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Role of Hungarian Local Governance in Responding to COVID-19 Crisis

S O F I A N B O U H L E L *

Abstract: This paper analyses and points out the preventive and protective measures undertaken by Hungarian local authorities to halt the spread of the COVID-19 crisis and ensure the safety of citizens. It is conducted in an empirical, qualitative manner. In doing so it covers Hungarian legislation and official documents from central and local authorities. Firstly, the paper gives a comprehensive overview of the Hungarian local government system by highlighting the types and powers of local authorities. Secondly, it discusses the specific preventive and protective measures introduced by the different local authorities within their competencies and then explores some challenges and opportunities faced by Hungarian local authorities. This paper determines the importance of local governance for an efficient response to COVID-19 in Hungary despite limited resources and powers. Accordingly, the state's long-term investment in local government and improvement is primordial.

Keywords: Hungary, local governance, COVID-19 crisis, measures, response

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 crisis has created many challenges for countries all around the world in implementing urgent strategies and measures to halt the spread of this virus and ensure the social, sanitary and economic security for their people. While public attention has focused on international and national policy responses, these efforts will ultimately need to be applied by local-level institutions, which played a key role in

determining not only the trajectory of the pandemic but also the outcomes of its different interventions. This research provides a preliminary analysis of the administrative and social role of local institutions in Hungary, which are always placed in the front line to serve people.

The increased spread of the virus forced the state to implement strict restrictions that created several problems for citizens, and made the local authorities' task more difficult. This paper highlights the efforts taken by local government with the state government to create and manage various initiatives to control this pandemic and protect the safety of citizens. The main objectives of the study are to analyse and highlight the preventive and protective measures undertaken by the Hungarian local authorities to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 crisis.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data and address the analysis questions and objectives based on problems and main goals. The data required have been collected from various sources such as the official Hungarian government COVID-19 database, the Hungarian Fundamental Law, local government databases in Budapest, Pécs and Debrecen, various articles and scientific publications. It is a

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data series collected for a period of four months from March 2020 to June 2020. The data analysis is mainly conducted based on simple tools, reports and figures to analyse the trend of COVID-19 growth and the measures taken over this period.

3. HUNGARIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

The Fundamental Law of Hungary explains the political system in the country, which describes Hungary as an independent, democratic, and constitutional state. It is a unitary republic with a decentralised state model. However, politics in Hungary functions within a framework of parliamentary representatives. The Prime Minister is the head of government of a pluriform multi-party system. Thus, the leading body of the entire Hungarian public administration is the government. This constitutional document is based on four fundamental principles: human dignity, separation of powers, state structure and rule of law.¹ The Fundamental Law is not limited to political aspects, it also contains the pillars of public administration in the country.

The decentralisation model and the principle of local government are enshrined in the Fundamental Law via the local self-government rules created in 1990 and updated on 2011.² According to Art. 31-35, the state respects three territorial hierarchies: central, regional (county) and local. Hungary consists of 20 territorial sections, more precisely, 19 counties and one capital, Budapest (administered as an independent entity) and 3,175 municipalities.

These different public institutions have different powers, different roles and separate responsibilities. The principal tasks of the counties are based on the administrative tasks and the preparation of the strategic development of the territory, while the role of the municipalities is to manage the necessary facilities such as pre-schools, public water utilities, rubbish disposal, elderly care and rescue services. Additionally, this local administration

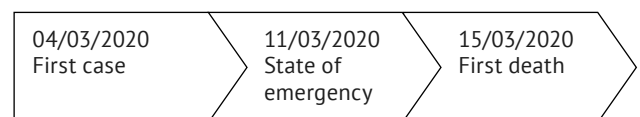
has the right to adopt regulations concerning different local areas of a given municipality according to Section (2) of Art. 32 of the Fundamental Law.

This local governance offers the autonomy to each territory to carry out its activity according to its own responsibility. The local government representatives are elected directly by the citizens to achieve their needs and develop their regions. The number of local council members depends on the number of inhabitants. In municipalities with a population of less than 10,000, the representatives are elected using an individual list, but in municipalities with more than 10,000, the representatives are elected in a mixed electoral system.³

To implement an efficient strategy during crisis periods, the decisions made by the local authorities must ensure the proper functioning of the regional administrations and their management with the collaboration of the central government.⁴ As a result, the local governments in Hungary played a key role in managing the COVID crisis during the pandemic.

4. COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN HUNGARY

Figure 1. Timeline of the most prominent events related to COVID-19 in Hungary



Source: author's own research and editing, based on data gathered from coronavirus website (Hungarian government website for COVID-19 pandemic)

From the beginning of January 2020, Hungary announced a prevention plan to combat the spread of the virus in the country with an Operational Group, which was formed especially for this purpose. According to the government's official website, authorities announced the first confirmed

cases in Hungary on 4 March 2020. Moreover, the first coronavirus-related death was declared on 15 March 2020. By the end of the month, the virus had spread into all counties of Hungary. Due to the dangers of this pandemic and the inability to manage the crisis in the normal way, the government took several decisive decisions like declaring a state of emergency on 11 March 2020, which was taken quickly and efficiently according to the first case and the first death date.

a) State of emergency

The need to speed up the legislative process in times of crisis pushed the Hungarian government to declare a state of emergency in the country on 11 March by introducing some initial security measures (this period lasts for 15 days, after which the state of emergency can be renewed by parliament according to the Fundamental Law). Firstly, all events including cultural and sporting events were cancelled. Secondly, all indoor gatherings with more than 100 people were banned. Later, other restrictions were implemented by closing universities, primary and high schools, and ordering cafes and restaurants to stop serving beyond 3 pm. From 30 March the parliament approved the extension of the state of emergency for an indeterminate period under the coronavirus law that enabled the central government to rule the country by decrees for as long as COVID-19 lasts.⁵

b) Impact of COVID-19 on local governments in Hungary

Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the different levels of governance in the world, the local level was the most impacted due to the direct responsibilities with citizens. The local governments were always at the forefront of combating the pandemic's spread and impact.⁶ Many critics focused on their response and recovery efforts, especially in the beginning of the crisis. Hungary was no exception as COVID-19 affected most cities and regions.

Hungarian local governments are responsible for delivering a good service for citizens by ensuring good coordination between different departments,

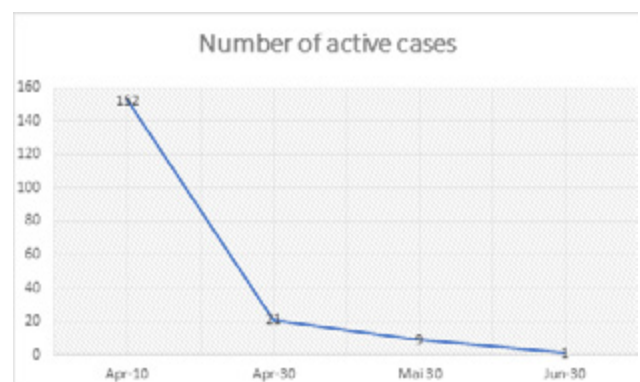
including health workers, police, public workers, drivers and volunteers delivering food, medicines and sanitisers to fight against the pandemic. To protect them, the authorities gave more care and attention to these citizens due to the sensitivity of their work by ensuring personal protection measures like the compulsory wearing of masks and gloves and the sanitisation of communal and frequently used materials. In addition, immediate quarantine was enforced for workers who showed any signs of a fever, cough or difficulty breathing. Moreover, several campaigns were planned to raise citizens' awareness of the dangers of COVID contagion and the need to respect isolation rules, avoiding close contact with others and any type of eye, nose or mouth touching. Cleaning and disinfecting public places became necessary to guarantee safe areas, a process repeated at certain intervals.

c) Statistics of COVID-19 in Hungary

The graphics above show the evolution of the active case numbers affected by COVID-19 in Budapest, Pécs and Debrecen from the beginning of the pandemic until 30 June. The choice of these cities was based on their political and economic importance in the country.

