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(Re)Centralisation of education governance in Hungary: its causes, declared goals, motives and some potential hidden goals

Abstract

After municipalities (local governments) and county level governments were established in Hungary in 1990, public education was operated, governed and financed by these elected bodies with the financial support of the central government until the end of 2012. In this decentralised system differences in local wealth and income of municipalities led to significant inequalities in the funding and performance of their schools, and the learning outcomes of the children studying in these. The FIDESZ-KDNP coalition government that took office in 2010 radically centralised the system of governance and funding of schools, claiming that this will be a remedy to the problems of the system. Based on a large set of research interviews and previous research results our paper investigates the declared goals of this reform, and tries to explore its motives as well. According to our research interviews granting equal opportunity in education to every child seems to be the overarching goal of centralisation, and there are three more other goals as well, including the creation of a more efficient and cost-effective system of institutional management. However, some characteristics of the selection of these goals and the seemingly complete lack of the monitoring of their fulfilment, together with the fact that independent research already proved that the centralisation was definitely unable to achieve its main declared goal, may substantiate the claim that this just served as a cover or pretext, and there probably exists a hidden agenda that is more important for the government than the publicly declared goals. Based on interviews with former politicians, education researchers, advisors and school headmasters we tried to find some

of the possible real motives and hidden goals. Although the existence of such goals is impossible to prove exactly, we found several circumstances that may substantiate their existence.

Keywords: education governance, centralisation, equality of opportunity, test results

Introduction

Based on the analysis of a large set of research interviews (50–90 minutes long each), and some pre-existing research focusing on the reasons, outcomes, consequences and problems of the (re)centralisation of school governance in Hungary during the last decade under three consecutive Orbán-governments, this paper aims at exploring the declared, and also the possible hidden or implicit goals of the (re)centralisation of education funding and school governance during the previous decade and the possible motives behind it. This centralisation is part of a much bigger picture¹ and is just ‘another brick in the wall’² of a new education policy. The starting point of this new policy was already set in 2011 when the new Act on National Public Education (Act CXC of 2011) was enacted. The next major step in the process was the enactment of Act CLXXXVIII of 2012 on taking over of the control and funding of some education institutions from local government by the state (i.e. the central government). See Péteri (2014), Szabó & Fehérvári (2015) on the reasons, implementation and first phase of the reform. Semjén, Le & Hermann (2018) and Györgyi (2019) give a more detailed picture on the main steps of his reform and its problems and development.

9 research interviews (containing 3 with education policy leaders and/or high rank government officials³ at the time of the interviews, and another 6 with

¹ There is undeniably a strengthening role of the government in the provision of public services and utilities in Hungary, which can be viewed as a manifestation of a broader general trend towards centralization (Rosta, 2014 and Kornai, 2015). As Kornai (2015) writes, in Hungarian politics recently prevails an “obsession with centralization, which is intertwined in many ways with the aforementioned tendency to nationalize”, and this is a tendency that “affects almost all spheres of society” (p. 6).

² This reference to the lyrics of the old Pink Floyd song seems to be warranted by some characteristics of the essential features of this policy itself: reducing the school leaving age of compulsory education to 16 years from 18, curtailing the autonomy of schools and their teachers, drastically limiting the schools’ and teachers’ rights and freedom to choose their textbooks, making entrance to (upper) secondary education [ISCED 3A and 3B level] more difficult and stressful to children, making the National Curriculum more rigid, putting more emphasis in education on knowledge than on the development of competence or independent and logical thinking, creativity and reasoning, on giving ready-made answers instead of the ability of asking the right questions.

³ An MP, who was the former secretary of state for education, responsible for the design of the new, extremely centralised school governance system, and two deputy state secretaries, responsible for public education or its reform, working on the implementation or the further development of the system.

high level civil servants⁴ working in the newly established centralised school governance system) were conducted by me and my assistant in 2014. As in 2014 these interviews were conducted for a study that was ordered by the Education Office, a government agency, with the help of the agency and with the support of the Ministry we could organise the interviews relatively easily within the central authority (abbreviated as KLIK) that became responsible for operating and financing the new system of governance. It also might have helped that being an education policy researcher since the 1980s I personally knew some of the interviewed education policy leaders responsible for the reform.

Another set of research interviews was conducted by us between 2018 and 2020. This second set of 21 interviews contains 3 interviews with former education policy leaders (1 ex-secretary of state during various former socialist-liberal coalition governments, being at the time of the interview an advisor of an opposition party, and 2 top level former government officials and education policy makers – an ex-minister and an ex-secretary of state – during the FIDESZ-led “conservative” coalition government between 1998 and 2002), 6 interviews with leading education researchers and/or private education consultants, another one with a leading education columnist, 3 interviews with actual or former leaders of the two existing teachers’ trade unions, another interview with the president of the National Teachers’ Association (NPK), a centrally founded organisation (all teachers working in the public sector school system are automatically members of this organisation according to the law), 3 interviews with school headmasters in the public system, 2 interviews with former and present leaders of *Tanítanék* (I’d like to teach), a teacher protest movement against the education policy of the Orbán-governments, that started in 2016 and was triggered by the problems of the overly centralised system of school governance and the resulting crisis of public education⁵, and last but not least an interview with a leader of an independent parents’ organisation.

