and financially highly significant cases, all of which are relatively recent and thus in progress at the time of writing. The outcome of these cases is likely to be an important test of the possibility of legal resistance. The Warsaw cases are more routine, whereas high-profile litigations are declared in city groups.

Disobedience has played a more significant role in the case of Budapest. All (known) cases of such disobedience occur at the metropolitan level and are related to taxes or fees the city government must pay the central government. These high-profile, high-stakes cases of disobedience to legally binding rules tend to be triggered and thus neutralized by immediate legislative changes that render them technically obsolete, but still politically and communicatively significant. In the case of Warsaw, there was only one atypical case of disobedience. Although the refusal to allow absentee voting in the scheduled presidential election had significant practical implications, the move was later confirmed to comply with the law.

Disobedience and communication highlight the unequal struggle between the cities and the central government. The central government has immense power to suppress undesirable actions by the capitals and to present its narrative in the mass media. Therefore, some cities’ reactions to authoritarian pressure are nipped in the bud such as the attempt to change the name of the main roundabout in Warsaw or the attempt by Budapest not to pay a solidarity tax, and others have little practical effect.

Finally, no political mobilization was found in the case of Warsaw – it seems that local society in the capital is so vibrant that there is no need for the city government to mobilize it. Instead, the City Hall supports bottom-up anti-government movements which we have considered as communication actions. However, in the case of Budapest, there has been a broad and diverse range of initiatives to mobilize citizens at both the district and metropolitan levels. According to several interviewees, such mobilization reactions are a sort of last resort, on which LGs can rely when countering illiberal recentralization.

As it comes to the cities’ responses that do not feed any of the initially defined classes, we can categorize them into three additional, new classes.

Domestic coalition building is similar to transnationalization in that it involves reaching out to, and cooperating with, new actors and/or reaching out to existing ones in new ways, whereby the cooperation is seen by the LG as a reaction to illiberal recentralization. The cooperation may involve various groups of actors and may have ambition to acquire symbolic, political and material resources to continue local public service provision, for building political support for the LG or for mounting pressure on the central government on particular policy issues. Whereas paradiplomacy and transnational coalition building are well-researched and rooted in the literature on

LGs (Aldecoa and Keating 2000; van der Heiden 2010), this domestic political lobbying/networking is usually not undertaken in academic studies (van der Heiden 2010; Lackowska 2014). What distinguishes this class from the earlier identified political mobilization is that it involves institutional actors such as Associations of LGs, and NGOs and generally has less ad hoc, more general and far-reaching objectives. We discovered this type in both capitals but with different accents. In the Warsaw case coalition, building refers mainly to the cooperation with large cities and their institutions. Meanwhile, Budapest LGs try to collaborate with local non-governmental actors using their resources in the realm of the shortage of city partners.

Behind-the-scenes bargains – may resemble domestic coalition building at first sight, but there are important differences. To start with, the party being the subject of these bargains is the central government or stakeholders acting on its behalf. Meanwhile, coalition building happens among LGs or various actors in opposition to the central government. In addition, they are more *ad hoc* and related to specific situations where – for political reasons – cooperation based directly on the logic of reciprocity is possible (Gouldner 1960). Such ad hoc deals are made on the political scene where there is no ‘table’ to negotiate in the partner atmosphere. They occur in the air of coercion where LGs are treated in a clientelist way, as totally subordinate to central apparatus. Far more advanced recentralization in Hungary seems to result in more of those actions than in the Polish context where the research allowed only a vague spotting of this phenomenon.

Financial austerity measures may, but typically do not mean an open confrontation with the central government. Somewhat similar to the case of domestic coalition building, these measures are part of LGs’ policy repertoire in ‘normal times’, too. What makes them a reaction to illiberal centralization is the intention and the purpose underlying their application. Their crucial role in resisting recentralization pressures – or, in the case of Budapest, in ensuring the daily survival of the LG – the later one was stressed by our informants in both cities.

