

## **„SUCCESS IS A KIND OF FAITH IN DOING SOMETHING CORRECTLY”. CASES OF SUBJECTIVE SUCCESS IN PERIPHERAL AREAS OF HUNGARY**

**Réka HORECZKI, Péter PÓLA, Ildikó EGYED**

Institute for Regional Studies, Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Eötvös Loránd University,  
7621 Pécs, Papnövelde u. 22. Hungary

### ***ABSTRACT***

*In the life of each municipality, settlement leadership is always a key factor of success. The study demonstrates that stable loyalty and confidence in municipal leadership is felt not only toward the figure of the leader but also his entourage, i.e., the administrative staff and the representative body. The primary data collection in the framework of the research conducted by the Institute for Regional Studies enabled us to examine a specific layer of local elites in peripheral areas from various perspectives. The study reviews the composition, role, and functions of the representative body during the successive local government election cycles in Baranya County in Hungary, with a view to examining the subjective determinants of settlement success.*

Keywords: periphery, mayor, success, local government, Hungary

JEL codes: O18

### **INTRODUCTION: THE STABILITY OF THE HUNGARIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM AND ITS ELEMENTS**

The complexity of self-government arises from the fact that it is not simply a local entity, but a legally recognised framework for the exercise of autonomy. Local government is a voluntarily elected authority, regulating and managing local public affairs through its own responsibilities and in the interests of its residents, within the limits of the law (Zongor, 2021). Both the 1990 and the 2011 Local Government Acts (*Act LXV of 1990 on Local Governments* (Ötv); *Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on the Local Governments of Hungary* (Mötv)) emphasise that “the member of the local community is also the subject of local government”. Thus, local government extends to all individuals who work together to promote the interests of a municipality and a particular territorial unit or minority group or community. In addition, the definition of local government includes the budgetary institutions run by a municipality. In Hungary, the newly emerging system of local government post-1990 was facing significant challenges. Safeguarding the principles of municipal autonomy, freedom and local democracy were the main priorities during the creation and development of the system. With the adoption of the 1990 Local Government Act, the tasks of local governments were defined, their economic foundations were established and a resource-based approach to financing was introduced. A key aspect of the

interpretation of the concept is the status of local government as a legal entity. Pursuant to the 2011 and 1990 Acts, the mayor is responsible for the body of representatives. At the same time, the office of representative has facilitated participation for a wide range of people in local public affairs and the legal representation of local communities. However, municipalities in different geographical areas of the country have heterogenous opportunities and perspectives. The various locations can confer them different responsibilities and competencies. The Local Government Act stipulates that “local government shall act autonomously in matters of local interest within its functions and powers. ... They are connected with the local exercise of local public authority of the municipal type and the local creation of the organisational, personal and material conditions for this”. It is the common aspiration of all local authorities to manage their own affairs in their own right; to establish an acceptable division of labour between central and local bodies; to prepare citizens for participation in public affairs and to introduce and apply comprehensive, uniform regulations. The local government decides for itself, within its means, which tasks it can and is able to perform. It relies heavily on the mayor, his network of contacts and the members of the council. Local government functions are performed by the body of representatives and its organs: the mayor, the committees of the body of representatives, the office of the body of representatives.

The 2011 Local Government Act has strengthened the role of the mayor, which has been further enhanced by the 2020 epidemic crisis. Mayors have been granted extra powers of autonomous decision making. The mayor is the chairman of the body of representatives as well as a representative. Local authorities have a wide range of responsibilities, as the public affairs managed at the local level are adapted to the geographical situation of a given municipality and its functions in the hierarchy of municipalities (*Csurgó & Megyesi*, 2016). Hence, the geographical location of a municipality is a key factor to reckon with. The fragmented settlement structure (*Table 1*) of the South Transdanubian region amplifies territorial and spatial disparities, making them particularly visible in relation to local government associations and regional organisations.

**Table 1: Number of settlements and local governments in Baranya county by election cycle**

	Settlement	County government	City with county rights	Town	'Nagyközség' Large municipality	'Község' Municipality
<b>1990</b>	297	1	1	4	10	282
<b>1994</b>	302	1	1	5	9	287
<b>1998</b>	301	1	1	9	6	285
<b>2002</b>	301	1	1	11	4	285
<b>2006</b>	301	1	1	11	5	284
<b>2010</b>	301	1	1	13	3	284
<b>2014</b>	301	1	1	13	3	284
<b>2019</b>	301	1	1	13	3	284
<b>2024</b>	301	1	1	13	3	284

Source: *HCSO* (2024) TEIR database

The region is inhabited by approximately 10% of the country's population, whereas nearly 20% of the municipalities are located in this county. This fragmented settlement structure is a historical legacy, having been a permanent feature of the region since Joseph II according to the 1784 census. In addition to the small village structure, the relative and absolute isolation of municipalities, the demographic characteristics and underdeveloped peripheral transport infrastructure disadvantage local authorities and are among the region's major shortcomings and pitfalls. To counter the effects of the unfavourable settlement structure, *Bujdosó* (2008) proposes a reform of the local government system, including a reduction of the size of representative bodies, the modernisation of the district administration and the mandatory participation in microregional structures for small settlements with fewer than 1000 inhabitants. The planned extension of the system of local authority associations was expected to facilitate the rationalisation of tasks and a reduction of the resource gap. There are several good examples for this in neighbouring countries, see *Klaric* (2021), *Kaźmierczak & Živanović* (2023) and *Tara* (2024). In a similar vein, *László* (1998) sees micro-regional cooperations as essential for reforming the system of local government. Co-operation is conceived based on the principles of economies of scale and efficiency, which are influenced, amongst others, by the size and composition of the population, the proportion of age groups within the population, the number of institutions and the number of people supplied. The proper management of the Council is essential for maintaining the functioning of the municipality as a whole. The body of representatives and its organs, together with the mayor, are responsible for the performance of its duties and decision-making. In *Fábián's* (2016) view, the main task of the body is to represent the local population, but as the main decision-making body, it cannot replace the community. The members of the body of representatives are directly elected to their positions, according to the requirements of democratic legitimacy (*Varga*, 2023).

