

Variations on the Same Theme? The Structure of Territorial State Administration in Selected Transition Countries of the European Union

Attila Barta^{*}

Zoltán Hegyesi^{**}

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The study focuses on the territorial systems of public administration in selected Member States of the European Union. A widely used solution in European administrative systems is the implementation of the central authority through deconcentrated bodies. However, there is no single solution; instead, there are different variations of this

* Attila Barta, Associate Professor, Department of Administrative Law, Faculty of Law, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary (izvanredni profesor, Katedra za upravno pravo, Sveučilište u Debrecenu, Mađarska), email: barta.attila@law.unideb.hu.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9945-4720>

** Zoltán Hegyesi, Assistant Lecturer, Lajos Lőrincz Institute of Administrative Law, Faculty of Science of Public Governance and Administration, Ludovika University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary (predavač, Institut za upravno pravo Lajos Lőrincz, Fakultet javnog prava i uprave, Nacionalno Sveučilište za javnu službu, Budimpešta, Mađarska), email: hegyesi.zoltan@uni-nke.hu.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9317-8240>

approach. The paper specifically illustrates the similarities and differences among some former regime-changing states (transition countries). We argue that the evolving needs of the present time and contemporary states and their active public administrations are no longer adequately addressed by the instruments of the past. In our scientific opinion, deconcentrated state administration will play a very important role in the future in addressing the challenges posed by the changing framework, where it exists. The study is intended to serve as a basis for further research.

Keywords: territorial state administration, deconcentrated state administration, selected former transition countries of the EU

1. Introduction

The state administration aspect of territorial public administration, specifically the system of so-called deconcentrated state administration, has been addressed in several of our previous international studies (Barta, 2021a; Barta, 2021b; Lopižić & Barta, 2022). In some of these, we also described specific states,¹ but we mostly focused on presenting the main trends. It is well known that the organisation of public administration is primarily influenced by the scope and complexity of the tasks performed by the state. The number and scale of these tasks vary over time according to prevailing conceptions of the state and public administration. As regards the nature of the tasks, however, it can be noted that public administration performs increasingly specialised tasks over time. A clear example of this is the last decade and a half. Since the end of the first decade of the 2000s, states have had to respond quickly and effectively to challenges such as major economic upheavals, various forms of migration, negative environmental impacts, problems arising from international conflicts, and diverse developments in the digital domain.

These challenges are undoubtedly reshaping the world we live in, and although the main features of public administration transformation are not

¹ The recent changes of Croatia's and Poland's deconcentrated state administration have already been presented in a previous study, so we have not examined these EU Member States in this paper. See: Lopižić & Barta, 2022; Hegyesi, 2022.

yet fully understood, it is clear that the changes are affecting not only the central and municipal level but also the middle/territorial level. The middle/territorial level of public administration is the so-called executive level, where clients come into direct contact with the state and its administration. However, these processes do not imply that states facing similar problems necessarily apply the same solutions in their public administration (or, if they do, in their territorial administration). There may be several different ways to solve the same problem successfully, as there is no uniform administrative model. Even today, public administration remains an integral part of state sovereignty, and countries themselves therefore define the basic characteristics of their executive apparatus, including territorial state administration.

This consideration has led us to take a “snapshot” and describe the deconcentrated public administration solutions in some EU Member States. More specifically, in this first phase of our broader research on the developments of deconcentrated state administration, we focus on a selected set of post-socialist EU Member States representing three regional groups: the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), the Visegrad Group countries (the Czech Republic and Slovakia), and the South-East European region (Romania and Bulgaria). These countries all underwent regime change at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. This delimitation marks the starting point of a multi-stage comparative project, within which we will later extend the analysis to additional countries. It is important to note that the order of presentation does not imply any ranking, as we are convinced that no single solution alone can be considered superior to others. Since there is no single recipe, the focus is instead on the need for the state to operate an administrative structure adequate to the tasks it has undertaken.