*Budapest

Graph 1. Number of active cases per day in Budapest from 30 March to 30 June



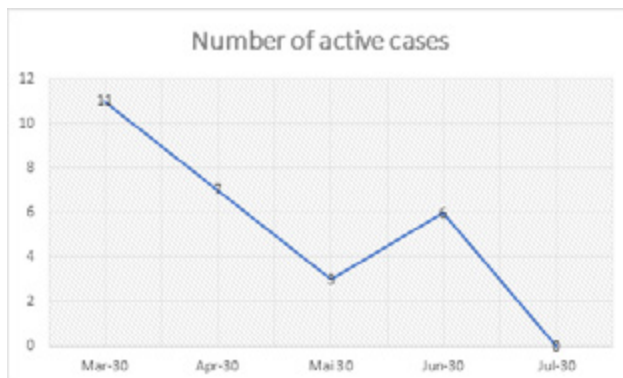
Source: coronavirus website data (Hungarian government website for COVID-19)

During the first three months of the pandemic, the number of cases in the capital grew rapidly compared to other cities. On 10 April it peaked, recording 152 cases in 24 hours. This rate increased the total number of citizens affected to 580. However, the following months looked more favourable for the inhabitants of Budapest. The statistics showed 21 positive cases on 30 April and only 9 cases declared on 30 May. Compared to the spring period (March, April and May), which was disturbing for citizens and the government, the number of infected people in Budapest fell to a low level in June. Only one case was added on the last day of June to the total number of people affected, accounting for 1978 cases from the 4155 in all counties, making Budapest one of the most affected Hungarian cities.

This result is due to the strong intervention of the different levels of governance (local and central) to control the crisis. During this period, the number of cases did not exceed 100 per day, which constitutes a success for the Hungarian authorities that took several measures to protect the safety of citizens. These new decisions were based on adherence to the state of emergency rules.

* Pécs

Graph 2. Number of active cases per day in Pécs from 30 March to 30 June



Source: coronavirus website data (Hungarian government website for COVID-19)

The situation in Pécs was more favourable than in Budapest at the beginning of the pandemic. By 31 March the total number of infected citizens

reached 89. This number multiplied four times in one month to reach 375 cases by the end of April. The number of active cases per day decreased from eleven on 30 March to only three at the end of May. Despite the slow increase in June, Pécs maintained the same downwards trend in infections as all other major cities in the country, and recorded a unique result at the national level by reaching zero cases of infected persons on 30 July. The statistics show that Pécs registered a low rate of infections per day. These results are primarily due to the conscience and responsible behaviour of its citizens, and secondly to the efforts of the local authorities in managing the crisis by adopting some rules and restrictions to protect citizens.

* Debrecen

Graph 3. Number of active cases per day in Debrecen from 30 March to 30 June



Source: coronavirus website data (Hungarian government website for COVID-19)

Debrecen, the capital city of Hajdú-Bihar County, did not register a high number of cases during the first wave of the pandemic. The infection curve was stable because of the practically inexistent day-to-day fluctuations. The total number of infected people was only 23 until 30 April, with an average of one case per day. This situation repeated itself in a similar vein in the following months. In May and June, the number was almost stable. Despite the spread of the virus throughout the whole country, the number of cases was negligible compared to the capital, demonstrating an exemplary prevention strategy against COVID-19 by local authorities in Debrecen, and a great sense of awareness by citizens.

5. PREVENTIVE AND PROTECTIVE MEASURES DURING THE COVID CRISIS

The appearance of COVID-19 in Hungary prompted mayors and local governments to get involved in crisis management and take efficient and quick decisions to prevent the spread of this new pandemic. The contribution of the Hungarian local government has been demonstrated in the sharing of good practices and lessons of how local authorities have managed the response and recovery phases. According to the results of this research, the role of local leaders has been extremely vital in determining how well cities have responded since the start of the outbreak. Budapest's mayor, *Gergely Karácsony* was one of these leaders who personally took to communicating with the public through social media from the start of the pandemic to provide updates about the local situation and explain the preventive and protective measures during the COVID crisis. The mayor of Pécs, *Attila Péterffy*, was also an influencer and decisive during this crisis. He called on the private sector early on to allow employees to work from home to avoid crowding inside offices, and to make employees feel safer and less stressed in their workplaces.