The 2018-2020 research interviews were conducted in a research project, made possible by a government financed NKFIH K_17 research grant. During this project we also tried to make some more research interviews with leading officials of the Klebelsberg Centre (the renamed and reorganised version of KLIK) several times, however we never succeeded, although we had good pro-

⁴ One government official (the president of the central government agency KLIK that controls, manages and operates the new system), and five school district directors at the time of the interviews. (We wanted to repeat some research interviews with school district directors in 2020 on their experience with the revised governance system with much bigger school districts and a bit more decision making power and autonomy given to their directors, but only one of them agreed and made herself available for an extra interview in 2020 January about the revision of model and the working of the revised system.)

⁵ See Bajomi & Csákó (2017) for more on teacher protests in Hungary,

fessional contacts with some former educational policy officials close to the government party.⁶

Background

After the systemic change, in 1990 newly established local and county governments took over the provision of primary and secondary education in Hungary from the previous hierarchic state school governance system. Although in this post-1990 system private (church and non-church) schools were also present, and their share was on the rise, the majority of schools were still owned, funded and run by local governments, and the vast majority of 6–14 y.o. pupils studied in local government run schools. From 1990 until 2013, schools that provided primary and lower secondary education (ISCED 1 and ISCED 2 levels) within the frameworks of the public school system, were operated by local (municipal or city) governments, while upper secondary education became the responsibility of county municipalities, although local governments could also choose to maintain and operate such schools. Previous research, e.g. Varga (2000) or Hermann (2008), has shown that in this system of education governance and funding the disparities in per-student expenditures were quite substantial during the 1990s and 2000s in Hungary. Moreover, Hermann (2010) also noted that student achievement in the decentralised system was higher in high income and high spending municipalities, even if differences in the individual characteristics of students were taken into account. Socio-economic background of children played an important role in their success in education, and determined their learning outcomes to a great extent. There were huge differences in the quality of teaching and the learning outcomes of children between schools. In 2013 the central government took over the tasks of running, operating and funding of public schools from the elected local or county governments, while the upkeep and maintenance of schools at this point still remained the

⁶ In 2018 within the frameworks of a government financed research project I wanted to make a research interview with the new president of the Klebelsberg Centre (who leads the Centre even today). I called her Secretariat several times asking for an appointment to make the interview. They always promised to call me back with the result, but they never did. Finally, having no other choice, I obtained her private phone number from a FIDESZ politician I knew well personally, and called her. She listened to my request and told me that she has to ask for permission from the Minister overseeing her work in order to grant me an interview, and that she will call back in two weeks. She never did, and she never again answered my subsequent calls: so I suppose she either did not get the permission or never even asked for it. She probably also forbade school district leaders to give me further research interviews, as (with one exception) not even those were returning my calls and willing to give me another research interview, with whom I conducted honest interviews in a relaxed mood in 2014.

responsibility of local governments (however, if these did not want to keep this task, they could also transfer it to the school district the school belonged to). This reform has changed the funding and governance of schools and reshaped the rules and practice of education governance immediately (for more details on the legal and institutional changes in school governance see Szabó & Fehérvári, 2015 and Semjén et al., 2018).

After the start of this new centralised system the governance and running of general schools (providing primary and lower secondary education), non-vocational upper secondary schools (the so called *gymnasiums*) and basic-level art or music schools have become the task of the (district-level) school district they belonged to, while vocational education institutions (including vocational schools and vocational secondary schools) were mostly governed and run by the so called county centre school districts. While the school districts became responsible for financing material expenses for the purchase of goods and services, the wages of teachers and other school staff were financed centrally by the state. To compensate teachers for the loss of their autonomy and to make the new system more acceptable for them, a New Career Model for teachers was worked out and established. The newly established central teachers' pay scale that was originally meant to be the attractive part of the new Career Model played also an important role in the process. This Teachers' Career Model took effect at the beginning of the 2013/14 school year, and tied the planned yearly adjustments of the pay scale of teachers to the yearly increase of the minimum wage. It was publicised as a significant pay rise for teachers (after a long lasting quasi wage freeze following the 50 percent wage raise for public sector employees in 2002 by the socialist-liberal coalition government), however, it was difficult to say to what extent it was indeed a pay rise, as the mandatory weekly contact hour workload of teachers was increased and payments for extra works were abolished. Even with these caveats the Career Model was meant to be the "carrot" in the "stick and carrot mix" of the 2012 reform measures that took effect in 2013. However, after the first year of the new system the link between the minimum wage and the pay scale was cut, and teachers' wages gradually have come closer and closer to the ever increasing minimum wage.

At the beginning of this reform 198 school districts were established, including 19 so called county centre school districts. In charge for the control and governance of these school districts was a newly established central mammoth government agency or office, KLIK (Semjén et al., 2018). KLIK also became technically the employer of the roughly 120 thousand teachers and 30 thousand other employees working in the public education system (van Dommelen, 2021). Nevertheless, employment decisions (recruitment, staffing and dismissal) were delegated to the individual school districts, and their decisions in most cases were in accordance with the proposals of school headmasters.