Regarding the newly identified classes, we may observe that their importance and exemplifications differ in the two capitals under study. Interestingly, these differences may provide a diagnosis of LG’s condition in the two countries. Actions which go beyond mitigating the effects of recentralization and involve political mobilization against centralistic pressure are more common in Warsaw, such as LG networking. Domestic coalition building involves different groups of actors – societal sector (NGOs) in the Hungarian case and other LGs in the Polish one – proving greater robustness of the institutional settings and scope for political manoeuvre in the latter. By contrast, the other two more defensive forms of coping with the centralistic pressure are more visible in the Hungarian capital. In Budapest, financial austerity is the most important means of continued operation or, as noted above, even mere survival, especially at the metropolitan level. LGs have a constantly evolving, increasingly diverse and sophisticated set of measures to counter the similarly evolving mix of central government measures aimed at their financial starvation. The reliance on financial austerity measures in Warsaw is important but less emphasized in the interviews. Behind-the-scenes bargaining such as undisclosed negotiations and backroom deals are inherently

difficult to detect and assess. However, key informants in Budapest described instances of such interactions in considerable detail. In contrast, in Warsaw no specific case of central-local bargaining was mentioned.

The three, newly identified classes of reaction relate to crucial areas of policy and politics. Domestic coalition building and behind-the-scenes bargaining are directly linked to the discursive layer of central – local struggle. They can be described as rescaling processes (Brenner 2004) – creating and using various political relations (i.e. scales, Gualini 2006) in the national arena. Whereas rescaling strategies are often analysed from the international perspective as transnationalization usually is, our study has shown that creating political relations in a domestic context is at least equally important as transnational strategies. Finally, financial austerity speaks about the very basis of recentralization, which aims to weaken LGs, making them incapable of fulfilling their tasks, undertaking new challenges and vulnerable to criticism of ineffectiveness.

While our research doesn't at present allow for a systematic attempt to explain the above patterns, some hypotheses can be put forward. As mentioned in Section 4, the lack of other large cities to cooperate with and the strong position of Orbán's legislative majority seem to make a significant difference because they limit Budapest's capacity to effectively react. The room for political manoeuvre was smaller for Budapest, and bigger for Warsaw, which not only cooperated with other large cities, but also had institutional 'tables' to present its positions.

Finally, some tentative conclusions have emerged regarding the role of large cities, especially capitals, in countering illiberal transformations. As we highlighted in our introduction section, an emerging stream of research has argued that the 'strangulation' (Kovarek and Dobos 2023) of (opposition-led) LG is an important and novel means of autocratic survival. While such autocratic innovations have received increasing research focus (see the contributions to the 2020 special issue of *Democratization*), our findings lend additional credence to the 'sword and shield' view of the field of illiberal recentralization and local responses to it. In the face of authoritarian innovations, the strategies of Budapest and Warsaw to resist them have proved to be surprisingly diverse and abundant. This leads us to formulate two considerations that can guide further research. First, to date, there has been hardly any research on counter-autocratic innovation. In this study, we have taken a step towards conceptualizing and empirically exploring the counter-autocratic innovation practices of large (capital) cities. Second, as the gradual dismantling of the illiberal state unfolding in the wake of Poland's national elections – which took place in October 2023, after the data collection for this research was completed – shows, autocratic survival has its definite limits. While our research did not aim to draw conclusions about the practical effects of capital city resistance, there is some reason to believe that the resistance of Warsaw and other (large) LGs made a difference in the political outcomes of the high-stakes national elections in Autumn 2023. Further research on how urban resistance affects autocratic survival and what factors moderate this effect may provide crucial insights into understanding hybrid regime dynamics.

## Note

1. The GDP data is only available at the NUTS2 level, so the share of GDP generated by Warsaw is expected to be smaller than 17.3%. To provide some context – population-wise the capital region (NUTS2) is almost two times bigger than Warsaw.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The article was financed by the National Science Centre, Poland, under research project “In search of the (new) power balance: study on the state—cities relations in Poland”, project number: UMO-2020/37/B/HS5/02138.