The role of the local governments was not limited only to efforts by leaders, it was also remarkable at the institutional level, with several efficient actions including mobilising their resources to provide the necessary support for health services and facilities, and extending assistance to the most vulnerable to stay safe and healthy. This paper will provide evidence of some measures taken by the local governments of the three selected cities (Budapest, Pécs and Debrecen).

a) Budapest

The Budapest City Council implemented several measures to counteract the spread of the COVID-19 virus in several services. Firstly, to avoid

crowding in public transportation, the authorities took the decision to increase the number of active vehicles, permitting passengers to board buses using all doors instead of only the front door, and sanitising all the facilities frequently. In terms of communications, the local authorities shared updates about new rules and regulations not only in the national language but also in English, and provided the necessary support for international residents and tourists living in the city. Additionally, Budapest's mayor took the decision to suspend all cultural activities scheduled in the city's public institutions such as theatres, cinemas and museums. In cooperation with the central government, a final decision was taken by the local government to postpone all planned international events, such as the Hungarian stretch of the Giro d'Italia cycling competition, which was rescheduled for a later date.⁷

For homeless people, new rules were urgently adopted by the Budapest City Council to regulate care facilities and protect the health of homeless people by providing them with separate residences to avoid the crowded homeless institutions.

This housing process allowed homeless people to move into 71 rental apartments in the capital.

Several criteria had to be met by the applicants to become eligible for this program.

Firstly, they had to reside in a night shelter or temporary accommodation for homeless persons in the administrative territory of Budapest. Secondly, they had to be in at least one of these categories:

- work in a healthcare institution, a nursing home or a care home for seniors,
- have a regular income or be self-sufficient,
- aged at least 65 years for men, or 55 years for women, and have a chronic illness that poses a high health risk in the case of a coronavirus infection.⁸

Moreover, given the extra burdens and expenditure on the city during the pandemic (need for protective gear such as masks and disinfectant), it was necessary to review the budgets of the capital and its districts with the central government authorities.

According to the Budapest mayor, it is essential to ensure cooperation not only with the government-run Operational Group in charge of mitigating the new coronavirus epidemic but also with district mayors, to create efficient common coronavirus-related measures and avoid unilateral rules taken by those responsible. Besides, the local authorities needed to improve their efforts to check the health of the elderly and increase the testing of teachers and administrative school staff.⁹

b) Pécs

“In order to slow down the spread of the new coronavirus, I have taken the following measures as mayor of Pécs on Monday, 23 March”, Attila Péterffy

*Digital city

In connection with the pandemic situation, the municipality of Pécs has taken numerous measures to slow down the spread of the new coronavirus. These measures require hard work, preparations and carefully considered decisions. In light of these new rules, which were introduced at the social, sanitary and economic level, many questions still arise every day in the minds of citizens regarding the circumstances and decisions.¹⁰

Applying an innovative and open culture of city leadership, the mayor of Pécs chose to communicate directly with citizens and answer their questions via online channels to reduce personal contact in the current situation. All municipal releases regarding the coronavirus were published in both Hungarian and English to provide all the necessary information and assistance to the foreigners and international students in Pécs. To guarantee the safety of citizens and maintain productivity at the same time, the mayor asked public and private companies to introduce “home office” technology for their employees.¹¹

*Coronavirus Charity Fund

Believing that patriotism and volunteering are important pillars of the recovery plan, the City of Pécs announced the launch of social initiatives to protect the most vulnerable groups and seniors

from the consequences of this pandemic. The introduction of the social program (PAPI) was essential in ensuring the delivery of food, medicines and postal packages to the homes of the elderly living alone. Despite these economically difficult times, many citizens and companies showed an interest in supporting our efforts by participating in the aid given to PAPI or providing the necessary sanitary facilities: protective gear and disinfectants for local institutions.¹²

With due consideration of the principle of transparency, which is deemed a fundamental principle of good governance, the local authorities created the Coronavirus Charity Fund, designed to organise the distribution of these donations in a positive way. These social tasks are crucial at the local level during the crisis. However, municipal institutions must ensure the continuity of providing the basic services by preparing an action plan for these extraordinary circumstances to manage all public services without any interruption, even during the epidemic.¹³

*New Mayor Coordinating Group

The main goal of the new Mayor Coordinating Group implemented during the crisis is to gather all the information about the current situation and evaluate it. In addition to its role boosting communication with all parties, this coordinating group helped prepare a prevention plan in cooperation with municipal companies and institutions to follow all the instructions introduced by the National Coronavirus Operational Group.¹⁴