According to our research interviews, school districts did not have separate budgets⁷ and had little autonomy and decision making power: they collected the problems, requests and demands of their schools and transferred them to the central mammoth authority, KLIK, that had decision making power but being far from the individual schools did not have and could not process the relevant information to make good decisions. An education researcher told me (based on his first-hand information from several KLIK leaders) in an interview that some former KLIK presidents in the first “heroic” years of operation of the (re)centralised system wanted to run it and make important decisions about finances and resources by organising regular monthly meetings with all the school district directors participating in order to present their problems and demands in public, and collected detailed statistical information from schools on paper sheets lying on the floor of their offices instead of successfully creating a functioning computerised information system. A sure recipe for chaos. Interestingly, the lack of a separate, unambiguous budget for each school district was considered a serious problem already during the 2014 round of interviews by most of our respondents.

It can also be noted that most of the school district leaders, and some of the education policy decision makers we could interview were of the opinion already in 2014 that the primitive hierarchic governance model of one centre – many school districts should be revised. Still, at this time most of them envisioned a pyramid-like multilevel model containing a strong middle (or county) level.⁸ However, the popular idea of making the governance model more operational by introducing a multi-level management structure and establishing a powerful middle level proved to be short-lived, as during the second phase (decided in 2016, and implemented in 2017) of the reform this was not to be the solution that was finally selected.

The main problems of the extremely centralised (one centre – 198 school districts) governance system were collected and discussed in Kopasz & Boda (2018), Györgyi (2019), and in Semjén et al. (2018) as well. By the beginning of 2016 the serious problems of the new governance model and the incompetence and inability of KLIK to tackle them became evident for most people working at the various levels of the administration, including the responsible ministry, the school districts, and the schools themselves. It became also evident for the general public and the press. The strengthening lack of trust of the general public in

⁷ At the beginning of the new system not even the KLIK had a fixed budget, they had to ask for extra financing several times during a budgetary year, and they also accumulated a rather big debt soon.

⁸ We are in no position to tell whether this opinion was held at this time by the majority of school district leaders, since the school district directors with whom we could conduct interviews were not selected randomly by us, but were designated by the Education Office.

the education system after 2012 (see Kopasz & Boda, 2018), together with the discontent of teachers due to various problems in the system⁹ soon led to protests amongst teachers, especially in some of the better upper secondary schools, and the evolvement of the *Tanítanék* (I'd like to teach) Movement of teachers (wearing chequered shirts as a symbol), and several other civil organisations of teachers and education researchers (e.g. The Civic Platform on Education), parents and later even secondary school students focusing on education issues. These civic organisations and movements played an important role in organising mass demonstrations focusing on education problems, and the civil disobedience in schools. See more on their formation and role in Bajomi & Csákó (2017). Most of them are still active and have a role in the new wave of protests and civil disobedience that started in 2022, after a government decree practically abolished teachers' right to strike. Sacking some teachers of several elite secondary schools in Budapest (Kölcsey, Eötvös, Vörösmarty, Karinthy), playing a prominent role in the civil disobedience of teachers, was only oil on fire, and led to increased participation of students and parents in the protests and demonstrations.

Although for those teachers who opposed the centralised system and started to organise protests or civil disobedience, and took part in the street demonstrations demanding better education, more school autonomy and higher wages for teachers, etc., the lack of autonomy was certainly one of the main problems of the centralised system, such progressive teachers were only a minority in most schools. Many of the teachers having a nostalgic attitude towards education during the communist or socialist regime were quite content with the lack of autonomy. Autonomy means also more responsibility and requires more creativity and more work from teachers. There are teachers who are not too enthusiastic about more autonomy and responsibility, and for whom a centralised system is more convenient. Some of our interviews with education researchers and former education policy leaders suggest that the 2012 centralisation reform was the politicians response to the demands of this conservative group of teachers.

According to our interviews several ideas on different ways to reform the system were put forward and discussed within the government administration: one deputy secretary of state, who for a short period became KLIK president, nurtured the idea of closing down in smaller villages lower secondary education (or some part of it, that is some grades of the 8-year general school), and establishing big school centres in bigger settlements to which the children were sup-

⁹ Increased workload, too much control, too little autonomy, low wages, etc., the obvious failure of the Teachers' Career Model and the newly established central teachers' pay scale that took effect in 2013, etc.

posed to be taken by school buses. However, in small settlements neither the local governments, nor the voters liked the idea of losing some part of their schools, and as in constituencies with many threatened small schools it was unpopular, the idea was rejected due to the pressure of the parliamentary fraction of FIDESZ-KDNP. Some education researchers whom we interviewed were of the opinion that an important reason why the idea of the bigger and better quality school centres was rejected and not pursued further was that the parents/voters in the bigger municipalities, where the school centres could have been established, were reluctant to have more roma children in the school where their kids also studied.

As it has been already mentioned, by 2016 the failure of the centralisation became obvious for nearly everyone who was in one way or another concerned with it. Protests started and some modification of the centralised system (or the reform of the reform) became unavoidable. Not only teachers and parents demanded this, but the need was evident even for those operating the system. KLIK ate up 5 leaders (presidents) in 4 years: by the time a new president more or less learned how to run the Centre and the system, he or she was already removed.