A structure in which the place and role of institutions are clear and in which the different subsystems function in harmony with each other is essential. If this is not the case, reforms may be necessary, though they may take very different forms (Goldfinch, 2023). Due to space constraints, we have made a selection in this review and included only countries that underwent regime change at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s and are currently members of the European Union. The question we posed was: to what extent will these countries operate with similar structural solutions in the 2020s, if such a common or similar direction can be identified? There is no doubt that, although public administration in the Member States is a national matter and therefore the European integration organisation has no direct power to shape it, it nevertheless plays a role

in influencing it to a certain extent. This is closely related to the issue of Europeanisation, the essence of which is that it is in the well-understood interest of the Member States themselves to develop or transform their institutions and administrative procedures in response to incentives and requirements coming from the European level (Behnke & Petersohn, 2024, p. 118). This phenomenon, which affects all major subsystems of public administration, can also be observed in the case of deconcentrated state administration. Our overview is illustrative, and we plan to continue this line of inquiry in future work by presenting the territorial state administrative systems of other states.

In our study, we started from the assumption that the territorial administration of modern states is characterised by a structural division, namely the simultaneous presence, with certain exceptions, of civil and police units of central authorities operating independently of territorial interests, and of bodies representing territorial interests with a degree of self-government at the middle level of administration (regardless of the exact number of levels and the geographical extent of the units in a given state). Although their proportions vary from one country to another and over time, the public administrations of European countries have long relied on these two subsystems and do not regard them as alternatives to each other. Let us now take a closer look at the current situation in the selected states and explain why we included the term “variation” in the title of this article, which hints at the diversity of possible implementation.

2. A Brief Overview of the Territorial Level of State Administration in Some Former Transition Countries in the 2020s

Looking at the territorial administration of several European countries that have changed their systems, the picture is varied. This is not surprising, since the social and economic processes in the countries under discussion today exhibit significant differences, which in many areas can override the shared socialist past. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the deconcentrated state administration bodies have lost their importance, especially at a time when the pressure of multiple mega-crises (e.g., climate change, armed conflicts, environmental pollution) demands rapid and effective central state action. Some examples from the northern, central, eastern, and southern regions of Europe are presented below.

2.1. Examples from the Baltic Region: Same Direction but Different Timing?

We start with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Estonia is a republic, a unitary state in terms of its organisation (Martin & Vali, 2021). Like many other countries undergoing regime change, Estonia looked to the French system of government as a model in the early 1990s (Koi, 2011a, p. 872). Since 1991, the country had only one level between the central and municipal (*kobalik omavalitsus*) levels: the 15 counties (*maakond*), two of which are on islands.² It is important to note that at the end of 2017, the local government system was significantly reorganised,³ as part of which many municipalities were merged and county municipalities abolished. This had a direct impact on the issues addressed here. As a result of the country-wide reform, the Estonian legislator also abolished the institution of the county governor (*maavanem*), previously responsible for territorial state administration. After the abolition of *maavanem* and its office that performed a variety of state administration tasks, some of these were transferred to municipalities and others to ministerial deconcentrated units. In recent years, state administration has been carried out by the relevant minister together with government offices (Suur, 2018).

In terms of outcome, Latvia's situation is similar to Estonia's. Latvia is a parliamentary republic (Akmentina, 2023) and undertook major administrative reforms over the last decade and a half. In 2009, the country implemented an administrative territorial reform by amalgamating local units, which led to the abolition of districts where most deconcentrated services had been organised. However, the transformation did not end there. Among several significant steps, in 2021, the country implemented another comprehensive administrative reform, resulting in 42 local self-government bodies – 7 city municipalities and 35 district municipalities. New councils began work on 1 July 2021, following the municipal elections in June (Karvatska, Yuriychuk, & Chepel, 2023). Most of the available professional sources report that the current Latvian administrative system, like the Estonian one, does not include a territorial state administration