*New measures for administrative services

In light of the current epidemic, the Mayor’s Office decided to change the opening hours for customer service. The capacity for receiving customers in the main office of the *Department of Authorities* was limited to only 100 persons per day in the building because of the new restrictions. In addition, direct contact with officials and civil servants was suspended. In-person administration consultations were only possible via the published contact

options (phone, email). Besides this, only urgent submissions and requests were accepted, and had to be handed to receptionists. Queue management also changed, only clients with numbers were able to wait outside in line (in front of the building) to avoid crowding.¹⁵

Using the same strategy as Budapest's mayor, public institutions provided services online, including all administrative tasks for citizens. They asked them to prioritise digital methods and limit their physical presence to necessary actions only for which there is no other solution, such as the registration of new births and marriages, intent requests and some real estate affairs. Civil marriages were possible, but only with some strict conditions:

- Ceremonies were only possible at the *Kossuth Square building* and in the *House of Happiness*.
- The number of allowed persons was limited: only the registrar, the couple and two witnesses.
- No celebration of any kind was permitted.¹⁶

*The market hall of Pécs

Due to the practical, symbolic and traditional importance of the market hall in the everyday life of citizens, as a basic source of food, the local authorities decided to keep the market hall open and ready to welcome customers, with due consideration of various restrictive measures and conditions:

- Entry and exit: only one entry into the market hall from the main street, while exiting was allowed on the opposite side of the building only.
- Limit on number of people who can be present inside the market hall to 100 persons at any time. Queues were organised both inside and outside the market hall by ensuring a safety distance of two metres between people in the line.
- Frequent sanitisation of often-used materials (door handles, railings, etc.) and ventilation of the market hall's entire area after closing.
- Customers had to leave the market hall as soon as they were finished with their purchases.

Despite the risk to the health of seniors, as the most vulnerable to the dangers posed by the new

coronavirus, the local authorities tried extending the activity of this market to provide a high quality of goods to consumers. In this case, it is important for citizens to be aware, to maintain a collective responsibility and to guard the safety of all citizens.¹⁷

*Reorganisation in the public medical sector

To protect healthcare workers from this pandemic, the City of Pécs decided to reorganise primary care with coordination from the Ministry of Human Resources. The main objective of this decision was to keep elderly GPs (over 65 years) away from risky areas for their own safety, and replace them with GPs under the age of 65. The senior doctors could continue their activities by participating in medical consultations or communicating with their patients via phone.¹⁸

*Cultural and sports activities

Implementing the Operational Group's vision to prevent the spread of the pandemic by minimising personal contact between people and respecting sanitary rules, the mayor of Pécs decided to suspend all events, including cultural and sports activities, and close sports halls, swimming pools, theatres, cinemas, the zoo and libraries until further notice.¹⁹

*Public transport

In terms of local public transportation, the mayor of Pécs took several measures to preserve the health of bus drivers at the local bus company – Tüke Busz Zrt.

This included restrictions regarding use of the front doors and the suspension of buying tickets from drivers, to guarantee the physical separation between the driver and passengers. Furthermore, the mayor ordered the buses to be cleaned and disinfected more frequently each day. To provide an uninterrupted public transportation service with respect to the safety measures, the local bus company – Tüke Busz Zrt. – decided to allocate extra buses during busy times.²⁰

*Schools, day-care, nurseries

Due to the pandemic, the Hungarian central government issued an ordinance which empowered the local authorities in Pécs again to decide whether to close day-care and nursery facilities. After long discussions between the Pécs city council members, the immediate closure of these facilities was the easier and desirable solution for the authorities, but it was not efficient for working parents, especially since grandparents were unable to take on the childcare responsibility, which could be dangerous to their health. Thus the mayor of Pécs decided to take a step-by-step approach to close day-care and nursery facilities as well as schools.²¹

c) Debrecen

In response to the coronavirus emergency, the mayor of Debrecen, Mr. László Papp, insisted on the importance of citizen participation and their strong sense of responsibility to give the necessary assistance to the local authorities. He also implemented some local municipal measures to stop the spread of the pandemic. Firstly, cultural events, concerts and festivals were stopped, while theatres, sports halls and thermal baths were closed. Secondly, cash transactions for buying tickets on local buses, trolleybuses and trams were stopped.²²

