

# Gábor Kozma, Attila Barta

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## Geographical aspects of the changes of Hungary's deconcentrated state administration system between 1990 and 2012

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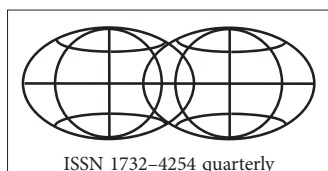
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## Geographical aspects of the changes of Hungary's deconcentrated state administration system between 1990 and 2012

Gábor Kozma<sup>1, CDFMR</sup>, Attila Barta<sup>2, CDFMR</sup>

*University of Debrecen*, <sup>1</sup>Department of Social Geography and Regional Development Planning, Egyetem tér 1., 4032 Debrecen, Hungary; phone: +3652 518 667, e-mail: [kozma.gabor@science.unideb.hu](mailto:kozma.gabor@science.unideb.hu) (*corresponding author*); <sup>2</sup>Department of Public Administration Law, Kassai út 26, 4028 Debrecen; phone: +3652 512 700, e-mail: [barta.attila@law.unideb.hu](mailto:barta.attila@law.unideb.hu)

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**Abstract.** One of the most important segments of the post-1990 transformation of territory-based administration in Hungary was the changing of the geographical structure of deconcentrated state administrative organisations. The study, on the one hand, provides a brief overview of the history of deconcentrated state administrative organisations in Hungary, and discusses the regional characteristics of the organisational transformations after the political changes, taking six moments in time (the middle of 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2012 respectively) as the basis. On the other hand, using the same six snapshots in time, it examines which settlements experienced favourable or unfavourable changes, and what factors influenced the selection of the seats for these institutions.

The results of the survey indicated that the alignment of territorial structure of deconcentrated state administrative organizations to the planning-statistical, NUTS 2 regions has already begun at the end of the 1990s. The government formed in 2006 took significant steps in the area of aligning the spatial structure of the organizations with the planning-statistical regions; however, in the period after 2010 the significance of the county level increased again. In the period examined, no significant changes took place at the top and at the bottom of the list according to the number of seats: the largest settlements of the individual regions reinforced their leading positions.

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### Contents:

1. Introduction . . . . .	60
Materials and research methods. . . . .	61
3. Results . . . . .	63
4. Conclusions . . . . .	67
Acknowledgements . . . . .	68
References . . . . .	68

## 1. Introduction

One of the most important questions of the process of decentralizing public administration in Western Europe, which started in the 1960s, was the creation of the intermediate level of territorial units, most commonly referred to as regions. On these levels, both elements of public administration gradually established their organizations: on the one hand, the self-governing bodies elected by the local population and gradually acquiring more and more powers were formed, and on the other hand, state administration also created its own deconcentrated institutions in these units. Geographical boundaries of the intermediate level administrative units were established using different methods. In some countries e.g. Austria, the territorial units already in existence earlier became this level of public administration (Newman, Thornley, 1996); elsewhere e.g. in France, this level was created by way of the consolidation of units (“départements”) that had been in existence for a long time (Wannop, 1995).

From the point of view of the decentralization of public administration, an important role was played by the changes in the regional policy of the European Union: after 1989, the delimiting of the lagging behind regions took place on the level of NUTS 2 regions. Initially, the sizes of the territorial units varied greatly; however, Regulation 1059/2003/EC of the European Parliament and the Council already strove to reduce these differences. Even though the European Union did not require countries to align their units of public administration with NUTS 2 regions, in the drawing up and the implementation of development programmes, such coincidences meant significant advantages (Balchin et al., 1999). As a result, from the second half of the 1990s on, in many Member States of the European Union that had previously not embraced (e.g. Denmark, Ireland), several definite steps were taken to ensure that NUTS 2 regions also be given certain administrative functions (Vrangbæk, 2010).

