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**Public Opinion Surveys as Tools of Administrative Reform:
The Hungarian Case**

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to give an overview about a relatively rarely discussed aspect of the post-communist systemic changes: those deep-going alterations in governance and administration that, prior to the collapse of socialism, were already signalled out in the vivid public debates as crucial preconditions of any further advancement in the continuation of the cautious reforms of the 1980s. Although the debates had remained merely on an intellectual level in those days, they helped to crystallise those ideas which then had a great impact on shaping the actual steps taken in administrative reforms after 1989-90. Due to these “preparatory” discussions, the core elements of the necessary changes were clear and were supported by a high degree of consensus.

The first and most important precondition of the systemic transformation was seen in the substantial reduction of power concentrated in the hands of the central organs of the state. It was argued that this should happen through the radical decentralisation of the tasks, duties and decision-making procedures toward the community-level bodies of governance. The reforms would also require the establishment of new legal and administrative institutions with clear authorisation for control over jurisdiction, management and finances. And, last but not least, the success of any further developments would presuppose meaningful modifications both, in the collection and the distribution of centralised resources of the state budget. In short, it was widely agreed that the functions of the state have to be redefined, and it is perhaps the sphere of public administration in the first place, where the newly defined functions should be set into motion.

In the second half of 1989, the Roundtable-Discussions between the then ruling Communist Party and the opposition “translated” these tasks to a kind of a “time-table” of the transition. Thus, straight after the elections in Spring, 1990, the first acts of the newly formed Parliament served to turn the theoretically clarified goals into practice. New institutions were set up within a fortnight, and a number of new laws limited the “rights” of the central bodies of governance (ministries, police, state-offices, etc.) to intervene from above. The institutional and legal framework of the new democratic order was created within an exceptionally short time. However, to fill the framework with meaningful content proved to be a more difficult task. Thus, after seven years of experience, it is justifiable to ask a few questions about the actual outcome of the reforms that have been undertaken.

The first of these questions relates to the essence of the transformation: how far have the structural changes in administration really served the two major tasks of moving from a command-regulated economic order to a market-based one on the one hand, and establishing democratic political principles of openness, accountability and service for the public on the other. Second, what are the forms of expressing the needs of various segments of “the public”, and what are their ways to the decision-making bodies and administration? Third, do public opinion surveys play some role in giving weight to diverse social, economic and political interests? How do the various governing bodies react to the publicised findings of opinion polls as forms of expressing expectations toward, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the prevailing institutions and measures of administration? Fourth, at present, what happens to seriously clashing interests on the level of governance: what are the fora of conflict-resolution, and how do the various governing actors relate to these fora? Do public opinion surveys provide some arguments for them in their debates?

These are those major questions that the paper attempts to respond to by the analysis of the main steps in recent administrative reforms in Hungary. After an overview of the decisive structural elements of this reform, the focal issue to be discussed will be the relationship between representations of public needs (and opinions) and their consideration in actual decision-making. The analysis will try to reveal those deficiencies in the utilisation of surveys in the preparation and control of governmental decisions which give rise to some “competing” ways of influence and often lead to unintended departures from the regulations in the process of application.

2. Some Decisive Features of the Post-1989 Administrative Reforms

Since the overweight of the central state in all decisive matters of economic, political and social life was perhaps the most paralysing legacy of the past regime from the viewpoint of the quick establishment of a new democratic order, the first and most important task of a meaningful administrative reform was to re-define the competencies that the different levels of governance should hold in the new arrangements of power and responsibility. In concrete terms, central, as opposed to community-level decision-making procedures had to be circumscribed, the division of duties with assigned financial resources for their accomplishment had to be determined, and the guarantees of visibility and public accountability had to be established. Two sets of actions served these goals. First, a number of new institutions were founded to exercise control over the legislative, administrative and financial procedures of the various governing bodies; second, a series of new regulations was formulated to define the entitlements, property-bases and finances of the decentralised decisions over and the daily management of public services, welfare and public safety.

As to the first set of tasks in strengthening control over actions and decisions of the central bodies, the most important change was certainly the increased weight given to the Parliament. Prior to 1989, it was the Central Committee of the Communist Party where strategic decisions were born. Its decisive role was gradually complemented by that of the government which was to represent professional viewpoints in addition to the political ones articulated by the Party. In that division of functions, the power of the Parliament was minimal: it had to do nothing more than to enact and approve with the "stamp of the law" those decisions which had been born outside its influence in "secret" negotiations. Obviously, with the appearance of the different political parties and with Hungary's full commitment to regular democratic elections, the role of the Parliament has suddenly changed. It has become the decisive forum of compromising clashing interests and exercising control over the government. Although the legislative deeds of the Parliament are under steady criticism, still, they are taken much more seriously than before. Beside more intense attention on the part of the electorate, new institutions help to guarantee the lawfulness of administrative actions and the orderly application of the law in lower-level regulations. Three such institutions (practically without precedence under socialism) have to be mentioned: the Presidency, the Constitutional Court and the Chief State Accountancy.

Though the formal power of the President of the Republic is somewhat smaller in Hungary than in some other countries of the region (one has to mention here Poland or the Czech Republic), his role in keeping balance between the government and the Parliament, safeguarding legality and embodying the unity of national interests cannot be emphasised enough. In many of the public issues generating rather serious political conflicts, it was the President who maintained constitutional order and halted authoritarian attempts (stopped harsh police-interventions in cases of mass demonstrations or strikes, made an end to the

persecution of agents of the secret police of the old regime by a Presidential Decree, exercised permanent control over the mass media to ensure fair information of the citizenry amid the heated party-debates over the new media-laws, etc.).

The second new institution enjoying high popularity is the Constitutional Court. The judges of the Court are elected by the Parliament, and are empowered to control all aspects of the legislative procedure. Their decisions are compulsory for both, the Parliament and the government. Since as yet the new Republic has not worked out its "own" constitution, the main role of the Court is to fill in the holes in the prevailing modified old Constitution by exemplary decrees in cases debated either by groups of the citizenry, or by one or another organ of the administrative system. The decisions of the Court are highly esteemed and are followed with great interest. Over the past six years, several hundred proclamations helped to clarify the actual content of certain newly declared political and human rights, the entitlements and property-rights of the local governments, the legal implications of the budgetary reforms, some contested aspects of the law on abortion, the necessity of protection of the environment, women's rights, etc..

The third new institution has different roles from the above mentioned two: the Chief State Accountancy is empowered to control the use of public money and safeguard accountability in its strictest economic sense. It is the Parliament which authorises this body to investigate the economic, financial and book-keeping activities of the various ministries, local authorities, social security, public foundations, the State Privatisation Agency and different public organisations. The reports of the Chief State Accountancy are presented to the Parliament which has the right to take actions if necessary. Although such claims are nearly always articulated, relatively little has been done to follow the dry factual reports by public disputes over responsibility and accountability. Therefore, the control-functions of this new

administrative body are reduced to rather formal investigations without serious personal and organisational consequences. Its prestige is high in professional circles, but less esteemed by the public, which, due to the lack of full publicity of its reports, sees the activities of the Chief State Accountancy as the wasteful efforts of a handful honest men to introduce legality in a sphere which traditionally has been loaded with corruption and the misuse of authority.

The second set of important changes in administration aimed at giving stronger weight to the representation of local needs and interests, and at decentralising the decisions over a number of issues in economic development, employment, delivery of services, and provision of welfare. The legal framework of the envisioned new division of power between the central and the local levels of public administration was established by the Act on Self-Governance in Summer, 1990. As laid down in this Act, all settlements were entitled to elect their new local governing bodies in substitution to the old councils (that had been set up according to the principles of political loyalty and centrally prescribed quota, and had been subordinated to tight hierarchical control from above, concentrated in the chief headquarters of the ruling Communist Party). The new local governments became the proprietors of those lands and infrastructural facilities within their geographical boundaries which earlier had been possessed by the faceless "nation-state", and they were seen as independent economic actors with a certain degree of freedom, but with a wide range of legally prescribed tasks. The dual principles of free elections and reorganisation of the governing system through the newly defined division of roles and duties between the central and local organs of the state seemed to guarantee not only the extension of democratic participation, but also to assist the rise of efficiency in decision-making and the allocation of resources. Although the unity of political will behind these goals was unquestionable, serious conflicts were foreshadowed, however, in the process of the actual preparation of the local elections held for the first time in Fall, 1990.

It became clear that the concept of self-governance lays in the junction of very diverse, sometimes diametric political, institutional, social and economic expectations. The issues at stake followed from the multiple functions which the new municipal governments were anticipated to meet.