In addition, the local authorities limited the number of people allowed to gather together to just 100 indoors, and 500 outdoors. Moreover, the mayor of Debrecen decided to introduce extraordinary suspensions of all nursery care, and implement a new form of education by providing the possibility of online teaching for primary, secondary school and universities to guarantee the safety of students and teachers and ensure the continuity of studies at the same time.²³

Social institutions in Debrecen worked on creating a new charity initiative in collaboration with citizens, companies and non-profit organisations to provide the necessary sanitary facilities for homeless people by supplying them with disin-

fectants, masks and plastic gloves. Just like in Budapest and Pécs, the local authorities in Debrecen encouraged the digitalisation of administrative operations, including the operation of urban public services, health care, security and commercial services. Additionally, the Debrecen City Council extended rental terms during the pandemic period for the social protection of citizens. Furthermore, the mayor asked citizens to respect sanitary rules and collaborate with the different administrations in a conscious and orderly manner to protect and preserve their own health and their families.²⁴

6. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

This crisis period tested the capacity of the local authorities and their leadership to respond to difficulties by facing challenges and creating opportunities.

a) Challenges

Lack of resources: Applying the same strategy of some other Hungarian mayors, Budapest leader Gergely Karácsony announced some economic reforms to reduce the city council's expenditures, which had increased due to the pandemic. After long discussions with central government, the two parties were not in agreement about the city's budget, the funds destined for the city's leadership decreasing by one-third and the number of city council committees falling from eight to five.

Thus, the Budapest city council decided to take some austerity measures: Firstly, five companies run by the city council were merged into a single public works company, according to the Stadtwerke model in Vienna and big cities in Germany. Secondly, the number of city council committees was reduced, and the number of deputy mayors was lowered to just four. Based on good governance, the mayor of Budapest

adopted this restructuring to save the necessary funds for other urgent expenditures related to crisis management. These new measures will not affect the normal citizens and workers of the capital as it only eliminated some executive positions, oversight committees and disbursement offices.

Reduction of powers during the state of emergency: During the pandemic crisis and specifically on 30 March, the Hungarian parliament passed a bill proposed by the FIDESZ-led government, allowing rule-by-decree for as long as COVID-19 lasts. Despite some critics, this decision was taken to facilitate the government's efforts to respond to the crisis because of the need to speed up the legislative process in times of emergency. This procedure affected the power of Hungarian local governments, which wanted to participate in taking important decisions and be the key player in managing this crisis from the front line of the fight against COVID-19.²⁵

b) Opportunities

The pandemic was also a source of inspiration for many institutions, including local authorities in Hungary, which consider COVID-19 an excellent opportunity to improve their online services and implement new platforms to facilitate e-government. This process presents a new vision in the administrative approaches to improve the quality of delivered services and facilitate communication between administrators and citizens. Many local authorities plan to continue this digital method even after the end of the crisis.

In addition, the central administration is working in full coordination with local administration during this pandemic. Combating the virus is the responsibility of all levels of governance. Thus, many Hungarian mayors focused on col-

laboration with others to publish common measures in coordination with central authorities. The participation of citizens in Hungary is key to the fight against the coronavirus. This factor was considered crucial by the social institutions of local authorities who collaborated with civil society to share the responsibility for all citizens by creating charity initiatives, protecting seniors, and giving the necessary protection to workers who sacrificed their health and lives to ensure the continuity of normal life for citizens.²⁶

7. CONCLUSION

According to the Fundamental Law, the Hungarian political system is based on a decentralisation model and the principle of local government, which offers autonomy to each territory to conduct its activity according to its own responsibility. Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, the local authorities in Hungary have moved directly to a practical mode. This paper analysed the statistics of three cities in Hungary (Budapest, Pécs and Debrecen) during the crisis period, and evaluated their preventive actions and measures taken during the fight against the pandemic.

Despite the different challenges faced, such as the limited resources and powers, Hungarian local governments did remarkable work to halt the spread of COVID-19, ensure the safety of citizens by responding to new problems, and to implement innovative solutions. As result, the response of Hungarian local government to the pandemic has been a success in Europe, and this is due to the efficient initiatives of local authorities and to the swift and disciplined behaviour of citizens. There have been virtually no mass incidents of infection, constituting an excellent achievement for the Hungarian state.

Notes

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