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The Increasing Replication of Territorial and Social Inequalities in Public Education in Hungary—Causes, Components, Practices and Mechanisms

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Abstract: Over the past decade, the approach to socio-spatial inequalities has increasingly focused on references to the complexity of this phenomenon and on the role of its trans-economic components (mechanisms of reproduction, institutional frameworks, local specificities). Among the institutional structures of social reproduction, public services play a prominent role, including the system of education and training. In my analysis, in addition to reviewing the inequalities within the education system and their causes, I focus on a detailed exploration of the mechanisms that shape people's access to services. In Hungary, according to the unanimous opinion of domestic analyses, changes in school inequalities (especially in the last decade) have been in the opposite direction in comparison with similar countries. Inequalities between schools have increased significantly and school segregation has become increasingly common (and accepted). My study first reviews the general structural features of the education system and its most important changes, then takes a case study approach, conducting a detailed analysis of primary school education in four municipalities in Hungary in order to explore the specific mechanisms of operation from a bottom-up perspective. The analysis of the local context also allows the specificities of the 'place' and the effects of hierarchies and networks beyond it to be isolated, and permits the interpretation of diverse local practices.

Keywords: socio-spatial inequalities; school segregation; mechanisms for the reproduction of inequalities; production of space

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1. Introduction

With the rise of persistent backwardness, marginalisation and the accumulation of related social and demographic problems, socio-spatial inequalities have recently become a frequently cited issue in academic discourse (e.g., Lang et al. 2015; Nagy et al. 2015; Dunford and Liu 2016; Rodriguez-Pose 2018). In the last decade, the approach to this topic has increasingly focused on references to the complexity of this phenomenon and to the role of trans-economic components, including mechanisms and institutional frameworks of social reproduction and local-spatial specificities (Soja 2010; Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014; Hudson 2016; Peck 2016).

Public services play a prominent role in the institutional structures of social reproduction, and thus their impact on the formation and reproduction of inequalities is also important. This is particularly true of the education-learning-training system, which has been one of the most important public services since the introduction of compulsory education. This is the case despite the fact that different countries and groups of countries have developed different social histories and traditions to arrive at the diverse education systems of today, which are mainly public, but they also allow for private services in different proportions and forms (as part of state regulation), with significant differences in other features (compulsory education, basic services, institutional structure, decentralisation, responsibilities of local authorities, professional and social control).

In the case of the education system, socio-spatial inequalities and their reproduction can be captured in the evolution of the chances of progression—whether and to what extent the opportunity is provided for young people to achieve high performance according to their abilities, talents and efforts, regardless of their place of residence, family, income or social situation (Velkey 2019a). The chances of progression, in terms of external conditions, are related to the availability (the range of services available) and quality of education services (education, learning and training) in the broad sense of the term. In modern societies, organised, institutional forms of education services play a dominant role, and the role of the state is of paramount importance in regulating, managing, controlling and, to a large extent, operating these services.

In Hungary, all pupils enter secondary school by the age of 14 at the latest. Although there have been initiatives to ensure the possibility of adjustment in terms of level of education or vocational outcome, citing programme incompatibility, these have now virtually disappeared from the system. There is no debate in the literature that the Hungarian system forces pupils to change institutions too early, without sufficient justification and almost exclusively on the basis of their primary school learning outcomes (Fehérvári 2015; Hermann 2008; Zolnay 2016; Radó 2018, pp. 31–56; Kende 2020), which also fundamentally affects their chances of continuing to higher education (Velkey 2013). Thus, in Hungary, performance in primary education has a decisive impact on students' entire school careers, so the services provided at this stage of education are of particular importance for the reproduction of social inequalities. My analyses therefore focus on primary education, which under current legislation is compulsory from the age of six (typically up to fourteen, but the maximum can be up to sixteen).

In people's daily lives, the organised institutional services, as well as the frameworks (conditions) and practices that shape their use, are always local, and at the same time they include, in a complex way, the economic and social influences (opportunities, expectations, rules, relationships) that have a transversal impact on the education system, as well as their components at different scales (global, regional, territorial, local). Thus, in the case of the educational system, the impact of macro processes on everyday life, the responses of social actors to these processes, the related conflicts and their repercussions on institutional frameworks can be approached in a complex way through studies carried out in specific locations. Moreover, it is the analysis of the local phenomena that can really help in understanding the mechanisms by which the effects of hierarchies and networks that transcend local social relations, endowments and heritages are manifested and asserted (Görmar et al. 2019; Timár and Nagy 2019).

In my analyses, which are based on my own empirical research, I therefore consciously approach phenomena from a "bottom-up" perspective, as they become perceptible to people and as they shape their possibilities and influence their actions. My research focuses on the access to organised educational services for people in different places and situations, together with its circumstances, conditions and procedures. I analyse the spatial location of schools, their training capacities, differences and changes in the content and quality of their services, and the ways in which missing or inadequate services can be improved or supplemented.

In the literature on the internal inequalities of the education system (in Hungary), there is broad agreement on the direction and main features of the processes. According to this, the Hungarian education system is highly selective, even by international standards. This selectivity, however, has developed gradually over a longer period of time, and the changes of the last decade have not reduced but rather, contrary to the stated goals, reinforced the differentiation of services, and further accelerated school selection and segregation (e.g., Ercse 2019; Berki 2014; Zolnay 2018; Kende 2020; Radó 2020). Two aspects—also typical of the earlier period, but nowadays substantially intensifying—played the most important role in this phenomenon:

1. More choice for parents and more choice for schools (more competition between schools). This is mainly due to a substantial increase in the number of church schools,

which are exempt from the burden of district provision (incidentally, also funded at a higher level than public schools), and thus they have significantly more freedom in the admission of pupils (Berényi 2016; Ercse and Radó 2019; Hermann and Varga 2016; Tomasz 2017).

2. The increasing need for schools to avoid problem pupils, and for parents to avoid problem classmates. This is mainly due to the increasing pressure for separation resulting from the dependencies, rigid content standards, increasing workloads and limited pedagogical resources (catch-up, development, talent management) associated with the extreme centralisation of the public education system (Radó 2018, pp. 31–56; Velkey 2019a).

The role of these factors is often linked in empirical research to the increase in social prejudice, specifically (but also simplistically) to the issue of the presence and proportion of Roma people. The spatial patterns of selection and segregation are thus mainly explained by the latter factors in the literature. However, my research suggests that the influence of local phenomena is more extensive: it is also reflected, for example, in (local) community responses to changes in state education policy that can be considered as external conditions, and in the concrete local implementation of central decisions. Examples include:

- significant differences in the number of church schools in each region and settlement, their growth over time, their denominational distribution, their role in the local education system, or
- significant variation between municipalities and schools in the decisions of centralised educational authorities on specific issues, which directly affect the quality of education (number of groups, group divisions, specialisations, special programmes, procedures for compensating for disadvantages, provision of specialists), or
- important differences in the internal power relations of the actors involved in shaping local education, in the articulation and assertion of different interests, which are closely linked to local specificities, social composition and practices.

It is on the basis of these mechanisms that it is possible to understand how the general features of the system are applied in practice, and why and in what way individual cases differ from the general features. A common argument in connection with interpreting individual phenomena as deviating from the general pattern is that 'there are of course resilient schools that perform significantly better than their position would suggest, but individual exceptions only counterpoint, not neutralise, the main trends' (Zolnay 2016, p. 93). Understanding the mechanisms can therefore help us to interpret the specific ways in which the 'main trends' prevail and manifest themselves, without which intervention proposals to address dysfunctions and bad practices cannot be formulated in a well-founded way.