## **THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF MUNICIPAL LEADERS ON THE SUCCESS OF BARANYA COUNTY MUNICIPALITIES**

Baranya County is part of a peripheral region - the southernmost county of Hungary, which has experienced steady decline for the past fifteen years. Despite the existence of individual success stories and competitive settlements in the region, the vast majority of the 301 settlements in the county belong to the less successful group (*MBH*, 2024; *Oláh et al.*, 2020; *Pámer et al.*, 2023; *Infostart*, 2021). The territorial structure of the county mirrors that of the country. Pécs, the central settlement of the region, shows the specific traits of the capital both in terms of its population and its role as a transport hub, cultural and industrial centre. Despite all this, Pécs and the rest of the municipalities of the county are far from being dynamic centres (*Pálné Kovács*, 2021). In Baranya County, small settlements are undergoing a process of social erosion (*Ragadics*, 2016), with a significant loss of population and a weakening of their local power base. The living standards of the majority of the population are below the national average. The tendency of intra-county migration towards central municipalities is increasingly visible in relation to small towns. The power of ageing and shrinking small towns is declining, and their capacity of interest representation is considerably eroded (*Horeczki & Póla*, 2023).

The delimitation of districts was problematic due to the small village structure of Baranya County; new aspects had to be considered during their elaboration. More districts were created in the county than originally planned; and the number of inhabitants was to be divided proportionally within the region. The *Table 2* illustrates the large number of settlements in the districts of Pécs, Siklós and Szigetvár.

**Table 2: Number of Baranya County’s settlements per district**

District	Number of settlements		Administrative centres	Percentage of municipalities surveyed* (%)	Population density, persons/km2	Population at the end of the year, persons 2019
	Sum	Town				
Bólyi district	16	1	3	5	54,8	11.322
Komlói district	20	1	4	11	123,2	32.761
Mohácsi district	26	1	7	12	59,6	33.045
Pécsi district	40	2	12	18	304,5	175.235
Pécsváradi district	17	1	4	6	47,4	11.327
Hegyháti district	25	2	4	8	35,2	11.617
Sellyei district	38	1	6	6	28,7	13.123
Siklósi district	53	3	9	17	55,5	34.364
Szentlőrinci district	21	1	3	9	53,3	13.936
Szigetvári district	45	1	7	9	38,8	23.974
Total	301	14	53	22%	80,1	360.704

Source: Based on *HCSO* (2024)

The results of the data collection reveal that the trust surrounding the person of the mayor can be transferred to employees of the mayor’s office and the representative body as well. Hence, the role of the institution, i.e. the mayor’s office, which is not limited to that of an administrative authority is to provide a sense of security and a kind of subjective well-being, making it an important aspect of success: in the questionnaire survey, when asked „What do you consider to be a success in the life of the municipality?”, more than half of the respondents indicated the stability of the local government and its employees as one of the elements of success. Primary data collection was carried out in the autumn of 2020 and 2021 (the monitoring of the subjective determinants of settlement success followed in the spring of 2022 and 2023). The aim of the questionnaire survey was to determine the subjective characteristics of the development trajectories of selected municipalities, as defined by the local elite, and to analyse the positive and negative aspects of peripherality. Some municipalities were identified as centres, while most municipalities within the region were identified as peripheral settlements. The municipalities identified as centres were defined in administrative terms as county seat, district seat, other town, large municipality (or “nagyközség” in Hungarian) and the seat of common municipal offices in the county. In addition, the municipalities with an administrative central function in the last 50 years were identified as former and potential centres. Our secondary aim was to demonstrate that municipalities with central functions can function as de facto centres with effective functions in the longer term. The delimitation criteria for the sample were the spatially even classification of administrative units according to their geographical distribution and the

representation of the county at the level of districts. Our secondary delimitation criterion is the proportional distribution of the size of the municipalities, corrected for the population size of each district and the over-representation of the county seat. In combining the delimitation criteria, we met the criterion for the last 5 categories of the size of settlement category by selecting the county seat, the district centres and the cities and towns. For the 10 districts, selecting the former central municipalities meant that since we effectively covered the category of settlements between 1000 and 2000 inhabitants, we had to distribute the 110 municipalities of the first four categories evenly, taking into account the size and population of the districts in these categories. A third, complementary selection criterion was the peripheral nature of the settlements. Within the county, we considered only the geographical, infrastructural and socio-economic peripheries. In order to define peripheries, we first identified the rail and road axes in the county. Fourteen municipalities were identified as railway axes. We identified 28 settlements as road axe settlements and created two categories for classifying road settlements: 10 settlements along single-digit main roads and 18 settlements along double-digit main roads.

The tertiary aspect was supplemented by additional peripheral factors, the role of administrative border changes in the development trajectories of the municipalities changing counties (46 municipalities); the role of borders in the life of municipalities: 14 municipalities are located on the national border, 24 municipalities on the county border. The following were included in our sample as extreme peripheries: the northernmost settlement in the county: Mekényes, the southernmost settlement: Kásád, the westernmost: Zadar and the easternmost: Homorúd. In addition, we analysed the 105 settlements from the county from the perspective of their trajectory towards the periphery. In the survey by questionnaire, the so-called snowball method was used to reach out to members of the local elite, i.e., we contacted a person with a public role in the municipality who recommended a person with an important position in the municipality and/or the adjacent municipalities (*Table 3*). During the definition of the sample, we identified the number of people included in our interview in each settlement category, i.e., 1 to 3 individuals in villages with less than 500 inhabitants, 3 to 4 people in villages with less than 1000 inhabitants and 5 to 8 people in small towns with above 5000 inhabitants. Discrepancies were found in some cases due to the low response rate. Almost a third of respondents failed to complete the questionnaire or did not respond to the majority of the questions.