² https://citypopulation.de/en/estonia/ua/0039__hiiu/, https://citypopulation.de/en/estonia/ua/0074__saare/

³ See more: https://www.eipa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Public-Sector-Performance-Programme-2022-2025-an-International-Benchmarking-Study_chapter-1.pdf. For other plans and administrative steps, see: <https://www.fin.ee/en/node/205#activities-supportin>

body such as the prefect in Francophone states. Individual specialised administrative areas (ministries) carry out their tasks at a lower level through their own deconcentrated bodies (e.g., inspectorates and state agencies).⁴ Looking at the Baltic region, the following features of Lithuanian administrative arrangements can be noted (Burinskienė, 2022). The lowest level of Lithuanian administration features 60 municipalities (*savivaldybės*). In addition to these, 10 counties (*apskritis*) can be distinguished below the central level. Previously, the governor (in Lithuanian: *apskritis viršininkas*) was appointed by the government to oversee the legality of local self-government and coordinate activities of the state administration bodies in their area of competence (Koi, 2011b, p. 925). However, in 2010, the middle-level state administration was restructured, and the institution of the county governor was abolished. Currently, administration at the middle-level is carried out in a slightly different way. Much of the power remains in the hands of the Lithuanian government, but territorial development is also carried out by so-called development councils, composed of representatives of the municipalities in the area. These development councils are legal entities, whose main aim is to plan and coordinate the implementation of national regional policy in their areas.

2.2. Examples from the Visegrad Four: Similarities or Differences?

To continue our overview, we highlight some important findings on deconcentrated bodies in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The Czech Republic is a parliamentary republic and a unitary state. There are 13 higher administrative units, essentially districts (*kraj*), between the municipal and central levels, with the capital holding a separate status.⁵ At the sub-national level, state and municipal administrations are not sharply separated and are monistic in organisational terms (Sláma & Zavrel, 2018, p. 7). This approach is based on the rejection of the separation of state administration and local self-governments, i.e., it implements an integrated instead of a dualistic model, and together represents an elected

⁴ See the State Administration Structure Law of Latvia: <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/63545-valsts-parvaldes-iekartas-likums>

⁵ Districts are essentially regions, corresponding to NUTS level 3 territorial units in the NUTS classification system. The capital has a special dual status as both a region and a city.

representative body, the so-called “self-governmental council”, the district magistrate (*hejtman*), and the subordinate administrative unit, the district office (*úřad*). Among the local government bodies, the district office or its head is responsible for the performance of administrative tasks (delegated scope of competence).

At the municipal level, in addition to the body of representatives (headed by the mayor), which is the key body in local government, a secretary is appointed to carry out the delegated administrative tasks. The secretary is assisted in the exercise of their powers by an office. The municipalities with the most state administration powers are the 205 municipalities with “extended powers” (in Czech: *obce s rozšířenou působností*), which have jurisdiction over smaller, surrounding municipalities (e.g., issuing birth certificates, identity cards, driving licences). The second largest number of tasks are performed by the 388 so-called “authorised municipal authorities” (*obce s pověřeným obecním úřadem*) (e.g., building authority and certain environmental tasks), but there are also tasks performed by “ordinary” municipalities (*obce*) (e.g., population registration, water management) (OECD, 2023, p. 199).

Given that municipal and state administrative tasks are performed within the same organisation, they are subject to shared control. Legislation adopted by municipalities is examined by the Ministry of the Interior, while the Ministry of State Administration supervises the *kraj* regarding delegated state administrative matters, and central bodies and districts jointly supervise municipalities (Halász, 2011a, p. 713). Consequently, the Czech system has relatively few territorial state administration bodies (e.g., labour offices, cadastral offices, finance offices, education inspectorates), each with specific competences, and no general body responsible for the territorial representation of the government.