The nationalisation of local government institutions clearly defines the organisation of schooling as a state responsibility, which seems to limit the influence of local actors. However, my empirical research has shown that nationalisation has relieved local political, social and economic elites of the responsibility for organising services in a balanced way (taking into account all local interests in some way), while allowing them to assert their own interests more freely and decisively. In other words, they could enforce the quality and content of institutional services to their liking and, if they felt it necessary, expropriate them in the face of pressure for separation.

Behind these changes, our investigations revealed a conscious and radical change in policy, the essence of which was the need to control central budgetary expenditure, to build up state control as widely as possible, and to regulate content in a uniform way (not without ideological content). All this goes beyond the framework of education policy and indicates a lack of trust in the state institutional system and its actors, and a desire to assert power-political agendas that override policy considerations, i.e., to extend 'political governance' to the field of education policy.

2. Theoretical Approach

The organisation of primary education has been one of the most important institutional public services of the state in most European countries for at least over a century, which implies that bureaucratic coordination and public funding have a dominant role in the management and financing of education systems. Institutional education is therefore a large (predominantly) publicly funded bureaucratic system in which the state organises and distributes services through the regulations it has adopted and the mechanisms it controls (supervises), which are made visible (in principle) to users according to their availability. However, accessibility may be limited not only in space or time, but also by other rules and possibilities of use. Services may thus show different patterns for people in different situations, which can be understood in the theoretical framework of Lefebvre's (1991) concept of social space and Soja's (1996) concept of spatiality.

Institutional education means service units in specific places, to which images, concepts and constructs are attached, and on the basis of these they somehow appear, becoming visible and perceptible to the individual. Thus, in the case of educational services, we can also talk about the production of space: we can distinguish between perceived space (first space), imagined space (second space) and experienced space (third space) (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1996; Berki 2015). Taking this dynamic conception of spatiality further, within the 'space of available services', which can be understood as an analogy of objective and in principle equally perceptible space for everyone, we can distinguish between the 'space of offered services', which represents real possibilities for users, and its concrete representation in them, which is thus 'both known and actually available'.

For users, accessibility is not only determined by distance in terms of kilometres or time, but also by the facilities relating to social conditions that enable them to overcome these. However, even a school building that is physically accessible is not a real service option if its training profile, programme and expectations exclude or limit a group of people seeking a service. Moreover, in addition to external barriers, there are also internal barriers (values, ignorance, lack of confidence) which may prevent some people from even considering services that are formally available and could be used—further limiting their effective choice.

The state shapes who has access to what services directly through the spatial location of institutions, the allocation of training orientations and the regulation of admissions, and indirectly through other conditions affecting physical access (road network, school bus, public transport, dormitories, etc.). In other words, the state not only defines (shapes) but also interprets (constructs) the service space of education for its users.

The "offering" itself is shaped during the process of decision-making, i.e., within the framework of the power-political field. Depending on the distribution of powers and responsibilities, it may have centralised or decentralised elements, or it may be directed—directly—at the education system (education policy) or—indirectly—at other influencing factors (social, municipal, economic, budgetary policy). It is thus at these levels that different interest groups and communities can seek to shape the services offered to them, including basic or complementary services provided by churches, communities and the market, since these can also operate through state regulation and are therefore part of state education policy.

Such initiatives may include efforts to enforce services that are lacking or limited (either publicly funded or through the organisation of private services), or actions to influence specific decisions at the local level affecting the whole or parts of the training network (setting up departments, special programmes, additional services, modernising infrastructure, improving staffing conditions, developing related services such as canteens, catering, sports and community programmes).

The space offered by educational services as a "second space" thus "interprets reality through representations of spatiality" (Berki 2014, p. 96), i.e., it is a space shaped and controlled by power. The 'interpretation' is shaped jointly by the actors with different levels of influence in the different levels of the power-political field, i.e., the legal frameworks

established, the bureaucratic organisations implementing them and their members, and the interest groups influencing the implementation, including the staff of the individual schools and the various parent groups, as well as local power actors.

The role of the state is therefore important, but not exclusive, in this complex process, which is itself quite differentiated, as it comprises the legislative framework, the various levels of bureaucratic state organisations and the specific decision-makers within them. The state formulates its goals and plans in legislation, concepts and development projects, but it shows its real face through the opportunities it offers to different people (Velkey 2019a), which become real through the mediation of the power-political field. People, in turn, adapt to them, translating them for themselves, so that they appear to them in different forms according to their approach and mentality. This is the lived space, at the centre of which is the subject who lives his everyday life 'here and now' (Carman 1999). The choice of school or, more generally, the concrete decision to use a service is thus the result of an adaptation to external constraints, an interpretation of one's own limits and a personal attitude (resignation, acceptance, expansion) towards them.

3. Main Research Questions, Methods

The field(s) of "available" and "offered" educational services and their "experience" can be understood in the context of everyday life, i.e., captured through studies carried out locally. It is the analysis of the local context that makes it possible to separate the specificities of the 'place' (endowments, heritages) from the effects of hierarchies and networks that go beyond them. In the case of primary education, these two elements mean the general characteristics of the education system and the local social characteristics that shape its concrete manifestation, as well as the functioning of local power and local public life. Additionally, the collective consequence stemming from all the above in that 'place' appears in different forms to people of different situations, cultures and relationships.

Over the past half century, the state has operated three fundamentally different education systems in Hungary. After 1990, the hierarchically structured yet partially decentralised 'council' education system of state socialism was followed by an extremely decentralised system based on a central framework, municipal maintenance and funding, and broad institutional autonomy, which was replaced after 2010 by a fully centralised state system that was unified in its funding, maintenance, management and control.

However, the local effects, the concrete manifestations and consequences of the latter changes, which were radical, affecting all essential elements of the system (financing, maintenance, management, regulation, supervision, social control) can only be understood on the basis of the general characteristics of the previous period. It is the longer time span and the overall main trends that make it possible to identify the mechanisms which, influenced by local socio-power relations, determine the real opportunities and chances of people and groups in different situations to make successful progress in (among other things) the education system.

In the first part of my analysis, I will therefore review the most important features of the general structural conditions, the main trends and their changes. In doing so, I draw on the official data available at national and regional level, my own research and the results published in the national literature. I will then analyse the mechanisms, components and key features of the operation from a bottom-up perspective through the example of specific municipalities.

In the selection of the municipalities surveyed, I focused on three aspects that are also considered important in the development of school selection and segregation based on the literature (Kertesi and Kézdi 2014; Ladányi 2009; Radó 2018; Zolnay 2018): ethnic differences, local income inequalities and other important characteristics of the "education market" (number of local schools, their characteristics and facilities, the services available in the surrounding settlements). The four selected settlements can be described by different characteristics in terms of their spatial location, their municipal links and their size. One is a small town with a central role in a traditional industrial zone (Municipality A). The other

is an even smaller town in a disadvantaged border area located in the vicinity of one of the most important cities in the county, with a wide range of public services (Municipality B). The third one is a peripheral village in the wider area of this small town, with particularly poor transport links (Municipality C). The fourth is a central town in a backward area with poor economy and transport links (Municipality D). The population of these municipalities is 20,000, 10,000, 1000 and 50,000 inhabitants, respectively, with the proportion of people identifying themselves as Roma/Gypsy ethnicity being around 13%, 31%, 10% and 2%, respectively, and the proportion of households without employment being around 45%, 52%, 60% and 40%, respectively, according to the 2011 census data.