## Data availability statement

The data is not publicly available as it contains information that could compromise the privacy of research participants

## ORCID

Wirginia Aksztejn  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2745-0151>

György Hajnal  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6624-4639>

Marta Lackowska  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7447-1150>

Krisztián Kádár  <http://orcid.org/0009-0009-0400-7086>

## References

- 24.hu. 2023. *Marad az autómentes Lánchíd – kihirdette a Budapesti Lakógyűlés eredményeit Karácsony*. June 20. <https://24.hu/belfold/2023/06/20/karacsony-gergely-budapesti-lakogyules-automentes-lanchid/>.
- Aksztejn, W., M. Lackowska, J. Krukowska, and M. Ł. 2022. “The Multiple Faces of Recentralization: A Typology of Central-Local Interactions.” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 46 (7): 1329–1349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2022.2124916>.
- Aldecoa, F., and M. Keating. 2000. *Paradiplomacy in Action. The Foreign Relations of Subnational Governments*. London: Frank Cass Publishers.
- Atkinson, R., and C. Rossignolo. 2008. *The Re-Creation of the European City: Governance, Territory and Polycentricity*. Amsterdam: Techne Press.
- Bagnasco, A., and P. L. Galés. 2000. “Introduction: European Cities: Local Societies and Collective Actors?” In *Cities in Contemporary Europe*, edited by A. Bagnasco and P. L. Galés, 1–32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, K. D. 1994. “Typologies and Taxonomies: An Introduction to Classification Techniques.” *Sage University Paper Series on Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences, Series No. 07-102*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Barber, B. 2013. *If Mayors Ruled the World. Disfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Batory, A. 2022. “More Power, Less Support: The Fidesz Government and the Coronavirus Pandemic in Hungary.” *Government and Opposition*, published online: 59 (4): 1017–1033. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.3>.