In the course of the remodelling of the system the severely criticised “one centre – many school districts” model remained in effect, but was modified to a great extent. Instead of delegating most of the tasks and the decision-making power of the overburdened and inefficiently functioning centre to a middle level, a different solution was selected. School districts have become much bigger and somewhat more autonomous, while their number have been drastically reduced, and some of the previously centralised decisions were delegated to them. However, the control of the Klebelsberg Centre over the school districts and their decisions remained rather tight. It is almost a miracle that such a deep remodelling could be done without publicly acknowledging the near complete failure and the dysfunctionality of the system introduced in 2013. It is not the case that KLIK presidents or ministers were not removed – but nobody ever took responsibility for the introduction of a dysfunctional system publicly. (No wonder it happened this way, as the person responsible for every important decision was most likely the prime minister himself.) It is not even the case that the serious problems and the non-viability of the governance system introduced in 2013 was denied – just the whole thing was presented in a “there is nothing to see here, please move forward” manner, and it was pretended as if this course of events were completely normal.¹⁰

¹⁰ In Miklós (2017) a journalist of a web portal really close to the ruling right-wing coalition suggests in her very first question that the centralised governance model failed to achieve its declared goals as the management of the Centre was inefficient, and the Centre was unable to fulfil its task as an economic unit. In spite of consecutive consolidation measures it fell into

Semjén et al. (2018) lists the important legal cornerstones¹¹ of the second phase of the school governance reform (pp. 16-17). Györgyi (2019) sees this second phase of the reform as a correction of the over-centralisation in the previous governance system, and he also describes the main characteristic features of the “improved” system. Although the changes in the governance of vocational training and vocational secondary education are also important, for our present analysis, however, the most relevant points of the second phase are the reorganisation of school districts into bigger ones, the drastic reduction of their number (from 198 to 60), and delegating some of the tasks of the centre to the school districts and the transformation of KLIK into a new government agency, Klebelsberg Centre. Also an important step forward was that the previously separated tasks of (1) operating and funding of public schools and (2) the maintenance of schools were united and both became the responsibility of the school district. Granting the school districts their own budget (van Domelen, 2021), and together with that increasing somewhat their level of autonomy (Semjén et al., 2018) were also changes that were greeted by both the schools and the school districts.

The declared goals of the reform

According to its concise and rather brief preamble the Act CLXXXVIII of year 2012 has four (not especially well defined) general goals. These are the following:

- the creation of a public education system that provides equal opportunities to every child;
- the creation of the operating conditions of a state that functions in a lawful and transparent manner and provides public services fully;
- the improvement and unification of professional standards in the provision of public education; and
- the achievement of a more efficient and cost-effective system of institutional management.

These are relatively clear, although some of the notions mentioned here are not at all easy or straightforward to interpret. This is especially true to the equal-

a debt spiral repeatedly, had severe liquidity problems and in the end it was unable to cover even the most necessary expenses of schools. And the new president does not deny it, moreover, he admits that in 2016 the original concept was revised and “moved towards decentralization”. He also admits that the Centre had to be stabilised financially in order to avoid a liquidity crisis. He also says that “the necessity of decentralisation is undisputed”.

¹¹ I.a. the amendment of the previous Act on Vocational Training and of another act on Adult Training, together with some less important related acts. The Act on National Public Education also was modified in 2016. At last a Government Decree (134/2016. [VI. 10.]) concerning organizations that perform state tasks in public education as school operators determined the new frameworks of the education governance system.

ity of opportunities, which is, as Elford (2023) demonstrates, is open to several quite different interpretations, each of which relies on assumptions that can raise a vast array of philosophical questions. However, we cannot and will not deal with them in detail here. As for the second and the fourth goal are concerned, these are not education policy goals per se or strictly speaking. The fourth goal has probably more relevance to public finances than to education. The third goal seems to deal more with the inputs of education than with the outcome.

Our interviews with education politicians who were responsible for the formulation or the implementation of this Act back in 2012 and 2013, and the school district directors working in educational governance usually mention these goals, although not necessarily in this order, and usually not each of them. The first and the last goal got the most attention and mentions both from education policy decision makers and school district leaders. Some of them especially emphasised the need for equality in education. However, neither the politicians, nor the school district centre administrators used precisely the term of equality of opportunity. In many cases they referred instead to the equalisation of the financial resources spent on the students in the various settlements and schools.

Reasons for doubting and querying the sincerity of the first goal

There are some reasons suggesting that this emphasis on the concern with equal opportunities in education may not be not completely genuine, honest or sincere.

(1) First of all, this supposed main goal was not even mentioned in the text of the original Bill (Government's Bill T/8888, introduced to the Parliament in October, 2012), from which the later "Act CLXXXVIII of 2012 on taking over the control and funding of some education institutions from local governments by the State" evolved. Instead of equality of opportunity, the first main goal listed in the Bill was a rather obscure or dim one, namely the facilitation of the establishment of the 'Good State'.¹²

(2) Although there were certainly some serious problems with fairness and equality of opportunity in the provision of education within the previous decentralised school governance system, it is far from obvious that the (re)centralisation of education can indeed be a good measure to overcome these problems. (For a brief review of the relevant international literature see e.g. Lénárd (2021), pp. 457-459 and Semjén et al (2018), pp. 10–11.)

¹² Contrasting the notion of 'Good State' to the concept of 'good governance' seems typical in the works of political scientists (e.g. G. Fodor and Stumpf, 2007), trying to find an ideology that can support the way FIDESZ rules. They are of the view that good governance "speaks the idiom of liberalism" (p. 79). Kákay (2013) also represents this school of thought. See Semjén et al., 2018, p. 13 and p. 17 for more on this.