**Table 3: The public role of individuals included in the questionnaire (based on personal interviews)**

Linked to the mayor's office	56
Linked to a civil society organisation	58
Linked to an institution operating in the settlement	17
Linked to an ecclesiastic organisation	3
Multiple roles	51
No self-confessed role	36
Did not respond	12
Total	233

The overrepresentation of the Pécs district (see *Table 2*) follows from the good accessibility of a large number of local elites located in the county seat. The districts of Szigetvár and Szentlőrinc were slightly underrepresented due to difficulties in contacting some subjects and the incomplete questionnaires. The 67 municipalities covered by the sample included the county seat, 13 towns, 3 large municipalities and 50 additional municipalities. A total of 233 persons were contacted, all of whom held a public role in the municipality, mostly related to the local government. The vast majority of respondents (60%) were male and over 50 years old (54%). An assessment of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents showed that the number of female mayors in small municipalities in Baranya exceeds the national average (48 of the respondents).

## **MEMBERS OF THE BODY OF REPRESENTATIVES AS ESSENTIAL UNITS OF THE LOCAL ELITE IN THE MUNICIPALITIES**

When examining the role of local elites, we encountered a range of different views. Researchers' definition of elites is both characterised with “inherent uncertainty” (*Pareto*, 1966) and “total determination” (*Lengyel*, 2006). The concept of “elite” is associated with the best, the biggest, the people with the most power. In terms of the conceptualisations of local elites, we adhere to the descriptive approach (*Dogan & Higley*, 1998; *Higley & Lengyel*, 2000; *Kolosi & Róna-Tas*, 1992). Elites belong to the upper third layer of the political, economic and social hierarchy; they are individuals involved regularly and over a longer period of time in decision-making processes. Such individuals are usually opinion leaders, capable of influencing the local population by virtue of their role in the social structure or network. Thus, the local elite is the stratum of society which has the human and/or material capital to hold positions through capital elements. The local elite is not a homogeneous entity within the country or even within a region or municipality (*Szilágyi*, 2012). The influence of the local elite does not necessarily lie in personal skills or other capabilities. This is particularly characteristic of the small villages of Baranya, where the figure of the mayor and the representative body are more influential factors than the level of education or social class.

Factors used to classify political elites (*Bibó*, 1986; *Lengyel*, 2006; *Kristóf*, 2019) are effectiveness, performance, good governance, predictability, good conceptualisation, and social sense. Their tasks are similar to those responsible for local public affairs: coordination of local political life, administration, organisation and provision of public services, and involvement in local economic development (*Pálné Kovács*, 2017 and 2023). The fifth field of activity allows some elements of the political elite to be linked to the activities and the daily life of municipalities as elements of the economic elite. The early studies of elite research in Hungary (*Püski*, 2000; *Gergely*, 1992; *Szakály*, 1987) were mainly limited to the study of economic elites, as well as military and ecclesiastical elites in historiography. The focus increasingly shifted towards the study of political elites over the past decade (*Kovách*, 2011). In this research, we used the reputational technique (*Pálné Kovács*, 1990) to identify the local political elite, not only in terms of their actual influence, but also formal authority. Using a questionnaire

survey, we identified the “influential actors”<sup>1</sup> in each municipality over the past 30 years. We received 498 valid responses to the question. On average, each respondent mentioned at least two persons with a decision-making position or formal influence in the municipality. The same names were mentioned on multiple occasions in the region; 82 persons were named at least twice and 23 at least three times (*Table 4*). The most frequently mentioned names were those of the mayor of the two small towns with the largest population. They were followed by the mayors of the most tourist-friendly municipalities, with 7-7 mentions each. In one-tenth of the questionnaires, no specific names were mentioned, only the highly visible position of a person who were either an elected MP, a former chairman of a given party, a local entrepreneur, a hospital director, a parish priest, a school director, etc.

Among the names featuring in the responses, we were able to distinguish five major groups (*Table 5*). The first was comprised of people linked to the municipality: mayor, representative; the second category covered the head of a specific institution (state or municipal: e.g. hospital, kindergarten, community centre, etc.), the third category included economic actors: company managers, entrepreneurs or other economic operators; the fourth category was defined by occupation: intellectuals who do not hold a managerial position; the last category included persons with an active life and who are respected members of the community: e.g. village caretaker, medical assistant, nurse, postman, etc. The characteristics of individuals identified as representatives of the first category are presented in the remainder of the analysis.

**Table 4: Number of powerful people by frequency of occurrence**

Question 14	The same person is mentioned at least twice		The same person is mentioned at least three times	
	Settlements	Persons	Settlements	Persons
Below 1000 inhabitants	10	23	4	4
Above 1000 inhabitants	22	59	12	19
Total	32	82	16	23

**Table 5: Categories of people considered influential**

	Below 1000 inhabitants	Above 1000 inhabitants	Total
Linked to local government	23.3%	76.7%	202
Head of institution	24.8%	75.2%	101
Economic actor	23.6%	76.4%	106
Intellectual	25.6%	74.4%	43
Other	39.4%	60.6%	33

<sup>1</sup> Question 14 of the questionnaire: in your opinion, who are the most influential people in the municipality at the moment, and what positions do they hold in the municipality? If you can, please mention more than one person. If you can tell us if you know the names of up to 6 people in the municipality and the positions they hold, please tell us if you know the names of the most important people in the municipality and the positions they hold. In addition, we asked whether the person who has played a strong role in the municipality has lived in the municipality in the last 30 years.

