

Political elites in local politics

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The notion of political elites is often related to the national level in politics since it suggests a high position in the political power structure and thus a high position in the territorial setting as well. While elites are indeed national level players – MPs, government members, high-ranking party officials – they are often embedded in local politics as well. In Hungary where the political power, especially decision-making is centralized, high politics is believed to dominate over local interests (Bóhm, 2006). Still, local level seems to attract much political attention: MPs are eager to hold local positions which enforces the phenomenon of holding multiple mandates and local issues are present in the political discourse.

The paper aims at exploring the role of local level politics in the career of political elites and the connection of local and national level politics in their activities. The first part of the paper analysis the local background of politicians: their past and present positions in local politics and the function of the available local networks. The second part of the paper focuses on the content side of the problem: it examines whether the locally embedded politicians represent the local interests, whether they reflect on local issues and if they do how they connect their local and national roles in their political activities. The analysis will concentrate on members of the Hungarian Parliament: the career patterns emerging among parliamentarians and the issues presented to the plenary by MPs with local background.

The framework of analysis

Local politics is a very wide concept in Hungarian politics. According to the law on local governments (LXV/1990) the main units in the territorial structure are settlements whose inhabitants elect the members of the local government and the mayor. The mayors are elected through direct voting by majority. The election system for the members of the local

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governments vary with the size of settlements: at settlements with 10000 or less inhabitants representatives are selected on the so-called “small lists” which means that each voter can vote on as many candidates on the list as the number of seats available in the local governmental body. At settlements with more than 10000 inhabitants a mixed election system is in place, representatives are partly elected in single-member constituencies and partly on lists. The capital, Budapest has a special place in the structure since its voters elect local governments and mayors in each district but also elect the mayor of Budapest and the 66 members of the municipal corporation of Budapest. In the territorial structure the local level is complemented by the county level as the country is divided in 19+1 counties (the +1 being Budapest). In the counties self-government is exercised through county conventions. The members of the convention are elected by voters of the county except for those living in cities with county rights, directly, on lists.

Regarding the incompatibility rules the reform of 1994 (LXIII/1994) has opened the door for holding multiple mandates since it specified that mayors can occupy parliamentary seats as well. MPs do profit from this opportunity and thus the number of MPs holding a double, local and national mandate has been increasing since 1994. Due to the fact that directly elected mayors are the head of settlements and thus the mayor position is one of the strongest local positions in terms of political capital in this paper we only focus on MPs who hold a mayor position while sitting in the parliament. However, the notion of holding multiple mandates needs some clarification since parliamentary elections are hold in the spring while local elections are hold in the fall every fourth year. In this paper only those MPs are taken into consideration who hold a double mandate after the fall local elections thus who occupy both positions during the whole parliamentary cycle (except for non-predictable events such as resignation during the cycle or death).

In the territorial structure there are great differences in terms of decision-making competencies and available resources between the different territorial units: being a mayor of a city with county rights offers a wider political arena and greater visibility in the political sphere than being mayor of a small Hungarian village. The differentiation has political consequences: research suggest that independent candidates have a chance of running for office only in the villages and smaller towns, while the elections of bigger towns, cities, cities with county rights and the districts of Budapest as well as municipal elections are dominated by party candidates (Böhm, 2006; Fekete, 2006; Soós, 2008). This tendency is partly explained by the fact that costs of running are higher in bigger settlements: there is stronger

competition as the pool of aspirants is wider, there is a need to spend more on communication and marketing and being well connected has a bigger importance. A strong party can offer a more stable background in this setting, so party candidates are favored. In smaller places independent candidates can have chance due to their respected figure or well-known personalities. On the other hand it is also true that parties are oriented only towards positions that offer benefits for the party in terms of financial, social and political capital, so they only send their strong candidates to bigger cities and towns. This problem can be set in a territorial setting and in this dimension it is interesting to see how far members of the political elite, in our research Members of the Parliament reach down into the local structure. The often used hierarchy of settlements (Fekete, 2006; Szónyi, 2006) which will be used for the sake of this research, is based on the legal status of settlements and distinguishes between villages, towns and cities, cities with county right, Budapest and its districts.