From the second half of the 1990s, in the course of their preparation for accession to the European Union, more and more attention was paid also in East Central European countries to the idea of the formation of regions. Researchers who analysed this transformation fundamentally mentioned two reasons: on the one hand, they referred to the process

of Europeanization, under which the EU's cohesion policy was driving institutional changes in these countries (e.g. Scherpepereel, 2010). At the same time, another group of researchers (e.g. Batchler, McMaster, 2008) expresses their doubts whether cohesion policy would necessarily support regionalization and believed that the international factors (and, in particular, the political elite) played a much more important role in this process (Brusis, 2006; O'Dwyer, 2006). At the same time, major differences can be observed between individual East Central European countries as far as the borders of the regions formed are concerned: Poland was the only one in which the intermediate level of public administration coincided with NUTS 2 regions (Ferry, 2003; Yoder, 2003). By contrast, in the other countries, even though the decentralization of public administration has started, no such coincidence can be observed: for example, in the Czech Republic, there are 8 NUTS 2 regions, but 14 territorial units on the intermediate level of public administration (Yoder, 2003; Brusis, 2005), while in Slovakia the number of NUTS 2-level regions is 4, as opposed to the 8 counties (“kraj”) comprised in the intermediate level of public administration (Brusis, 2005).

In the 4–5 years after the political changes in Hungary, similarly to other Central and Eastern European countries, a decrease of the importance of the counties, the intermediate level of public administration, could be observed, while in a parallel way the role of the local (municipal) and the central (governmental) level increased. In 1990, in accordance with the agreement between the two most important parties of the given parliamentary cycle (the government party Hungarian Democratic Forum and the opposition party Alliance of Free Democrats), Act LXV of 1990 on local governments was a so-called 2/3 majority law. This meant that any changing of the roles of the newly created county governments and the creation of regional governments was only possible with the votes of 2/3 of the members of Parliament, which fact significantly curtailed any such efforts of the governing parties in power. As a consequence, the activities of the central government related to regional public administration were decidedly concentrated on the transformation of the ministries and the deconcentrated of the state administrative organisations, as well as the modification of the territorial compe-

tences of the same, since this could also be done by way of acts of Parliament passed with simple majority and government decrees.

With a view to the above, this study attempts to give answers for the questions below:

- How has the governmental approach towards the deconcentrated state administrative organisations changed since 1990, what were the reasons behind the changes and how has this fact influenced their territorial structure?
- Which towns in Hungary can be regarded as winners of this process and to what factors can the success of these towns be traced back to?

The importance of the research project can explain the fact that citizens are in a very close contact with this level of state administration, as one of the actors of the executive power, and accordingly, its efficient operation, in which the most appropriate territorial structure is also inherent, is a basic condition of the satisfaction of the citizens.

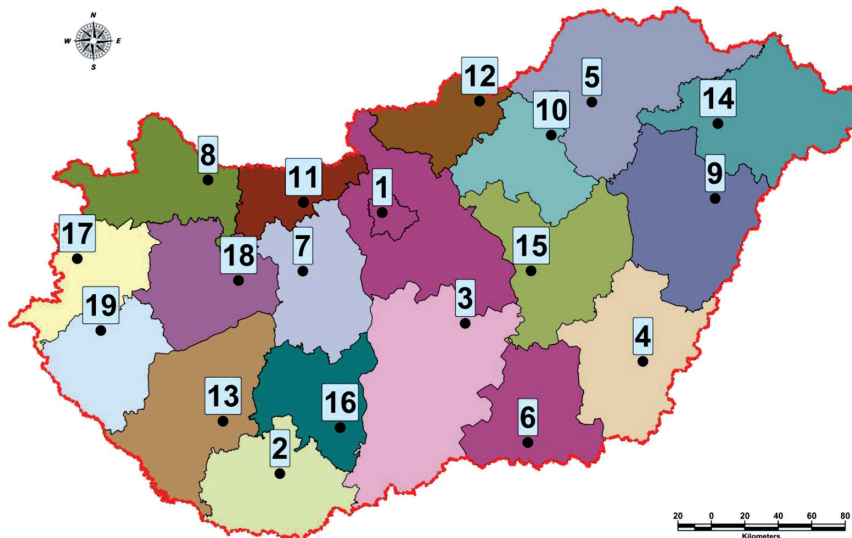
## 2. Materials and research methods

In the research for this paper, we relied on the provisions of law (acts of Parliament, government de-

crees, government decisions) pertaining to the intermediate level of the individual territorial administrative organisations, and only took into consideration civilian organisations i.e. the study does not cover law enforcement agencies, such as the police, border patrol). As a result, a total of 47 organisations constituted the subject of our inquiry.

