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**Appearance of regionalism in the election campaigns between 1998 and 2004.**

**Preliminary**

Hungary joined the European Union on 1<sup>st</sup> of May in 2004. Before its full membership, the actors of the political scene tried to grab the opportunity to sign the contract between the EU and Hungary in order to use this achievement in their election campaign. At least the socialist prime minister, Peter Meggyessy got the opportunity to sign that contract. Until the successful joint, the European Union has appearances as a huge and unfailing financial source that can make Hungary a welfare country. This positive expectation was influencing the party campaigns during the elections. The parties also drew euphemistic pictures about the Union; therefore they enhanced the people's irrational expectations for the next years.

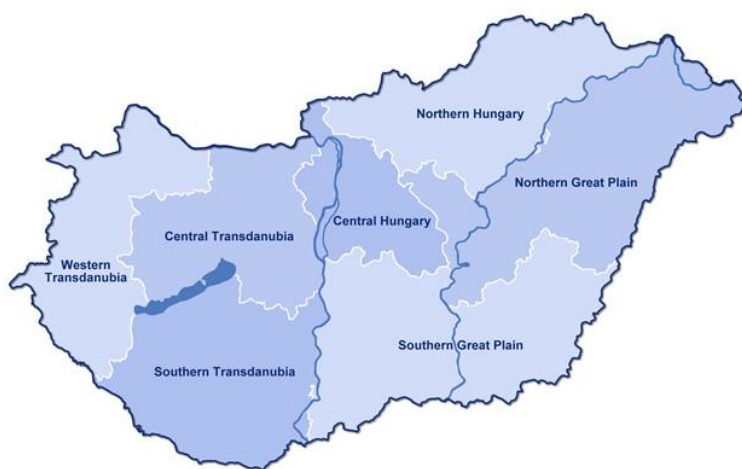
When the people faced the reality of the European Union, and recognize that all the new countries had to make efforts to get the common welfare, they gave up the positive approaches, and turned away from the EU. After 2004 the EU scepticism has been increasing and this tendency became one of the most significant factors that influence the common mind. That new process was integrated into the party communications - especially by the extremists – and the all-time opposition tried to use all the occasions to criticize the government that took steps toward to integrate the EU rules and laws. The regionalism and what is behind it was another victim in that political fight.

The question of regionalism has appeared again since the conservative party won the last elections. According to their opinion the regionalism is not fit to the traditional Hungarian county system, thus they refuse to change these administrative units. Before the very recent political situation, the previous left-wing government tried to create a regional system in the public administration, but the only result of that endeavouring was the destruction of a well functioning institutional system of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH). The regionalisation of the offices resulted difficulties in the data serving, due to the strong centralisation. The power of the data serving centres in the counties was reduced, and almost all of their functions were integrated into the regional centres, such as Miskolc, or Debrecen.

This implementation fragmented the data servings and made those important procedures longer and more difficult. Besides this, many posts were ceased increasing the unemployment in the regions (and counties).

### The regionalism since 1990

The theory of regionalism was not so far from the Hungarian mind in regard to the public administration. The regionalism appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a part of the institutional system of the various state organisations like the railway or the Royal Post.<sup>1</sup> The regionalism has appeared with emphasis since 1990 and it has become determinative issue during the year 1998, when the European Union joining procedures of Hungary became more



Picture 1: The seven regions of Hungary (source: <http://www.itdh.org>)

realistic. Initially the first government of the third (some say fourth) republic decided to integrate Hungary into the prospering system of European Union in 1990, and due to that decision they started to prepare the negotiations. The so-called Committee System was

dismissed after 1990 and the decision makers realized that Hungary needed a

brand new structure in the public administration, what is more extended than the previous county system. There had been trying to solve the problem related to the mid-level of the public administration in the previous eras, but at least in 1990, the regional system seemed the adequate solution. The political and professional experts merged the 19 counties into seven regions what solution was based on such previous theories were created by István Bibó (“Principles of public administration” - 1975), and Attila Ágh.

Temporarily the regions only has been existed as non formal administration units beside the counties that still owned their significant importance, maintaining the fragmented structure of the public administration. The new administrative unit was called NUTS2 (*Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques*) by the European Union and it meant a new connection

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<sup>1</sup> Endre Bilecz: „A regionalizmus-koncepció érvényesítésének politikája, közigazgatás- és társadalompolitikai összefüggései a reformkoncepció kapcsán” 2003.

between the centre (the state) and the municipalities. The European Union did not obligate the member states to integrate the NUTS units into their law system of public administration, that is why Hungary also has not used it officially.