From a *political* perspective, they were seen as the institutional guarantees for an equitable share in *power* and *authority*. The legacy of a strictly centralised and hierarchical bureaucratic order put this political claim into the context of independence and equality in realising community-rights. Thus, the new Act aimed at significantly curtailing the scope for interference from above, and put a large emphasis on the institutional warranties of local autonomy. From an *institutional* perspective, the new municipal governments were seen as parts of the system of *public administration*, thus, the core issue was to raise administrative efficiency and to assure accountability. In this regard, much of the authoritative functions of the preceding local councils had to be suspended, and replaced by a redefined and legally regulated relationship between the *citizen* and the *state*. From an *economic* perspective, the local organs were seen as providers of a great number of public services, i.e., as units of *production* and *distribution*. In this context, a new system of taxation was established, and clear rules of collective property-rights were defined, fitting also into the major task of economic restructuring and marketisation of the entire macro-economy. Finally, from a *social* perspective, local governments were seen as representatives of the *needs* and *interests* of the community which was going to elect them. In this regard, central command on entitlements had to be replaced by a political consensus on the range and standard of *legally acknowledged basic needs* to be met locally. This strive implied the definition of the place and duties of municipal governments in the delivery-system of social welfare, and the fair share of responsibilities in income redistribution. In short, the reshaping of local governance brought to

the forefront all the key-aspects of systemic transformation: old authority had to be changed by modern administration, subordination by representation, bureaucratic orientation by entrepreneurial innovation, command by service, central dependency by independent self-determination. Given the outstanding role of the local governments in the realisation of administrative reforms, the ordering of priorities among the clashing expectations and the actual activities of the municipalities have been accompanied by intense public debates throughout the past six years. It is also in relation to their exceptional role in shaping people's living conditions that - as it will be presented below - local governments are much more frequent customers of public opinion surveys than are organs of the central administration. Their vivid daily contact with the electorate gives solid justification to the surveys, and the findings of the various polls are directly utilised in the decision-making process.

3. Brief History and Some Current Features of Public Opinion Surveys

It was a clear manifestation of the slow erosion of the totalitarian character of the socialist system that by the 1980s, regular measurement of the opinion of the public as a useful (and necessary) preparatory tool in the decision-making process became acknowledged not only by professional circles, but also by the highest authorities of the Communist Party. The Party-sponsored surveys in those days served to "pre-test" the reactions of the various social groups to those planned actions that the Communist Party was already determined to take. In other words, public opinion polls provided a quick "barometer" for the politicians, and their results were used to legitimise either increased caution, or, on the contrary, the need for speeding up the reforms. Concerning their topics, these surveys were thus centred around issues in the forefront of the reforms: first of all, people's attitudes toward the continuation of economic changes in the direction of marketisation. The concrete questions put up for

investigation were people's willingness to accept increased income-differentiation, their views on the causes of social inequalities, the expansion of poverty, the state's role in matters of social policy, etc.. In addition, a number of polls were designed to measure people's optimism/pessimism toward the foreseeable future, their observations on the functioning of a range of public institutions from health-care to the educational system, their expectations toward social services, etc..

Since all these issues were highly politicised, it goes without saying that public opinion surveys were under the strict control of the Communist Party. The main organisation in charge of running them was the Mass Communication Research Centre, an institution financed rather generously directly from the state budget and subordinated to the Party-elected President of the Hungarian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company. It was an irony of history that, though the Centre as an institution was not allowed to publicise the results of its surveys up until the late 1980s, its researchers were, however, regarded "independent intellectuals" to write freely about issues for concern. This schizophrenic attitude of the authorities gave an "underground" flavour to those writings, which "cited" scattered findings of the otherwise "secret" polls, and told the rest in an essay-like form of "free meditation". The skills of this style of writing did not differ so much from those developed by any other social scientist: empirical facts were not very welcome anyway, and it required a certain degree of courage to present them for publication, facing the constant threat of censorship because of "anti-socialist" content. Despite all the ambiguities of the authorities, public opinion research and other empirical investigations were highly esteemed as important sources of information and as reliable tools of measuring the public approval of the reforms. In acknowledgement of their usefulness, an ever widening circle of social science research institutes was entrusted to investigate an extensive range of issues from centrally allocated resources. Thus, from the mid-

eighties on, beside the Mass Communication Research Centre, public opinion surveys were done either independently, or in conjunction to other empirical investigations in nearly all major social science research institutions and also in the Central Statistical Office. These surveys were financed exclusively from public funds, either in direct contract between the research-team and one or another organ of the Party or the state administration, or through the slowly evolving schemes of grants for research in service of governance. In the latter cases, the degree of freedom to publish the research results was greater, but strict control was slowly elevated also in cases of directly sponsored investigations. When, after more than two decades of suspension, sociology-departments were re-opened at the major universities in the 1970s, due to the strong traditions of empirical research in Hungarian sociology, survey methods were taught from the outset as inherent parts of the curricula. Lecturers of these courses worked mostly on the ground of temporary invitations: this arrangement gave a high degree of freedom to sociology-departments to invite the best and most acknowledged experts of the field. The professional knowledge in running opinion polls was further extended by those internal courses that the leading researchers of the Mass Communication Research Centre organised for their permanent interviewers and research assistants. With this well-established expertise in the background, it is hardly surprising that after 1989, the increased need for public opinion research has been easily satisfied - at least from the viewpoint of the available trained personnel.

However, the collapse of socialism generated deep-going changes in the organisational arrangement of public opinion research. The prestigious Mass Communication Research Centre was closed down because of its earlier party-affiliation in 1991. Its leading researchers went into private business: within a short while, four major research-centres were set up, giving employment to the former heads of distinct sections of the Centre - now working as

directors of separate (and competing) research entities. Three out of the four new organisations are exclusively in private property, the fourth - called Public Opinion Research Centre - belongs to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and is financed partly from the state budget, partly from research-grants applied for in open competitions. This latter offspring of the former MCRC is engaged in theoretical work, though runs also opinion-surveys on relatively small samples. Beside the four successors of the Mass Communication Research Centre, a number of research institutions appeared on the market of opinion-surveys. However, most of them run polls in addition to their basic activities (media-studies, customers' services, market-research, environmental studies or "ordinary" sociological work). In most of the cases, these surveys are one-time thematic ones without later follow-up, adjoined to the focal subject of the project (the themes show a great variation from local environmental issues through views on social stratification, the changing labour market, private business, entrepreneurial habits, changes in household economies and lifestyles to choices in the school-system, patterns of occupational mobility, work satisfaction, etc., or to some "classical" subjects of market-research, as investigations of consumers' satisfaction or evaluation of certain types of business). Regularly repeated polls are much less frequently done and only on a narrower thematic basis. However, the two major privately owned public opinion centres - Median and Sonda Ipsos - do such work in order to follow the changes in voting behaviour and general political attitudes (see below). Recently, a series of new and important studies has been done about opinions on various aspects of the budgetary reforms by TARKI (otherwise doing research mainly about changes in the living conditions, environmental issues, migration, shifts in the composition of the labour market, etc.) and on some characteristic features of the changing political culture of contemporary Hungarian society by the Department of Political Science of the Central European University (their

specialisation is mainly in international comparative research within the post-communist countries of Central Europe).

Although it is difficult to make numeric estimations, the topical composition of public opinion surveys has certainly changed to a great extent in recent years. In comparison to the past, when attitudes toward the economic reform were in the forefront of research, the most important novelty is surely the current dominance of polls measuring trends in people's voting behaviour, political thinking, and, especially, in their attitudes toward the various parties. Willingness to participate in the elections, popularity of the parliamentary parties and the leading politicians, public support to the programs of the competing political actors are among the topics of these surveys, some of which have been regularly repeated simultaneously by the two most respected agencies, Median and Sonda Ipsos. These regular polls are financed by the press (by now, the leading newspapers and journals have their "own" centres to work with). In addition, the parties also commission regular polls - though the findings are rarely publicised, but are kept for internal "orientation". Another recurrent topic of the polls (never investigated before 1989) is the evaluation of governance: it is mainly again some newspapers that commission surveys of this character. Beside them, the widespread needs of local governments dominate the scene: they approach the public opinion centres with requests to get feed-back either about the acceptance of certain local programs, or about the general evaluation of the work of the elected bodies and the offices of the municipality. A further bunch of public opinion polls consists of surveys on people's economic expectations and their views on the progress of certain elements of the ongoing economic reform (here, again, it is the mass media showing the greatest interest toward such investigations, though some of them are run from research grants.) In addition, the trade unions should be mentioned among the sponsors of opinion-polls: from time to time, they commission research on "classical" topics of

unionism, such as issues of welfare, views on unemployment and poverty, people's occupational expectations or their reactions to the anticipated changes in the administration and delivery of certain social services.