Concerning the territorial structure of the deconcentrated state administrative organizations in Hungary, two main types can be basically identified, with the further subdivision of the second type into three subcategories:

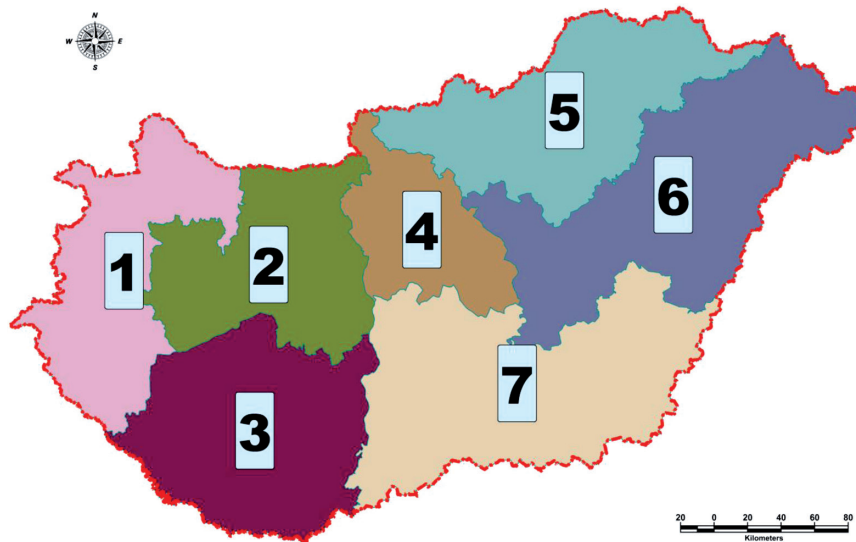
- organizations operating at the county level (the NUTS 3 level in the nomenclature of territorial units of the European Union – Fig. 1)
- organizations operating at the regional level
- organizations with territorial competences aligned with the planning-statistical, NUTS 2 regions (there are 7 planning-statistical regions in Hungary presently – Fig. 2)
- organizations along the county borders but aligned with the planning-statistical regions (Fig. 3)
- organizations with territorial competences not aligning with the county borders (borders are mainly effected by natural geographical conditions – Fig. 4).



**Fig. 1.** County seats of Hungary

Explanation: 1 – Budapest; 2 – Pécs; 3 – Kecskemét; 4 – Békéscsaba; 5 – Miskolc; 6 – Szeged; 7 – Székesfehérvár; 8 – Győr; 9 – Debrecen; 10 – Eger; 11 – Tatabánya; 12 – Salgótarján; 13 – Kaposvár; 14 – Nyíregyháza; 15 – Szolnok; 16 – Szekszárd; 17 – Szombathely; 18 – Veszprém; 19 – Zalaegerszeg

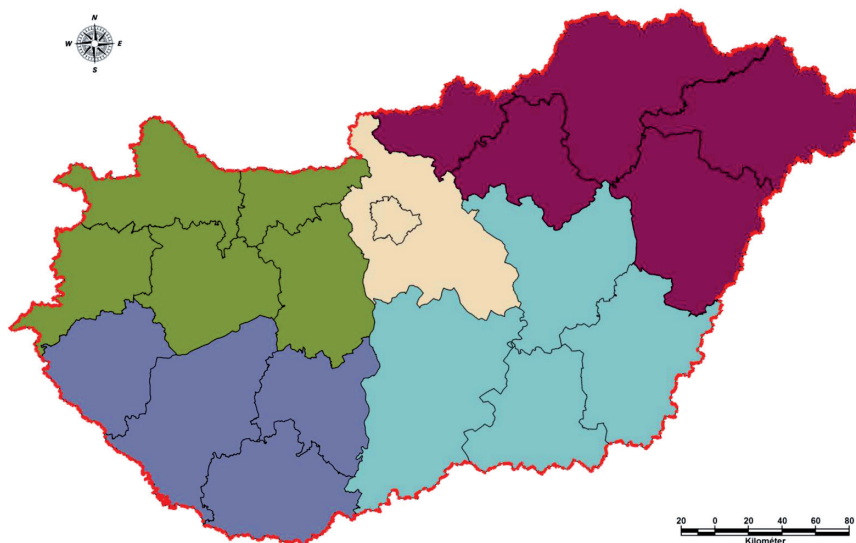
Source: [www.nfu.hu](http://www.nfu.hu) (Homepage of National Development Agency), DoA: 9 January 2013



**Fig. 2.** Borders of Hungarian planning-statistical regions

Explanation: 1 – Western Transdanubian region; 2 – Central Transdanubian region; 3 – Southern Transdanubian region; 4 – Central Hungarian region; 5 – Northern Hungarian region; 6 – Northern Great Plain region; 7 – Southern Great Plain region