Moving on to the Slovak solution, it should be pointed out that although the modern Slovak administration has been strongly influenced by the Czech model (Halász, 2011b, pp. 761–762), it is far from being its mirror image. The country’s territory is divided administratively into the following levels: below the central level, there are 8 regions (*kraj*), under which 79 districts (*okresy*) have been created. The lowest level of administration features 2,890 municipalities (*mesto* and *obec*) (Statistical Yearbook of the Slovak Republic 2024). At the district level, there are only state administration bodies.

Deconcentrated bodies can be found at territorial level (NUTS 3), but the most important territorial level of government is the district level.

In Slovakia, several districts have been created in the two largest cities, Bratislava and Košice. This is important because the current number of territorial state administration bodies with general powers is 72, which means that the system is only partially adapted to the territorial division of the country, unlike in the other countries examined. The government's territorial bodies of general competence are the district offices (*Okresné úrady*), which were introduced in 2013 as part of a comprehensive reform. As a result of the reform, a number of previously separate, special-purpose deconcentrated bodies have been integrated into the district office organisation. Only the territorial, local bodies of a few central bodies were not affected by the restructuring (Police, Fire and Rescue Service, Directorate of Mining, Labour Inspectorate, Financial Directorate, Directorate of Monuments, State Trade Inspectorate, local bodies of the Veterinary and Food Office) (Nemec, Mericková, Svidronova, & Pisár, 2017, p. 202).

Some of the integrated bodies currently exercise autonomous functions and powers as departments of the district office. As a result, the district office is under shared management: the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for the organisational management, while the professional management of the various specialised sectoral matters is under the management of the relevant line minister. On the basis of shared management, the Ministry of the Interior, in agreement with the professional management bodies, determines the organisational and operational arrangements of the district offices. As a result of the organisational integration of recent years, the coordination activity of the district office has also been transformed, its main function being not to provide this but to ensure the unified administration of public administration through integrated customer services (Klierová & Kútik, 2017). Consequently, the district office performs a wide range of official tasks (e.g., trade licensing, documents, environmental and nature protection, animal protection, traffic, land registry) (Samalík, Horváth, & Cívik, 2024, p. 581).

The district offices can be divided into three categories, based on the scope of tasks and powers they have in their jurisdiction. Each district office has responsibilities and competences in the fields of civil protection, environmental protection, and land administration. In comparison, the priority district offices (42 in number) have a wider range of tasks at district level. The most extensive functions and powers are exercised by the third type of district offices, which have jurisdiction over the whole region (Samalík & Horváth, 2022, p. 134.). The head of this type of district office has a different status, and in fact has the general powers of a territorial

representative of the Slovak State. In connection with the foregoing, it is also necessary to point out that in Slovakia the supervision of the legality of local self-government is not linked to the executive power, but to the prosecutor's office (Fazekasné, 2019, pp. 90–91).

2.3. Examples from the South-East of Europe: Prefects and Governors

We conclude our overview with a discussion of the territorial sub-systems of the Romanian and Bulgarian administrations. Romania is a unitary republic. The country's public administration bears strong similarities with the Francophone organisational culture, but when looking at the details, we can speak of an autonomous sub-variant compared to the initial models (Dincă, 2012; Pollák, 2019, p. 285). The country is divided into 41 departments (*judets*), which are NUTS 3 level units. Within the departments there are 83 municipalities (*municipium*), 180 towns (*oras*), and 2,864 communes (*comuna*).

At the middle tier of Romanian administration, the current county (*jude-tul*) level, the administrative system is dual. Its public administration side is operationally integrated, with the prefect representing the Romanian government. The prefect, who serves as the political leader, is appointed by the Government for an indefinite term in the 41 counties and the Municipality of Bucharest. In 2021, the legislator strengthened the political nature of the prefect institution by allowing prefects to be members of a political party.⁶ Another recent change is that, while the law previously provided for the appointment of two deputy prefects, known as subprefects (*subprefectului*), from March 2025 it is possible to appoint a single general deputy.⁷

The prefect is responsible for exercising control over the legality of local and county councils. In this context, the prefect reviews the legality of administrative acts issued by the county council, the local council, and the mayor, and may challenge acts considered unlawful through administrative proceedings (Veilandics, 2022, pp. 105–106). The prefect also plays an important role (e.g., through guidelines) in ensuring the uniform

⁶ At the same time, the post of secretary was introduced, who serves as the senior professional manager of the Prefect's Office (Profituriu & Negoita, 2022, p. 110).