A striking feature of the topical distribution of surveys is the very low representation of studies on "elite-views" among them. According to the unanimous information provided by the major poll-centres, investigations on the visions, reform-ideas, expectations and views of those in key-positions of decision-making and management are commissioned only on the local level of public administration or in different organisations of public services (mostly in health-care). In contrast to the public sphere, these types of surveys are, however, "customary" phenomena in the business-world: to shape their longer-term business-policy and staff-recruitment, the largest enterprises and banks entrust the centres to run investigations to find out the ideas of top-managers and those high up in administration about the positioning of their firm on the market, future perspectives of development, necessary areas of investment, career-expectations, internal atmosphere, fields of lower efficiency in production and marketing, etc. Obviously, none of these firm-based surveys are accessible to the public, thus, elite-ideas rarely can be compared with those of the citizenry on the same issue.

Looking at the range of public opinion surveys from the point of the "functions" that they are to serve, the picture is rather controversial and shows clear signs of under-utilisation. The causes are manifold. First, it is in only a minority of the cases, when survey-results are available to the public. According to my informants from the major poll-centres, surveys for open publication make up at best the quarter of their work: it is exclusively the polls commissioned by the press where they are allowed to publish all the findings without limitations. In addition, surveys commissioned by one or another ministry are put up for "summary-report" in the yearly published Political Yearbook of Hungary (however, in these

cases, partial censorship is exercised by the authorities). Thus, it can be said that democratic discourse and the establishment of the painfully missing culture of political argumentation is relatively poorly served by public opinion research in these days. The second source of controversies and under-utilisation is the rather widespread distrust in the findings of opinion-polls. Because of the relatively short history of independent research, “bad news” of one or another survey are taken as exhibits of “secret” political predilection of the reporting survey-centre and are heavily attacked in the press. Given the low standard of general knowledge about sampling and data-processing, such attacks certainly destroy the prestige, popularity and powerful use of survey-research. The third factor behind under-utilisation is the uncertainty of finances. Since opinion-polls are to measure people’s views in a given moment, their findings are not for long-term use - except when repeated. Regular surveys would but require regular commissioning. However, amid the general shortage of resources, organisations or agencies rarely have funds for repetition. Thus, in most of the cases, polls are just one-time surveys which lose relevance within a relatively short time, and it is considered to be rather difficult to build longer-term reforms on their results. The process of administrative reforms follows a different logic, where those in decision-making positions still are inclined to pay more attention to the proposals of the various interest-organisations and the expert-groups behind them than to the results of investigations about the views of the potential users or subjects of institutional change.

With all these reservations in mind, one can report the gradual acceptance of polls as sources of information either as “pre-tests” of the expectable reactions to future reforms, or as evaluations of the outcome of institutional changes of the recent past. In general, macro-level bodies of decision-making rely less on survey-results than local authorities do. It seems that the closer those designing the changes to those being “subjects” to them, the richer is the

utilisation of the empirical findings of population-surveys (polls included among them) in determining the concrete steps, priorities and the time-table of the reforms.

In the subsequent sections below, some of the most decisive spheres of administrative reform will be outlined, and the major findings of public opinion polls investigating people's views about the given area will be presented. Since it would be rather difficult to differentiate according to the functions of the surveys, the presentation below will be structured according to the various fields of administration/activity, and within them, the utilisation of survey-results either in preparation, or in control of the reforms will be summarised. In each section, one exemplary case will be discussed at length.

4. General Evaluation of the Reform-processes and the Functioning of the New Institutions

The history of democracy is too short in Hungary to be sure about its unconditioned acceptance by all citizens and all political agents. Therefore, it is essential to know: how far do people support those institutions which are to safeguard it? How far has the functioning of these new institutions met people's expectations - have they developed trust in them, or has the degree of distrust increased over time? By raising these comprehensive questions, changes of the general political climate are approached - an issue, which is important and interesting enough to account for broad public resonance. Thus, it is not surprising that the domestic and foreign press, the different television- and radio-broadcasting agencies and a range of independent foundations are willing to sponsor regularly repeated surveys to get as detailed responses, as possible. However, it is a cause for some worry that neither the subsequent governments, nor other central organs of the state administration have shown up among those who would commission such investigations. Although the evaluation of their work is a

recurrent topic in these types of polls, success or failure of the institutions of the state apparently is not scored according to their public assessment - those in power measure efficiency on different terms. While people would highly esteem those institutions which seem to stick with their own rules and are open to public control and criticism, the administration's own evaluation would appreciate bureaucratic virtues, loyalty and the strength of background political support in the first place. This departure between the two sets of evaluation points to an important feature of political life in the country: people do not feel that politics are for them, and the politicians do not see the public to be informed and competent enough to have a say in matters of administration.

The yearly published summary reports of the major public opinion survey centres give some insights to the interpretation of this phenomenon. When approached with the direct question: "how important is politics for you", the great majority would respond by saying "I do not care". People usually regard politics "dirty", "disgusting", "full of hatred and quarrels", a sphere where "the actors follow just their own particular interest", etc.. Despite their negative views on politics in general, Hungarians are, however, exceptionally well informed both, about the institutions and the major actors of current political life. In addition, they would give quite high trust to these institutions, even if find problems in their current functioning. This controversial relation to politics is reflected also in people's voting behaviour: though the prognoses had anticipated a definite decrease in participation in the second elections in 1994, in fact, the rates actually outweighed those at the first ones in 1990. At the same time, political events (meetings organised by the parties, broadcasting of the sessions of the Parliament, organised mass-demonstrations, etc.) are usually followed with disinterest, and neither do the parties report substantial increase in their membership. All in all, people would regard politics a matter of professionalism: they refuse the noisy self-made

figures, and would choose instead those, who had proved to do good job before. These widely shared images of the “good” politician raised to over 80 per cent the proportion of former professionals in the two subsequent Parliaments (it is worth adding that those holding a degree in one of the “pragmatic” fields of agriculture, engineering or economics made up 33 per cent in the first and 42 per cent of the second legislative body, moreover, many of the MPs had substantial organisational practice before: more than two-fifth of them left behind higher managerial or administrative positions), and similar considerations are in the background of the high proportion of re-elected former heads of the local councils in the first, and former mayors in the second round of local elections (their share was about two-thirds in the first, and nearly three-quarters in the second case).

Another general thread of political thinking is people’s distrust in the parties as representatives of different ideologies, interests and political strives. While the support given to the abstract concept of multi-party based democracy is high, the actual embodiments of the concept are not very welcome. People usually do not see decisive differences among the various party-programs, though they would correctly rank the parties either on the liberal-conservative, or on the ruling-opposition divide. The simultaneous surveys of the major poll-centres unanimously confirm that Hungarian society trusts most those institutions in service of the democratic order which are neutral in their party-affiliation: recurrently, it is the Presidency, the Constitutional Court, the army and the police which are thought to best fulfil their functions. As to the subsequent governments, people’s expectations have markedly changed over time: while straight after the elections, the new governments had enjoyed high support and a good deal of trust, their popularity reached its bottom-index after two years of governance, and seemed to show some improvement by the time of approaching the new elections. The base of criticism was partly independent of the actual content of their differing

policies, partly reflected certain peculiar negative features of the prevailing programs. But regardless of the ideological-political differences, people found more constant (negative) characteristics of the central administration than “transitory” elements to be corrected over time - latest by the next elections. According to the main arguments, all governments proved to be insensitive to the “real” problems of everyday life - they have not done enough to pull out the country from the economic crisis and have not given enough weight to the most important issues of job-creation, steps against inflation and the decline of the living standards, or the improvement of the social services, education and health-care. The first government was blamed to forget people’s problems because of its preoccupation with ideological issues and the wasteful efforts to re-establish old-fashioned nationalist values, while the new coalition-government is thought to neglect them because of its dogmatic understanding of neo-liberalism and the one-sided interpretation of the priorities of marketisation and privatisation. Besides, the politicians of all the subsequent post-communist governments have been recurrently evaluated being too arrogant and showing too much conceit to pay attention to the claims and preferences of “ordinary” people.

The detailed evaluation of the work of the various ministries is rather consistent with all what has been said. The three ministries receiving the highest scores in the monthly surveys over a year’s time-span (between March, 1996 and March, 1997) are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interiors (supervising not only the police, but also the local authorities). In contrast, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Welfare are constantly at the bottom of the scale. Even the Ministry of Finance, the harshest force of rigid monetarism comes out better than the administration responsible for matters of social policy and health-care! Thus, one can say that Hungarian society has accepted that in the current shape of its economy, generous spending cannot be

afforded. In return for austerity, people expect, however, high professionalism and clear steps toward the betterment of the general conditions.