Source: [www.nfu.hu](http://www.nfu.hu) (Homepage of National Development Agency), DoA: 9 January 2013



**Fig. 3.** Borders of Mining District Authorities of Mining and Geology Bureau of Hungary

Source: [www.mbfh.hu](http://www.mbfh.hu) (Homepage of Mining and Geology Bureau of Hungary), DoA: 9 January 2013

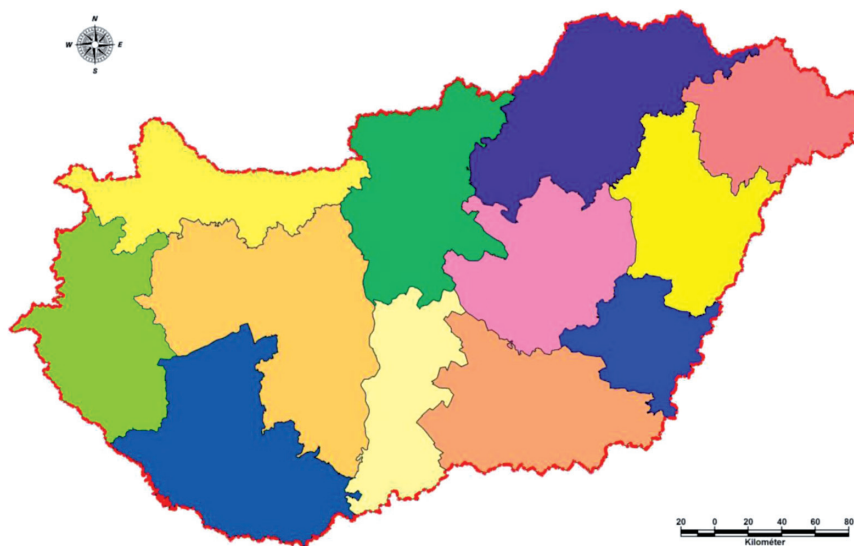


Fig. 4. Borders of National Institute for Environment

Source: [www.neki.gov.hu](http://www.neki.gov.hu) (Homepage of National Institute of Environment),  
DoA: 9 January 2013

### 3. Results

The role of the deconcentrated state administrative organizations in Hungary's public administration has increased after the regime change of 1990, when a significant majority of the ministries tried to exploit the space evolved at the intermediate level due to the decreasing role of the counties. Thus, they tried to obtain positions at this level, due to which the role and influence of the government has significantly increased in the territorial state administration. At the beginning of the 1990s more than 30 deconcentrated state administrative organizations operated in Hungary. In order to cease the parallelism and to stop the overgrowing organizations, the Hungarian Socialist Party – Alliance of Free Democrats coalition government that entered into power in 1994 aimed to review and reform the situation of these organizations. Although the reform implemented as a result of the Government Decisions no. 1105/1995 (XI.1.) and 1027/1996 (IV.3.) led to the rationalisation of the system at a certain rate, neither the content, nor the territorial structure was basically changed (Szigeti, 2000). The territorial development of deconcentrated state administrative organizations was considerably effected by the 35/1998 (III.20.) Decision of the Parliament

on the National Spatial Development Concept containing the system of planning-statistical regions for the first time that is also in force today.

The right-wing Orbán government that came into power in 1998 also considered the regional transformation of the territorially based state administration (and initially also the self governing administration) as an important task, in the background of which was primarily the effect of the European Union (accession negotiations with Hungary started in 1998). It was in this spirit that Government Decision no. 1052/1999 (V. 21) on the plan of governmental tasks concerning the continued development of the public administration system in 1999–2000 was adopted. It provided that, on the one hand “the possibilities for the formation of self-governing regions with elected bodies should be examined,” and on the other hand, “the possibilities for placing the territorially based state administration on regional foundations should be examined,” and in the framework of the latter, the seven planning-statistical regions should be given a priority. The role of the seven planning-statistical regions was further strengthened by the Act XCII of 1999 on amendment of Act XXI of 1996 on Regional Development and Regional Planning, which declared that regional development councils operate in planning-statistical regions. At the same time, Govern-

ment Decision no. 1057/2001. (VI. 21.) on the plan of governmental tasks concerning the continued development of the public administration system in 2001–2002 can be regarded as a step back, since from among the two tasks outlined above, it only contained the second one, which signalled the fact that the Orbán government abandoned the plan of forming the self-governing regions (Wiener, 2003).

