

# THE STRUCTURE OF MUNICIPAL COUNCIL COMMITTEES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OF HUNGARY BEFORE AND AFTER THE LOCAL ELECTIONS OF 2014

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***Abstract:** The aim of the present paper is examine the committee structure of municipal councils of Hungarian settlements having a population over 5,000 before and after the local elections of 2014, and to analyse the presence of external experts in the work of the various committees. The most important findings can be summarized as follows: the average number of municipal council committees shows a strong correlation with the size of the settlements. The roles of the individual sectors as filled in the municipal council committees, and the changes to the same, are affected by amendments in the relevant laws and the subsequent governmental measures. The participation of external members in the municipal council committees is typical primarily in sectors that are less important and require mainly professional knowledge; at the same time, municipal councils strive to keep external members away from the work of committees discussing issues that are confidential or otherwise sensitive from the point of view of the local governments.*

***Keywords:** Municipal council committees, Hungary, Size of settlements, Democratism, Local election of 2014.*

***JEL Classification:** H75, H76, Z18.*

## **Introduction**

After the political changes of the 1990s, the scope of tasks and powers of local governments significantly increased in former socialist countries in comparison with the earlier situation [4, 8, 9, 11, 13]. The municipal council elected by the population has become the chief decision-making body, which governs the life of the given settlement by way of local government regulations and decisions. At the same time, however, similarly to the way it is done in most Western European countries, municipal councils in most countries in this region delegate a part of their tasks and powers, together with the financial resources necessary for their implementation, to specialized committees (e.g. Poland: [12], Slovakia: [6, 10]). Besides they also have the function of providing their opinions on proposed local legislation before it is submitted to the municipal council (the exact rights of the individual committees, however, are contained in the local laws, and as such they differ from one settlement to the next; therefore, it is not possible to make general observation about their characteristic features). In most cases, committees deal with more topics than would be obvious from their names; however, to some extent those names reflect the system of priorities of the given municipal council, emerging as a result of external (e.g. measures of the central government) and internal (e.g. budgetary constraints, the endowments of the settlement) influences.

In addition to members of the municipal council (councillors), external experts may also sit on committees, whose presence there means the embodiment of the democratism of public administration [5, 7, 14].

There had been hardly any previous publications analysing the situation in the individual sectors and the reasons for the changes, and therefore, our study can be considered as a pioneering one, but this situation also makes comparisons with the international tendencies harder.

## **1 Statement of problem**

Under the relevant provisions of Hungarian law in effect (Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on the local governments of Hungary), municipal councils have a large degree of freedom in setting up the committees. On the one hand, they can decide whether a committee may only consist of councillors or also external experts, with the only limitation that the chairperson of the committee and the majority of its members must be councillors [2]. On the other hand, laws only require specific committees to be established in a few cases (e.g. it is mandatory to set up a financial committee on settlements with a population over 2,000, as well as to have a committee dealing with issues related to public education in case of local governments maintaining three or more educational institutions), and otherwise the municipal councils may freely decide on the creation and naming of the committees [3]. Despite the fact that the scope of the committees' work is often wider than can be deduced from their names, we think it stands to reason to examine this area, since the names reflect to some extent also the system of preferences held by the municipal council.

In the spirit of the above, this paper fundamentally wishes to accomplish two aims: on the one hand, to examine the committee structure of municipal councils before and after the local elections of 2014, and to point out the causes of the differences between the settlements and the changes occurring after the elections. On the other hand, it would like to analyse the presence of external experts in the work of the various committees and to explore the differences between the various sectors/areas, as well as the factors that stand behind them.

The choice of the abovementioned time limit is fundamentally attributable to the fact that the new municipal councils constituted after the elections in most cases significantly adjusted the structure of committees, with attention to the external and internal factors.

## **2 Methods**

The target group of the research were the municipal council committees of settlements having a population over 5,000 (a total of 273 settlements). The necessary information was available from the Rules of Organisation and Operations, which in most cases contained the names and compositions of the committees; in the absence of this information, the minutes of the municipal councils, as well as information available on the websites of the settlements concerned were used.

In the course of the analysis, on the one hand, treating the settlements as the units, we examined the frequency with which the sectors/areas are present, as well as other characteristic features. On the other hand, in order to explore the differences between the settlements, they were placed in four categories on the basis of size (5,001 to 10,000 persons, 10,001 to 25,000 persons, 25,001 to 50,000 persons, above 50,000 persons).

### 3 Problem solving

#### 3.1 A general description of municipal council committees

The role played by the size of the settlement can be clearly observed in terms of the number of municipal council committees (Tab. 1): with the increase of the number of population, the average number of the committees also increases. An analysis of the tendencies of change after the elections of 2014 reveals a minor decrease, but there are differences that can be observed between the various categories according to size: in case of settlements with a population of 10,001 to 25,000 and above, the average number of committees decreased, with an opposite change occurring in case of the other two categories.