In order to explore the role of local politics in the career of MPs, this paper maps the career movements of members of the Hungarian Parliament between the local and national level on the one hand and analyzes the MPs plenary activities on the other. The local and national level activities are defined as positions: local background of MPs refers to local positions hold before getting elected to the parliament while holding multiple mandate refers to holding local positions and a parliamentary seat. There are different political positions in the local sphere: politicians can be members of the local government, mayors, members of county conventions and the presidents of county conventions. As stated before in this paper we focus on MPs holding a mayor position although in some cases other data will be presented as well. The main source data is the database published by the Elite Research Centre of the Corvinus University (Ilonszki, 2008) which includes extensive information about all MPs since 1990. In this paper four parliamentary cycles starting from 1994 will be analyzed which means 1607 cases. Variables concerning the political past of MPs and variables coding the presently occupied local positions will be used. The content analysis is based on the data available on the Hungarian National Assembly's website (www.parlament.hu) where all motions and speeches can be downloaded.

The local background of MPs

According to the traditional model of political careers politicians are fueled by a progressive ambition motivating them to step higher up the political ladder. In this model, local politics is

often regarded as a “base office” (Schlesinger, 1966:70-88) where many politicians launch their political career. Borchert distinguishes different career types based on two main dimensions: the direction of movement and the linkage of offices by succession or cumulation. According to Borchert this type of career is characterized by unidirectional movement: “Positions in this type are clearly organized along hierarchy. As everybody wants to move up, the direction of all career moves is the same. (...) Typically, the unidirectional pattern should follow the organization of the state from the local over the regional to the national level.” (Borchert, 2001:8). In terms of linkage the model also suggest the succession of political positions meaning that as politicians move along they leave the lower level positions behind. In case local politics function as base office in the Hungarian system, we expect to find a group of MPs in the Parliament who started their career at the local level.

Table 1: Local background of MPs in different parliamentary cycles

Parliamentary cycle		Local political background			Total
		None	Exists	Mayor	
1994	N	299	88	14	401
	%	75%	22%	3%	100%
1998	N	218	150	29	397
	%	55%	38%	7%	100%
2002	N	176	198	38	412
	%	43%	48%	9%	100%
2006	N	173	177	45	395
	%	44%	45%	11%	100%
Total	N	866	613	126	1605*
	%	54%	38%	8%	100%

*There are two missing cases in the 2006 parliamentary cycle

Indeed according to table 1 38% of all MPs in the four analyzed parliamentary cycle had occupied a local political position, and another 8% functioned as mayors before becoming member of the National Assembly. An increasing trend can also be observed which by 2006 resulted in the fact that more than half of the MPs had gained local political experiences before gaining parliamentary seats. While our research focuses only on data after the 1994 elections, it is worth to mention that the phenomenon is not new: Fekete states that on the local level there was a strong continuity and that many local politicians could keep their position after 1989 as well (Fekete, 2006) and that there were MPs already in the first

parliament who served as local politicians before the regime change. Thus the local level proves to be a potential springboard for launching a political career in the Hungarian political system. This is true for both important parties in Hungary: among MPs of the socialist party, MSZP 44% had occupied local position before getting elected while for the biggest party in opposition, Fidesz this proportion is 55%. In MSZP 6% of MPs while in Fidesz 10% of MPs had been mayors before entering the Parliament. For the smaller parties the proportion of MPs with local political background varies: in KDNP which is the Christian-Democrat party this number is around 20% while for MDF, the Hungarian Democratic Forum and SZDSZ, the Liberal party it is around 10%. The dividing line thus seems to be the political importance of the party: the two big parties are more embedded in local positions than the smaller ones.