(3) There have been some well-known examples of successful centralised educational systems (especially in Asia), and also some examples of decentralised systems that perform rather poorly.¹³ Nevertheless, the recent centralisation of educational governance and funding that took place in Hungary after 2010 certainly seems to be an outlier.

As it is demonstrated through detailed country studies (France, Poland, Sweden) in Péteri (2015) and Semjén (2019), in Europe even the more centralised education governance systems have already moved towards decentralisation. Péteri (2015) makes it also clear that the universally praised Finnish system is a decentralised one, with strong and powerful local governments. So the direction of the Hungarian reform seems rather surprising. Zhao (2015) as well presents several well-performing, traditionally centralised East Asian education systems (i.a. Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea) that in recent years have gradually loosened central control (pp. 21–22). SEAMEO INNOTECH (2012) surveys the experience of 11 Southeast Asian countries with decentralisation of their educational management. Radó (2023) also concludes that decentralised governance systems compare favourably to centralised ones in many respects (143–163), but he also suggests that on the longer run even these governance systems will have to move towards some new directions, like multilevel governance and heterarchical governance¹⁴ (pp. 173–182). According to Radó's book two new models, the Network Governance Models and the Societal Resilience Model (pp. 175–177) will gain special importance worldwide in the governance of education soon, as signs of this new trend are already visible.

(3) If a government really wants to achieve some policy goals, and for some reasons tries to achieve them with methods that are unusual and not proved to be working, it is necessary to translate goals into objectives and targets, and monitor these. Nevertheless, in the centralised Hungarian system there is a nearly complete lack of central monitoring of results (learning outcomes, test results, etc.). Although there are national competence tests conducted every year, etc., and the results are of course collected and available, they are not

¹³ According Györgyi (2015), if one measures the success of different education systems with their PISA scores, it would be difficult to decide whether decentralised or centralised systems are the more successful ones in general. However, amongst post-socialist countries his Figure 1 (p. 25) suggests that the key to success may be a decentralised system, since if we examine the connection between the level of decentralisation and the country's PISA score by plotting each country's PISA score in 2012 against the share of locally decided education spending within total education expenditure in the country in 2011, we can see in the chart that countries with better than average PISA scores (e.g. Poland or Estonia) tend to have a rather decentralised education governance system, while countries with a more centralised system of education governance (e.g. Slovenia or the Czech Republic) tend to have below average PISA scores.

¹⁴ See e.g. Pečarič (2015) on heterarchical models. For an example of a heterarchical model in the field of education governance see Bailey et al. (2013).

processed within the education administration in such a way that could prove for education policy makers and the general public the success or the failure of the reform in achieving its supposed main policy goals. A potential advantage of a centralised system of funding and governance could be that the policy makers could react and intervene if monitoring unveils some serious problems within the system, in certain school districts or schools. If there is any centrally approved protocol for the necessary interventions in case of obvious problems with the performance of some elements of the present system, it must be a secret. We do not know examples of this kind of centrally initiated interventions. Whenever there were centrally initiated interventions, those usually aimed at punishing those schools and teachers that were active in some protests or civil disobedience.

(4) As for the quantitative consequences of the changes reshaping education administration, school governance and school funding in Hungary, little empirical research has been done so far: Semjén et al. (2018), Lénárt (2019) and Hermann & Semjén (2021) and (2023) are a few examples of such studies. Recent research results in Hermann & Semjén (2021) and (2023), based on the analysis of administrative data and national competence test score results showed clearly that while the centralisation reform had a certain equalising effect on per student education costs, it was not effective in diminishing the differences in the learning outcomes of students according to the average income of the municipality, or the education attainment of the students' mother.¹⁵ Centralisation also had no beneficial effect on the level of test results: Lénárd (2021) using difference-in-differences method and value added models found no improvement in average 6th and 8th grade test scores for schools operating in the centralised system.

All in all, based on recent research results we can conclude, that although the (re)centralising reform of education governance and funding definitely failed to achieve one of its main declared goals (namely perhaps the most important one, concerning the provision of equal opportunities to every child), education

¹⁵ Using education cost functions (loglinear regression models) that use the logarithm of per student expenditures (costs) in the various schools as their dependent variable, and the average income of the settlement where the school is, together with some independent school level control variables, the authors estimated the elasticities of per-student school expenditures to average income in municipalities. The results revealed a substantial equalization of school resources after the reform of governance and funding: while before the reform rich municipalities had spent on education per student significantly more than poor ones, after the reform no systematic difference in per student spending could be detected among schools. The authors also estimated linear regression models separately for every year. These models explained 6th and 8th grade individual national competence test scores with the settlement's average income and some individual control variables, including the educational attainment of the students' parents. The results suggested that the effect of the municipality's average income on test result did not show any significant change after the reform compared to the pre-reform years, and the differences in test scores according to the mothers' education attainment also did not disappear.

policy did not feel it necessary to intervene and change anything (e.g. funding or the methods of governance and control) within the centralised model.

A former conservative Minister of Education, working now as a mayor in an elegant residential district of Buda, suggested during a 2018 research interview that the centralization reform may not have had any education policy goals at all, and could just reflect a general lack of trust in decentralized political processes and the central government's desire for and need to control as many things as possible. According to this view, the concern for equality of opportunity was nothing more than a mere pretext. This could well be true. Nevertheless, we do not think that those education policy leaders who, according to our research interviews made in 2014 and the interviews published in the press (see e.g. Teczár, 2014) seemed genuinely believe that the main goal of the drastic reform of education governance and funding was the reduction of the unfair differences and inequalities in school finance and student outcomes, and guaranteeing equal educational opportunity to every child, wanted to mislead us. They could just be useful idiots¹⁶. It is up to the readers to decide which is the case – and which answer is the better.