⁷ With the exception of the Bucharest municipality, a vice-prefect may be appointed. See more: Act on Romanian Administrative Code 57/2019. Art. 249. Par. 5.

performance of public administration tasks. Consequently, the prefect wields significant authority over deconcentrated state administration bodies. While these bodies retain organisational autonomy, they remain subject to the coordination and supervisory powers of the prefect regarding the public administration tasks they perform. The Constitution stipulates that “the prefect, as the territorial representative of the Government, shall direct the public services of the ministries and other central public administration bodies, which are deconcentrated in territorial public administration units” (The Constitution of Romania, Art. 123, Par. 2).

The scope of the so-called deconcentrated public services (*Serviciilor Publice Deconcentrate*) varies from county to county, with significant differences between them. For example, there are currently 10 deconcentrated public services in Covasna County, 21 in Brasov County, and 41 in Arad County (List of Deconcentrated Public Services, n.d.). The coordination activities of the prefect are supported by a college composed of *ex officio* members, namely the heads of the deconcentrated public services.⁸ The prefect also monitors the uniform implementation and enforcement of the Constitution and legislation within the county. In performing these duties, the prefect is assisted by the prefect’s office (*instituiția prefectului*), which is headed by the prefect. The head of the office is the secretary (*secretarul general al instituției prefectului*), who is directly subordinate to the prefect and serves as the professional head.

As we conclude this section, we turn to Bulgaria. The country is a parliamentary republic and a unitary state (Stamenkov, 2022). Although there are plans to transfer some powers from the central to lower levels (Decentralisation Strategy 2016–2025), Bulgaria remains one of the most centralised countries in Europe, where the role of the middle-level administrative units is solely to represent the will of the centre (Sipos, 2011, p. 852). The country also has six planning-statistical regions, so-called *raions*, which are not, however, state-administrative-unitary units.⁹ The deconcentrated state administrative bodies consist of 28 *oblasts* (28 “regions”, according to the English translation of the relevant Act),¹⁰ while the local

⁸ The vast majority of deconcentrated public services operate as local bodies of a centralised body (e.g., Public Health Directorate, Labour Inspectorate), but there are also institutions that are not public administrations.

⁹ Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works: Law on Regional Development. Retrieved from <https://www.mrrb.bg/bg/zakon-za-regionalnoto-razvitiie/>

¹⁰ According to the amendment to the Territorial Administration of the Republic of Bulgaria Act, Promulgated, State Gazette No. 63/14.07.1995 (amended and supple-

self-governments are essentially village communities, numbering 265 in the early 2020s.

In Bulgaria, the representatives of the state administration at the territorial level are the territorial organisations of the ministries (e.g., Regional Directorates of Forestry) and the county governors (Dimitrova, 2021). According to the Bulgarian Constitution, the duties of the governors include the following key elements: they ensure the implementation of state policy, safeguard national interests, uphold law and public order, and exercise administrative control (Art. 143) over the legality of the acts issued by municipal councils.

The relevant Bulgarian Act on Administration (hereinafter: Act) emphasises that one of the local executive authorities is the institution of the regional governor.¹¹ According to Art. 29(1) of the Act, a governor shall implement state government at the local level and ensure alignment between national and local interests in the implementation of regional policy. In accordance with the provisions of the Bulgarian Constitution described above, and elaborating on them, Arts. 31 and 32 of the Act stipulate that Bulgarian governors coordinate the operations of the executive authorities and the administrations within the region, as well as the interaction of the said authorities and administrations with local authorities.