In the framework of various research projects,[1] I studied the institutional system and the functioning of primary education, the development of school segregation and the characteristics and consequences of in-school segregation in these settlements. The empirical research background for these studies was provided by visits to institutions, personal observations, document and data analysis, as well as many personal interviews and discussions. In each of the municipalities, I interviewed representatives of the school administrators, municipal leaders, school principals, teachers and other staff, parents, students and professionals from the educational services. My analysis also drew on measurable data on school performance (competency measures), the so-called family background index on the social situation of pupils, data on learning disabilities and behavioural disorders, and other complementary information on the social status, cultural and ethnic characteristics of pupils and their families. On the basis of these detailed and diverse data collections and observations, I reconstructed the primary school education systems and the most important changes in each of the municipalities studied, highlighting the local specificities that have influenced the local impact of national trends. The examples of settlements in my study can therefore not be considered as case studies in the traditional sense, but rather as 'local educational histories' of specific settlements that I reconstructed.

My thesis is therefore a summary of a longer research phase, including both theoretical and empirical studies. The main aim of my work was to show how the phenomenon of segregation in primary schools has become an increasingly widespread process in Hungary, despite the policy decisions that have been made all along rejecting segregation. I analysed the role played in this by the governance, funding and operating rules that govern the education system as a whole, and how local specificities may have strengthened, weakened or modified these general trends. Indeed, empirical studies highlighted a wide variety of practices behind the overall clear deterioration in trends, with significant variations in pupil performance. This diversity can only be understood in terms of the specific (local) mechanisms by which the general trends are expressed, and this can also draw attention to whether and how local education services can be made successful in spite of adverse external conditions.

4. The Three Main Stages of the Hungarian Education System and Their Most Important Features

4.1. Gradually Increasing Selection and Segregation after the Change in Regime

The practice of "schooling" in primary schools immediately after the change in regime was characterised by the continuation of the static, uniform tradition of the organisation and use of institutions under state socialism, following a district-based enrolment logic. Free school choice had already been introduced in the legislation (1985), but at that time, the use of district schools was still prevalent. The social composition of pupils in schools thus followed the spatial distribution of society, with a higher proportion of disadvantaged or Gypsy pupils in settlements or parts of settlements that were themselves segregated. In the early 1980s, a national survey in Hungary cited one hundred and fifty groups of pupils in which Gypsy pupils were in the majority (Havas et al. 2002). By 2005, the situation had changed significantly: while the proportion of Gypsy pupils in schools had doubled, the number of homogeneous Gypsy classes had increased eightfold, and the number of classes with more Gypsy pupils than non-Gypsy pupils was three times as high (Havas and

Liskó 2006). The literature therefore already draws attention to the growing segregation concerning mainly the Roma population in the 1990s.

Two other covert techniques of deliberately segregating pupils have also become more widespread: the practice of forcing pupils who were difficult to manage, especially Gypsy pupils, into special schools (Ladányi 2009), and the practice of segregating pupils on the basis of performance at the start of upper secondary school (age 10) in schools with several parallel classes (Velkey 2013). This institutionalised internal selection served both the needs of parents and the increase in the professional prestige of schools. Moreover, it was in line with the education policy of decentralisation and marketisation of late Kádárism, which had overshadowed the centralised but declaratively egalitarian education policies of previous decades (Kovai and Neumann 2015), and which consciously promoted pluralism, autonomy and alternativity in contrast to the earlier 'standardisation'. The choice of district schools was questioned mainly on the grounds of alternative pedagogical programmes, institutional specialisations and talent management, first in a narrow and then in an increasingly broader context.

This process has been accelerated since the mid-1990s by three factors: (1) the persistence of excess capacity (oversupply), (2) the strong differentiation of services, and (3) the changing attitudes of parents (Velkey 2019a).

1. Faced with the unsustainability of training capacities adapted to the previous demographic peak, municipalities, faced with the financial incentives since the early 1990s, have started to phase out surplus places with varying degrees of intensity. The reduction in staff numbers was followed, with a slight delay, by a reduction in the number of learning groups. However, the reduction in the number of schools has continued to lag behind, in order to avoid local conflicts. The new church primary schools created after the change in regime also played an important role in maintaining the oversupply. Thus, in almost all parts of the country, primary school surplus capacity has been maintained consistently, allowing pupils to move between schools and settlements as soon as they start primary school.
2. The strong differentiation in the quality of schools was mainly related to the budgetary situation of the municipalities. Smaller municipalities with little revenue of their own found it increasingly difficult to supplement the state subsidy, which initially declined gradually and then dramatically in real terms, and the higher unit costs of maintaining their schools resulting from a low number of children made it even more difficult. Together, these factors led to the deterioration of the educational infrastructure and equipment, difficulties in providing the necessary specialists and the impossibility of providing the conditions for catching up and talent management. Larger municipalities have been less affected because of higher staff numbers and greater budgetary room for manoeuvre, and per capita financing has made them more interested in taking in children "fleeing" from deteriorating standards. In larger cities, this effect of attracting pupils was even more pronounced because of the wider range of provision (specialised classes, art, language, IT, talent management, specialised teaching services, church schools), the remaining surplus capacity and the improvements in facilities and content resulting from the more favourable budgetary situation.
3. The change in parental attitudes played an important role in the development of these processes, which resulted in the acknowledgement of competition, the acceptance of a "competitive society", the acknowledgement of social inequalities and polarisation, and the pursuit of individual strategies aimed at achieving a better position. At the time of starting schooling, this is reflected in the choice of a "good school", and at a later age in the demand for "special classes" (foreign language, music, movement, sport, youth community, interest group). The choice of a good school is determined by its facilities, the quality of the building, equipment, professional staff, reputation, prestige and, not least, the composition of its pupils. Additionally, the choice of school

by parents with a high level of education is motivated by the prospect of further education as soon as their child enters primary school.

Thus, the persistence of overcapacity meant that the principle of school choice was widely guaranteed, i.e., the range of services available (and in principle optional) was substantially extended. However, the realistic possibility of inter-community mobility (access) was greatly influenced by the social situation (lack of school buses, state of local public transport, parents' commuting, car use, etc.), which in itself narrowed the range of those who could actually use the services offered further afield. The change in parental attitudes increased the willingness to choose, and the accelerating differentiation of services almost forced those who wanted and were able to access better-quality education to leave behind the disadvantaged smaller schools.

Increasing competition between primary schools tended to develop within larger municipalities, which could include schools in easily accessible surrounding municipalities. The conditions of competition for public schools were determined by the local authority (districts, number of classes, specialisation, infrastructure, equipment, budgetary margins). Thus, the functioning of local power, the composition and organisation of local society played a decisive role in the conditions under which individual schools could operate, how the 'education market' developed and what role the other actors (church schools, private providers, schools in neighbouring municipalities) could play in them (Radó 2018; Velkey 2019a; Zolnay 2018). Despite this diversity of practice, some form of 'elite schools' and segregated schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged or Gypsy pupils, mostly in peripheral rundown districts, appeared in all the larger cities. Thus, there was an increasingly fierce and mutually reinforcing competition between parents (pupils) for access to higher-quality provision and between institutions for children, which could mean both survival (filling places, keeping jobs) and the acquisition of pupils who were easy to manage, less problematic and promised higher attainment (Velkey 2013; Zolnay 2016). For schools in demand, this meant selecting the 'suitable' and rejecting the 'unsuitable' when recruiting pupils, while pushing the latter back to the district schools that provided compulsory admission.