Among the influential/powerful people named as representatives, 100% live or have lived in the municipality where the survey was conducted. In the case of these individuals, we also asked how the respondent viewed their influence in the municipality.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the categories offered, 72 respondents also used the open text response option. Contrary to our expectations, the role of party relations was downplayed. The majority of small-town mayors run and win elections as independent candidates, and our impression was that this was over-represented - at this level - based on the questionnaire data. Personal skills and moral factors played a decisive role. Based on the proportion of responses, good local connections and trustworthiness were the most influential factors in the case of those affiliated to the local government. In some cases, trust and confidence in the municipal administration appeared to be unstable (based on a similar survey by questionnaire conducted in 2016-17 among leaders of small villages with less than 1000 inhabitants in Baranya County<sup>3</sup>). According to the mayors of Baranya County, the trust received from their local constituents is a key factor of the development of the municipality, in the absence of strong and stable trust in municipal leaders, the municipality cannot build a properly functioning economic and business environment. And in the absence of an adequate business environment, companies capable of absorbing the local workforce will not be attracted to the settlement. With respect to the influence and reliability of municipal leaders – who are themselves members of the representative body – a key analytical aspect was the evolution of the number of mayoral candidates in the respective municipalities. In 10% of the Baranya County municipalities with less than 1000 inhabitants, 1 candidate ran for mayor between 2004 and 2019. A general observation is the remarkable stability of the body of representatives in relation to the family members of the body of representatives, former or future mayors. In the case of 31 villages in the county, no contest took place in the elections. On the other hand, there were 28 villages where four or more mayoral candidates ran during each election. Four villages had 6-6 candidates in the past two elections, and one village ran 7 candidates for the post. One possible explanation for the large number of candidates is the retirement of the mayor (in many cases due to long-term illness or death), resulting in a loss of confidence among members of the community. This phenomenon is partly highlighted by the dissertation of Ragadics (2016), focusing on small villages in Ormánság (a special geographical area of Baranya country). Skills and hard work were identified as secondary factors of success of particular importance. The survey of municipal leaders also included data on educational attainment. 6% of the managers surveyed did not have secondary education; 16% had secondary education but no school leaving certificate (apprenticeship, vocational training). Among the managers without a school leaving certificate, one had higher education qualification and participated in postgraduate training, which also pointed to the diligence of the person. The vast majority of mayors, deputy mayors and notaries interviewed completed postgraduate training. They mentioned training programmes related to legal, economic and digital skills. 33% of those surveyed had a school leaving certificate and 40% of this group also had higher education

---

<sup>2</sup> Question 16 of the questionnaire: regarding the persons mentioned above, to what extent do the following factors explain their influence/power? In addition to eight pre-defined response options, respondents were offered other options.

<sup>3</sup> Read more about the research and methodology: Bodor et al., 2019.

qualification. 35.9% of respondents had tertiary education, 20% of them attended multiple courses, holding several degrees; one of them also had an academic degree. The officers with higher qualification according to the questionnaire have a greater insight and a more diversified confidence rating compared to their less qualified counterparts. On the other hand, the size of the network of relationships determined by qualifications may also be influenced by age, entrepreneurial attitudes and party preferences. This was also confirmed by the results of the 2021 survey. The research broadened the scope of the respondents, with the survey of local elites indicating that 94% of elites have at least a high school diploma, and amongst them, 76.8% have a university degree. This result corroborates the idea that the elite, whether rural or urban, are constituted by the most outstanding members of society.

The role of the local level and its increasingly valorised function is reflected in the weakening role of the national level and the weakness of party preferences. Respondents living in smaller villages (mainly those living in settlements with less than 200 inhabitants) only rated the role of the local level positively, with neither the county nor the national level emerging on their mental maps when asked about local economic development, local development and influential people.

In the other category, the influence of the members of the body of representatives (*Table 6*) was most often described in terms of honesty and integrity, reliability, dedication and commitment (in line with the analysis of *Bódi & Bóhm*, 2000). This description echoes the definition of a “democratic, professional” elite. Responses associating honesty and integrity also referred to the age of the local elite. Those named and described using such words were predominantly in the 55+ age group. 63.7% of our respondents were over 50 and a further 29.2% were over 40 years of age. This type of overview of local elites is also thought-provoking, as in many other areas, in local government and in representative bodies, generational change has become a priority issue. In some cases, we find that this is seamless, for instance, in the two municipalities in Baranya where the mayor is 30 years old and receives all possible help from the outgoing, retiring mayor. This type of local elite is the building block of local society, striving for internal cohesion and cooperation. Exploring the parallels between the resource absorption capacity of municipalities and population retention could be a useful area of investigation beyond the scope of this study.

**Table 6: Percentage of factors explaining the influence of employees in the local government sector**

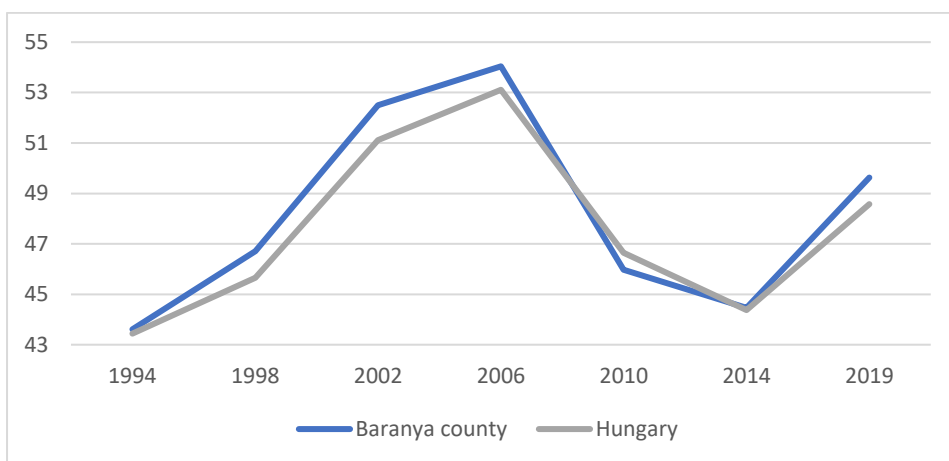
Answers for question 16	Not explained (%)	Slightly explained (%)	Significantly explained (%)
A good local network	0.5	5.6	94.0
Reliability	1.4	8.1	90.5
Skills	0.5	12.7	86.8
Diligence	1.4	13.3	85.3
A good network of contacts	9.7	25.1	65.2
Good contacts at national level	22.9	36.1	41.0
Position held elsewhere	36.3	34.3	29.4
Influential parties behind them	64.7	18.8	16.4