- Bauer, M. 2023. "Administrative Responses to Democratic Backsliding: When is Bureaucratic Resistance Justified?" *Regulation & Governance*, published online:18 (4): 1104–1117. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12567>.
- Begadze, M. 2022. "Playbook of Subnational Illiberalism: Autocrats Face the Opposition-Led Local Governments." *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 14 (2–3): 309–330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-022-00184-8>.
- Brenner, N. 2004. *New State Spaces. Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bustikova, L., and P. Guasti. 2017. "The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?" *Politics & Governance* 5 (4): 166–176. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1156>.
- Chandler, J. 2005. "Comparative Inter-Governmental Relations: Models That Need to Travel." *Local Government Studies* 31 (3): 269–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930500095061>.
- Copus, C., M. Roberts, and R. Wall. 2017. *Local Government in England. Centralisation, Autonomy and Control*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Corry, D., and G. Stoker. 2000. *New Localism, Refashioning the Central-Local Relationship*. London: New Local Government Network.
- Council of Europe. 2013. *Local and Regional Democracy in Hungary*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.
- Council of Europe. 2020. *Monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Hungary*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Dickovick, J. T. 2011. *Decentralization and Recentralization in the Developing World: Comparative Studies from Africa and Latin America*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Dobos, G. 2021. "Institutional Changes and Shifting Roles: Local Government Reform in Hungary, 2010–2014." In *Local Government in Europe*, edited by M. Lackowska, K. Szmigiel-Rawska, and F. Teles, 99–116. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.
- Drapalova, E. 2023. "Thorns in the Side: Strategies of Populist Parties Against Local Public Administrations." *Governance-An International Journal of Policy Administration and Institutions* 37 (S1): 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12843>.
- Finta, I., I. Hoffman, K. I. Pálné, and G. Péteri. 2021. "A magyar önkormányzati rendszer megújulásának irányai." *PÓLUSOK* 2 (2): 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.15170/PSK.2021.02.02.01>.
- Gouldner, A. W. 1960. "The Norm of Reciprocity." *American Sociological Review* 25 (2): 161–178. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2092623>.
- Griffith, J. A. G. 1966. *Central Department and Local Authorities*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Gualini, E. 2006. "The Rescaling of Governance in Europe: New Spatial and Institutional Rationales." *European Planning Studies* 14 (7): 881–904. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654310500496255>.
- Guasti, P., and L. Bustikova. 2022. "Pandemic Power Grab." *East European Politics* 38 (4): 529–550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2122049>.
- Hajnal, G., and Z. Boda. 2021. "Illiberal Transformation of Government Bureaucracy in a Fragile Democracy: The Case of Hungary." In *Backsliding and Public Administration*, edited by M. W. Bauer, et al. 76–99. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hajnal, G., I. Jeziorska, and É. M. Kovács. 2021. "Understanding Drivers of Illiberal Entrenchment at Critical Junctures: Institutional Responses to COVID-19 in Hungary and Poland." *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87 (3): 612–630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852320981138>.
- Hajnal, G., and É. M. Kovács. 2020. "Governance and Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Hungary: Early Experiences and Lessons." In *Good Public Governance in a Global Pandemic*, edited by P. Joyce, F. Maron, and P. Reddy, 305–315. Brussels, Belgium: International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS).
- Hajnal, G., and B. Kucsera. 2023. "Municipally Owned Corporations in Hungary." In *Corporatization in Local Government*, edited by M. Van Genugten, et al. 99–117. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Hausner, J. 2007. "Polityka a polityka publiczna." *Zarządzanie Publiczne/Public Governance* 1 (1): 43–60.
- HGV. 2023. *Május végén kezdi el a pereskedést a szolidaritási adó csökkentéséért a főváros*. May 18. [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20230518\\_Majus\\_vegen\\_kezdi\\_el\\_a\\_pereskedest\\_a\\_szolidaritasi\\_ado\\_csokkenteseert\\_a\\_fovaros](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20230518_Majus_vegen_kezdi_el_a_pereskedest_a_szolidaritasi_ado_csokkenteseert_a_fovaros).
- Hlepas, N. K. 2016. "Is it the Twilight of Decentralization? Testing the Limits of Functional Reforms in the Era of Austerity." *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 82 (2): 273–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852315581994>.
- Hungarian Central Statistical Office. 2023a. [https://www.ksh.hu/stadat\\_files/nep/en/nep0034.html](https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/en/nep0034.html).
- Hungarian Central Statistical Office. 2023b. [https://www.ksh.hu/stadat\\_files/gdp/hu/gdp0077.html](https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/gdp/hu/gdp0077.html).
- John, P. 1990. *Recent Trends in Central-Local Government Relations*. London: Joseph Rothree Foundation.
- Katz, B., and J. Nowak. 2017. *The New Localism: How Cities Can Thrive in the Age of Populism*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Kovarek, D., and G. Dobos. 2023. "Masking the Strangulation of Opposition Parties as Pandemic Response: Austerity Measures Targeting the Local Level in Hungary." *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy & Society* 16 (1): 105–117. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsac044>.
- Kovarek, D., and L. Littvay. 2022. "Greater Than the Sum of Its Part(ie)s: Opposition Comeback in the 2019 Hungarian Local Elections." *East European Politics* 38 (3): 382–399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2038571>.
- Kuhlmann, S., P. B. Dumas, and M. Heuberger. 2022. *The Capacity of Local Governments in Europe. Autonomy, Responsibilities and Reforms*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lackowska, M. 2014. *Miejska polityka "zagraniczna". Koncepcja przeskalowania w doświadczeniach polskich miast [Urban „foreign” policy. Rescaling concept in experience of Polish cities]*. Wyd Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Lackowska, M., R. Matczak, P. Swianiewicz, D. Sześciło, and K. Wojnar. 2023. *Indeks samorządności*. Warszawa: Stefan Batory Foundation.
- Ladner, A. 2024. *International Comparative Research on Local Autonomy*. <http://local-autonomy.andreasladner.ch/downloads/>.
- Ladner, A., N. Keuffer, H. Baldersheim, N. Hlepas, P. Swianiewicz, K. Steyvers, and C. Navarro. 2019. *Patterns of Local Autonomy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Muro, D. 2015. "When Do Countries Recentralize? Ideology and Party Politics in the Age of Austerity." *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 21 (1): 24–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2015.1003485>.
- Musil, P. A., and S. Yardımcı-Geyikçi. 2023. "Transnationalization of Opposition Strategy Under Competitive Authoritarianism: Evidence from Turkey and Hungary." *Government and Opposition*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2023.19>.
- Népszava. 2023. *Szolidaritási adó: alkotmányossági aggályok merültek fel a Magyar Államkincstár eljárásával szemben, Budapest az azonnali jogvédelemben bízik*. November 28. [https://nepszava.hu/3216979\\_szolidaritasi-ado-magyar-allamkincstar-per-alkotmanyossagi-aggaly-budapest-jogvedelem](https://nepszava.hu/3216979_szolidaritasi-ado-magyar-allamkincstar-per-alkotmanyossagi-aggaly-budapest-jogvedelem).
- O'Dwyer, C., and M. Stenberg. 2022. "Local-Level Democratic Backsliding? The Consolidation of Aspiring Dominant-Party Regimes in Hungary and Poland." *Government and Opposition* 57 (3): 508–531. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.12>.
- Page, E. C., and M. J. Goldsmith, eds. 1987. *Central-Local Government Relations: A Comparative Analysis of West European Unitary States*. London: Sage.
- Page, E. C., and M. J. Goldsmith. 2010. *Changing Government Relations in Europe. From Localism to Intergovernmentalism*. London: Routledge.
- Pálné Kovács, I., A. Bodor, I. Kacziba, Z. Grünhut, P. Finta, and G. Zongor. 2016. "Farewell to Decentralization: The Hungarian Story and Its Implications." *HKJU-CCPA* 16 (4): 789–816. <https://doi.org/10.31297/hkju.16.4.4>.