The differentiation of services offered in relation to the social situation was by then not only noticeable, but also an increasingly marked and widespread phenomenon, closely following the characteristics of the settlement structure and the spatial distribution of the disadvantaged population. Thus, selection based on ability, which had already become accepted in the early 1990s, was progressively and increasingly complemented by social and ethnic selection.

The role of organised private services—apart from in the capital—was still marginal. The education of high-status, learning- and knowledge-oriented students capable of outstanding performance and the differentiated care of talented students were provided to a high standard by elite schools, including six- and eight-grade grammar schools, among which the share of church institutions was significantly higher than in other segments of public education. In 2001, the share of pupils in religious institutions was around 14% in grades 9–12, and 29% in the 5th–8th grades of special 8-year grammar schools. By 2010, the proportions had risen by just under 1% in years 9–12 and by 2–3% in years 5–8. In contrast, the share of pupils in private schools remained below 5% for both age groups in 2001, and by 2010, there was only a 2% increase in grades 9–12 (Hermann and Varga 2016). However, the role of supplementary private services and private tutors has steadily increased due to increasing competition, particularly in larger cities and especially during the most competitive periods for eight-year, six-year and traditional upper secondary school enrolment, which have the highest rates of admission to higher education (Velkey 2013).

4.2. Initiatives to Tackle the Cumulative Problems since the Early 2000s

An important change in the way in which cumulative problems are addressed was the introduction of the issue of school segregation into education policy discourse and the

clear governmental recognition of the need to address it. In the search for solutions, as a result of the fundamental problems of the seemingly unchangeable local government system due to the two-thirds legislative rules (Pálné Kovács 2008; Péteri 2005; Velkey 2013) and the maintenance of the institutional system by the local government, from the early 2000s onwards, the government tried to find solutions in three directions:

- supporting integrated education to compensate for disadvantages;
- organizing the fragmented institutional system into larger territorial units;
- introducing administrative rules to limit school segregation.

The mainstreaming of an equal opportunities approach in education policy is clearly shown by the strengthening of the specialised pedagogical services, the integration of itinerant special education and physiotherapy services, the creation of conditions for early development and diagnosis, the detailed regulation of disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged situations, the support of integrated education for pupils with special educational needs and pupils with various disabilities, supported by financial incentives, and the establishment of the regular national measurement of pupils' performance. However, these undoubtedly forward-looking measures could only be implemented in practice by the government indirectly, because the institutions were maintained by the municipalities. The actual implementation thus depended to a large extent on the approach, willingness to cooperate, sensitivity to problems and possibilities of the maintainers, as well as on the advocacy capacity and professional attitude of the institutions, which resulted in a wide variety of local practices with huge differences in this respect.

The problems of a fragmented institutional system with significant internal differences from a budgetary point of view were addressed by introducing and giving priority support to forms of association that organised institutions into larger units. The normative allocation for the institutions in the partnership (linked to the number of students), the regulation and additional normative allocation for the multi-purpose small-area partnerships and the specific normative allocations for specific tasks (which better approximate the real costs of services) encouraged the institutionalisation of cooperation between the partners. In this way, it sought to extend the practice of settlements with a larger population and generally more favourable financial situation, with better provision of specialists, providing more differentiated and higher-quality services, to schools in smaller settlements in their vicinity (Balázs and Kovács 2012; Velkey 2019b). The accumulation process, which is also evident at the level of data, and the resulting improvements reduced the gap in the differences in service quality to a lesser extent than expected. In addition to the widespread improvement in asset and professional provision indicators, some studies have also pointed out that the mobilised additional resources improved services in the main settlements rather than in peripheral settlements, and that the role of administrative references may be more important than the actual expansion of services in explaining the improvements in the data (Kovács and Koós 2018; Nikitscher and Velkey 2012; Zolnay 2008).

In response to the increasing phenomenon of direct segregation, and in line with the recommendations of the professional public (Kertesi and Kézdi 2009), several administrative desegregation rules were introduced, of which two types can be distinguished:

- school enrolment and admission rules, detailed rules on the obligation to attend school in the district, the principles of districting, and procedural rules on over-enrolment, and
- rules guaranteeing the progression of pupils in schools with fewer than eight grades.

The first type of rules aimed to close the segregation channels that existed, with increasingly complex and bureaucratic procedures. The second type of rules were necessary because, in the case of accelerating school segregation, if an institution in a disadvantaged small town had fewer than eight classes, none of the larger institutions in a nearby town would take the difficult-to-handle, predominantly Roma pupils.

There is no significant disagreement among experts on the intention and effectiveness of the initiatives:

- The open embrace of equal opportunities in education policy and its role in shaping attitudes is unanimously seen as a positive step (Havas 2008; Zolnay 2016; Radó 2018). There has been a noticeable increase in the acceptance of an integrated approach to education among professionals working in schools, to a lesser extent among school administrators and to an even lesser extent among parents.
- By the middle of the decade, the level of segregation in urban areas had significantly declined and then stagnated (Kertesi and Kézdi 2014). There has also been a significant reduction in selection based on ethnicity and social status within institutions (Havas and Zolnay 2011).
- According to several empirical studies, in the absence of other options, urban school authorities have only been able to reduce primary school segregation by closing down school sites that have become Roma-majority (Radó 2018), which has already divided professional opinion.
- However, in those municipalities where the local school's enrolment area was part of an education market that was easily accessible from the municipality, the higher-status students continued to be the predominant group (Zolnay 2016).
- Overall, the measures have only been able to mitigate the negative trends, which can be attributed to the limited and indirect steps mentioned above. Since the governance of an institution is in the hands of a local government body elected by the local society and is dependent on it for its re-election, if the local society wants to segregate, the collective response to even progressive desegregation rules will be their collective circumvention, especially if the system of control and punishment does not work (Radó 2020; Velkey 2013).

4.3. Key Features of the New Centralised Public Education Governance after 2010

After the 2010 parliamentary elections, the governing parties, which won a qualified majority in parliament—and were thus not constrained by the two-thirds rule that had bound previous governments—used their broad social mandate to push for a radical transformation of the entire social system. In doing so, they fundamentally changed the constitutional system and all other subsystems under the control of the state, including the public administration, territorial administration, local government, and all institutional human services, including the entire system of education, which are relevant to our study.

All this was done without broad social and professional consensus, claiming political legitimacy, after brief preparation and formal professional consultation, and with all the actors concerned confronted with ready facts. In other words, they were unilateral, rapid and far-reaching changes affecting almost all major elements of the previous system (Velkey 2017).

The changes affecting the education system were part of the process of creating a "new state", as stated in the explanatory memorandum of the bill. After parliamentary debates in 2011 and 2012, they came into force in September 2012 and early 2013, respectively, and after several minor amendments, they were adopted in 2017 as a result of a broader correction that left the basic features of the new system unchanged (Semjén et al. 2018).

The radical transformation after 2010 can be divided into three distinct phases:

1. In 2010–2012, the erosion of the previous system took place as those who had played a key role in running it (municipalities, professional organisations, professional staff) became more uncertain and sought a new way forward.
2. Between 2013 and 2016, after the introduction of the new system, the process of adaptation started, and the barriers and dysfunctions that made the operation and functioning difficult became visible.
3. The third phase, starting in 2017, is a period of consolidation of the regulatory, organisational, governance and financing system after the correction.