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: REPRESENTATION OF PARTICIPATION IN BARANYA COUNTY

The number of municipalities in Baranya County has remained stable since the 1998 elections. There are shifts, however, at different levels of the hierarchy of municipalities. Currently, there are 13 towns and 3 large municipalities in the county, excluding the cities with county rights (see *Table 1*). The number of municipalities has been drastically reduced since the 2010 elections. This has further undermined the capacity of small municipalities to assert their interests. Electoral turnout in the county has exceeded the national average in all of the years under review, except in the cities, where it has reflected the national average. In 2019, the electoral turnout in Baranya (49.6%) was the third highest in the Transdanubian region, with only Vas (55.4%) and Somogy (50.5%) counties having superior outcomes.

In terms of turnout, the 2006 municipal election had the highest turnout in recent election cycles, both countywide and nationally. The county has an asymmetric distribution of municipal turnout (*Figure 1*). The number of municipalities with turnout rates below 40% is very low (16); and there is a relatively high number (73) of municipalities with outstanding turnout rates above 75%. The county outperforms the national average with these rates, and the national participation rates (outstandingly low-high) can be considered balanced (11.1-11.6%).

**Figure 1. Change in turnout rate in Baranya County\*, % (1994-2019)**



Source: Based on *Nemzeti Választási Iroda* (n.d.)

In 2019, the participation rate was 62.4% in settlements with less than 1,000 inhabitants and 52% in settlements with between 1,000 and 2,000 inhabitants, which was 2.2% and 2.8% superior to the national average. The issue of re-election is a decisive factor for both the body of representatives and the mayor. The number of re-elected and cyclically re-elected mayors in the county is particularly high. The analyses carried out so far tend to focus on the partisan orientation of the body of representatives in the county capitals, presumably due to the difficulty of accessing

information and its time-consuming nature, while no such analyses have been carried out for smaller towns or smaller municipalities. The municipal office showed outstanding activity. There was a significant over-subscription of candidates for MPs, with more than 30,000 candidates running in 2019. Among cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, three cities in the county had 11 seats each.

The over-registration of candidates for the single-member constituency elections, including compensatory list candidates, was 173 in Baranya County and 6,639 nationally. On this basis, the average oversubscription was three and a half times higher per constituency and per seat obtained. This figure shows a decrease compared to previous elections, with 6-7 times higher electoral turnout observed before 2014.

Competition in the county was also visible among the candidates for the Council of Representatives. At least two candidates ran in 19% of the municipalities, while the remaining 81% had 3-5 candidates in municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants. Despite the over-subscription generated by the distribution of votes, the majority (67%) of elected and re-elected representatives in each municipality come from the same family. A slightly higher proportion of candidates ran in the larger municipalities. In the small town category, the 3.6-fold oversubscription in Baranya was unique in the country, but there was also an exceptionally high proportion of candidates in villages, with Alsószentmárton's 7.7-fold oversubscription being the second highest in the country after Kunágota (8.2) in Békés county. In these settlements with a large number of candidates, it was easier to obtain seats in the representative body with low support, in several places therefore some candidates won seats with less than 20% of votes. At the other extreme – a minimum number of candidates – we have also found several examples: in 158 municipalities, including 21 in Baranya, the number of candidates was equivalent to that of seats, the election of representatives in these places was thus practically uncontested.

No reliable data was available on the measurement of trust in the board of representatives. The questionnaire survey did not include a specific question on this aspect. *Kullmann* (2009) introduced the concept of cumulative lack of trust in depressed areas, where municipal leaders are dissatisfied with the current government measures and the financial backing of catch-up programmes. A similar view is presented by *Bóhm* (1992), who defines depressed zones by examining the social and societal characteristics of each area. *Utasi* (2009) describing the weakening of social integration and the lack of confidence in small communities, identifies loss of confidence as one of the main causes of the crisis.

The analysis of the questionnaire and the interviews indicate that the county is full of municipalities that regard themselves as successful and perceive themselves as centres<sup>4</sup>. Based on the survey responses, we were able to identify a number of subjectively successful municipalities in the county. It is worth noting that a significant number of successful municipalities along subjective dimensions are located within the same micro-region, often being adjacent municipalities. It is also worth noting that only two questionees mentioned the county capital specifically. A comparison of the list of objective and subjective determinants of success (*Table 7*) has demonstrated that some

---

<sup>4</sup> In the questionnaire, we asked respondents 4) to define their settlement as a center or a periphery, and we also asked them 5) to explain why they considered it to be so. 7) To how much does the role of centre/periphery influence the perception of the municipality?

overlapping municipalities can be considered truly successful (both in terms of internal factors and statistical indicators) in this peripheral area.

**Table 7: Successful settlements based on subjective judgements and objective measures**

Statistics show they are successful		Subjectively successful	
1.	<i>Kozármisleny</i>	1.	<i>Bóly</i>
2.	Pécsvárad	2.	Villány
3.	<i>Bóly</i>	3.	<i>Kozármisleny</i>
4.	Nagykozár	4.	Mohács
5.	<i>Harkány</i>	5.	Alsómocsolád
6.	<i>Siklós</i>	6.	<i>Harkány</i>
7.	Pellérd	7.	Hosszúhetény
8.	Magyarszék	8.	<i>Siklós</i>
9.	<i>Mecseknádasd</i>	9.	Palkonya
10.	Bicsérd	10.	<i>Mecseknádasd</i>

Regarding the subjective perceptions of success, it is worth noting that relatively few municipalities can be considered successful according to the local respondents. Mohács, on the contrary, appears to be a successful municipality along objective dimensions as well. In addition, a further 13 municipalities were mentioned by the locals. It is not only the high number of mentions that confer Bóly the status of a successful municipality in the region. The best practices of this small town make it a role model for other towns as well, largely thanks to its coherent and conscious urban development and settlement management practices. When examining the factors of success, the composition of the representative bodies of the five most frequently mentioned municipalities was also studied in detail. The five municipalities included four small towns and one village, Alsómocsolád. Each municipality forms a jewel in the crown of this peripheral county, showing a degree of stability and permanence – hardly quantifiable statistically – that contribute to their success in the perception of the local and county population.