Governors ensure observance of the law within their administrative regions and exercise administrative control over compliance with administrative acts. In addition, they liaise with local units of the central administration of the executive branch within the region and supervise the implementation of the acts and actions by the heads of these units. According to Art. 32(1), regional governors are empowered to issue orders, any of which may be appealed before the competent Administrative Court. Together, these provisions clearly illustrate the main objectives and framework of the Bulgarian governorate institution.

mented several times, of which the following is mentioned in this study: State Gazette No. 154/28.12.1998).

¹¹ See more: <https://www.me.government.bg/en/library/administration-act-382-c25-m1515-1.html>

3. Some Common and Distinct Features of Territorial State Administration in the 2020s in the Countries Studied – Initial Reflections

The states presented above allow several conclusions to be drawn. The EU countries undergoing democratic transformation exhibit both similarities and differences in their structures and administrations, with the latter considered particularly significant. To support this view, we outline some of these similarities and differences below, using them as a starting point for further research. Our key findings are also summarised in a table at the end of this section.

It can be noted that all the states are unitary, but the system for performing deconcentrated administrative tasks is still developing. In some of the countries examined (excluding the Baltic States), a general state administration body at the territorial level still exists and functions, alongside sectoral deconcentrated bodies responsible for representing the government territorially and overseeing the legality of local self-government (Slovakia, as noted earlier, has transferred this power to the prosecutor's office). The former has been shaped by centralisation and the need to increase the efficiency of state-building after the regime changes, the latter by the importance of protecting local self-government, newly institutionalised as a result of democratic transformation. It should be emphasised that the territorial body of general competence, if present, always has a coordinating role in the country, even though some deconcentrated bodies remain outside the territorial government office structure (as indicated previously, this is true even for the Romanian territorial government offices, which have a high absorption capacity).

Our findings lead us to conclude that the public and territorial administration of the states under study are at least as diverse as the similarities identified so far. While there is no doubt that the post-socialist states responded to similar historical circumstances in similar ways, each of them also accounted for specific national considerations. These, combined with the adaptation of various foreign elements during regime changes, have given their current administrations a distinctive character. This is evident in the differing pace of reforms in the Baltic States and the divergent development trajectories of the Czech and Slovak territorial administrations. Among the differences, it is also worth noting that, although the middle level of public administration in most of the states studied consists of a single tier, it has not remained static in recent decades. The process has not followed a uniform trajectory, as there are some transition states

where the number of middle levels has declined over time (e.g., the Baltic States), whereas in others it has increased (e.g., Romania).

We consider it particularly important to note that, regarding the regulation of territorial representation of the government, similar “anomalies” can be observed as in other areas. At one end of the spectrum are those states where there is no such body, as in the case of Latvia. At the other end are the countries undergoing democratic transformation, where such a body exists but its powers are limited and specific (e.g., the Czech Republic, where it was established solely to monitor the legality of local government). Slovakia represents a different approach, where multiple institutions are designated as the government’s priority territorial bodies. Our main findings are summarised in the table below.

Table 1: *Summary of the main findings from the countries examined*

Regional group	Country	Area (km ²)	Deconcentrated state administration	Special features / notes
Baltic States	<i>Estonia</i>	45,227	Sectoral deconcentrated agencies; no general representative body of the government	Centralised supervision; municipal councils exercise delegated administrative tasks
	<i>Latvia</i>	64,589		Recent municipal consolidations; sectoral tasks only
	<i>Lithuania</i>	65,300		Limited integration; central ministries retain most powers
Visegrad Group	<i>Czech Republic</i>	78,866	Municipal offices with delegated administrative tasks; sectoral deconcentrated offices	Integrated model; limited territorial state representation
	<i>Slovakia</i>	49,035	79 District offices, 72 with general competence; represent the state; sectoral deconcentrated offices	District offices have wide responsibilities and also provide one-stop customer service
South-East Europe	<i>Romania</i>	238,397	42 Prefects (county level) with general competence; sectoral deconcentrated offices	Prefects coordinate deconcentrated services, represent the central government, oversee legality
	<i>Bulgaria</i>	110,993	Governors of the 28 regions; territorial directorates of ministries	Centralised system; governors ensure implementation of state policy and administrative control

Source: Authors.