Studies dealing with the interpretation and phasing of changes after 2010 typically refer to two phases, and the phase boundary is aligned with the legislative changes that define the basic features of the system (Semjén et al. 2018), or the public policy debates

that shape them (Radó 2021), and therefore they put it at 2016–2017. These approaches focus on systemic changes, and are therefore less sensitive to changes in the local forces that also influence the decisions of actors (institutions, teachers, parents). However, the two to three years of uncertainty preceding the enactment of concrete changes, fraught with debates and assumptions, may lead to major changes in the individual and collective attitudes of actors, in the way local societies interpret the situation, and thus in their concrete reactions. Moreover, in the case of Hungary, due to the severe domestic political crisis that preceded the global economic crisis, this period of uncertainty began at the turn of 2008–2009, anticipating a change in government and, as a consequence, a marked change in the direction of social policy. This period of several years was thus characterised not by documented changes in the system, but by drifting and path-finding related to political movements, political and social policy references, drafts, debates and the assumptions associated with them.

Two important sub-components of change can be distinguished in the background of the processes shaping the primary school education system and within it the processes of segregation and selection:

- bringing the entire system of public education, which was predominantly owned and maintained by local governments, under the direct control of the central state (nationalisation, ultimate centralisation and uniform regulation for all), and
- a public education policy that promotes the expansion of the role of churches in public education, free from the constraints of the state system, and thus maintains surplus capacity in almost all parts of the country.

4.4. Key Consequences of Nationalisation, Centralisation and Unification

The most important features of the new system were pervasive centralisation, a shift to bureaucratic management and control, and, in line with this, the abolition of the organisational, financial and professional autonomy of schools (Radó 2021). Regulatory instruments adapted to the former decentralised system, which oriented actors with a wide range of autonomy, disappeared or were replaced by centralised bureaucratic mechanisms. The formerly municipally owned and managed institutional network was brought under direct central state control, with school facilities remaining temporarily under municipal ownership, but later also being taken over by the central state. The state schools ceased to be independent legal entities, and all management powers were transferred to the Klebelsberg Centre for the Maintenance of Institutions (KLIK), which operated the entire system through its de-concentrated district bodies, which were endowed with only bureaucratic powers. As part of the centralised management and funding model, uniform and compulsory content regulation was introduced. Quality management based on self-evaluation was replaced by an external, bureaucratic evaluation system and a promotion system in line with it (Radó 2021). Professional forums were formalised with the establishment of a centrally organised mandatory professional chamber and a new centralised delegation scheme for other professional organisations. Later changes included the removal of vocational education and training from the control of the central institution-maintainer in 2015, and the creation of 60 new school districts after 2017, replacing the previous 198 de-concentrated offices. The task of the restructured Klebelsberg Centre (no longer an institution-maintaining body) has been reduced to professional management and supervision, while the powers of the school districts have been significantly increased; they have a separate budget, their heads are appointed directly by the Minister of Education, and all substantive powers (employer rights, service structure, pupil admission, maintenance, development and use of infrastructure) have been transferred to them. This has removed the previous extreme centralisation, but the reorganisation of the institutions into larger units has increased the workload of the school districts, the distance between the districts and the individual institutions, and the powers of the heads of the institutions have not changed, which together have further reinforced the bureaucratic procedures and approach to the process of management and control.

Although the most frequently cited justification for the overall overhaul of the system was to reduce the huge disparities and inequalities in the basic public services provided by local governments, the hidden objectives of the above changes can be found in the need to control central budget expenditure, to build up as much state control as possible and to regulate content in a uniform way (Semjén et al. 2018). The pronounced and combined enforcement of these factors points to a distrust of the actors of the education system and the entire institutional system, and in itself also justifies the need to enforce power-political aspects that override political considerations, which is directly enforced in all parts of the system today through the centralised administrative and bureaucratic control, as well as the emptying out and political occupation of the mechanisms of social and professional control.

Placing the institutions under direct state maintenance and centralised management seemed to address the problems arising from the highly differentiated financial situation of the municipalities and the per capita financing. The resource constraints of smaller municipal schools have been addressed (Péteri 2014), but the funding situation of previously better-off urban and metropolitan schools has declined substantially. The recurring solvency problems of the KLIK and the resulting need for financial consolidation were due to systematic under-budgeting (Semjén et al. 2018), which forced school district leaders to cut spending and only undertake the minimum mandatory tasks. These measures have substantially hindered the provision of conditions necessary for the organisation of integrated education, the compensation of disadvantages, and the treatment of learning and behavioural disorders (lower group sizes, allowing group splits, individual coaching, small group sessions, the necessary specialists, development tools, provision of adequate infrastructure, further training), i.e., all the factors that reduce segregation and reduce selection pressure.

Thus, in the process of the nationalisation of services, the previous systems of complementary services (specialised pedagogical services, professional services, social complementary tasks, etc.) were first dismantled and then, at the level of individual institutional units (institutions, sites), only the conditions for social services (all-day care, school meals, school doctor) were created. Specialised physical education, special education, early diagnosis and development, organised within school districts, have declined markedly, even in larger towns, due to budgetary constraints and limitations. Indeed, the previous funding system led the actors to be interested in identifying and addressing care needs, while the new one provides the budget to cover only the most necessary staff (Velkey 2019b).

The increase in the number of compulsory teaching hours, the rigidity of content standards, the limitation of independent initiatives, the elimination of overtime compensation and the continuing lack of additional staff (teaching assistants, mental health, IT support, etc.) have further increased the so-called separation pressure, making quality pedagogical work much more difficult (Radó 2018, pp. 31–56; Velkey 2019a). Schools, without tools and support professionals, became partners in organising homogeneous groups and avoiding problematic students, i.e., they first acknowledged, later accepted, and possibly (also) supported selection and segregation.

4.5. The Rapid Expansion of the Role of Churches Freed from the Rigid Constraints of the State System and Its Consequences

The increase in the number and proportion of ecclesiastical institutions, which accelerated in parallel with the gradual restructuring of the education system, has set in motion a new process of differentiation and polarisation of services, in which local conditions and local actors have played a decisive role.

Between 2001 and 2009, the number of religious and private institutions and their share of students grew slowly and steadily. After 2010, the number of new private institutions slowed down and then declined, while the number of religious institutions grew much more dynamically between 2010 and 2014. The growth rate continued after 2014, but it slowed down (Hermann and Varga 2016). The results of this expansion process can

be seen in the increase in the share of pupils attending primary education in religious institutions from 7.4% in 2010 to 15.6% in 2018. The data show that its dynamism was at its highest between 2010 and 2013 (+6.4%) (Varga 2019), i.e., during the transition period when concrete plans for changes in relation to the new education system were formulated and implemented in several steps. In contrast, the share of pupils in private institutions, after stagnating following a slow expansion until 2010, gained momentum following the nationalisation of municipal schools and increased from 1.8% to 2.6% in 2018. However, this growth was almost exclusively confined to cities, especially the larger ones, and was closely linked to regulations that severely restricted pedagogical innovation.

The rapid expansion of the network of ecclesiastical institutions is mostly the result of the transfer of municipal (later state) owned schools to various Christian churches (Ercse and Radó 2019), which is confirmed by empirical research on the topic (Neumann and Berényi 2019; Erőss 2019; Zolnay 2016). Among the reasons for this, we can highlight the wider choice between pupils (1), the more favourable budgetary situation (2), the locally retained decision-making powers and the significantly greater pedagogical freedom (3).

