

Think global, act local

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Local governments in Hungary

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The idea of local government reforms has again come to the foreground of Hungarian professional discussions. This may even be good news if the various reform ideas rested on objective analyses and the lessons distilled from the professional disputes but unfortunately, this is not the case. The dominant opinions (at least in the media) are based on presumptions and prejudices rather than on knowledge, although scholars do what they are supposed to do, their results could be built upon.¹ An example for this is a monograph that was recently published, which we can call the “black book” of the Hungarian local government system in the sense that it ruthlessly does away with all the illusions that have led to the development of today's system. The author, who is an honored senior researcher of the narrow professional circles, has summed up her several-decade research on the subject in her latest book. The book is a scholarly piece of work in the widest

and most positive sense of the word but as we have already suggested, it is also much more than that. While it meets all the criteria of scientific analysis and monographic elaboration (use of the relevant literature, synthesis of theoretical and practical knowledge), it describes the international trends and correlations of the analyzed area, it also ruthlessly explores the operational mechanisms of the subject and takes a clear standpoint on further development, on the basis of firmly stated values. The author does not make it a secret either that she is “for” local governments but she looks at the “Hungarian model” of the local government system with the criticism of a clever parent and not with a kind of “doting attitude”. She confronts the public and the researchers of the area (including herself) with those illusions and prejudices as a result of which (too) the Hungarian system of local governments is in its current status. As regards its genre, the “black

book” may even be green. By this, I do not mean to qualify the maturity of the conclusions contained therein but I mean that the decision-makers of the local government reforms could boldly use the book as a source. Of course, the politicians of any time are not obliged to take over, or copy the warnings and guidance of science as such. The observer sitting in the crow's nest² is not in the same position as those serving on the captain's bridge. He does not see the same things, he is not the one to steer the boat. Treacherous reefs may escape the attention of the observer but the land is probably better seen from up the deck.

The author starts the book by describing the theoretical framework of the topic, presenting and systematizing the knowledge accumulated by economics and political science. The second part deals with local and regional policies, avoiding all kinds of mystification and flourish but at the same time, clearly describing the most important feature of this complex, if you wish, highly specific public policy area. It is indicated by some provoking subtitles (Does local power exist?, Who governs?) that the book aims to bring up, and if possible, to resolve problems rather than to gloss over them. Theoretical foundation is followed by the narrative description of the evolution of Hungarian state administration through several chapters. This is followed by the detailed and many-sided description of the structural and public policy features and operation of local government. The monograph is closed by presenting some scenarios for solving today's unsustainable situation, which statement is also proven by the book. If one only gets their information from the table of contents, they may be missing the obligatory chapter on “international outlook”. Well, thanks to God, this is missing from the book, as we are talking about a book that discusses the international trends and the domestic processes (be they theories, public policy, or organizational solu-

tions) *as an organic whole*. We hereby do not undertake the (impossible) mission of introducing all the relevant ideas of the book. Instead, the reviewer highlights those messages of the book which are especially attractive to him and which may encourage the readers of this review to read the book themselves.

From the book, you will learn about those strong tendencies in the development of the global economy that result in permanent changes in the role of the state, as well as the transformation of the spatial structure of the economy. The presented periodical processes, which should also be reckoned with by those who devise domestic reform ideas, tend to fundamentally reshuffle not only the contents of the state tasks but also the distribution thereof between the individual government levels. It shows how, besides and instead of regionalization, the global networks of cities affect the spatial relationships of the economy and what challenges they pose to the state organization.

In the author's analysis, *system approach* and *historical view* jointly represent themselves. These virtues may teach important lessons to the “radical” reformers. The art of reforms is the art of distinguishing between something *to be changed* and something that *can be used*, between things that *can be changed* and things that *cannot be changed* momentarily. It is an art, as politicians always act in a specific field of force. Science can help politics in that it shows the opportunities and constraints of its action. The book's merits are both in the presentation of the things determined by the past and the continuities, as well as in its making the reader feel that society and its various subsystems make up an organic whole. Each intervention modifies the internal balance of this organic whole at any time. The application of these approaches makes the book enjoyable reading for both those interested in the widest professional spectrum of social sciences and the actual players of the local government system.

These approaches are also suitable for getting a sophisticated picture of the syndrome “from front-runner to straggler”, which idea dominates Hungarian public speech. It is obvious from the book that this approach is rather narrow-minded. When the Berlin wall came down, the Hungarian politicians and professionals of this field used to have a libertarian view of the market and of democracy, which was actually an idea about a social structure that had never existed anywhere. The use of the past tense is by far not justified in the light of the reform ideas of today, as the prejudices of the recent past haunt us even today.

This had several kinds of consequences. On the one hand, planning-based coordination disappeared from the Hungarian set of concepts, depriving itself from an efficient tool of solving several problems. The West used to “suggest” strong decentralization to the countries in the process of changing their political systems, *in spite of* the obvious integration tendencies of the Central-European countries, with good reasons. A “small” and weak state is less able to resist the economic advocacy groups and the external political lobbies. The latter is very conspicuous in the case of the disintegrated post-Yugoslavian states but the story is also about other countries.

Dr. Ilona Pál-Kovács shows it from many aspects that the Hungarian model of local governments has realized decentralization without subsidiarity and collective irresponsibility, while the constitutional frames and the economic realities got increasingly distant from

each other, and the model became a “dump-site” for the unsolved conflicts of the political shift.

In her proposals, the author diverts at several points from today's fads in political science and state administration in Hungary. She has a determined counter-opinion against the municipality regions and de-concentrated organizations installed on the NUTS2 level. This opinion of hers, however, is not emotionally biased and not the result of a “consistency” in a negative sense but the application of the outcome of the research activities which provide the background of the book and which continued after the completion thereof³.

It would be good to act but it does make a difference how. Political action is always specific, or local, if you like. The local feature, however, is not the synonym of provincialism. The reforms are not for themselves but for the better operation of the areas to be changed. The ambitious reformers of the local government system had better pay attention to such analyses as the book written by Dr. Ilona Pál-Kovács. I am sure that the monograph will become the Bible of students of political science and PhD students dealing with the subject. I am less sure, however, whether those who make the political decisions will also utilize this treasury of knowledge. Thus, I recommend this book written in extraordinarily good style to both reformers and those who are simply interested in the topic.

András Vigvári

NOTES

¹ The literature provided here is intended to be a kind of obligatory and extendable list of sources for those interested in the local government reform.

² Metaphor used by Bálint Csátári

³ See also Mrs. Pál, 2008

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