This may easily mean that the centralization of education administration is not seen by the government as a means to an end, but is an end itself, an objective *per se*, having its own, intrinsic value for the government. The centralization of education governance, fitting into the general trend of the strengthening role of the government in the provision of public services and utilities in Hungary (mentioned earlier in footnote 1) reflects the prime minister's general lack of trust in democratic processes and his obsession with control.

Is there a hidden agenda?

Semjén et al. (2018) already pointed out that the centralization of governance might serve a hidden agenda, as it can help the government achieve undeclared or implicit goals. It is not easy to decide whether such motives indeed played a role in the centralization. The hypothesis of a hidden agenda would be extremely difficult to prove exactly: nevertheless, certain features of the law-making and the implementation process can substantiate such a claim.¹⁷

¹⁶ This term, probably erroneously attributed to Lenin, refers to persons supporting and propagating a cause without fully comprehending its goals. They are cynically being used by the leaders or promoters of the cause.

¹⁷ Semjén et al. (2018) enumerates many features of the centralisation of governance that either imply a completely amateurish government, or might suggest that the true motives of it are not the ones enlisted in the Act's preamble. Such features include the complete lack of stakeholder participation in the preparation process, the lack of a pilot project prior to the introduc-

Some of our research interviews also referred to the possibility of a hidden agenda; several respondents even mentioned a few possible implicit (veiled or covered) goals that the centralisation of governance may perhaps serve. Unfortunately, in most cases our respondents eventually rejected the hypothesis of the existence of a hidden agenda as based on probably unfounded rumours. However, even by mentioning these and feeling the need to deny their existence they acknowledge that these hypothetical implicit goals behind the centralisation are not completely absurd.

We just enumerate a few of such popular veiled or hidden goals that were suggested during the second round of our research interviews:

- producing cheap labour force with some specific skills but with a low level of general skills (workers for the future labour market of a low value added country envisioned as a huge assembly line),
- deliberately worsening the standards in public schools in order to create masses of potential voters susceptible to propaganda,
- cutting the education budget/reducing public expenditures spent on education,
- worsening the standards in the public sector so as to divert students coming from middle class families towards church schools that are better financed than the public ones, have better (and better paid) teachers and standards, and (due to the different regulations regarding admission and selection in public and private schools) can be in some cases less inclusive (especially towards ethnic minorities) than public schools (see Ercse, 2018 for more on state-encouraged church-assisted segregation in the school system),
- making the education system more selective and thus creating obstacles to social mobility in order to conserve the present social structure.

In order to keep this article reasonably short we will deal here in some detail with only two of these hypothetical hidden goals.

Cutting expenditures

Although the majority of education policy makers and education administration officials denied during the 2014 round of research interviews that cutting expenditures was one of the reasons of the reform of education governance, the data in Semjén (2018) show that in the first two years after the introduction of the new system of governance, current per student education expenditures fell (p. 24.) However, later they were increased little by little.

tion of the new, centralised system in the whole country, the lack of any feasibility study and thorough impact analysis, the lack of clearly defined intended outcomes and expected benefits, translatable into targets that can be monitored easily, the lack of accountability (a consequence of the lack of an organised monitoring process) and the frequent *ad hoc* modifications of the system as a response to its reported problems.

Cutting education expenditures may be a completely legitimate government goal in case of economic austerity and a need for budget cuts. As one of our respondents said, one of the goals is a more efficient and cost-effective system of institutional management, and if this goal is achieved it may mean smaller education expenditures, i.e. cutting the education budget. This is especially true if due to demographic trends the school age population decline.

One of our interviewees, who used to be the leading education politician of FIDESZ from the mid-90s for some 10–15 years, explained that cutting budgetary resources was a means to bring public education under stricter control. It can also be seen as an example of a typical Orbán-strategy concerning public services: as a first step resources are cut drastically, and when there are already really serious problems in the everyday operations of the services in the sector, money starts to dribble back bit by bit from the budget to the sector. This strategy may help the government to find where the limit of inoperativeness or collapse really is, and may be especially useful in situations when the politicians responsible for running the sector are not really trusted by the prime minister and thought to exaggerate sectoral needs and the lack of resources.

Worsening the standards in public schools in order to produce more voters susceptible to government propaganda

Low-quality education as a means of providing voters for the government may sound as a phrase taken for some dystopia. Nevertheless, it is obvious from detailed election results data that FIDESZ is much stronger in villages and rural regions than in bigger cities or the capital. It is also a well-known fact, that the educational attainment of the population in rural regions is lower than in bigger cities and the capital. However as voting in elections are secret data, we will need exit polls or public opinion polls to determine the composition of a party's voters. These data can show i.a. that FIDESZ is much stronger in older cohorts than in younger ones.

Pék (2023) presents the results of a recent public opinion poll which was conducted by asking a relatively large (roughly 7200 potential voters strong) sample of randomly selected voting age people via telephone interviews in the first quarter of 2023 about their party preferences.¹⁸ The sample was representative according to gender, age group, educational attainment and type of settlement.