The cumulation of mandates

The function of local level politics exceeds the initial phase of political career building, since local level can offer valuable financial, professional and human resources for politicians involved in higher level politics. According to De Winter and Bras local positions attract the interest of national-level political players for various reasons: first, the available double salary is an evident motivation. Second, local level politics can offer a wider space for movement since national level activities are often strongly controlled by parties. Third, the local level can offer additional visibility and contact to voters which is an important asset during political campaigns (2003:57). This last two reasons point to a different understanding of local politics: for members of the opposition parties the local arena can offer an alternative space of political activity since national level political decision-making is often dominated by the government. Borchert points out an additional function: local level politics can offer a way out of national level politics or can function as a safety net where politicians can retreat from national level careers. As a result in those cases where there is no institutional constraint on holding multiple mandate, MPs aim at accumulating different positions to access additional resources and to build strong base (Borchert, 2001; Stolz, 2003)

MPs have certainly recognized the above mentioned advantages since around 22% of all MPs in the 1994-2006 parliamentary cycles hold multiple mandates. Taking into consideration that there is an important group of politicians coming from the local level in the Hungarian National Assembly, it is worth to analyze the continuity of local positions. Table 2 shows data about the local political background of MPs who hold a double mayor-MP mandate.

Table 2: The local background of MPs holding a mayor positions

Local background		Number and proportion of MPs holding a mayor position	Number and proportion of all MPs
None	N	33	866
	%	18%	54%
Other local position	N	56	613
	%	32%	38%
Mayor	N	88	126
	%	50%	8%
Total	N	177	1605*
	%	100%	100%

*there are two missing cases

The relation between local political background and the holding of mayor position is statistically significant (Cramer $V=0,554$, $p=0,000$), which suggests that MPs aim at keeping their local positions. It is interesting to see another dimension of the same data: among those MPs who hold a double mayor-parliamentary mandate 50% had already been mayors before getting elected to the National Assembly 32% had other type of local positions and only 19% became mayors while being MPs without any local political experience. Incumbency is also strong among mayor-MPs: in the 2006 parliamentary cycle out of the 74 MPs currently holding double mandate, 27 have already had multiple mandate in the previous parliamentary cycle and 10 had multiple mandate in the two previous cycles.

The above described trend points to the importance of keeping local positions which is basically a bottom-up, unidirectional movement with the accumulation of offices. However, there is movement in the other direction as well: there are MPs without any previous local experience who recognise the advantages and seek local positions. Among the 177 cases of MPs holding double mandates there are 89 MPs who had been members of the Parliament first and then became mayors. While this group is rather small compared to the 1607 cases in the database, it has to be mentioned that the trend is increasing: while in 1994 only four MPs run for local positions to complement their national career, in 2006 there were already 20 MPs who run successfully for mayor position without any prior experiences as mayors. Among them we can find prominent politicians such as Zoltán Pokorni, mayor of the XII district in Budapest, who has been member of the Parliament since 1994 and has lead the Fidesz

parliamentary group two times. Lajos Koscsó, who has been involved in the MSZP since 1990 and served as an MP from 1994-1998 also became a new mayor in 2006.

While the motivation behind the cumulation of offices seem evident, it is rather hard to track it in empirical terms. Additional resources seem to play an important role, but it has to be mentioned that local positions, even mayor positions can be different in terms of available financial and other tools. Certain local positions are of bigger importance as Szógyi (2006) points out being mayor of a city with county rights is attractive for members of the political elite and as a result the number of MPs occupying the mayor's seat in these cities has been increasing. Currently out of the 23 cities with county rights there are 14 where the mayor is an MP. Similarly among the 23 districts of Budapest, the mayor is an MP in 10. Table 3 shows a summary of the settlement types (city with county rights, district of capital, city or settlement) where MPs occupy the mayor's seat. Taking into consideration that in Hungary there are 23 cities with county rights, 23 districts of Budapest, 273 cities and 2856 other settlements, MPs are overrepresented in the districts of Budapest as well as in cities with county rights and cities.

Table 3: Mayor positions according to different types of settlements

Type of settlement	Frequency	% of all mayor positions
District of Budapest	27	15,3%
Cities with county rights	39	22%
Cities	82	46,3%
Settlement	29	16,4%
Total	177	100%