The existence of the connection is also reflected by the various statistical indexes: the value of the Pearson correlation coefficient with respect to the size of the settlement and the number of committees was 0.513 before the elections and 0.456 after the elections (the Spearman rank correlation coefficient was 0.461 and 0.431), which indicates a significant relationship on 0.01 level (however, the decreasing value refers to a slightly weakening connection).

**Tab. 1: The average number of municipal council committees at settlements of different sizes before and after local election of 2014**

Number of inhabitants	Before the local election	After the local election
5,001 to 10,000 persons	3.22	3.27
10,001 to 25,000 persons	3.91	3.73
25,001 to 50,000 persons	4.57	4.79
above 50,000 persons	5.94	5.78
all settlements	3.78	3.75

*Source: Authors compilation*

In the course of setting up the committees, municipal councils may freely decide in the question of how many areas a committee deals with, as reflected in their names. An examination of the data (Tab. 2) reveals that committees in charge of two sectors dominate, with the second place occupied by committees whose scope of tasks and powers covers three or more sectors. If we analyse the tendencies after the local elections of 2014, there are no major changes, as the rate of change did not exceed 0.5% in any of the cases.

**Tab. 2: The most important elements of the committee structures of municipal councils at the settlements examined before and after local election of 2014**

Elements of the committee structure	Before the local election	After the local election
The percentage of committees dealing with a single sector/area (%)	30.2	30.5
The percentage of committees dealing with two sectors/areas (%)	37.1	37.3
The percentage of committees dealing with three or more sectors/areas (%)	32.7	32.2

*Source: Authors compilation*

Based on the examination of the relationship between the municipal council committee structures and the size of the settlement (Tab. 3), we can find a very close connection: in case of larger settlements, committees dealing with one or two areas are more frequent,

while in case of smaller settlements the proportion of committees responsible for three or more sectors is above average, which fact is primarily due to the different sizes of these municipal councils. At the same time, from Table 3 it is also apparent that the differences between the individual categories of settlements are not too big (only 3-5% difference from the average).

**Tab. 3: The most important elements of the committee structures of municipal councils at settlements of different sizes before and after local election of 2014**

Number of inhabitants	A	B	C
5,001 to 10,000 persons	29.9	36.9	33.2
10,001 to 25,000 persons	28.7	36.9	34.4
25,001 to 50,000 persons	32.1	37.3	30.6
Above 50,000 persons	32.7	40.4	26.9
All settlements	30.5	37.3	32.2

*A – the percentage of committees dealing with a single sector/area (%), B – the percentage of committees dealing with two sectors/areas (%), C – the percentage of committees dealing with three or more sectors/areas (%)*

*Source: Authors compilation*

### **3.2 The areas controlled by the municipal council committees**

As mentioned above, with a few exceptions, the municipal councils can freely decide on the names of the committees and the scope of tasks and powers they have. In terms of the order of the sectors (Tab 4), finance occupies the first place, the second largest group includes urban development, social affairs and procedural, followed by culture, and then another larger group that includes sports, education and healthcare. In terms of the tendencies of change, it was rather a decrease that was characteristic: out of the 20 sectors examined, the share of 11 decreased, while only six increased, with the remaining three undergoing no change. The rate of change, however, can be considered as minimal (3-4%) in case of most areas, with only three sectors being exceptions to this rule (education, health care, human).

**Tab. 4: The appearance of the individual sectors/areas in the structure of municipal council committees before and after the local elections of 2014 (only those sectors are shown in the table which were mentioned in case of at least 5% of the committees both before and after the given date, in %)**

Sectors	Before local election	After local election
Financial	100.0	100.0
Urban development	69.6	71.1
Social affairs	71.4	68.9
Procedural	70.3	67.0
Culture	64.5	60.8
Sport	52.7	50.5
Education	60.4	49.8
Healthcare	52.0	46.2
Economic development	35.2	32.2
Law	35.9	31.9
Human	24.5	31.9
Environmental protection	28.6	28.6
Youth	25.6	24.9
Public safety	17.2	18.3
Urban management	14.3	14.3
Tourism	10.3	13.9
Public procurement	10.6	9.5
Asset management	9.2	8.8
Agriculture	8.4	8.8
Wealth-declaration	7.0	7.3

*Source: Authors compilation*

From the analysis of the importance of the individual sectors according to settlement category (Tab. 5), we can draw the conclusion, that the size of the municipal council has an important influence on this. If we examine the situation after the local elections of 2014, we can see that in case of 9 out of the 19 sectors, the role of a given sector was larger as the settlement size increases, while in case of 6 sectors there was only a single difference in each. An analysis of the tendencies of change according to settlement size reveals that the biggest decrease in case of settlements with a population over 50,000 occurred in healthcare, while the human sector showed a significant increase in the category of settlements with populations between 10,001 and 25,000.