1. Almost immediately after the change in government, the financial counter-interest of municipalities in the transfer of institutions was abolished (Tomasz 2017). In contrast to the district provision obligation imposed on the public primary service and the exclusion of enrolment-related screening, the minimum proportion of students to be admitted from the district was set at 25% for church schools, thus opening up the possibility of a wide selection of applicants, reinforced by allowing admission screening based on religious content (Ercse 2018).
2. The higher level of public funding has been reflected in the provision of full wages for employees not limited by specific indicators, per capita operating subsidies that significantly exceed the specific operating costs of public institutions, and regular additional development subsidies (Ercse and Radó 2019).
3. In church schools, the head of the institution retains the powers of employment, management and (mostly) financial administration. They also have considerably greater powers in the organisation of pedagogical work (group numbers, group splitting, small group teaching, accounting for teachers' compulsory hours, involvement of other specialists) and in the choice of textbooks.

The measures listed above clearly demonstrate the government's strong support for church institutions, which has been and is still being repeatedly confirmed by senior government officials through concrete statements and symbolic gestures (opening of the national school year).

If the government's attitude towards state institutions is described in terms of 'distrust', then in the case of church institutions, it is characterised by government 'trust', which is based on the ideological commitment of churches and their institutions and, consequently, on the (supposed) value-oriented educational guarantees that are considered to be of paramount importance in basic care, which is further evidence of the role of power-political considerations overriding policy decisions.

As to which of the factors listed above played a role in the transfer of a specific institution or the creation of a new one, and which actors initiated the change locally, the abundant empirical research available provides a diverse picture. The most frequent initiatives undertaken by municipalities are driven by the predominance of surplus budget support and local decision-making powers. This is confirmed by the fact that between 2010 and 2015, the number of municipalities with only church primary schools increased from 38 to 137 (Tomasz 2017). Additionally, although these included some that provided an escape route for the non-Gypsy population of the neighbouring municipality (Zolnay 2016), a very large number of them became segregated institutions themselves.

In addition to the need to obtain additional resources and to preserve institutional autonomy, institutional and parental initiatives were significantly more often cited as reasons for more free enrolment and a more competitive position, which clearly indicates a desire to select between pupils. The negative experience of municipal maintenance and the

fear of state maintenance may also play an important role in the background of institutional and/or parental initiatives. Behind formally ecclesiastical or parochial initiatives, there is often a desire for a value-oriented, committed Christian education on the part of parents or the local church community. Zolnay's empirical research (Zolnay 2016) typified the initiatives (faith-based, status-preserving, position-acquiring, commuting, providing local influence) and also pointed out that in only a part of them does the strengthening of segregation and selection appear as a real reason.

When evaluating the process as a whole, it is also important to note that empirical research shows that in the vast majority of cases, churches have been open to initiatives, are cooperative with all stakeholders, have used public funds to run the institutions and have been partners in developing the content and infrastructure and in obtaining the necessary additional resources (development projects, public grants).

In summary, the spectacular growth of the role of churches in public education has provided a new, state-supported opportunity to "escape" from the rigid rules of state education. In which localities and at the initiative or in the interests of which actors these opportunities were used depended primarily on the internal relations, characteristics and divisions of local societies. This is illustrated by the following examples of different practices in the municipalities.

5. Brief Summary Report on Local Educational Situations—Results of Empirical Research

5.1. Town "A"

In "Town A" in the mid-2000s, there were five independent schools run by the municipality, four of which were relatively close to the centre of the municipality and easily accessible from almost all parts of the town. The suburban school was located in the outskirts of the town in a part of the municipality which was formerly attached to it, with a mixed population and a traditional village structure. In addition, the municipality had a church primary school established immediately after the change in regime, and a minority primary school run by a minority municipality. The latter provided for the emerging educational needs of the church and the national minorities with significantly smaller classes (12–15 per grade) than the classes typically run in municipal schools with 20–25 pupils. The professionals working in the county's municipal schools for pupils with mild intellectual disabilities provided a high level of support for the town's needs for early diagnosis, development, itinerant remedial education and physical education. Of the municipal schools, the one in the town centre (School C) had a German minority language specialisation, and the school located in the larger and newer building (School D) had a physical education section. This was essentially the traditional structure of the municipal school system (the local primary school education market) over several decades, which was only minimally modified by the emergence of the eight-form church grammar school in the neighbouring town.

The reduction in the number of pupils was initially offset by a reduction in the number of classes started, but in 2006, in line with national trends, the municipal schools were also merged into a single administrative unit. Due to further reductions in staff numbers, classes were moved from the smaller and older school building in the town centre to the larger new building in 2009, as planned and scheduled. In the meantime (in 2008), the central building of the merged school (School D) was upgraded to include an English bilingual class in the upper grades in an ascending system, while the previously popular physical education class was also retained. This was done to counteract the draining effect of the eight-grade church grammar school in the neighbouring town, and to increase the chances of local students to gain access to the four-grade dual language grammar school, also in the neighbouring town. The reorganisation of the schools into a single administrative unit and the withdrawal of one of the buildings was a consequence of the deteriorating financial and budgetary situation, while the dual language section was an institutional and municipal response to parental pressure. The smaller and older buildings of the merged institution (Schools E and F) were thus only used for normal (non-specialised) classes.

In 2005, five of the town's seven schools were run by the municipality, operating on a district-based enrolment basis, including the German minority language class and the physical education section. The church and minority municipal schools enrolled just under 15% of the local pupils. Thus, in this period, school selection was still limited when primary school started, and ethnic segregation did not accelerate despite the high number of Roma pupils. The composition of the schools followed the internal structure of the settlement, with the proportion of children from higher-status families in the inner town, minority and church schools only slightly higher than average. Gypsy pupils were relatively evenly distributed among schools according to residential location.

By the end of the decade, the role of district-based enrolment had declined significantly as a result of increasing selection pressures and changes in the school structure of the municipality. Urban and non-municipal classes now accounted for almost 40% of places, compared with 15% previously.

Locals attribute the increasing selection pressure to four factors:

- a change in parental attitudes, which is reflected in an increase in the demand for parochial and minority municipal schools and for specialised classes;
- the increasing pull of the neighbouring town's eighth-grade grammar school;
- the intensification of competition for further secondary schooling and fears of disengagement, and
- an increase in the proportion of Gypsy students.

The references are more indicative of the need for elitism, with little change in the distribution of Gypsy pupils between schools despite increasing segregation pressures. All interviewees attributed this to the result of measures to compensate for disadvantages and to the identification with centrally imposed desegregation rules, which were also in line with local social traditions and which had ensured a balanced coexistence of Gypsies, ethnic Hungarians and Hungarians of different religions for decades. Developmental pedagogy and itinerant therapeutic pedagogy services were available in all of the town's schools, the necessary specialists were available, and despite the decreasing number of classes, the groups were divided proportionally, thus ensuring differentiated education and efficient talent management. The pressure for segregation from teachers and parents did not shift to the point of pushing out an ever-widening range of problem pupils. Therefore, the sought-after schools of the local elite were not only accessible, but they were even offered to children from more difficult social situations, including those from Gypsy families.

However, after 2010, the national situation changed radically, and this accelerated school selection and segregation in "Town A".

- An important local outcome of this process was the renovation of the previously vacated inner town school building, and the creation of a new church school in 2012. The number of school places thus continued to grow despite the declining number of pupils, and competition between local schools for children from better-qualified, higher-status, knowledge- and learning-oriented families became even fiercer. This has increased the pressure on public schools to open specialised classes and to increase internal selection. The proportion of places in district provision in the town fell to below 40%, while places in non-public institutions increased to 25%, almost 10% above the national average.
- Here, too, service links between institutions broke down and there was a significant decline in external educational services to compensate for disadvantage. Additionally, the deterioration in teaching conditions made teachers increasingly discouraged and resigned.
- Although formally the anti-segregation provisions remained in force, the change in the classification of disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged pupils at the administrative level removed segregation in the town. Previously, almost 90% of the class of only Gypsy pupils in Building E was a class of pupils with cumulative disadvantage. After the change in the rules, less than 50% of the same children became cumulatively disadvantaged, so that according to the official data, the class was not segregated, and

therefore there was no need for anti-segregation measures and additional resources to address cumulative disadvantages.