Since a huge number of parties operate (and an even bigger number used to participate in the elections) in Hungary, we classified them in the Appendix into

¹⁸ They were asked which party they would vote if the parliamentary election was held that Sunday. If they could not give an answer to this open question, they were given a list of parties and could select one item from the list (provided that they were willing to answer this question).

four groups to make our figures in the Appendix easily comprehensible. The first group contains the two parties of the populist FIDESZ-KDNP coalition that have governed the country since 2010. These allied parties run for parliamentary seats jointly, using a joint electoral list. The so-called group of far-right parties contains two competing nationalist parties, Jobbik-Konzervatívok (The Better one – Conservatives) and Mi hazánk (Our Homeland). The difference between the political ideology of these parties and the ruling FIDESZ-KDNP is not too significant according to some observers and political scientists, but as they fight for basically the same voters, they are more rivals than allies. Nevertheless, on some issues these extreme right parties may vote together with the MPs of the ruling coalition.

The group of “opposition” parties (DK, MSZP, MKKP, Momentum, Párbeszéd-Zöldek, LMP) is a rather mixed lot (socialists, social liberals, greens, liberals, etc.), although some of them may support a common candidate in an election. Some of these parties have already lost most of their previous voters, while some others never ever had many voters. All in all, there are at least 2–3 parties in this group that have little or no chance to win parliamentary seats if they run separately.

The group of other small parties contains MMN and A Nép Pártján, and many other minuscule parties without any chance to get a seat.

In Figure 1 of the Appendix there is a shocking contrast between the education profile of committed FIDESZ-KDNP voters and committed voters for the “opposition” parties. While the share of FIDESZ-KDNP voters steeply diminishes as educational attainment becomes higher, in the group of “opposition” parties we can see an opposite tendency: their share of voters grows as educational attainment increases.

If we compare the composition of the voting age population according to educational attainment (Figure 2) to that of the committed FIDESZ-KDNP voters (Figure 3) we can see immediately that while in the voting age population as a whole the share of those with completed upper secondary (ISCED 3A or 3B level) education or with a tertiary degree taken together is close to 60 percent, amongst committed FIDESZ-KDNP voters this share is much-much lower, just a bit above 40 percent, while the share of those with general school education only or with ISCED 3C level secondary education (i.e. vocational school) taken together is well above 50 percent. So FIDESZ-KDNP voters are on average much less educated than the average voter, and lagging far behind the education attainment of the voters favouring the “opposition” parties.¹⁹ Let’s not jump to

¹⁹ Pék (2023) also demonstrates that the average FIDESZ-KDNP voter is not only less educated than the average voter, but is also much older. While in the voting age population the share of those above 50 y. of age is only 48 percent, amongst committed FIDESZ-KDNP voters this share is 59 percent. At the same time the share of younger people (18-39) amongst FIDESZ-KDNP voters is 41 percent, while the same share in total population above voting age seems to be 52 percent (p. 9).

conclusions too early! Perhaps these differences in the education profiles of voters of different parties are not enough to make an impact on education policy: however, taken this together with the supposedly high demand for low-skill labour force²⁰ perhaps can somewhat explain some surprising features (e.g. reducing the length of compulsory education by 2 years, introducing an extremely selective, centrally administered entrance examination for children wanting to enter ISCED 3A and 3B level upper secondary education, etc.) of the Hungarian education policy after 2010.

Appendix

Note: In Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3 below the term „secondary education” refers to ISCED 3A and ISCED 3B level programs that lead to school leaving examinations entitling the students to enter higher (tertiary) education (ISCED5 level). Vocational school refers here to ISCED 3C programs not entitling their participants to enter higher education.

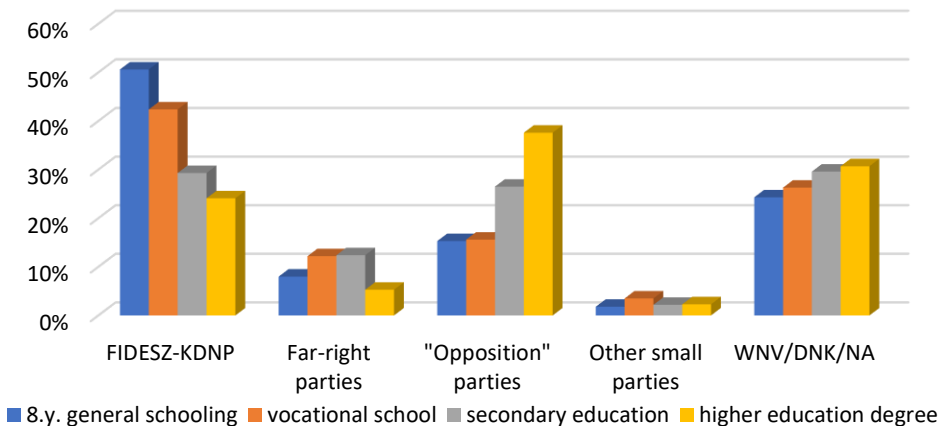


Figure 1
Party preferences* according to educational attainment

* Preferences are measured here as the percentage of committed voters for the 4 groups of parties in each of the educational attainment categories shown in the Figure. The percentages refer

²⁰ Please note that this hypothesis is false according to any labour economist that can be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the influential president of the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has been promoting this view for a long time and complaining of a shortage of skilled workers and a surplus of higher education graduates. However, the labour market shortage of low skill workers is mostly due to the low level of Hungarian wages in uncompetitive companies and the free movement of labour force. Wage premium data, however, did not and do not support the concept of graduate surplus and over-education et al.

to the whole voting age population, including also those not wanting to participate in the elections, or those who are uncertain or want to hide their preferences. (WNV stands for „would not vote”, DNK for „does not know” and NA for „no answer”.) Educational attainment refers to the highest level of education that an individual has completed.