**Tab. 5: The appearance of the individual sectors/areas in the structure of municipal council committees at settlements of different sizes before and after the local elections of 2014 (%)**

Sectors	5,001 to 10,000 persons		10,001 to 25,000 persons		25,001 to 50,000 persons		Above 50,000 persons	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Urban development	68.9	69.7	71.6	71.6	50.0	67.9	91.4	83.3
Social affairs	68.2	67.4	71.6	65.3	78.6	75.0	83.3	88.9
Procedural	70.5	69.7	67.4	58.9	78.6	75.0	72.2	77.8
Culture	62.1	61.4	63.2	57.9	64.3	64.3	88.9	66.7
Sport	47.0	48.5	56.8	49.5	50.0	50.0	77.8	72.2
Education	52.3	53.9	65.3	51.6	64.3	53.6	88.9	77.8
Healthcare	45.5	45.5	61.1	49.5	46.4	42.9	61.1	38.9
Economic development	22.7	24.2	38.9	32.6	67.9	57.1	55.6	50.0
Law	17.4	18.2	48.4	38.9	64.3	50.0	61.1	66.7
Human	22.7	26.5	27.4	40.4	28.6	35.7	16.7	22.2
Environmental protection	18.9	21.2	38.9	33.7	25.0	35.7	50.0	44.4
Youth	20.5	16.7	23.2	26.3	46.4	35.7	44.4	61.1
Public safety	10.6	12.1	23.2	20.0	21.4	32.1	27.8	33.3
Urban management	6.8	6.8	13.7	14.7	35.7	39.3	38.9	27.8
Tourism	6.1	12.1	10.5	8.4	17.9	25.0	27.8	38.9
Public procurement	5.3	4.5	15.8	12.6	14.3	21.4	16.7	11.1
Asset management	4.5	1.5	5.3	6.3	17.9	28.6	50.0	44.4
Agriculture	6.8	6.8	10.5	10.5	10.7	10.7	5.6	11.1
Wealth-declaration	5.3	6.1	8.4	6.3	3.6	7.1	16.7	22.2

*A – before local election, B – after local election*

*Source: Authors compilation*

The weight of the individual sectors is shown, to some extent, by whether a separate committee deals with it, or the scope of tasks and powers of the committee concerned covers, at least as far as the name of the committee indicates, several areas. The analysis of the data (Tab. 6) shows the outstanding relative significance of the financial area, the second place is occupied by the human sector and the third place by committees dealing with rule of procedures.

**Tab. 6: The number of committees dealing exclusively with a single sector at the settlements examined before and after the local election of 2014**

Sectors	Before local election	After local election
Financial	99	95
Human	48	68
Procedural	45	38
Social affairs	30	29
Urban development	20	21
Economic development	15	12
Public procurement	12	11
Culture	4	9
Urban management	3	5
Asset management	3	4
Education	6	3
Agriculture	2	2
Public safety	2	2
Tourism	1	2
Civil society	1	1
Environmental protection	1	1
Healthcare	1	1
Law	1	1
Minority	3	1
Sport	4	1
Wealth-declaration	4	1

*Source: Authors compilation*

### **3.3 A general description of municipal council committees**

The appearance of democratism, as mentioned earlier in the introduction of this paper, may be primarily accomplished by way of an involvement of external (expert) members in the work of the committees; at the same time, significant differences can be observed in this respect between the various sectors (Tab. 7). The rate of participation of external members in the committees is higher in the sectors of agriculture, human affairs, tourism and public safety while the opposite extreme (a relatively low level of participation of external members in the committees) can be found in committees dealing with issues of municipal assets, rules of procedures, public procurements and wealth-declarations of councillors.

**Tab. 7: The composition of municipal council committees in the period after the local elections of 2014 (the table only shows those sectors in which at least 20 committees work)**

Sectors	The proportion of committees in which there are not any external members
Agriculture	0.00
Human	2.41
Tourism	2.78
Public safety	3.85
Environmental protection	4.05
Youth	4.62
Healthcare	4.88
Urban management	5.41
Sport	5.93
Social affairs	6.03
Education	6.57
Culture	6.79
Urban development	6.95
Financial	8.78
Economic development	9.52
Law	9.64
Asset management	12.50
Procedural	18.18
Public procurement	20.00
Wealth declaration	42.11

*Source: Authors compilation*

## 4 Discussion

The findings of the research clearly underline the importance of the size of the settlement (Tab 1), which can be fundamentally explained by two factors. On the one hand, in case of a larger settlement, several such topics emerge the problems of which can be expediently addressed by separate committees, and therefore, the local councils also strove to have as many sectors represented on the level of committees as possible (Tab 5). On the other hand, larger settlements also have larger municipal councils (Tab 8), which means that the human resources necessary for setting up the committees is more readily available.