The next large-scale governmental intervention in territorial system of deconcentrated state administrative organizations was implemented in 2003/2004, this time already under the leadership of the left-wing/liberal government and this process can be primarily explained by the accession of Hungary to the European Union in 2004. On the one hand several regulations, e.g. 2198/2003, 1113/2003, 1075/2004 Governmental Decisions accentuated the necessity of harmonising the territorial structure of the deconcentrated organizations and the planning-statistical regions (Ivancsics, 2006), on the other hand concrete steps were to be taken e.g. transforming the territorial organizations of the Central Statistical Office. The formation of the regional tier of the intermediate level public administration was a very important element of the programme of the left-wing/liberal Gyurcsány government, elected in 2006 (NUTS 2-level regions were meant by regions); however, in the absence of a sufficient parliamentary majority, only the transformation of state administration could be accomplished by them. The legal background of the process was created by Act CIX of 2006 on the amendment of certain statutes in connection with changes in the branch of government, relying on which several government decrees issued in late 2006 implemented the regional transformation of the deconcentrated state administrative organisations, which had so far had county-based structure, in such a way that they were aligned with the planning-statistical regions.

The Orbán government elected in 2010 altogether abandoned the idea of the regions, and as a consequence, they moved the emphasis also on the intermediate level of territorial state administration from regions to the counties as units of significant historical traditions. There were fundamentally two factors in the background of the process: on the one hand, in recent years, the European Union is also displays an increasing degree of distrust towards Eastern-European regions (Pálné, Kovács,

2009), on the other hand, the new government was striving to emphasize independence from the European Union, and this effort also manifested itself in the area of public administration. It was in the spirit of the above, that the Hungarian Parliament passed Act CXXVI of 2010 on metropolitan and county-level government offices and legislative amendments pertaining to the establishment of metropolitan and county-level government offices and to territorial integration, which stated that the metropolitan and county-level government offices are the territorial state administration agencies of the central government with general competence. As the next step of the transformation, Government Decree 288/2010 (XII. 21.) on the metropolitan and county-level government offices was adopted, under which the majority of the earlier independently operating territorial units of the central administration became sub-units (to use the official term, specialized administrative agencies) of the metropolitan and county government offices.

Examining the development of the territorial structure of the deconcentrated state administrative organizations (Table 1) we can essentially reveal the effects of governmental interventions detailed above. In the 1990s more than half of the organizations operated at county level (Hajdú, 2001) and the most of the organizations operating within regional frames did not fit to the planning-statistical regions. The only exception is the territorial offices of the Hungarian Geological Survey and, in 1998, the branch offices of the Directorate of Cultural Heritage.

The first significant change in the territorial structure was introduced between 1998 and 2002, which was basically originated from the National Spatial Development Concept and Act XCII of 1999 mentioned above. As a result, on the one hand, the territorial structure of the National Office of Measures and the Hungarian Customs and Finance Guard was adjusted to the planning-statistical regions (earlier, both organizations operated in the territorial structure of counties), and on the other hand, the majority of the newly created deconcentrated state administration organizations (National Centre for Assessment and Examination in Public Education, Office of Immigration and Nationality, SAPARD Office) followed the planning-statistical regions. The equilibrium that was in place in 2002

**Table 1.** The change of the territorial structure of the deconcentrated state administrative organizatio

	June 1994	June 1998	June 2002	June 2006	April 2010	September 2012
organizations operating at county level	17	17	16	14	7	19
organizations operating at regional level	16	15	18	23	29	15
Of these:						
organizations with territorial competences aligning with the planning-statistical regions	1	2	6	11	20	7
organizations along the county borders but not aligned with the planning-statistical regions	10	8	6	6	4	3
organizations with territorial competences not aligned with the county borders	5	5	6	6	5	5

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of government decrees and decisions concerning each organization

between the deconcentrated state administrative organizations operating on the county and regional levels was moved towards the regional organizations in 2006. It is true that three organizations operating in county frameworks (Agricultural and Rural Development Agency, National Land Fund Managing Organisation, and Office of Justice) were created in this period, but the abovementioned transformation of the territorial organizations of the Central Statistical Office and the Hungarian Asset Management Directorate; in addition, the territorial units of the Hungarian Labour Inspectorate also continued their work in accordance with the planning-statistical regions.