Besides resources, the local political arena can serve as an alternative space for political function. In 1994 socialist MPs used to be stronger in the local scene, since out of the 14 MPs who had a double mandate 10 belonged to the MSZP which had a more stable local base and a wider local institutional context. However, Fidesz has taken a leap forward and in 1998 it dominated among multiple mandate holding MPs: out of the 29 MPs occupying mayors' seats 16 were members of the Fidesz parliamentary group. In 2002 the difference between the two biggest parties decreased and while the socialist MPs were stronger in the local arena, it was only by a few members, 30 vs 23. In 2006 the difference has diminished since there were 35

socialist MPs and 33 MPs of Fidesz who were mayors at the same time. The smaller parties lack a strong presence of multiple mandate holding MPs which can be explained by the fact that the bigger parties are more prepared to support their candidates on the local level as well. The phenomenon can partly be explained by the dynamics of national and local elections: national elections are held in the spring semester every four years and local elections are held in the fall semester every four years. There is also a tendency in the discourse about politics to nominate local elections the third year of national elections which constrains the analysis of local elections as an independent event. Still, the fact that the opposition sends prominent politicians to the local scene (as for example Zoltán Pokorny, ex-Minister of Education) supports the hypothesis that the opposition consciously uses the local positions to gain more visibility.

Finally, the cumulation of mandates is explained by the fact that local positions can create a safety net for MPs finishing their national level career. The database offers limited cases in this sense, since not many MPs with local positions have quit their parliamentary careers yet. For the mayors, there were 30 mayors with parliamentary positions who did not occupy parliamentary positions in the next elections. Out of those 30 21 succeeded at the local elections and strengthened their positions as mayors. 19 of them already had local experience before becoming MP which again suggests the strong embeddedness of certain members of the political elite.

The phenomenon of multiple mandate is thus very strong in the Hungarian Parliament. It is mainly explained by the fact that MPs coming from a local background try to keep their local positions for various reasons. However, the movement from top to down seems gaining momentum: local politics makes a true safety net and local positions can be used as incentives and can be awarded to successful politicians as well.

The content of holding multiple mandate

The evaluation of the holding a multiple mandate is rather mixed in Hungary. First, the idea of having two parallel paying jobs just doesn't seem acceptable for the public, most people think that politicians cannot deal with the dual burden properly. On the other hand in opinion polls voters said that they trust their local politicians who is an MP that s/he will represent local issues more powerfully in the Parliament (Böhm, 2006). This latter reasoning is in line

with the opinion of Zombor who calls the group of MPs holding local mandates the local lobby group of the parliament (Zombor, 2006:5) which suggests that these politicians are indeed strong representatives of their local background. Still, it is important to make a distinction between two sides of interest-representation: raising a local issue (such as for example the environmental problems of the river Rába by Zsolt Németh, mayor of Vasvár, a town situated near the Rába) is different from raising a local governmental issue (as for example the decreasing financial resources available for local governments for the purpose of education). The second part of the paper aims at gaining an inside into this content side of the problem and aimed at discovering what kind of issues do MPs with mayor positions represent.

In order to map the topics raised by mayor-MPs their political activities within the Parliament needed to be analyzed. There are two important channels of communication within the Assembly: first, MPs can turn in motions to the Parliament, second MPs also have the right to speak up at the plenary. Both the motions and the parliamentary minutes can be downloaded from the websites for content analysis. In order to limit the scope of the research, the parliamentary cycle 2002-2006 was chosen as the most current, complemented cycle. In this cycle there were 60 MPs holding mayor positions. In order to see how local positions influence the issues represented, presidents of county conventions were also included in the research. In 2002-2006, there were 8 of them in the National Assembly. Out of the 68, 24 MPs were included in the sample selected based on the type of settlement they are mayor of and based on their party positions. In the current sample there are 14 members of the Socialist Party, MSZP, 8 members of the biggest opposition party, Fidesz and one member of the Liberal Party, SZDSZ and one member of the MDF. Among them there are 5 MPs who are mayors of cities with county rights, there are 4 mayors of districts of Budapest, 11 mayors of cities and other settlements. In order to get a clearer picture on the impact of the type of position I also included 4 MPs in the sample who were head of the county conventions.