4. Possible Directions for Development

In recent decades, many new tasks have undoubtedly emerged in the states under study, the management of which has led to the creation of several related administrative institutions (Jreisat, 2011, p. 47). Under the pressure of globalisation and regional integration, the number of institutionalised relations between nation-states has multiplied, ultimately resulting in the blurring of previously sharp boundaries, the adoption of good and transferable solutions and practices, the convergence of large administrative systems, and an increase in their similarities. However, in our view, this process has not represented a breakthrough and appears to be increasingly challenged in many areas. Even when the main trends are considered, sub-central or territorial state administration in the Member States remains highly diverse, as it is shaped by each country according to its specific needs and requirements. In examining deconcentrated state administration in the countries presented, we have come to the conclusion that there is no single solution or universally accepted model. Although there are undoubtedly similarities between the administrations, each of the countries studied has its own national administrative system – a distinct variation on a common theme – that differs from the others.

Even in countries that are geographically close and share similar socio-economic characteristics, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this holds true. This raises the question of whether any international trends in territorial state administration can be identified and, if so, what changes might be expected. In our view, the question can only be addressed successfully when considered in context. The phenomenon of public administration is closely linked to the phenomenon of the state. Until the 1980s, the middle level of public administration was characterised by a relative stability and equilibrium. This situation changed with the wave of decentralisation (devolution) in the 1980s, which resulted in a wide range of tasks and competences being transferred to the middle level of civil administrations, primarily to local government units.

The reorganisation of powers has also affected deconcentrated state administration, as several countries established a new administrative level between the former central and intermediate levels. In some cases, the spatial structure was transformed by the progressive strengthening of the regional idea. In some countries, the entire former state administration apparatus was transferred to autonomous regional units, diminishing the importance of the former central level. Nevertheless, its function did not disappear; rather, it was transformed. This process was accompanied by

the influence of the New Public Management (NPM), (Osborne & Gaebler, 1994), which advocates efficiency and cost-cutting solutions drawn from the competitive sector, emphasises entrepreneurship, and represents the transfer of management techniques and business principles from the private to the public sector. NPM operates in symbiosis with and based on a neoliberal understanding of the state and economy (Drechsler, 2005, p. 95; Jreisat, 2011, p. 6), and also impacted administrative reforms at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. The trend proved so successful that, by the last two decades of the 20th century, several international organisations supported the adoption of its solutions, including those of the European countries undergoing transition.

Although NPM aimed to improve the administrative performance, its statist orientation resulted in a gradual erosion of the role of the state, sometimes with a self-contradictory character and role. Indeed, the neoliberal conception of the state, combined with under-regulated or unregulated market mechanisms, weakened the state and its executive apparatus. These processes collectively contributed to a decline in the powers of territorial government, with the extent of this decline varying from country to country. To address the social crises affecting much of Europe, we believe that most states (with some exceptions) will respond by strengthening the territorial level, including territorial state administration. Thus, our answer to the question posed above is affirmative: a direction of development can be identified, although the concrete solutions, as we have already seen, will differ across countries and be implemented in a nation-specific manner (Balázs, 2011, pp. 190–193; Hovanyecz, 2009, p. 9). In our view, the future evolution of territorial state administration will clearly result from a reassessment of the role of the state. It is necessary to determine what the new state and its administration should be in the post-NPM era, as the processes described above have left them misaligned with contemporary challenges (Józsa, 2011, p. 27). This choice will determine the functions that can be assumed and, consequently, the administrative organisation that will carry them out. Because this choice will be guided by individual criteria and priorities, the details will vary. The new challenges faced by today's states and their public administrations can no longer be adequately addressed by the instruments of the past (Verebélyi, 2005, p. 65).