The greatest waves of changes were implemented in December 2006 when certain concentrations were implemented (e.g. the National Office of Measures, whose tasks were taken over by the Hungarian Trade License Office). Furthermore the government completed the regionalization of the county-level organizations such as Tax and Financial Control Administration, National Public Health and Medical Officer Service, Public Administration Office, National Transport Authority, Hungarian State Treasury, Labour Centre and Pension Payment Directorate. The large-scale changes can be primarily attributed to the fact that in the European Union 2007–2013 programming period, approximately 25% of the financial assistance available in the New Hungary Development Plan was used in the framework of the Regional Operative Programmes, and the central government believed that the alignment of the system of deconcentrated organisations would significantly contribute to the successful implementation of these programmes.

The measures of the new government entering into power in 2010 at the same time also significantly changed the spatial structure of the territorial organizations. The majority of the specialized administrative agencies of the newly created metropolitan and county government offices, as a matter of course, have continued to work in the framework of the counties, but we can also observe some exceptions:

- Forestry Authorities have territorial jurisdictions that also cross over county lines.
- Offices of Cultural Heritage have regional jurisdictions established along county lines, but these regions are not identical with the planning-statistical regions.
- The deconcentrated organizations earlier working in the framework of the Hungarian Trade License Office, such as the Offices of Measures and Technical Safety of the Metropolitan and County Government Offices continued to operate on the level of the planning-statistical regions.

Parallel with the reorganization of regional state administration, strong competition emerged between the individual country centres for getting the title of seat of the new regional organizational units, which is fundamentally due to the fact, as researchers (e.g. Harvey, 1989) agree, that the presence of the given regional seat can have several advantages for the given settlement:

- the status of regional seat lends prestige to the given settlement, and it can be used, for example, in publications promoting the settlement, thus also emphasizing the central role played;
- having the regional seat increases the number of employees in the given settlement, thus reduc-



ing unemployment and the burdens on the local government.

Analysing the seats of the centres of deconcentrated organizations (Table 2) we can find the situation to be clear in the case of five regions where Debrecen (Northern Great Plain region), Szeged (Southern Great Plain region), Pécs (Southern Transdanubian region), Miskolc (Northern Hungarian region), and Budapest (Central Hungarian

region) have functioned as centres for the most organizations in the whole period examined. The important role of the county seats concerned can be explained by having the largest number of population within the region, their central location (in this respect, Miskolc is the only exception), and their historical roles: the cities concerned were considered, already in the socialist era as counterpoints to Budapest, and their development was a priority.

**Table 2.** The central offices of the deconcentrated (territorial) state administration organizations (the table contains only those settlements in which, in any of the years indicated, at least 10 organizations had their centres, the number of organizations aligned with the planning-statistical regions in brackets

	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2012
Central Hungarian region						
Budapest	31 (1)	30 (2)	32 (6)	35 (11)	35 (20)	33 (7)
Northern Hungarian region						
Miskolc	30 (0)	28 (1)	30 (5)	31 (8)	24 (11)	31 (6)
Eger	21 (0)	19 (0)	19 (0)	20 (2)	17 (7)	23 (1)
Salgótarján	17 (1)	16 (1)	16 (1)	15 (1)	8 (2)	19 (0)
Northern Great Plain region						
Debrecen	31 (1)	30 (2)	31 (4)	32 (8)	25 (12)	30 (5)
Nyíregyháza	20 (0)	20 (0)	20 (1)	20 (2)	16 (6)	23 (2)
Szolnok	22 (0)	23 (0)	22 (1)	20 (1)	12 (2)	22 (0)
Southern Great Plain region						
Szeged	28 (1)	27 (2)	28 (6)	28 (8)	22 (12)	29 (6)
Kecskemét	21 (0)	22 (0)	21 (0)	21 (3)	16 (6)	23 (1)
Békéscsaba	19 (0)	20 (0)	20 (0)	18 (0)	10 (2)	20 (0)
Southern Transdanubian region						
Pécs	33 (1)	32 (2)	32 (4)	35 (9)	27 (12)	33 (6)
Kaposvár	19 (0)	18 (0)	19 (2)	18 (2)	14 (6)	21 (1)
Szekszárd	18 (0)	18 (0)	17 (0)	15 (0)	9 (2)	19 (0)
Western Transdanubian region						
Győr	26 (0)	25 (1)	26 (4)	27 (7)	23 (14)	26 (5)
Szombathely	23 (0)	24 (1)	22 (1)	23 (3)	14 (4)	24 (1)
Zalaegerszeg	21 (0)	20 (0)	19 (1)	17 (1)	10 (2)	21 (1)
Central Transdanubian region						
Székesfehérvár	21 (0)	23 (1)	24 (3)	25 (6)	21 (12)	27 (5)
Veszprém	24 (1)	22 (1)	24 (3)	23 (5)	15 (6)	24 (2)
Tatabánya	16 (0)	16 (0)	15 (0)	14 (0)	8 (2)	19 (0)