Even though Alsómocsolád was ranked fifth in the county in our survey of settlement success, this peripheral settlement of 300 inhabitants turned out to be the most successful among the villages. This result is interesting given the extreme peripherality of the village, situated at a distance of 45 km and an hour's drive from the county seat and 17 km from the nearest district seat, Dombóvár. The population of the village has been steadily declining, with a programme to attract young people to the village showing moderate success, making the age structure appear more favourable compared to similar settlements in the area. The village has a picturesque landscape, being situated on the northern slope of the Mecsek, in the vicinity of fish ponds, and despite not being qualified as a tourist destination, its tranquillity and well-ordered physiognomy are attractive for those who desire to visit the countryside, making it a popular destination for Dutch settlers as well (as indicated by the high number of second homes). This small, isolated village owes its success to its highly engaged, developmentalist mayor, currently in his ninth term in office, who is capable of involving and mobilising the civil population in development projects. It is worth

noting that over the past year, the general assembly was composed entirely of women. Another key factor of success is the strong, cohesive community that has managed to reach a consensus on key issues throughout decades. Naturally, the major prerequisite for success is the availability of an economic base, with luck being a non-negligible factor. Two major meat processing plants operate on the outskirts of the municipality.

The small town of Villány with a population of 2,000, lying in the southern part of Baranya, owes its national and European reputation to the famous Villány wine brand. Despite the fact that viticulture and wine tourism provide the economic base of the town, its population has declined by almost twenty percent over the past ten years. In spite of the good accessibility of the M6 and M60 motorways, the connecting road infrastructure requires major upgrading. The county capital is at a distance of 40km, and can be reached by rail as well, but its accessibility is poor compared to its touristic significance. The settlement is home to a significant German ethnic minority (over 20%). The distance from the district seat is 15km, conferring the town the status of micro-regional centre. The development of wineries gained growing momentum around the period of the regime change. During the preceding decades, large-scale, cooperative structures tended to dominate wine production, but by the turn of the millennium small family wineries had experienced a significant upsurge, and the visibility and popularity of the wine region was considerably enhanced by its well-managed wine-tour programme launched in the 1990s, as well as the emergence of foreign investors in Villány and the adjacent villages. Nowadays, a large number of wineries have outgrown their family frameworks as a result of substantial investments and public subsidies, making them major employers in the small town's labour market, both in the wine production and hospitality sectors. Villány also owes its success to its active and successful tendering activities as well as its political relations. Several renowned wineries are reported to maintain good relations not only with the region's MP, but also with ministers and the Prime Minister. In addition, it is common for several proprietors of wineries to obtain seats in the town assembly.

The small town of Bóly (population 3,700) in southern Baranya is located in an area with significant agricultural assets, within the Economic Development Zone of the South Transdanubian Region, the Pécs-Mohács Economic Development Centre which also belongs to the agglomeration of Pécs (*Terra Studio Kft.*, 2023). Thanks to its educational and social facilities, it fulfils the role of a de facto regional centre. The economy of Bóly, relying primarily on manufacturing industry, performs well compared to the surrounding settlements, not least due to the conscious economic development strategy implemented since the early 1990s, generating large scale industrial park and energy development projects. The municipality's international relations, as also reflected in foreign direct capital investments, are heavily German-oriented: German serfs were settled in the historical manorial centre under the reign of Maria Theresa, whose descendants still live in the municipality, hence the proportion of those with a German nationality makes up a quarter of the local population.

In general, Bóly is considered to be a successful municipality, with the figure of the mayor ranked as a major factor of success (an independent municipal leader with an engineering background, leading the town through five terms over 34 years and strongly supported by the local society), alongside conscious and highly effective

municipal management. In addition, the presence of industrial enterprises and the results of well-planned infrastructural and industrial development projects are also mentioned as major factors of success, alongside tendering activities, a good community and the diligence of the Swabians. Uncontestably, the building of the geothermal energy system, the conscious and consistent approaches to development have borne their fruits. In the case of Bóly, (as noted above), the mayor remained in office between 1990 and 2024. One member has served 7 terms and two have served 5 terms in the representative body. The composition of the body can be regarded as stable, showing an even gender balance (*Table 8*).

**Table 8: Percentage of continuity in the composition of the five most successful municipalities (along subjective dimensions), holding seats in the previous body (%)**

	2006/2002	2006/2010	2010/2014	2014/2019	2019/2024
Bóly	91	50	50	83	66
Kozármisleny	73	75	38	25	63
Mohács	41	88	55	82	45
Villány	44	17	67	33	50
Alsómocsolád	60	75	75	75	25

Source: Based on *Nemzeti Választási Iroda* (n.d.)

In Kozármisleny, a new mayor was elected after one serving two terms, serving four terms and replaced by a new mayor serving two terms without being re-elected. Only one member in the body has served five terms. In Mohács, a new mayor was elected after two terms post-regime change and became a strong leader with significant powers. He served as an outstanding lobbyist for the city until his premature death in 2019. The composition of the body is characterised by stability. The current mayor has served seven terms in the assembly. In Villány, the same mayor served six consecutive terms. The representative body has undergone considerable changes. It is typical for two or three renown local winemakers to be permanent members of the assembly. In Alsómocsolád, the mayor has remained in office since 1990. Whereas the small board has periodically replaced one or two of its members, most recently, only one member has kept their seat from the previous body. Interestingly, there are only female representatives in the village besides the male mayor (*Table 9*).