As a result, the two church schools, as well as the German section and the English dual language classes of the state school became the training ground for the local social, political and economic elite. These classes were then essentially closed to disadvantaged, low-status and (especially) Roma pupils. The schools are formally accessible to them, yet they do not represent an education option actually offered to these students.

Prior to 2010, the town centre and nationality schools had the highest performance on the national competency tests: these schools were among the best performing primary schools in the country (top 5%) in both sixth- and eighth-grade math and reading comprehension. After 2012 (when pupils were entering sixth form at the time of the school reorganisation), their results deteriorated noticeably, and then in the last few years they showed slight improvement in the nationality schools. This may be explained by the fact that in a period of accelerating segregation, the nationality school became an escape route for better-off Gypsy families.

For the average Gypsy pupil, the schools available (offered) remain in principle the state-run D, E, F and G, which, due to their spatial location, exclude the suburban (D/G) and the D/F school on the other side of the town, except for those living nearby. The latter school district traditionally has a lower proportion of Gypsy pupils. For the more disadvantaged pupils and the majority of Gypsy pupils in the city, the choice of school E is a reality. This is where the majority of Gypsy pupils are relegated to, except for those who, risking integration difficulties due to growing social prejudice, seek escape routes (with limited other options), such as the B (nationality) school.

In 2019, the best results in the competency tests were achieved by the pupils of the church school founded in 2012 (especially in mathematics). This is not only due to the parental background, but also to the pedagogical work. The school performs particularly well on both the value added and the family background index. In the traditional church school, English and German language provision are slightly above the national average, showing slight improvement over time. The school that has become the main destination for Gypsy pupils performed in line with the average until 2012–2013, and then showed a marked deterioration. Due to the low number of pupils participating in the measurements, family background index data are not available, but the low participation is in itself indicative. The results of the schools located in the suburbs and in the older building, which performed district tasks, also showed a slightly deteriorating trend, regarding more recent results—in line with national data—also underperforming relative to the social situation of families.

5.2. Town "B"

"Town B" traditionally had three primary schools. In the 1990s, the modern, well-equipped school in the town centre was one of the most successful small-town institutions in the county's academic competitions. The other two schools were located on the outskirts of the town. One was near the industrial estate: it was attended by the children of industrial workers (large food processing plants). The other was an old school in a zone with a higher Gypsy population. Neither a religious nor an ethnic school was established in the settlement, nor is it currently in operation.

As in "Town A", until the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, pupils chose the school nearest to their place of residence, following the logic of district-based provision. The social composition of the schools followed the spatial distribution of the population: children from higher-status families tended to go to the inner school, Hungarian children from lower-status families went to the industrial estates, and Gypsy pupils from the peripheral areas went to the least-equipped old school. The two classes run in each grade of the inner school were, according to the then accepted practice, formed on the basis of academic results after the fourth grade, with the aim of creating homogeneous groups. Competency tests clearly show a significant variation in results by class. The better class

in the inner school showed results significantly above the small-town average, while the other class, similar to the one in the suburban school, showed average results.

After 2006, the merger of the schools into one institution was carried out in this town too, followed by the removal of the old building as a second step. This was conducted by the municipality, citing the reduction in the number of children, the need to renovate the old building and the desegregation rules that were already in force at the time. The evacuation of the old school building was carried out in one phase, with the classes of the old school being held together and placed next to the two functioning normal classes of the inner school, which previously had three parallel classes. The small group of pupils with mild intellectual disabilities from the inner school were also kept in a separate class. According to the 2008–2010 competency tests conducted after the merger, the (third) class transferred from the old school scored 57% of the top class's average in mathematics and 63% in reading comprehension in the sixth grade, well below the national average.

The merger and the removal of the buildings set off a chain reaction that quickly developed due to the large number of Gypsy pupils entering the inner school. According to the enrolment figures, a gradual departure of pupils from the upper grades of the inner school started almost immediately after the merger, to the classes of the upper grades of the suburban school with lower enrolment on the one hand, and to the eight-grade church grammar school in the nearby big city on the other. At the same time, even after the fourth grade, an increasing proportion of pupils left the school in search of eight-grade grammar schools in the surrounding towns. By the time of first grade enrolment, more people from the inner town had already opted for the industrial estate school and the well-organised, well-equipped primary schools of the easily accessible big city. Thus, whereas previously the local primary school education market at the first-grade level was not affected at all by the services of the surrounding municipalities and the available eight-grade secondary school education had only a limited impact on the first grade, this situation changed dramatically after the merger. As the city's schools became devalued in the eyes of the local elite, those affected were forced to seek the service appropriate for them in a wider education market at extra cost and inconvenience.

Due to the fewer entrants and those departing, classes in the inner school started to be reorganised, which further accelerated the 'exodus', as one school staff member put it. According to locals, there are now at least two buses of primary school-age pupils going into the neighbouring town every day.

The data from the competency tests clearly confirm the migration between schools and accelerating segregation. The two remaining parallel classes in the inner school, despite their small numbers (15–20 pupils), have been among the lowest performing groups of pupils in the country in the last three years in the sixth-grade maths tests, nearly 300 points below the national average and 200 points below the average achieved by the school in the industrial estate.

According to local experts, the removal of the old building was a serious mistake. Given the segregation of the population on the basis of location, the accumulation of problems in the old school should have been addressed by strengthening pedagogical work and providing equipment and specialists, thus avoiding the collapse of the town's school system and the flight of more and more people to the big city.

In their view, the decision that started the negative process was politically motivated and initiated from outside, as they feel that the nationalisation of schools now makes it impossible to represent the interests of the local community in a broad sense. "The state took the school and with it took the responsibility, and then told everyone to get on as they could. Those who can, do, and those who can't, stay", said one exasperated school worker. In essence, then, as local services deteriorated and disintegrated, mobile, high-status families with good advocacy skills created for themselves the right (offered) services by expanding access and constituting a wider, larger education market. This opportunity is not available to those who are often fleeing to the next town. Some of them may enter a

school in the industrial estate, while the rest remain, relegated to the inner-town school, the only one available to them, which becomes a clearly segregated institution.

Teacher workloads, lack of recognition and the marginalisation of professional teaching services are seen by all as important factors in the dramatic acceleration of school selection and segregation. According to the local population, the increase in social polarisation almost automatically leads to segregation, with pupils being grouped according to their family background, especially where there is a higher proportion of Gypsies and where their social integration is difficult.

5.3. Village "C"

The story of "Village C" presents a very different picture. There is a single school with a small class size for each grade. The geographical location of the village and its transport links make it difficult to reach a larger town with a higher level of services. The district seat is 28 km away and the nearest larger village is 12 km away, but in the opposite direction. Two other villages with one primary school in each, both of which are difficult to maintain and have low staffing levels, can be reached via this village.

Apart from the few students who commute to secondary school every day, barely a dozen people leave the town for work, so the number of students commuting with their parents is minimal. Local children either go to the local school, or the family would have to move to the next village just for school, which used to happen only in a few cases but not any longer. Due to the high proportion of Roma people in the settlement, all classes in the school have a Roma majority, and thus the institution can be described as a highly segregated ghetto school, according to the literature. The local (accessible) market for educational services is thus essentially a single school: the smaller schools in the neighbouring villages present no alternatives as they are not better off, either in terms of facilities or the supply of specialists. Only the lower proportion of Gypsy pupils was the reason why some children used to commute to these schools, but this did not become the norm. The example of one or two children who did so made it clear to the residents that commuting did not offer any more prospects. In other words, it was necessary to try to move forward locally.