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of government decrees and decisions concerning each organization

In the Central Transdanubian region, Veszprém still had a better position in 1994, after which Székesfehérvár began to emerge gradually and became the regional centre of state administration by 2010. A similar process can be observed in the

Western Transdanubian region as well where the development and emergence of Győr decreased at the same time the significance of other urban settlements (e.g. Szombathely, Zalaegerszeg). In the background of the process in both cases was the fact

that Székesfehérvár and Győr were among the most successful cities of the economic transformation in Hungary, and this fact also made its effect felt in the political sphere while in the case of Székesfehérvár, the effect of the longer historical tradition was also considered to be an important factor.

At the bottom of the list at all times were Salgótarján, Szekszárd and Tatabánya. In the first two cases, the low number of population played an important role in the absence of centres, to which was also added in the case of Salgótarján the peripheral location within the region, and in case of Szekszárd the fierce competition between Kaposvár and Pécs. In the case of Tatabánya, the unfavourable position can be traced back, firstly, to the lack of traditions in that city in the field of public administration, secondly, to the competition between Veszprém and Székesfehérvár, and thirdly, to the bad accessibility from the other two county seats.

In connection with the restructuring in 2006, which generated the greatest changes, we can draw the conclusion that the government did not intend to concentrate the centres of the deconcentrated state administrative organizations into one town, but it distributed these organizations among the county seats of the regions. In our opinion, this fact can be fundamentally attributed to two things. On the hand, the central government has endeavoured to spread the notion of regional administrative structure, and in this respect it would have been disadvantageous to concentrate the new centres in one county seat for each planning-statistical region at the expense of ignoring the other two county seats. On the other hand, after the anti-government demonstration in the autumn of 2006, the government did not want to have further conflicts with the mainly opposition-lead county seats because after the local election of 2006 only six county seats – Nyíregyháza, Miskolc, Szeged, Pécs, Székesfehérvár and Szombathely – had mayors who came from the governing party.

#### 4. Conclusions

The most important conclusions of this study can be summarized as follows. The intermediate level of public administration can be regarded as unbal-

anced in Hungary since the regime change, due to the lack of political consensus, with a view to the statutory requirements applicable to the area concerned, for a long time no significant decisions were made either in the county vs. region debate or in terms of the scopes of competence of the individual territorial levels. Consequently, the activities of the central government were limited to the transformation of one branch of public administration, i.e. state administration. In the background of the processes that took place until the second half of the 1990s was the intention of increasing efficiency and creating organisational units of appropriate size, and then with the date of accession coming closer, the effect of Europeanization played and increasingly important role. In the new millennium, preparation for the regional policy of the European Union already played an important role, which is also shown by the fact that as a result of their transformation in 2006, organisation aligned with the NUTS 2 level came to dominate. Simultaneously, the role of the internal factors can be regarded as minimal, which can be explained by the artificial nature of the formation of the regions (the county borders could not be changed) and with the weak regional identity (Pálné, Kovács, 2009).

In the light of the above it is not surprising that the alignment of territorial structure of the deconcentrated state administrative organizations to the planning-statistical regions began at the end of the 1990s, after the acceptance of the National Spatial Development Concept and the amendment of the law on regional development. In the interest of the successful implementation of the European Union's regional policy in the 2007–2013 period the government formed in 2006 took significant steps in the area of aligning the spatial structure of the organizations with the planning-statistical regions. However, the period after 2010 saw a major restructuring, the significance of the county level increased again, which can be primarily traced back to the changed political preferences of the new government. In the period examined, no significant changes took place at the top and at the bottom of the list according to the number of seats: the largest, economically most important, geographically the most favourably located settlements of the individual regions reinforced their leading positions, with Székesfehérvár in the Central Transdanubian and Győr in

the Western Transdanubian region coming to the forefront, due mainly to economic and partly historical reasons.

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