In view of this, when considering the territorial sub-system of state administration, we recognise that this specialised administrative system must be part of the implementation apparatus of a strong, intelligent, and active

state – one that is also partnership-oriented and endowed with similar characteristics. The administration of such a state must possess the legal instruments and powers necessary to carry out its tasks. It must also be capable of acting and intervening when needed, as well as willing and able to cooperate. To achieve this, we argue that the classic instruments of public authority must be given new content and adapted to the contemporary requirements, and that a more integrated and efficient administrative apparatus is essential.

We emphasise that this does not primarily or exclusively imply organisational integration. Reducing the number of administrative bodies or merging them for reasons of cost efficiency may appear to be among the simplest and quickest answers to these questions. As the examples of the countries described above demonstrate, even in the face of crises, integration has not become the general trend in territorial administration. In addressing the challenges posed by the changing environment, where they exist, we believe that deconcentrated bodies will play a crucial role in the future by becoming increasingly involved in enhancing competitiveness and facilitating communication between different levels of government, thereby contributing to the concept of a new and more effective state.

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VARIATIONS ON THE SAME THEME? THE STRUCTURE OF TERRITORIAL STATE ADMINISTRATION IN SELECTED TRANSITION COUNTRIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Summary

This overview shows that public administration remains a core aspect of state sovereignty, with countries themselves determining the basic characteristics of their executive apparatus, including territorial state administration. However, there is still no single recipe or uniform variation on the same theme, the emphasis being rather on the need for the state to operate an administrative structure adequate to the tasks it has undertaken. This is clearly reflected in the territorial systems of the states presented as examples. The EU countries undergoing democratic transformation display both similarities and differences in their structures and administrations, though we consider the latter to be the most significant. In our view, the future evolution of territorial state administration will clearly result from a reassessment of the role of the state. The key question is what the new state and its administration should look like in the post-NPM era. In our scientific assessment, deconcentrated state administration bodies will continue to play a crucial role in addressing the challenges posed by the changing environment, where they exist.

Keywords: territorial state administration, deconcentrated state administration, selected former transition countries of the EU

VARIJACIJE NA ISTU TEMU? STRUKTURA DEKONCENTRIRANE DRŽAVNE UPRAVE U ODABRANIM TRANZICIJSKIM ZEMLJAMA EUROPSKE UNIJE

Sažetak

Pregled pokazuje da je javna uprava i dalje dio državnog suvereniteta te da države same određuju temeljne značajke svojeg izvršnog aparata, uključujući i dekoncentriranu državnu upravu. Ipak, još uvijek ne postoji jedinstven recept niti postoji jedna varijacija na istu temu; naglasak je, prije svega, na potrebi da država uspostavi upravnu strukturu koja je primjerena zadaćama koje je preuzela. To se jasno vidi u teritorijalnim sustavima država prikazanih u ovom radu. Države članice Europske unije koje su prošle demokratsku transformaciju imaju određene sličnosti u svojim strukturama i upravama, ali i razlike, pri čemu autori smatraju da su potonje važnije. Prema mišljenju autora, budući razvoj dekoncentrirane državne uprave očito će proizaći iz ponovnog preispitivanja uloge države. Pitanje je kako bi nova država i njezina uprava trebale izgledati u razdoblju nakon novog javnog menadžmenta. Prema mišljenju autora, dekoncentrirana tijela državne uprave imat će vrlo važnu ulogu u budućnosti u suočavanju s izazovima koje donosi promjenjivo okruženje, ondje gdje takva tijela postoje.

Ključne riječi: teritorijalna državna uprava, dekoncentrirana državna uprava, tranzicijske zemlje