- Perulli, P. 2013. "Return of the State and Attempts of Centralization in Italy." *Métropoles* 12 (12). <https://doi.org/10.4000/metropoles.4665>.
- Pirro, A. L. P., and B. Stanley. 2021. "Forging, Bending, and Breaking: Enacting the "Illiberal Playbook" in Hungary and Poland." *Perspectives on Politics* 20 (1): 86–101. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001924>.
- Reszkető, P. E., B. Váradi, and Á. Hajnal. 2022. *Local Governments and Types of Political Favouritism – Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Evidence, and Plan for an Empirical Analysis in Hungary*. Budapest: Budapest Institute for Policy Analysis.
- Rhodes, R. 1981. *Control and Power in Central-Local Government Relations*. 2nd ed. 1999. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Sartori, G. 1970. "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics." *The American Political Science Review* 64 (4): 1033–1053. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1958356>.
- Seawright, J., and J. Gering. 2008. "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research. A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options." *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (2): 294–308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912907313077>.
- Stenberg, M., F. Rocco, and S. A. Farole. 2022. "Calling in "Sick": COVID-19, Opportunism, Pretext, and Subnational Autocratization." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2 (3): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac017>.
- Swyngedouw, E. 2004. "Globalisation or 'Glocalisation'? Networks, Territories and Rescaling." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17 (1): 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0955757042000203632>.
- Szente, Z. 2013. "Hungary. Local Government in Hungary: A Creeping Centralization?" In *Local Government in Europe. The 'Fourth level' in the EU Multilayered Governance*, edited by P. Carlo and M. R. Varney, 151–182. London & New York: Routledge.
- Sześciło, D. 2019. "Is There a Room for Local and Regional Self-Government in the Illiberal Democracy? Struggle Over Recentralization Attempts in Poland." *Studia Iuridica* 9: 166–179. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0013.1893>.
- Sześciło, D. 2020. *Samorząd-centrum. Bilans po trzydziestu latach od odrodzenia się samorządu i pięciu latach nowego centralizmu*. Warszawa: Stefan Batory Foundation.
- Tamás, B. 2023. *Beperli a Fővárosi Vízművek az államot*. July. <https://444.hu/2023/07/13/beper-eli-a-fovarosi-vizmuvek-az-allamot>.
- Telex. 2022. *Kiújulhat a kormány-főváros harc a Városligetért*. April 19. <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/04/19/kiujulhat-a-kormany-fovaros-harc-a-varosligetert>.
- Telex. 2023. *Megfojtja a kritikus sajtót, lélegeztetőgépen tartja a baráti médiát a kormány*. November 9. <https://telex.hu/gazdasag/2023/11/09/allami-hirdetesek-eloszlasa-mediapiac-printlapok-online-teve-radio>.
- Uster, A., and N. Cohen. 2022. "Local government's Response to Dissatisfaction with Centralized Policies: The "Do-It-Yourself" Approach." *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 89 (3): 825–841. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208523221094414>.

- Valaszonline. 2021. "A NER már a sajtó 50 százalékát kontrollálja – itt a nagy médiatérkép." January 4. <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2021/01/04/a-ner-mar-a-sajto-50-szazalekat-kontrollalja-itt-a-nagy-mediaterkep/>.
- van der Heiden, N. 2010. *Urban Foreign Policy and Domestic Dilemmas. Insight from Swiss and EU Cityregions*. ECPR Press.
- Vasvári, T., and D. Longauer. 2024. "Against the Tide: How Changes in Political Alignment Affect Grant Allocation to Municipalities in Hungary." *Public Choice* 198 (3–4): 467–492. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-023-01138-w>.
- Yin, R. K. 2013. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.