

# **A tale of two recentralisations. Polish and Hungarian capitals in front of centralistic pressure.**

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**Abstract:** Our research relates to conflictual situations in the national context: between the central governments and local governments. While eclipsed in the recent years by more violent events (eg. war in Ukraine), far-right populism, centralisation of power and democratic backsliding have remained a serious problem. Recentralisation can be identified as one of the symptoms of illiberal turn. Our research joins the – nascent and limited – strand of work focusing on the ideologically motivated recentralisation. Existing research on this type of “subnational autocratization” (Stenberg et al. 2022) or “subnational illiberalism” (Begadze 2022) mainly focused on describing the motifs, drivers and instruments of (re)centralization taking place in illiberal contexts. A few of them endeavoured to put forward broader conceptual categories or typologies of centralization measures. Whereas recentralization practices, especially when taking place in illiberal contexts, are rarely studied, the systematic study of local governmental reactions or responses is almost entirely absent. But, as the handful research available on the topic suggests (Uster and Cohen 2022) local governments targeted by recentralisation measures are not necessarily totally passive objects. Rather, they may exhibit significant agency in counteracting such measures. Moreover, the outcomes of recentralization waves may depend on the strategies, tactics and resources local governments possess. Our research fills this gap with an in-depth analysis of two CEE countries experiencing recentralisation: Poland and Hungary. In our paper we compare centralistic practices the two countries experienced and analyse the response of their capital cities as the most potent actors facing the autocratic pressures. Taking into account differences in the respective national contexts we address the following research questions:

- How do the reactions of the capital cities in the two countries look like?
- Is resistance against centralistic pressure possible and by what means?
- How the point of departure (diagnosed eg. by Local Autonomy Index) and the specificities of the latter recentralisation process have influenced the situation of local governments in the studied countries, their resistance possibilities and a general resilience?

Empirically, two different data sources were used to triangulate our findings (data triangulation): news media content analysis and in-depth interviews carried out with key informants in the two capital cities.