After the political twist in 1994 the so called liberal party; the Association of Free Democrats (its short form was SZDSZ in Hungary) undertook the philosophy of regionalism as one of their main message, and their partners in the coalition, the socialist party joined this direction. In those times Hungary had to face their financial and economic problems, therefore the people were not interested in the question of regionalism, thus it vanished into the quotidian political battles between the government and the opposition.

### **The regionalism in the election campaigns between 1998 and 2010**

The year 1998 brought new political direction because of the right-wing conservative coalition won the elections. The negotiations with the EU were getting faster at the same time. According to this new tendency, the two main parties in the government (Fidesz, MDF) started to use that positive political environment in their campaign messages. The right-wing political formations emphasized the importance of the 1000-year-old county system (it was found by the first king of Hungary), and their campaign messages that related to the EU only focused on the theory of subsidiarity. Basically the moderate political groups did not argue with each other on the basic questions of integration, only the right-wing extremists explained their worries about the sovereignty of Hungary. Due to this, the other parties sent positive messages to the society about the EU integration that included the regionalism as well. Although the parliament modified the law about the regional development in 1999, creating the regional development councils, that efforts did not result in the stronger regions. The prime minister, Mr Viktor Orban took his usual country valuating speech on 9<sup>th</sup> of September in 2000 but he did not mention any steps toward the regionalism, whereat Gabor Kuncze the fraction leader of the liberal party express his critics, due to the topic still meant significant issue for the SZDSZ party. It is a fact that the government parties made efforts to strengthen the position of the traditional county system due to its conservative conviction (Géza Sipos). That deed was totally opposite of the regionalism. The conservative parties stuck to their principles but this stubborn behaviour blocked the reform endeavours in public administration. Attila Ágh came up with a brand new idea related to the reform, and drew up such a regional system what focused on the regional centres and the central government would have given more administrative power to them. To form their own regional parliament

appeared in that new idea, but it would have caused the reduction of the governmental power, therefore this theory was aborted.

In 2002 the regionalism occurred with stronger emphasis during the election campaigns. The parties dedicated their attentions to the issue of regionalism according to their political interests. Apparently the conservatives tried to avoid the question of regionalism, thus it did not manifest in their political communication during the elections. However the opposite parties explained their doubts related to the regionalism, and Mr Etele Baráth from the socialists mentioned the various GDP values among the Hungarian regions, showing statistical data that introduced the difference has increased by almost 0.4% between Western and Eastern Hungary. He added that Hungary was not tied by any contracts of the EU related to the regional development, thus the country was able to make their own economic decision. Even though the Szechenyi plan, the GDP of the southern region decreased under the average values all around the country that would have threatened with the loss of the financial supply from the structural funds. Only the liberals dedicated the most of their attention to the regionalism in their election campaign. The party program included a whole article (number 8) related to the public administration reform and regionalism. Its title was the “Self governments and autonomy”. The party respected the achievements of the first local governmental reform that was implemented in 1990, but according to their opinion some element of the reform became outdated. The judicial background should have changed and represented a clear scope of authority between the government and the municipalities. The local governments was not able to separate accurately the particular exercises, but due to the development of the political and economic environment the municipalities have had the chance to form the levels of the public administration in order to satisfy their real needs. The liberals imagined two levels in the public administration, what could own self government; the first one was the municipality and the second one was the region. The municipalities would have coordinated the regional development and maintained the institutional system instead of the counties, because that task did not claim an own administrative level, thus the counties became unnecessary. The local governments of the municipalities should have cooperated with each other to run the formal institutional system belonged to the countries, therefore the liberal parties would have supported the sub-region partnerships, according to their conception of “functional federalism”. The campaign programme shown the importance of subsidiarity as a part of the federative logic. The constitutional background of these new administrative units (the regions) would have based on the “European Charter of Local Self-

Government” strengthened by a judicial background which should have ensured an expanded competence for them. The party programme described that the habitants had to elect the management of these newly formed units in a direct way. The campaign programme also criticized the mentioned above law modification related to the regional development, because it contradicted the expectations of the European Union – added the authors. The liberals stated that the successful European regions consist of a decentralized and innovative model which is built on local sources, therefore the regional level could have been the centre of the regional development, because of the counties are too small to complete this task in a country such as Hungary. The regions would have dedicated attention to other related solutions to the environmental issues like drainage and refuse disposal, if the municipalities were not able to solve these problems. The regional government would have been allowed to maintain institutions which could ensure social services, for example the health care. This function would have related to the later reform of the health care system that also was implemented by the liberals and proved to be unsuccessful. The regional politics should have dedicated attention to the cities - especially the regional centres – because the ability of adaptation and innovation was up to that skill besides the development of the rural territories as well. The cities should have appeared in the regional development with stronger emphasize, and the government would have to ensure some parts of the financial background of these activities.