**Table 9: Gender composition of the five most successful municipal assemblies (along subjective dimensions) (male-female, %)**

men/women	2002	2006	2010	2014	2019	2024
Bóly	82-18	73-27	66-33	50-50	50-50	50-50
Kozármisleny	92-8	87-13	62-38	62-38	62-38	62-38
Mohács	66-33	65-35	63-27	55-45	64-36	55-45
Villány	89-11	78-22	100-0	100-0	83-17	83-17
Alsómocsolád	80-20	80-20	75-25	75-25	75-25	0-100

Source: Based on *Nemzeti Választási Iroda* (n.d.)

## CONCLUSIONS

The majority of the territory of Hungary is considered less developed according to NUTS2 regional classification, and most border regions are peripheral. Over the recent years, population loss has affected the majority of rural regions alongside the peripheralization of various micro-regions, and there has been a drastic decline in the population-retention capacity of settlements, endangering the cultural characteristics of the countryside. To reverse these processes, more emphasis should be placed on the valorisation of local assets, the exploration of survival strategies, and detecting potential sources of funding, whereas a more effective communication and cooperation between small settlements could significantly promote their catching-up processes. The role of an influential stakeholder with adequate innovative potential and undertaking developments that serve not only their own interests but also those of the community and more importantly, who enjoys the trust of local residents is also quintessential. All the above factors are necessary to ensure the survival of rural settlements. However, there is no universal methodology applicable to small settlements to guarantee their success; opportunities need to be tailored to local circumstances in every case. The results of our empirical survey indicate that in settlements regarded as peripheral from certain geographical or power aspects, the decisive factor of success (as well as population-retention) is the figure of the settlement leader.

The subjective factors of success are invariably connected to municipal leadership. Our analyses have shown that where confidence in a person has been stable since the change of regime, the composition of the supporting staff, i.e. the body of representatives, is also stable. Generally, the figure of the mayor is perceived by many as an essential component of settlement success (their activities, preparedness, organisation), while the role of their entourage is equally significant. Additional determining factors include social and human capital (local residents' skills, activity, their willingness and ability to cooperate) in a given municipality. If a municipality is located in a disadvantaged district or micro-region, with its population experiencing permanent and drastic decline, and public safety and living conditions deteriorating, this can undermine the stability of its representative body. In the case of such municipalities, stability is the prerogative of the more successful settlements. This particularly applies to small towns. Among the municipalities studied, stability has emerged as a basic pre-requisite for success, not only in relation to the figure of the mayor, but the local elite and members of the representative body and their supportive staff.

A key objective of our research was to identify the factors ensuring the success of settlements despite their peripheral status, as well as the conditions that allow them to mobilise their endogenous assets and local resources in favour of (at least partially) restoring their economic base. In recent times, the emphasis of development policy has shifted to complex - integrated - settlement development. The stock of settlements is characterised by high complexity; in many cases, direct intervention in the determining factors of success is not even possible. Instead, the resources determining organic growth and the direction of development should be mapped. Only then can the appropriate goals and instruments of implementation be elaborated.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Project no. 146411 has been implemented with the support provided by the Ministry of Culture and Innovation of Hungary from the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, financed under the K-23 funding scheme.

## REFERENCES

- Act LXV of 1990 on Local Governments* (Ötv)
- Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on the Local Governments of Hungary* (Mötv)
- Bibó, I. (1986). Elit és szociális érzék. In I. Vida, & E. Nagy (Eds.), *Válogatott tanulmányok 1935-1944.* (pp. 221–241). Magvető.
- Bodor, Á., Grünhut, Z., & Ragadics, T. (2019). Kapcsolati hálók és bizalom a vidéki Magyarországon. Baranyai kistérségi polgármesterek társadalmi tőkéje. *Tér és Társadalom*, 33(2), 20-40. <https://doi.org/10.17649/TET.33.2.3159>
- Bódi, F., & Bóhm, A. (Eds.) (2000). *Sikeres helyi társadalmak Magyarországon.* Agroinform.
- Bóhm, A. (1992). Depressziós zónák helyi társadalmi. *Esély*, 2, 58-71.
- Bujdosó, Z. (2008). Változások és lehetőségek az önkormányzati gazdálkodásban. In A. Buday-Sántha, J. Hegyi, & Sz. Rácz (Eds.). *Önkormányzatok gazdálkodása – Helyi fejlesztés.* (pp. 15-23). Pécsi Tudományegyetem Közgazdaságtudományi Kar.
- Csurgó, B., & Megyesi, B. (2016): The roles of small towns in local place making. *European Countryside*, 8(4), 427-443. <https://doi.org/10.1515/euco-2016-0029>
- Dogan, M. & Higley, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Elites, Crises and the Origins of Regimes.* Rowman & Littlefield.
- Fábián, A. (2016). A helyi önkormányzat (nem jogi) fogalmáról. *Új Magyar Közigazgatás*, 4, 35–40.
- Gergely, J. (1992). *A katolikus egyházi elit Magyarországon 1919–1944.* Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Szociológiai és Szociálpolitikai Intézet.
- Higley, J. & Lengyel, Gy. (Eds.). (2000). *Elites after State Socialism. Theories and Analysis.* Rowman & Littlefield.
- Horeczki, R., & Póla, P. (2023). Fejlesztési lehetőségek a periférián egy Baranya megyei felmérés tükrében. *Tér és Társadalom*, 37(3), 77-97. <https://doi.org/10.17649/TET.37.3.3503>
- HCSO (2024). *TEIR database.* Hungarian Statistical Office <http://oeny.hu/en/teir>
- Infostart (2021, November). *Elkészült a magyarországi települések 2021-es élhetőségi rangsora.* <https://infostart.hu/belfold/2021/11/30/elkeszult-a-magyarorszag-telepulesek-2021-es-elhetosegi-rangsora#>
- Kaźmierczak, M. & Živanović, F. (2023). Financial Autonomy of Local Self-Governments in the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Poland – Comparative Analysis. *Central European Academy Law Review*, 1(2), 107-128. <https://doi.org/10.62733/2023.2.107-128>
- Klaric, M. (2021). Local Government in Croatia—Continuity and Change. *US-China Law Review*, 18(3), 122-133. <https://doi.org/10.17265/1548-6605/2021.03.002>
- Kolosi, T. & Róna-Tas, Á. (1992). Utolsókból lesznek az elsőek? A rendszerváltás társadalmi hatásai Magyarországon. *Szociológiai Szemle*, 2(2), 3–26.
- Kovács, I. (Ed.) (2011). *Elíték a válság korában. Magyarországi elíték, kisebbségi magyar elíték.* Argumentum.
- Kristóf, L. (2019). Szelekció, Defenzivitás, Pozicionalitás. Az elit, mint nehezen elérhető társadalmi csoport kutatásának módszertani problémáiról. *Politikatudományi Szemle*, 28(2), 37-58. <https://doi.org/10.30718/POLTUD.HU.2019.2.37>