The distance between people's expectations and the priorities held by the government is rather sensitively measured by two sets of questions raised recurrently in the monthly opinion polls on the performance of the state administration (these polls are commissioned by two leading dailies, and are run on countrywide representative samples of a size of 1,000 by Sonda Ipsos Ltd.. The sample is selected according to the "layers" of settlement, age, sex and occupational position. Field-work takes place at 101 different settlements of the country.). In these surveys, people are asked to score twelve different activities/areas of governance according to two different considerations: a) how important is the area/activity in the respondent's view; b) in his/her evaluation, how important is the given area/activity in the policy of the government. The areas are the following: economic management, public safety, relationship with the neighbouring countries, social policy, fight against corruption, culture and education, recognition of public opinion, prestige of the country abroad, assurance of free speech and free press, support to agriculture and the countryside, good atmosphere in the country, reliability.

The findings (which prove to be rather stable over time) are self-expressing. With a scoring between 0 and 100, the three areas with the highest "grades" in the respondents' view were the following (the figures are cited from the last survey in March, 1997): economic management (78), social policy (68) and public safety (55). At the same time, these areas got much lower scores in people's evaluations about their importance in the current policy of the government; the figures were the following: 37, 19 and 37. In return, the government was thought to give the highest weights to the maintenance of good relations with Hungary's neighbours (78), to raise the country's prestige abroad (71) and to safeguard free speech (41). These areas enjoyed the lowest ranking when people put themselves in governing positions. The respective figures in their "own" priority-list were 11, 10 and 3. It has to be added that within the six months between September, 1996 and March, 1997, the difference between people's "own" ranking and the one they "read" from the government's actions has been definitely increasing in the case of good economic management, the fight against corruption and the assurance of free speech. However, the "causes" of increasing departures were different and informative in themselves. While people gave exactly the same grades to the importance of economic management in the two surveys, they saw a decrease of this area on the priority-list of the government; fight against corruption became positioned higher by the respondents over time (its scores grew from 40 to 45), but, at least in their "reading" of the events and news, it somewhat lost its importance for the government (the respective grades changed from 32 to 29). Finally, amid the given conditions of competing tasks, people would see the safeguarding of free speech a lower-priority issue (they scored it 5 and 3, respectively), while they would think of the government as being more and more preoccupied with this task (the respective scores in the two surveys were 32 and 41).

The findings summarised here should be more and more important in preparation to the forthcoming elections of 1998. In the campaigns, the competing political actors should listen to the electorate. If the government proved to be less and less effective in economic management, then those with a convincing program would have good chances to gain extensive support. This is all the more so, because Hungarian economy shows some signs of recovery. However, with the decreasing trust in the government, people do not believe to

enjoy the fruits of this welcome tendency. They see the government's policy on forced taxation as open robbery without return. Thus, they would like to see a central administration more sensitive to matters of social policy and more inclined to invest into areas which people would still think parts of the responsibility of the state, like the development of education, culture or health-care.

5. Views About Administrative Reforms on the Local Level

As it was pointed out earlier, the re-shaping of community-level governance belonged to the core-elements of the series of administrative reforms of the 1990s. The two local elections in 1990 and 1994 were accompanied by extensive public interest, which was reflected, among other things, in the rather high rates of participation on both occasions (the respective ratios were over 50 per cent in 1990 and 44 per cent in 1994, with marked variations according to the type of settlement in favour of the villages). At the outset, the issue of local governance was surrounded with high expectations: in people's views, it was seen to embody the rights of the community, to guarantee autonomous decisions on all internal matters, to assist rapid economic advancement and to safeguard high standards of a wide range of services for people's daily use.

As also mentioned above, the top-down decentralisation of power and authority was accompanied by a grandiose program of property-distribution in the hope of creating stable bases for autonomous economic activities. In accordance with the clear liberal drives of the new economic policy, serious attempts were made to reduce the economic weight of the state by delegating a number of earlier centrally performed tasks to the lower levels of governance. Thus, contribution-based social security became the major agent of income maintenance, while the local authorities were appointed to administer all welfare programs and also the greater bulk of compulsorily delivered public and social services, with the same momentum of designating them as the owners of the municipal infrastructure in assistance of the various provisions. It was also hoped that the limitation of central tasks would bring about additional

economic advantages by reducing both, the actual presence and the costs of bureaucracy and administrative activities, thus, besides being more efficient in meeting needs where they appear, it frees moveable resources which are so much needed amid the conditions of general shortage of money and capital. In this design of a liberal turn, macro-economic claims for efficiency seemed to be in full harmony with the micro-level political demands for disengagement from dictates and control from above. Thus, decentralisation appeared to be an all-round panacea much beyond the technical implications of management and administration. It was seen as a straightforward route to democracy and economic prosperity.

The actual execution of these ambitious reforms has been followed by a range of surveys from the outset. Changes in local finances, the diverse policies on service delivery, changing priorities according to the social composition of the settlements, the ordering of the economic tasks and steps of technical developments, variations in the professional considerations on job-creation, welfare-policy, educational and health-policy, etc. were among the topics for closer investigation. In conjunction to the collection of hard facts about budgeting and staff-recruitment, most of these surveys made enquiries also about the views of the different bodies of local administration. The surveys were either financed from research-grants, or sponsored by the local authorities themselves. To my best knowledge, simultaneous opinion-polls have not been done, neither were surveys of the same character repeated over time.

Although detailed questions have been rarely asked about the evaluation of the work of the local governments in the above-cited regular public opinion polls on the general “state of arts” in public administration, still, the “ranking” of the municipality among the institutions in service of the citizenry is asked in the monthly surveys of both, Median and Sonda Ipsos. As a measure of general satisfaction, it is worth noting that local governments are among the

institutions enjoying a high degree of trust: in both sets of surveys, their average scores (on a scale grading the institutions between 0 and 100) have been around 50-57 in recent years, and - in contrast to the Parliament, the government, the ministries, the trade unions or the parties - their good positioning has not changed too much over time. The relatively favourable placement of community-level governance is mainly due to the fact that people - especially in the villages - really feel the change in this regard. While central institutions still prove to be too much distanced and alienated from them, considering the municipalities, they definitely see more political space to influence the decisions than what they had in the earlier system of councils directed from above. Moreover, in the local surveys on the subject, they have recurrently given rather good evaluation about the work of the elected councillors and the different local committees. It is important to note that people generally refuse party-politics on the local level: they wish from "their" self-elected bodies to put aside ideological and political differences and work to come to compromises about common local matters. In accordance with this orientation, the number of party-affiliated councillors is rather low in the municipalities, and one finds a number of "strange" coalitions on the local boards unimaginable on any of the higher fora of decision-making.

Amid the favourable general atmosphere, "outsiders" and those in the various bodies of local governance are in agreement to refuse the increase of local taxes (all three past central governments made attempts to reduce budgetary support and convince the local authorities to make more efforts to raise funding within their community), and would rank the earlier mentioned different functions of local governance rather similarly: when asked about the competing tasks of political representation, the embodiment of community-rights, the administration of decentralised tasks of governance or the provision and distribution of public infrastructure, they give clear priority to the last set of tasks. The overwhelming majority sees

self-governments as responsible bodies of meeting the welfare needs of their community and providing a number of public and social services. At the same time, they would put on them less bureaucratic tasks, and would refuse that these bodies should be more preoccupied with economic management and finances.

In 1991, the Foundation for Local Democracy and Innovations (Budapest) made a survey on various political, administrative and economic aspects of local governance. The survey was run on a layered countrywide representative sample of 208 local authorities (the sample was built up according to regions, the size of the settlements, the urban/rural divide and a comprehensive index of fundamental socio-economic characteristics). Within each local government, nearly identical questionnaires were asked from the mayor, the head of the office of the local administration (chief clergy) and all the councillors. In addition, a population-survey of a representative sample of 1,000 inhabitants was run with a questionnaire consisting a wide range of similar questions, but also some additional ones on the living conditions and general political orientation. (The research project was financed by the Norwegian Research Council for Applied Social Science.)

The survey concentrated on those political, professional, organisational and human values that are at play when building up the various bodies of the municipality and also orient the procedures of decision-making. Besides, priorities applied at the preparation of the yearly budget, the policy and mechanisms of local economic management, views on the responsibility of the central state in assisting the local authorities, options on longer-term economic development were in the focus of the research.