The analyses of documents was a rather complex task. The categorization of the motions and the speeches was along a simple line: whether it reflected local issues or not. Most of the texts could easily be categorized since they either reflected on a national issues (as for example taxes, education or health care) or they were very much specified (for example the question posed by Árpád Potápi, mayor of Bonyhád on 12 December, 2002 about the situation of the workers of Bonyhád and the about the planned measures of the government to tackle this problem). However, there were texts with mixed messages: most mayors for example referred to local cases when discussing national affairs. When discussing the 2006 budget, Ferenc

Wekler, mayor of Mecskénádasd said: “I give you my own example, because one can work better with numbers that are familiar. In my settlement, Mecskénádasd, social alimentation, the home care for elder, the club for elders is based in the social centre, which works as a small regional institution. Based on the proposed budget, this institution would now get 9 million less for financing. ... this is a drastic decrease...” (25 November, 2005). Also mayors tend to tackle issues that are relevant for them even if they do not cite local issues or examples specifically: László Botka, mayor of Szeged questioned about the possible financial resources for developing bigger cities (6 December, 2004), while during the fall sitting in 2003 András Gábor Nagy, mayor of 1st district of Budapest where important historical monuments are situated asked about the planned punishment for graffiti three times. In a sense Gábor Zongor pointed out an important phenomenon as well when he talked about the “lobby of local authorities” as these MPs often expressed their opinion about regulation of local issues. For example almost all of them contributed to the plenary debate about the amendment of the 1990/LXV law on local authorities.

Despite of these difficulties in dealing with mixed messages I attempted to build a simple categorization which results are shown in table 4.

Table 4: The issues raised by MPs holding a double mandate in 2002-2006

2002-2006	Independent motions				Plenary speeches			
	Local issues		Other issues		Local issues		Other issues	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Presidents of county conventions	31	16	50	29	28	12	75	28
Mayors of cities with county rights	74	38	7	4	59	26	6	2
Mayors of districts of Budapest	20	10	38	22	33	15	89	30
Mayors of other settlements	70	36	77	45	105	47	118	40
Total	195	100	172	100	225	100	288	100

N=24

The data shows that mayors of cities with county rights seem to be most involved in local issues since during their activities they talk more about local than other issues. For all other type of MPs other issues still dominate the agenda. Presidents of county conventions are the least involved in local issues which could indicate that being further from local issues results in displaying less local interest on the one hand and that being involved in county level politics means a wider perspective on politics where national-level problems can also be relevant. It is also interesting to see the overall representation of local and other issues and

explore which actors bring up local issues more: it seems that concerning independent motions mayors of cities with county rights followed closely by mayors of other settlements are the most active, together they represent 74% of all local issues debated. At plenary speeches these two groups remain the leading actors in local dimensions.

Despite of the simplicity of the presented content-analysis it can be concluded that MPs who hold mayor seat do represent local issues in their discourse. They seem to be familiar with the local environment they work in (they often present relevant data and examples), they are ready to represent specialized local issues on the national level and they also seem to develop a local identity. They often start their speeches by stating that “being the mayor of ... settlements, I often experience...”. Their activity can be explained as a lobbyist attitude since when they argue for the increase of local resources or the strengthening of local governments, they argue in their own interest. In order to get a clearer picture of their activities the content-analysis needs to be further developed: there is a need to build a more detailed categorization of the content, to involve different type of actors (representatives in local governments) and to develop a comparative framework meaning that the activities of locally embedded MPs should be compared to that of MPs without local ties.

Conclusion

Among Hungarian MPs we can identify a group which members are strongly embedded in the local arena. Most of them start their career at the local level and aim at keeping their local positions while moving up the political career ladder. The benefits of a local position are multifold: it offers financial and social resources, it offers an alternative political sphere and visibility and can function as a safety net for retirement. These advantages explain the fact that more and more nationally successful MPs are oriented towards the local level and run in local elections. While the local level plays an important role, national level politics still strongly dominate over local politics, which is reflected in the fact that candidates supported by stronger parties seem to be successful in running for important local positions.

The content analysis of those MPs who have a local position offers a more detailed picture: MPs embedded in local politics represent local issues at the national level. They often talk about local issues, cite local cases, offer local examples and seem to have a local identity.

They also act as a lobbyist group for local self-governance since the expansion of local competencies and available resources is in their own interest.

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LV/1990 law about the legal status of MPs

LXV/1990 law about local governments

LXIV/1990 law about the election of members of the local governments and mayors

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