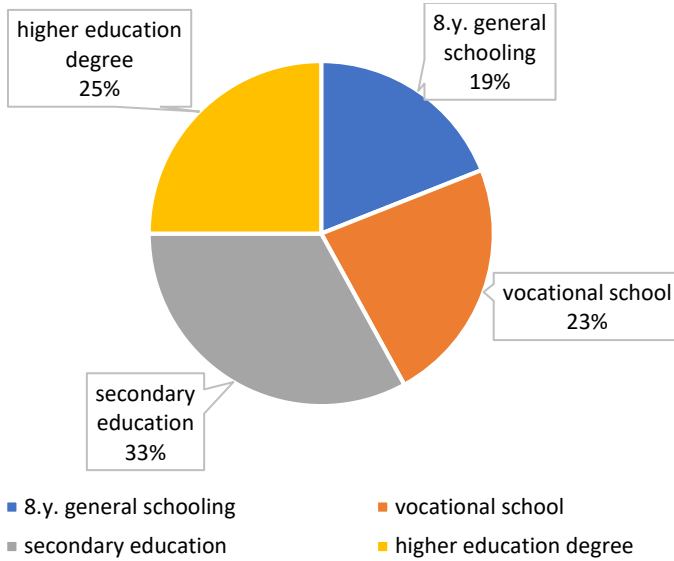


Figure 2
Educational attainment of voting age (18+) population

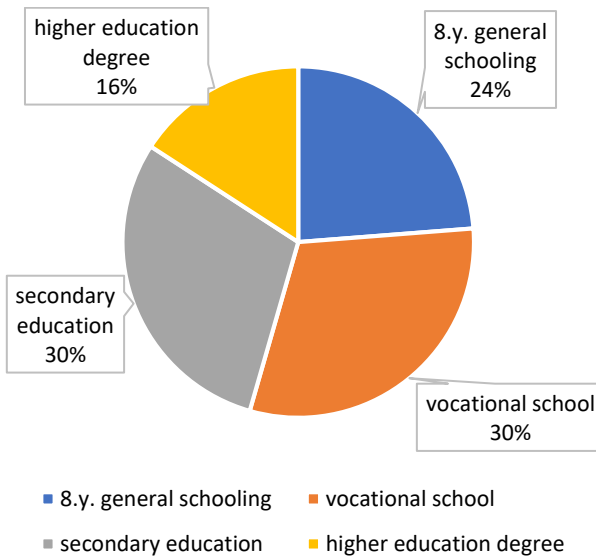


Figure 3
Educational attainment of committed FIDESZ-KDNP voters

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(Re)centralizacja zarządzania oświatą na Węgrzech: jej przyczyny, deklarowane cele, motywy i potencjalne ukryte cele

Streszczenie

Po utworzeniu na Węgrzech w 1990 r. gmin (samorządów lokalnych) i władz na szczeblu powiatów, do końca 2012 r. te wybrane organy prowadziły, zarządzały i finansowały edukację publiczną, przy wsparciu finansowym rządu centralnego. W tym zdecentralizowanym systemie różnice w zamożności i dochodach gmin doprowadziły do znacznych nierówności w finansowaniu i wynikach szkół, a także w osiągnięciach w nauce dzieci do nich uczęszczających. Objęty w 2010 roku rząd koalicji FIDESZ-KDNP radykalnie scentralizował system zarządzania i finansowania szkół, twierdząc, że rozwiąże to problemy systemu. W oparciu o duży zbiór wywiadów badawczych i wyniki wcześniejszych badań w naszym artykule analizujemy deklarowane cele i motywy tej reformy. Z naszych wywiadów wysuwa się wniosek, że zapewnienie każdemu dziecku równych szans w edukacji wydaje się być nadrzędnym celem centralizacji, ale istnieją jeszcze trzy inne, w tym stworzenie bardziej wydajnego i opłacalnego systemu zarządzania instytucjonalnego. Jednak pewne cechy wyboru tych celów oraz pozornie całkowity brak monitorowania ich realizacji, w połączeniu z faktem, że niezależne badania wykazały już, że centralizacja nie była w stanie osiągnąć swojego głównego deklarowanego założenia, mogą uzasadniać twierdzenie, że służyło to jedynie jako przykrywka lub pretekst i prawdopodobnie istnieje ukryty program, który dla rządu jest ważniejszy niż publicznie deklarowane cele. Próbowaliśmy znaleźć możliwe realne motywy i ukryte cele na podstawie wywiadów z byłymi politykami, badaczami edukacji, doradcami i dyrektorami szkół. Chociaż istnienia takich celów nie da się precyzyjnie udowodnić, znaleźliśmy kilka okoliczności, które mogą je uzasadniać.

Słowa kluczowe: zarządzanie edukacją; centralizacja; równość szans; wyniki testów.