The study showed a surprisingly high degree of congruence between views of the local elite and the population. When asked about the most important gifts a "good" councillor should possess, "honesty", "ability to find compromises" and "sufficient knowledge of the locality" were emphasised with a high degree of consensus. With similar agreement between "insiders" and "outsiders" were the values of ideological commitment (including religious beliefs) and party-affiliation ranked to the bottom among the thirteen items for consideration. Moreover, the most important tasks that a local government should carry out were seen also in great harmony by the four groups of respondents. The list offered for choice consisted of 27 items that the interviewees had to "grade" on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (one of the most important tasks). The items were the following: housing construction, urban rehabilitation, water-supply, sewage, garbage collection, road-construction, parking facilities, public transport, telephone services, gas-services, primary school education, secondary school education, nurseries, kindergartens, primary health service, outpatient clinics, hospitals, provisions for the elderly, welfare assistance, culture (public libraries, theatre), environment-protection, advancement of the local economy, job-creation, local policy on unemployment, fire-fighting, public safety, protection of ethnic and minority rights. With minor variations in the actual averages, the options of the three "insider" groups were identical: job-creation, public safety and the development of local phone-services were the leading items of their lists, while the enlargement of parking facilities, the improvement of secondary-level education, and investments into the nurseries were the items ranked lowest. Neither was the ordering of items remarkably different in the population-survey, though, besides giving the highest scores also to public safety and job-creation, people claimed much more efforts in the area of services for the elderly. The "refused" items were, however, more departing from those closing the lists of the "insiders". In the population-survey, people regarded the least important to improve public

transport, enlarge the parking facilities and to protect ethnic and minority rights. The low positioning of this last item reflects partly the rather widespread prejudices against the Gypsies (who are the only ethnic minority with considerable size in contemporary Hungary), partly the lack of public discourse on certain newly defined human rights. In contrast, those already in positions of power and decision, seem to be more aware of the essence of these rights, though still would rank the classical tasks of service-provisions and local economic management higher.

The survey revealed a great deal of professionalism in local decision-making. It also brought to the surface the widespread possession of those organisational and administrative abilities that the local elite had slowly acquired in various administrative positions during the 1980s, and now capitalise on them by taking also the burdens of responsible decisions. Thus, a number of the municipalities were able to formulate rather refined programs for medium- and longer-term development within a surprisingly short period after the elections.

All in all, local-level governance seems to be much more supported by the public than the central state-administration. The locally elaborated programs reflect better the priorities and needs of the community, therefore, they enjoy a higher degree of support both, by the elite and the electorate. Given this rather favourable general climate, regular surveys of the field could provide useful results that should be explored in the preparation of decisions on central schemes for job-creation, infrastructural investments and in the targeted comprehensive programs for reducing the still remarkable regional inequalities.

6. Views on Gains and Losses in the Process of Economic Reforms

Although the reforms to attain higher efficiency and better performance of the economy have had an exceptionally long history in Hungary (dating back to the late 1960s), the collapse of socialism brought about fundamental changes in the conditions determining the space and scope of steps to be taken toward genuine economic advancement. In order to show the significance of the political turn in facilitating the necessary restructuring of both, production and economic management, it has to be recalled that amid the socio-political conditions of Communist rule, institutions and measures of the market could at best be “imitated”. All the decisions and deeds of the ostensibly “independent” actors were subordinated to the ultimate control of the central organs of the Party which, instead of weighting up the costs and benefits in economic terms, set the limits of “independence” according to bare political considerations. Thus, despite all the innovative efforts to establish

institutions looking like their counterparts in market-economies proper, the imitation never produced results identical with those of the original: the stimuli of the market were recurrently slowed down and biased by interventions of the central command. With the unstoppable decline of production from the early 1980s on, it became clear, however that production hardly can be further raised amid the given structural conditions. The potentials of the cautious reforms had been exhausted: the continuation of economic development would require fundamental change in the prevailing property-relations. However, such a claim touched upon the strongest political taboos of the socialist regime. Thus, all the radical ideas built on the dominance of private ownership seemed to remain in the drawers forever. But with the systemic changes of 1989-90, the chances of realising them changed from one minute to the next. On the basis of the ready-made programs outlining also the necessary legal, financial and organisational steps required for a successful transition from a command-based to a market-regulated economic system, significant measures were taken straight after the elections of 1990.

The most important among them were those acts and regulations which helped the conversion of former state-run firms to private companies and assisted the formation of small enterprises from the earlier informal businesses of the second economy. Beside the legal acknowledgement of private capital, a number of monetary measures were introduced to speed up the process. Thus, within six years, private property became dominant: at present, more than 60 per cent of the productive assets are in hands other than the state. The expansion of private ownership has been accompanied by a drastic change in the composition of production: the once painfully underdeveloped service-sector has grown to a decisive part of the economy, providing now some 60 per cent of the GDP.

Beside the strong attempts to convert the once state-dominated production to that ruled by competing private owners, strong actions were taken also in foreign trade. The generous subsidies given to the export of Hungarian products were to inspire better productivity, but also aimed at gaining sufficient returns for the payment of Hungary's gigantic foreign debts. The same goals were served by liberating the prices of practically all domestic products from their heavy central subsidies. At the same time, full liberalisation of the import-side of trading aimed at orienting production toward better adaptation to external challenges.

Further elements of the reform served the development of the earlier missing commercial banking sphere: a substantial injection of central funds and international loans helped to rapidly modernise the financial system which is so much needed to invigorate economic growth. Institutional changes in banking have been accompanied by a liberalised monetary policy of the Hungarian National Bank to improve the position of the domestic currency on the international financial market. In addition, a great number of new credit-schemes (with strong backing of the state budget) were set up to assist business-activities.

It has to be added that all these changes have taken place amid the serious crisis of production. Thus, radicalism in shortening the period of transition toward a market-economy had to be countervailed by a number of strong measures to mitigate the negative effects of the process - first of all, to control inflation and the rise of unemployment. In this context, the establishment of central and regional institutions of industrial relations became an important element of the reform-process. The regional institutions of conflict-resolution are powerful agencies of determining medium-term programs for job-creation, deciding about regional re-training programs and regulating co-operation between entrepreneurs, local authorities, NGOs and various interest-groups in the area. The National Council of Reconciliation (set up in 1993) has developed to an important forum of three-partite negotiations between the

government, the associations of employers and the trade unions, where agreements on limits of the yearly wage-increases, the changing rates of contributions to social security, modifications of service-provisions, assistance for job-creation and unemployment have been born. These agreements have helped to keep some control over the living standards and to slow down the increase of poverty and unemployment. Despite all the efforts, however, the greater part of Hungarian society has experienced a remarkable decline of real income and a formerly unknown degree of uncertainty in recent years. Thus, “economic reforms” mean mostly negative experiences for the majority. These experiences greatly influence people’s perception of the changes, and are clearly reflected in the views expressed in the numerous public opinion polls on the subject.

The widespread feeling of insecurity has been signalled recurrently by a number of surveys. When asked about perceptions of economic changes, the two aspects where people express fear are the limited hopes to preserve their workplace and to maintain the given standard of living. Year by year, the expected rates of unemployment exceed the actual ones by some 30-35 per cent. Expectations for substantial loss of income are also high, though less so, when personal future is asked: people see more space for their own personal efforts to gain additional resources than for “them above”, thus, their evaluation about the general state and future perspectives of Hungarian society is rather gloomy. With time passing, the nostalgia for a greatly coloured “golden age” of the late 1980s has been increasing. At the same time, people do not have longing for the command-economy: when asked about the most preferred system of economic regulation, hardly anybody gives approval to “socialist” management, while the support of free market, and, especially, of a “mixed” economy is on the increase. Similarly, people approve denationalisation and privatisation - though they would like to see more state-actions to ensure more recognition of the interest of “rank and file” employees

also in private business. Obviously, these “averages” of public opinion hide great variations according to the level of schooling, occupation, place of living, and, above all, the actual standard of living. In general, urban professionals (men somewhat more than women) are strong supporters of radical steps toward marketisation, and they are the least critical of austerity-measures in service of the longer-term goals. The former middle-classes of qualified blue- and white-collar workers are usually half-hearted “voters” of the reforms. In full accordance with their greatly changing personal conditions and perspectives, their varying positive response-rates in the subsequent polls indicate a high degree of hesitation: on the one hand, they see themselves partial winners of the changes, on the other, the gains seem to wither away easily, if central protection decreases too rapidly. It is the elderly, the unskilled, the long-term unemployed, and, above all, the Gypsies who identify themselves with the great losers of the changes and expect further deterioration of both, their personal- and “class”-situations. Nevertheless, even they do not claim the come-back of old times. What they would like to see is more actions on the part of the central administration to countervail the negative aspects of the transition with more efficient measures in social policy.