- Kullmann, Á. (2009). *A regionális gazdaságfejlesztés eszközrendszere és magyarországi alkalmazása*. [Doctoral dissertation, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Természettudományi Kar]. Microsoft Word - 1\_phd\_KA\_0902 - Kd\_11294.pdf
- László, M. (1998). *Az önkormányzatok gazdasági eszközrendszere*. [Doctoral dissertation, Janus Pannonius Tudományegyetem, Természettudományi Kar].
- Lengyel, Gy. (2006). Megjegyzések az „elit minőségéről”. In J. Molnár, (Ed.), *Elittek Kelet-Közép-Európában*. (pp. 5–13). Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- MBH. (2024). *Hol a legjobb élni 2024-ben?* [http://mbhindex.hu/sw/static/file/07\\_elhetoseg\\_elemzes\\_2024.pdf](http://mbhindex.hu/sw/static/file/07_elhetoseg_elemzes_2024.pdf)
- Nemzeti Választási Iroda. (n.d.). *Önkormányzati választások*. <https://www.valasztas.hu/onkormanyzati-valasztasok>
- Oláh, A., Vargha, A., Csengődi, M., Bagdi, B. & Diósi, T. (2020). *Magyarország Boldogságtérképe*. <http://boldogsagprogram.hu/magyarorszag-boldogsagterkepe-2020/>
- Pareto, V. (1966). *Sociological Writings*. Frederick A. Praeger.
- Pálné Kovács, I. (2017). Helyi önkormányzatok. In A. Jakab, & B. Fekete, (Eds.). *Internetes Jogtudományi Enciklopédia*. <https://ijoten.hu/szocikk/helyi-onkormanyzatok>
- Pálné Kovács, I. (1990). *Helyi politika*. Akadémiai kiadó.
- Pálné Kovács, I. (2021). A centralizáció és a perifériák fejlődési esélyei. *Tér és Társadalom*, 35(4), 215–240. <https://doi.org/10.17649/TET.35.4.3372>
- Pálné Kovács, I. (2023). What Can Hungarian Counties do for the Countryside? *European Countryside*, 15(2), 297–312. <https://doi.org/10.2478/euco-2023-0016>
- Pámer, Z., Finta, I., Horeczki, R., Péncsár, Á., & Dombi, P. (2023). Területfejlesztési források felhasználása Baranya megyében. *Tér és Társadalom*, 37(3), 98–118. <https://doi.org/10.17649/TET.37.3.3491>
- Püski, L. (2000). *A magyar felsőház története 1927–1945*. Napvilág.
- Ragadics, T. (2016). *Helyi társadalom, lokális közösségek az ormánsági kistérségeken*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Pécs]. <https://pea.lib.pte.hu/server/api/core/bitstreams/e55530af-da3f-470e-a70c-8b74fbde7764/content>
- Szakály, S. (1987). *A magyar katonai elit 1938–1945*.
- Szilágyi, Zs. (2012). A társadalmi tér használata a kecskeméti multifunkcionális elit gyakorlata szerint, 1920–1940. *Tér és Társadalom*, 26(3), 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.17649/TET.26.3.2083>
- Tara, S. (2024). Municipal Size and Efficiency in Romania: Larger is Better? *Perspective Politice*, 17(Special Issue), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/24.17.0.19>
- Terra Stúdió Kft. (2023, June). *Bóly Településfejlesztési Koncepció és Integrált Településfejlesztési Stratégia*. Bóly. [https://varos.boly.hu/uploads/rendeletek/hesz/Boly\\_ITS\\_aktualizalt\\_formazott\\_v.pdf](https://varos.boly.hu/uploads/rendeletek/hesz/Boly_ITS_aktualizalt_formazott_v.pdf)
- Utasi, Á. (2009). Bizalomvesztés és kapcsolathány a poszt-szocialista országokban. In K. Biernacki, & Cs. Jancsák (Eds.), *Tudásjavak áramlása a közép-kelet-európai régióban a rendszerváltást követően (A Magyar Szociológiai Társaság 2008. évi vándorgyűlése)*. (pp. 11–247). Belvedere Meridionale.
- Varga, Á. (2023). Thoughts on the meaning content of the principle of local autonomy. *Institutiones Administrationis – Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 3(1), 85–97. <https://doi.org/10.54201/iajas.v3i1.65>
- Zongor, G. (2021, September 30). Nyolc polgármester választás - töretlen bizalom. [https://www.dhkf.hu/News/2021/Nyolc\\_polgarmester\\_valasztas.html](https://www.dhkf.hu/News/2021/Nyolc_polgarmester_valasztas.html)

Corresponding author:

**Réka HORECZKI**

Institute for Regional Studies

Centre for Economic and Regional Studies

Eötvös Loránd University

7621 Pécs, Papnövelde u. 22. Hungary

e-mail: horeczki.reka@krtk.elte.hu

© Copyright 2025 by the authors.

This is an open access article under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons attribution (CC-BY-NC-ND) license 4.0.