So, the liberals sketched up a pretty detailed future plans in regard to the public administration, and some points of this programme were implemented by the socialist-liberal government at last. The campaign related to the socialist party contained less reference in regard to the regionalism. The socialist campaign programme was called the “100 days programme” and the later prime minister Mr. Peter Medgyessy explained the socialists’ opinion related to the regionalism that urged the reform processes in the public administration. He emphasized the concept of decentralisation as the main character of the reform. The MSZP focussed on the service system of the public administration instead the technical and structural modifications. According to the nominee, Mr. Medgyessy defined three main features related to the new structure of services: rapidity, efficiency, modernity. He was not perfectly sure in the issue of regionalism but he got the same opinion like the liberals had in regard to the direct election of the regional management. The regional administration system was not told as the only way to get the financial supplements from the structural funds, but it appeared as one of the most efficient organisation to achieve the purpose of local prosperity, besides the strengthening of sub-regions.

Hungary gained its full membership of the European Union on 1<sup>st</sup> of May in 2004. The efforts related to the structural modification of the public administration did not result the expected achievements. According to their promises the socialist-liberal government initiated reform processes in the public administration. Prime Minister Medgyessy resigned in 2004 after a dispute with his partners in the coalition, and his successor Mr. Ferenc Gyurcsány continued the initiated reform of public administration. Prime minister Gyurcsány nominated Mr. Tibor Draskovics as the minister of home affairs, who got a significant and criticized role in the reform. The regionalisation of the organisational structure of the national statistic bureaus was proved one of the most significant – as well as the most criticized - steps toward the implementation of the regional structures. Mr. Draskovics - who was the formal president of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office – undertook that task, and implemented the regionalisation in the administrative structure of the statistical offices. The county level was reduced and its competencies were added to the regional centres which caused confusions and increasing unemployment. The regional centres were not able to functioning adequately, therefore the county centres have preserved their previous roles informally in the administrative system.

In 2006 the new election campaign was started. The parties focused again on various issues. The opposition continued a negative campaign criticizing the implementations of the socialist-liberal government. The government parties however emphasized their achievements for example in the field of regionalism. They preferred the strong sub-regions and the decentralized structure according to the principles of regionalism. The two preferred levels were supplied continually according to the endeavours to eliminate the county system, which also meant such decisions that were not reconciled with the opposition. Some sources call this reform as the “hidden regionalisation”. The government had to face with an unsuccessful reform process in the public administration just before the elections of 2006. The opposition party, the Fidesz took an important statement before the local governmental elections in 2006, which described the efforts of the government as a series of failure decisions, that were implemented in order to build up a strong regional administration instead the counties. The liberal-socialist government commented their own implementation as a compulsory acting, but the Fidesz questioned the reform processes that initiated by the government, and added the European Union never obligated the regionalization in the member states. The opposition told that the regional development councils could use the supplies from the structural funds adequately; thus the elimination of the county system was not necessary.

The question of regionalism was dwarfed by the economic problems, albeit it has appeared as a significant part of it. It remained only in the background, nearby such problems as the public finance, but both the government and opposition parties created a strong opinion related to the regionalism. The former MSZP-SZDSZ government has taken a stand on the regionalisation, while the main opposition party, the Fidesz puts on the role of critic, thus their political messages asseverated the importance of the county system. Their campaign program got the title: "Politics of the national issues" did not contain any references to the regionalisation. The MSZP however continues its argument in order to the regional system speaking about the Copenhagen Criteria which includes the question of regionalism besides the human and minority rights, and still regards the regionalisation as an important instrument to the integration.

## **Conclusion**

The latest events in the public administration strengthened the municipalities and many former county tasks have been integrated to the municipal governments - expect the regional development - due to the recent conservative decision makers also has recognized the counties became unnecessary. The regional development councils are disappeared as the new direction in the public administration goes step by step toward a newly defined regionalism, because it seems the counties will carry on the task of regional development.