Since 1992, Sonda Ipsos runs monthly opinion polls with a set of questions to reveal people’s economic expectations. The surveys are commissioned by the press (currently, one of the most prestigious economic weeklies is financing the research and publishes its results month by month). The monthly samples are of a size of 1,000, representing the adult population by the basic socio-demographic characteristics. The survey called “Economic barometer” repeatedly asks the same set of questions: views about the expectable rate of inflation and the size of the unemployed population by the end of the year, the anticipated start of economic improvement and people’s estimation about the per capita monthly income needed for descent living.

The monthly findings draw up remarkable tendencies within a yearly time-span, clearly indicating the increase of optimism/pessimism of society, and the connection of these orientations with the changes in people’s political attitudes. These longer-term analyses are especially valuable to see people’s reactions to the rather radical austerity-measures of the government. The turning point in this regard was the introduction of the so-called Bokros-package in March, 1995: named by the Minister of Finance in office at that time, this program aimed at applying a smoothened version of the famous Polish shock-therapy. A number of serious austerity-measures were taken by the government in order to avoid the financial crisis of Hungarian economy and to halt the further opening of the scissors between falling exports

and increasing imports. Thus, domestic consumption has been restricted, and a number of services financed from budgetary resources have been put under limitations.

The "Economic barometer"-surveys of 1995 indicated the sharp reactions of society to these measures. Though people expected just a minor further increase in the rate of unemployment, the picture was different concerning inflation. In comparison with the findings of the respective surveys in 1994, the anticipated inflation-rate was 35 per cent higher, and exceeded the actual one by some 5 per cent. Pessimism turned out to be greatest with regard to the future: while in 1994, people had thought that economic recovery would start in five years, in 1995, the span of anticipated "bad times" suddenly jumped to 10 years. In correspondence with the generally pessimistic views, estimations of the necessary income for modest, descent and luxurious living all were more moderate (in real terms) than a year before. In this sense, people accepted the "message" of the applied measures of the government: consumption has to be (and will be) restricted, though the future fruits are still in the far distance. It has to be noted, however that the most pessimist picture was drawn by the youngest cohorts, who, in theory, should be the long-term "winners" of today's restriction. But they do not see things to develop in this direction. Thus, the proportion of opponents of the presently governing parties is increasing among them - which should be a warning for the politicians in preparation for the forthcoming elections.

7. Views on the Budgetary Reform

In order to lessen the financial burdens detaining free economic activity and quick adaptation to the challenges of the market, serious reforms have been initiated to reduce the extent of the state budget. Parallel to these reforms, steps were taken to redefine the concepts and functions of central financing. In contrast to the past undifferentiated distraction and redistribution of incomes on the ground of central command, a number of regulations were enacted to circumscribe the notions, functions and subjects of the various taxes, the bases of different contributions, the entitlements for returns and assistance, and the guiding principles of central redistribution. Issues of the budgetary reform have been constantly on the agenda of public debate in recent years, and there has been a great pressure on the Parliament and the Constitutional Court to make more attempts to define and stabilise the legal framework of taxation and access to subsidies alike. Since steps toward a meaningful budgetary reform have been taken amid the conditions of a serious and lasting economic crisis, the process has been

accompanied by recurrent harsh social conflicts. The clashes for and against the maintenance of central intervention have been extraordinarily intense in this sphere of administrative reforms.

A number of surveys revealed the causes of these conflicts and ambiguities. In the first place, the economic motives are obvious. Independent economic activity entirely separated from the state requires a stable capital backing and a well established market, but neither of these conditions could be created in the past decades. This is why there will be a need for the state pillar in the raw material sense for a long while to come, even though its utilisation now openly serves the accumulation of private capital rather than ensuring the structural bases for totalitarian intervention, which is undeniably a fundamental change. At the same time, the need for the economic presence of the state is kept alive by the fact that the restructuring of production has also begun to erode even market relations that had hitherto been regarded as more or less stable and “everlasting”. The privatisation of the state firms has disrupted the state orders thought to be secure, while the collapse of the CMEA and the Eastern markets has confused and endangered the established export relations. All this greatly increases the risk of full independence and increases the social pressure for the buffer role of the state.

However, the causes of this ambivalent relationship include not only direct economic components, but also cultural and attitude factors. Above all, it is worth mentioning the boomerang effect that accompanies liberation from the political power of the state. Paradoxically, the decades of resistance to the state as oppressor is now quite clearly being reversed, and while the various corporate bodies and interest alliances only clung to the state distribution policy out of fear and defencelessness, they now make angry claims on it. Behind the opposing principles of privatisation intended to “regulate” the plundering of public assets, intensely competing demands for compensation can be detected. Widely varying groups

consider that time has come for “the” state to compensate them for their historical grievances and their decades of “lagging behind”, to give them open assistance for the advancement they “deserve”, but have never achieved - and they outbid each other in submitting various claims for compensation that are all “legitimate” when considered separately. Having the arguments justifying these claims accepted and embodied in the legislation, is a question of rude political force: in this way, privatisation and the creation of a bourgeoisie is the direct function of the latent bargaining positions established over the past decades.

The other arenas of economic life throw an even clearer light on the ambivalence towards the state. The large number of civil societies, associations and foundations now being organised are model cases of the simultaneous demand for self-organisation and for bureaucratic recognition. In this, they are faithfully continuing the traditions of the informal economy under socialism - now within institutionalised frames - which demanded undisturbed autonomy in formulating needs, and support from above for their satisfaction. The situation is similar in the acquisition and regulation of income: enterprise managers and trade union activists are unanimous in protesting against all forms of central restriction of wage bargaining (interpreting even the attempt to reach uniform agreements as a sign of central intervention). At the same time and with the same momentum, they also heavily rely on the very same central state: they all use the old channels that have proved successful in obtaining individual treatment to win compensation for themselves from various bodies of the central budget in face of the inflation they regard as some kind of unavoidable fatality. There is little sign of self-restraint. It is in the name of the traditional “they” and “we” dichotomy that the atomised actors of the economy and politics enter the competition where the stakes as yet tend to be minimising personal risks rather than the hope of real gains. The desire to minimise risks in

itself gives the actors a tendency to formulate advantages for themselves in face of others in various “exceptions” and “concessions” and in other forms of bureaucratic protection.

In accordance with these widely shared views and deeply rooted interests behind the resistance against serious cuts of state spending, recent public opinion polls show that people largely refuse those reforms which aim at a substantial curtailment of earlier universal benefits and programs. However, when surveys go deeper and ask also about the “sacrifices” that people would be ready to make in order to maintain the schemes in question, the picture becomes more complex: readiness to pay more depends a lot on current economic conditions, level of schooling, place of residence and age. In general, those being aware of the rationale of the reforms (young, urban professionals with at least acceptable level of income) would be willing to support more taxation in case the utilisation of the funds becomes clearer than now. These surveys also demonstrate the prevalence of solidarity with the poor and those with special needs. People would be inclined to accept even some increase in their personal contribution, if regulations on entitlement were clearer and the standard of legality were higher in actual distribution. Further, the support for multi-sectoral solutions in education and health-care was proved, manifesting that the values of knowledge and health-maintenance enjoy high positioning in people’s preference-list in contemporary Hungarian society.

In 1996, TARKI executed a survey to measure people’s general knowledge about the fiscal system, taxes and state-financing. The survey was run on a sample of 1,000 individuals, representing the economically active population of the country. The project was commissioned and financed by the Ministry of Finance (with partial contribution of the Central European University). The one-hour interviews combined methodological elements of classical opinion-research with a specially designed experiment to create a decision-making situation for the respondents. Besides asking their views on the tax-content of certain items for daily consumption (bread, petrol), on the extent of the state’s responsibility in providing free health-care, family-benefits, minimum pension, drug-subsidies and free higher education, the respondents were requested to make options item by item: would they be willing to pay higher contributions, and/or certain state-provision should become more strictly conditioned, and/or those having access would be more limited, and/or certain quality-requirements of free provisions would be given up.

The survey provided insightful results about the great variations in the standard of knowledge regarding different aspects of the state-finances. Beside the decisive impact of the

educational level, occupation, age and place of residence of the respondents, it turned out that people's knowledge is highly dependent on the quality of information available through the media and also on their own direct contact with one or another institution/scheme under consideration. However, willingness to accept some reduction in the role of the state in the provision of the above-listed services/benefits did not show strong correlation with these variables. The survey revealed a rather high degree of solidarity *together* with the acceptance of more play of the market and some increase in individual financial contributions (e.g., the majority of the respondents opted for the maintenance, or even some extension, of welfare assistance for the poor at the expense of paying more for it; access to free medical care was supported even when more sacrifices were asked for, etc.).