In addition, we can also observe that in terms of the number of sectors supervised by the committees, the differences between settlements of various sizes are not too big (Tab 3), which can be explained by two factors. On the one hand, the municipal councils are aware that the combination of the responsibilities of too many sectors/areas would make the efficient performance of work very cumbersome; on the other hand, it would be quite difficult to find council members or external experts, as the case may be, who would be proficient in so many fields.



**Tab. 8: The number of councillors that can be elected at settlements of different sizes**

Number of inhabitants	Number of councillors
5,001 to 10,000 persons	8
10,001 to 25,000 persons	11
25,001 to 50,000 persons	14
Above 50,000 persons	minimum 17

Source: [1]

The examination of the order of the individual sectors and the tendencies of change (Tab. 4 and Tab. 5), the most important factors appear to be provisions of law that have been in effect for a long time, as well as those newly entering into effect. On the one hand the population of all settlements included in the analysis was above 2,000; consequently, there was a committee dealing with financial affairs at all of the settlements (Tab. 4).

On the other hand the significant decrease in case of education is clearly attributable to the reorganisation of this sector: at 1 January 2013, the professional supervision and control of primary and secondary schools was moved from local governments to the Klebelsberg Institution Maintenance Centre. As a consequence of this fact many municipal councils came to the conclusion that since they are unable to influence the local conditions of the sector, therefore it is unnecessary to represent the sector on the level of committees, and for this reason they decided to eliminate their committees dealing with (among other things) education.

Similar reasons could be mentioned in case of another sector showing a significant decrease: healthcare. After 2010, the operation of healthcare facilities, previously a function of local governments, was taken over by the state, and as a result, local governments devote less attention to this area. The largest number of hospitals affected operated on the biggest settlements, and consequently, it is not surprising that the decrease predominantly affected settlements with populations over 50,000 persons.

The data of the human sector, which is the only one manifesting real growth, is primarily attributable to the fact that, with a view to cost reduction and the abovementioned decreasing significance of certain sectors/areas in local level, several municipal councils have decided to combine the previously separate committees in charge of education, culture, social affairs, etc., into a single "human affairs" committee. The above phenomenon was primarily characteristic of medium-sized settlements (10,000 to 25,000 people), which can be primarily related to the fact that the sectors belonging here (education, culture, sports, healthcare, social affairs) showed the biggest decrease in case of this category. At the same time, the increase of the significance of the human sector and the decrease of the role of the other five areas also explains the data in Tab. 1, according to which the biggest decrease in the average number of employees was in the category of settlements with 10,000 to 25,000 people.

With respect to the sectoral distribution of committees dedicated to a single area (Tab 6.), we can partly identify the abovementioned statutory requirement as being in the background of the outstanding importance of finance, and partly the fact that the drawing up of the budget and the monitoring of the financial processes are tasks that, in the opinion of municipal councils, require the concentrated attention of a committee. The second place of human sector (and here a significant increase may be observed after the elections) is attributable to the processes outlined above (the intention to combine several sectors and thereby decrease the number of seats on committees) while the third place

of committees dealing with rules of procedures is due to the special significance and character of the issues falling in the scope of competence of these committees.

The high level of democratism in the sectors of agriculture, human affairs, tourism and public safety can be explained by two factors. On the one hand, these are sectors dealing with which requires considerable professional knowledge; on the other hand, as shown earlier, these are not considered by municipal councils among the most important sectors. The position of sectors (issues of municipal assets, rules of procedures, public procurements and wealth-declarations of councillors) characterized by low level of democratism can be traced back to two reasons. In case of the areas of municipal assets, public procurements and wealth-declaration, the committees concerned mostly discuss issues that are of special significance from the point of view of the financial management of the local government and/or the income situation of councillors (and in some cases also constitute confidential information), and consequently, external members are not always welcome on these committees. In case of the areas of rules of procedures one of the main group of tasks is the discussion of the organisational issues of the local government, and municipal councils also strive to keep external members away from this work.

## Conclusions

By way of a summary to this paper, the following main conclusions can be drawn:

- The average number of municipal council committees shows a strong correlation with the size of the settlements, and after the local elections of 2014, it has significantly changed in several categories established according to settlement size.
- The roles of the individual sectors as filled in the municipal council committees, and the changes to the same, are affected by amendments in the relevant laws and the subsequent governmental measures. The centralization processes going opposite to European trends were the strongest in the fields of education and healthcare, and as a consequence it was the committee positions of these sectors in municipal councils that changed (deteriorated) most significantly.
- The presence of democratism (the participation of external members in the municipal council committees) is typical primarily in sectors that are less important and require mainly professional knowledge; at the same time, municipal councils strive to keep external members away from the work of committees discussing issues that are confidential or otherwise sensitive from the point of view of the local governments.

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