Investigations of this character are useful "pre-tests" of curtailments of the various schemes earlier exclusively provided by the state. Apparently, the public reactions are not uniform: there are areas where the claim for maintaining the state's full responsibility is stronger than in other ones. Besides, with more efforts to raise the level and quality of information on the rationale of certain fiscal reforms, the government could attain much more public support than up until now.

8. Views on Reforms in the Health-care System

The numerous constraints and inadequacies that people experienced in the functioning of the health-care system were among the most widely discussed issues already in the 1980s. The reasons for accusation were manifold. First, a wide range of indicators signalled the unstoppable deterioration of the health-standard of society: age-specific mortality rates - especially those of the male population - had been increasing since the second half of the 1960s; the incidences of alcoholism, mental disorders and cardiovascular diseases have steadily exceeded the corresponding figures in most of the European countries; the occurrence of fatal accidents put Hungary to the top of the industrial world; rates of infant mortality have stopped to improve since the mid-1980s, etc.. Second, the health-care system proved less and less capable of coping with the more and more serious problems it had to face. There were structural constraints as much in the background, as the late consequences of decade-long under-financing of the services. The system showed serious symptoms of overuse: decline of the quality of its provisions, chronic shortage of facilities and lack of correspondence between needs of the patient and services on offer have developed to widely shared experiences of society. Amid this situation, access to the adequate form and institution of medication became increasingly dependent on bribing and latent social, political contacts, which all worked to the detriment of the less well-off social groups - those who would have been in need for extra frequent and intense medical intervention. The reproduction of shortage, deteriorating health and increasing socio-economic inequalities seemed to be everlasting.

Given this state of affairs, the promise for meaningful reforms in health-care was one of the most emphasised priorities in all the party-programs at the turn of the 1990s. The subsequent governments had to face, however that these reforms would require a substantial increase of funds spent on the area. Since any such claims were in sharp conflict with the

general drive for reducing budgetary expenditures, alternative solutions had to be found. Although the decisive steps are still ahead, some important changes were made. The first was to put public health service under the administration of social security (in other words, to separate its revenue from the state budget, and to set up an independent, responsible professional body for its management), and induce normative rules in the financing of the various provisions (per capita quotas in primary health-care, disease-specific scoring in hospitals, etc.). Second, efforts were made to “economise” drug-consumption and the costs of all kinds of medication. Third, restrictions were made on long sick-leave, and the control over the take-up of disability-pensions has been tightened. Fourth, the notion of “mixed provisions” has been supported by giving favours to private business in certain specialisations. Fifth, attempts were made to meet one of the most frequently articulated demands: the earlier exceptionally low salaries of the physicians and nurses in state hospitals have been significantly raised. However, all these measures generated rather controversial results: in some areas, the quality of the services continued to decline, and the efforts to keep pace with the rising prices put unbearable extra burdens on the impoverishing strata of society. Thus, the conflicts around the issues of health and health care are still in the focus of public debate.

The public opinion surveys on the subject give some feed-back about the intensity of these conflicts. Investigations among various groups of physicians representing a wide range of specialisations led to the same results: those working in the sphere see chronic under-financing the major cause of all other “diseases” of the system. Recurrent complaints are the lack of preventative care and the low standard of rehabilitation. Regardless of the peculiarities of their profession, all groups of the physicians agree in the analysis of the most disturbing structural feature of the system: the overweight of hospital-care to the detriment of the much cheaper and often more effective outpatient services. A further bunch of frequent critical

comments refers to the backwardness and bad distribution of equipment and infrastructural facilities. When asked about the possible solutions, the various professional groups emphasise the combination of two necessary steps: the need for a widely discussed, well-elaborated long-term health-plan and the urgency to move toward the establishment of a multi-sectoral health-care system with the inclusion of private capital and non-profit provisions.

Lay opinions do not seem to differ too much of the professional ones. As mentioned earlier, people rank health high on the priority-list of values, and would be open to accept the presence of private and non-profit institutions in the area, provided that the rules of payment and access become much clearer and better regulated than now. Although the mentioning of bad experiences in one or another health-care institution is rather frequent, there is still a high degree of trust in the physicians whom people would like to see better paid and better supported with assisting personnel.

In 1994, the Health Insurance Fund commissioned and financed a survey on people's recent experiences with the health-care system and their views on the introduction of contribution-based provisions and a few other elements of the health-care reforms. The investigation also aimed at revealing some decisive sociological determinants of people's health behaviour and the major patterns of "using" the system. The research-work was done by a team of the Economic and Social Research Institute of the Trade Unions. Questionnaires were asked from one of the adult members of a national representative sample of 5,000 households. The extensive final report never became accessible to the wider public, though a summary was published in the Working Paper Series of the Health Insurance Fund (a semi-public series which does not get into "normal" circulation in bookstores or public libraries, but is available upon request).

The survey revealed the very low standard of knowledge about the financing of health-care: though both, the employers and the employees pay a substantial contribution to cover pensions, family-benefits and the costs of "free" medical care (at present, employees' rate is universally 10 per cent of the gross salaries/wages, that of the employers' is 42.5 per cent of their monthly wage-fund), neither the overall proportion of contributions, nor its internal division between the two funds managing in-cash benefits and health-services, respectively, was known. Better-educated people estimated these rates somewhat better than those with less schooling, though the level of knowledge was rather low even among them. Interestingly enough, all those whose occupation was related to the broadly understood health-sector, gave exact responses - as if the issues of maintaining the health service were their "internal" matters.

Even less was known about other recent changes in the health-care system. People could not even guess the ratio of subsidies paid from central funds to certain basic

pharmaceutical products in general use. All what they knew was the extreme increase of prices in this sphere of consumption.

When asked about the most disturbing shortages and quality-problems in health-care, people's most frequent complaints referred to the low level of hygiene in hospitals and the poor quality of food given to the patients. These reproaches were rather general - they did not prove to be in close connection with recent personal experience. Besides, under-staffing and overcrowdedness were also among the repeatedly mentioned critical remarks.

A series of questions asked, whether people would accept payment and/or the decline of quality and/or reductions in budgetary funding of certain social services outside health-care as a "price" to be paid for improvement in the following areas: services of general practitioners, outpatient clinics, hospitals, in-cash benefits for pregnancy, all other areas within the medical sphere. The findings are revealing: people would stick most with hospital-care (they would not give green light to any cuts in this area) and would accept most the gradual introduction of payments for special provisions. However, the far most favourite option was to suggest the decision-makers to find areas outside the medical sphere where, in people's view, more "economising" with the scarce funds of the state would affect less basic needs of less wider groups. The maintenance of state-supported, free (or, at least, cheap) health-care is a strong claim of Hungarian society.

A fundamental conclusion of this survey was the need to raise people's knowledge about the "economics" of health-care. The coherence of ideas for future reforms should be made clear. In addition, health-care is too much a basic issue to determine its future restructuring simply on the grounds of expert-ideas. People should get the opportunity to have a say about the various alternatives and make informed choices among them.

9. Views on Joining the European Union

After four decades of placement under full-fledged Soviet rule that had been driven by the logic of the cold war, the collapse of socialism suddenly opened the historical chances to re-negotiate Hungary's geo-political position. The issues at stake were manifold, ranging from the country's military belonging to the future character of her political, economic, social and cultural life. Although the Communist rule openly oppressed or, at least, strongly de-favourised any such attempts, the deliberate effort to maintain the European traits of society had been an integral part of the daily life of families and local communities throughout the entire period of socialism. Thus, despite all attempts from above to establish the notion of the Iron curtain also in the "other-ness" of various socio-cultural aspects of the prevailing way of life, people's European self-identification has found its way in thousands of Westernised

patterns from housing or the most frequent leisure-activities to food-consumption or the “Western” style of dressing. This decade-long prehistory of informally sustained “Europeanism” has to be identified behind the fact that claims to constitute a political and economic order compatible with people’s cultural self-definition received nation-wide approval among Hungarians around the turn of 1989-90. In this context, it is not surprising that all political parties emphasised as one of their very first priorities to start negotiations with the European Union (then EC), NATO and other regional organisations about membership in the important bodies of supra-national policy-formation and decision-making.

However, when facing the huge amount of work that has to be done to pave the way toward representation on the various European boards, initial enthusiasm of society was somewhat cooled down. It turned out that neither the prevailing legal system, nor that of education, social security, economic management or the technological regulations of production are compatible with those applied in the Western part of the continent. Thus, strong efforts have to be taken for a purposeful conversion of all these systems of administration, and the process still might take years - if not decades. The foreseeable difficulties did not challenge, however, the publicly supported commitment of the subsequent governments to start the necessary reforms. As parts of the long preparation of full “entrance into Europe”, a number of steps were taken straight after the enactment of the first government in 1990. On the one hand, new institutions and organisations were founded to be the “professional” bodies in charge of co-ordination among the various governing agencies from the particular aspect of “Europeanisation”. On the other, administrative reforms in all the important public spheres have been permanently observed and re-formulated in the light of regulations taken by the European Union. A corner-stone of the process was the handing over of the “European questionnaire” in 1996. This event opened the gate to more concrete

negotiations between the present government and the administration of the EU about the “schedule” of co-ordinated programs in preparation of formal membership.

Unlike in most other spheres of the ongoing administrative reforms, the proceedings taken to attain Hungary’s EU- and NATO-membership have been seriously and regularly monitored by government-financed public opinion surveys. In the past seven years, a number of simultaneously run investigations have been commissioned to measure the level of knowledge that various groups of Hungarian society have about the structure of policy-formation and decision-making on the European level, people’s evaluation about the nations/regions having the greatest impact on the future of the country, and also their changing attitudes concerning the personal and nation-wide consequences of membership. Among these surveys, the most comprehensive ones are the yearly “Eurobarometer”-studies run in 19 Central and East European countries. In the case of Hungary, it is the MODUS Consulting Ltd. which is responsible for the field-work and the comparative analysis. In addition to the uniform parts of the questionnaire repeatedly run in all participating countries, MODUS puts up for investigation also some of those Europe-related questions which are important for domestic concern in the first place (this set of country-specific questions aims at measuring changes in attitudes toward the inflow of foreign capital, modifications in people’s political orientation on the cosmopolitan/autarchic scale and their perceptions about the improvement/worsening of Hungary’s development in a longer-term perspective). As the trends of the past five years show, parallel to the decrease of full support of neo-liberal economic policy, fears have been on an increase to enter the European market without strong protective policy of the government. Although the majority still would “vote” for joining the European Union, claims to make more efforts for better training and a deliberate labour market policy to prevent marginalisation of the Hungarian labour force have become stronger.

In accordance with their more endangered perspectives, it is mainly elderly rural people and urban unqualified workers who see more negative than positive aspects of the ongoing “Europeanisation”, and who openly fear Hungary’s future EU-membership. With regard to NATO-membership, Hungarians are more cautious than other Central and East European societies: full support is given only by a minority, while the majority still would like to see a “neutral” military policy of the country. It is worth noting that a quarter of the population openly and strongly objects Hungary’s NATO-membership: in their view, this way the country might become a “depository” of dangerous, second-order weapons without a say in important military decisions, and entrance also might induce expenditures which are too high to meet amid the foreseeable economic conditions. In an international comparison, it turns out that with the distribution of their responses on the supporter/opponent scale, Hungarians are straight behind Slovakia and Bulgaria (whose populations are even weaker defenders of the re-shaping of the military map of Europe by new NATO-memberships of the post-socialist countries). However, these two countries always have been strong allies of Russia (thus, historical and linguistic explanations are easy to make for their reluctance), while such an argument does not hold for Hungary. Recent experiences about the ambivalent steps of the West in relation to the Yugoslav war, the still vivid memory of poor solidarity of the Western governments in 1956, and the low self-esteem of a small nation to preserve autonomy all might play some role here. However, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon would require more detailed future sociological and psychological investigations on values, expectations, political and general orientations and cultural attitudes.

In Fall, 1996, Sonda Ipsos made a series of public opinion surveys to measure general knowledge about and attitudes toward the European integration. The surveys were commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and were financed from funds of the PHARE Program. The study embraced samples of four different social groups which were selected as particularly important ones from the point of view of building up a purposeful government-strategy on dissemination of information about policies to attain Hungary’s EU-membership. The groups singled out for closer investigation were the following: the young, those living in

backward rural-agricultural areas, journalists, and adults "in general". These groups were represented by the following samples: 1.400 respondents were randomly selected from the cohorts aged 16-29; a geographically concentrated sample of the size of 1.000 individuals was chosen to represent the rural-agricultural population; a small sample of 250 journalists was interviewed to reveal the views of those working in various fields of mass communication; and a "key-sample" of 3.000 individuals aged 18 or above was selected with the classical random methods to gain information about attitudes of the adult population in general.

In accordance with the findings of other surveys, this series of investigations also found that most Hungarians have a positive attitude toward future membership in the EU. Differences behind the average are self-explicable: the young and middle-aged groups are stronger supporters than the elderly; urban professionals gave more approval than unqualified village-dwellers; those in industry and various services saw future membership more advantageous than agricultural labourers. When asked about the reasoning to join the EU, people gave mostly economic arguments - cultural and political ones were less frequently mentioned. As to the future political formation of a united Europe, the relative majority (46 per cent of the "adult-sample") spoke of a European Confederation, while somewhat less support was given (with 38 per cent of the "votes") to a "European United States". In accordance with these ideas, people thought that trading, environmental or monetary policy are all-European matters, while issues of social policy, education, defence of the borders, or transport should be left on national levels of decision-making.

The surveys showed a relatively high level of knowledge about the foreseeable changes in spheres of employment, appropriation of assets, education, migration or communication. However, information about the organisational structure of the Union proved to be of very low standard. Even less known were the procedures of election to the European Parliament, the symbols of "Europe", or those recent regulations which have been taken about the monetary union.

As to the expected hopes, Hungarians foresee a strengthening of national identity and increased respect for Hungarian culture as a result of future membership. The respondents listed also with high proportions the better chances for the country in foreign affairs and in international interest-representation, and a substantial improvement of the general economic conditions. As to the disadvantages, the majority fears an increased spreading of already disturbing phenomena of crime, alcoholism, drugs, suicide, etc. . In addition, some domestic problems came up for greatest concern. Causes for dismay were the expectable further cuts in social spending, and also the deepening social and regional inequalities between more and less adaptive parts of society.

Signs of a relatively high degree of solidarity were expressed not only with fellow-Hungarians, but also on the international scale. People proved to be very critical of all "separatist" actions and of any manifestations of competition among the Central European governments. The great majority sees Hungary's future in the context of the region, and thinks of the attainment of formal EU-membership together with other "Visegrad-states".

In light of these surveys, the spheres to improve the dialogue between the government and society appear with great clarity. On the one hand, the administration bravely can build on the satisfactory knowledge of people about the expectable pro-s and con-s and on the fact that the balance between them proves to be positive. On the other hand, much more information should be disseminated on those political and bureaucratic procedures which shape the actions of the Parliament and the government in order to make a step further toward membership. It is too often the case that regulations are introduced without any public explanation, or, the reasoning comes only after loud public disapproval. These "gaps" in communication lower people's trust in the government, challenge their confidence that the administration is acting

on their behalf, and increase the fears toward the otherwise much awaited European membership.

10. Conclusions

In this paper, six broad areas of administrative reforms were presented from a peculiar perspective: how do “rank and file” people understand and evaluate the attempts to modernise the various areas of governance and to attain higher efficiency of services and provisions.

Although all the selected fields are of great importance of daily life, obviously, the time-span of the reforms differs among them. All what happens in the budgetary sphere has immediate consequences in the consumption of commodities and services, while the impact of “Europeanisation” is more gradual; local investments broaden people’s job-opportunities without any further actions, while the improvement of hospital-care requires the co-ordinated work of a number of authorities within and outside the medical profession, etc.. These “professional” characteristics of the various fields of administrative reforms are clearly reflected in the respective public opinion surveys. In general, reforms with immediately felt favourable consequences enjoy greater support than those where people either do not see the coherence of actions, or fear that those in power might “change their minds”. Another differentiating dimension is the “closeness” and “controllability” of the decisions: people feel more comfort with areas where they see the entire process from the registration of needs through the preparation of regulations to the experiences with the results. Their “closeness” and greater “accountability” gives greater popularity to the actions of the local administrations than to those of the far-distanced central government or the Parliament. However, this difference is not self-evident. With more efforts on communication and public discourse, much could be done to gain support to state-level actions - even if their execution requires some sacrifices on the part of society. As it is proved by a number of surveys, Hungarian society does not think in “black or white” terms. The majority is ready to accept even temporary worsening of the general conditions if sufficient arguments for such necessities are given.

True, acceptance of the negative sides of the reforms greatly depends on people's evaluation about those in power: experiences about corruption, conceit and arrogance make serious damage to people's confidence that those deciding above their heads really "represent" them and are in the high positions of governance according to their highest merits in service of the country.

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