During my research, I only met a single Gypsy woman working locally in the social field, who had enrolled her child in an eight-form religious grammar school in a large city in another region after finishing primary school, hoping that the remoteness, once-a-month meetings and high-quality boarding facilities would give them extra mobility.

In essence, then, it is the contraction of available services that has created a situation in which the school has become a prominent symbol of survival for the local community. The local community therefore made a huge commitment to the school, both during and after the period of municipal maintenance: everyone was committed to its survival, operation and development. As a result, with the help of EU funds, the building was completely renovated a few years ago and a new gymnasium was built, bringing the infrastructure and equipment up to the standards that can rightly be expected today. The school's teaching staff all live locally, and local government leaders and farmers also send their children here, as do those on public work or social benefits. They try to provide a personalised service by organising smaller groups to nurture talent and compensate for disadvantage. The change in approach and development has taken time, but the results are clear.

According to the data from competency tests, from 2008 to the present, the sixth-grade math and reading scores of students have always been at the level of the municipal average, with minor fluctuations. The eighth-grade results in reading comprehension remain around the municipal average, but in mathematics they exceed it in several year groups, showing the results of cooperation and care, further strengthening the potential for improvement and progress.

5.4. Town "D"

"Town D" has an extensive primary and secondary education system. As the demographic tide ebbed in the mid-1990s, the municipality drew up detailed plans to withdraw surplus capacity and improve the conditions for high quality education. This forward planning based on data and analysis characterised the town until the 'nationalisation' of schools.

The town's primary school network initially provided services in fourteen buildings, of which a small school in one of the annexed villages operated as one of the sites of a school in the nearest town. Among the schools, the one that stood out based on its special programme was one that worked with small groups and provided training from kindergarten to graduation in one of the nationality languages. In the second half of the 1980s, at the initiative of the local elite, a new school was built in the town centre, which also offered twelve years of education with two classes per year and a six-year secondary school with admissions from outside the school. In addition, a church primary school with one class per year, established during the period of the change in regime, and an eight-year grammar school, also established during this period and maintained by another church, enriched the local services.

From its foundation to the present day, the church primary school has provided a service to families with close links to the church, and can therefore be described as clearly faith-based. In response to the establishment of an eight-year church grammar school, the local high-prestige grammar school also started an eight-form course, but after a few years, based on the enrolment experience, it reverted to the traditional four-form grammar school education (there is one high school in the district seat, and beyond this the nearest secondary education centre with a wide range of services is in a middle-sized town, 45 km away. The majority of secondary school students studying in the district or in the county town 60 km away typically live in dormitories due to the difficulty of public transport). The eight-form church grammar school has always lagged behind the two leading municipal grammar schools in terms of demand and popularity, and for many decades, a higher education-oriented vocational school specialising in economics running dual language programmes was also ahead of it. Because of the well-organised and high-quality primary schools, one six- and two eight-form grammar schools met the demand for non-traditional secondary education. In addition to these, the town also had a school for children with mild intellectual disabilities, which later provided integrated education for children with autism.

Almost all of the institutions recruited pupils primarily from their districts, and each tried to create an attractive image by organising specialised sections, sports classes and talent groups. The three schools in the inner town were the most sought-after because of their location, but even in these schools the proportion of pupils from outside the district was at most 20%. Few children were brought in from the surrounding villages (+5%) because of the well-functioning institutional system in those villages. The spatial distribution of Gypsies in the municipality affected two school districts, but at the end of the century, only one of these had a proportion of Gypsy pupils of 20–25%.

The competition between institutions was triggered by a reduction in the number of pupils, which was further exacerbated by the municipality's plans to reduce the network and even consider closing buildings. However, after careful consultation, the municipality managed to contain and regulate the intensifying competition by a set of rules, which also included principles for a longer-term restructuring of the network. An important prerequisite for a regulated competition was to strive for a balanced provision of infrastructure and equipment, to promote pedagogical innovation and talent management in the city, and to develop a complex local system of early diagnosis and development, developmental pedagogy, educational counselling and a travelling therapeutic pedagogy network. These services were available under the same conditions in all of the city's institutions.

The local enrolment rules (as conditions of competition) also set out the procedures adopted by each school, the maximum number of classes that can start in each school, the

minimum number of pupils in each class, the institutional specialities and the enrolment districts. The districts were established on a proportional basis, i.e., each school was able to admit pupils from outside the district in similar proportions, subject to maximum enrolment. Only the two small schools in the two municipalities formerly annexed to the town and the nationality school were subject to special rules to help them survive.

Until 2010, this regulated competition ensured balanced and high-quality conditions for primary education in the city. Maximum class sizes and the maintenance of proportional district enrolment constraints limited elitism, and the balanced provision of conditions ensured good quality education in all schools. The fact that the church primary school operated with small numbers, it was located on the outskirts of the city, and the principle of recruitment based on a commitment to faith was consistently maintained certainly played a role in this. Another consequence of regulated competition was that the reduction in the number of children was followed without major conflict by a reduction in the school network. As a result, three primary school buildings were withdrawn from primary education, which are still used for other purposes today.

The previous system was not completely reversed even after 2010, but selection and segregation not only became more pronounced, but increased markedly in many schools, with a noticeable reduction in services to address disadvantage. The three sought-after inner town schools were joined by a fourth, a dual language school, which became the school for the 'entrepreneurial elite'. This elitism was further reinforced by the establishment of primary education grades 1–4 and a kindergarten on behalf of the eight-form church grammar school. This has led to a decline in enrolment in schools in peripheral areas and the spread of the phenomenon of negative selection. As a result, the proportion of Gypsy pupils in the aforementioned peripheral schools has risen from 50% to over 80%. The data of the competence measures approximating the family situation by means of a questionnaire survey show a value (−0.712) significantly below the national county average and the town average, which is essentially the same (+0.175). Furthermore, the school in the annexed municipality has become a small institution for low-status families living locally (here the family background index is +0.003). However, an important consequence of the former well-functioning local education system is that the former school's results in the competency tests are slightly below the county average in mathematics, but close to the county average in reading comprehension. The peripheral school has the reverse results, being below average in reading comprehension but above the national average in mathematics. Based on enrolment figures, these two schools are today on the verge of closure. The further expansion of selection mechanisms is prevented by enrolment rules that continue to limit the number of classes that can be started in the more desirable schools.

6. Summary and Conclusions

In the course of our analysis, with the background of the processes shaping the primary school education system and the segregation and selection within it, we have identified the two most important components of the changes that are ubiquitous (i.e., appearing everywhere in some form) as: (1) the nationalisation of the system, resulting in the extreme centralisation of control and as a consequence the bureaucratic approach and procedures that have become dominant, and (2) the educational policy supporting the substantial expansion of the role of the churches and thus maintaining excess capacities in almost every corner of the country.

1. Nationalisation, the extreme centralisation of public education management, the bureaucratic approach that became dominant, and the financial considerations that came to the fore due to the budgetary constraints on state schools, not only pushed differentiated education, which helped to compensate for disadvantages and nurture talent, into the background, but also pushed schools, teachers and parents towards homogeneous classes and groups of pupils, further reinforcing the pressure for segregation that had already been present in society.

2. Our analyses have shown, in line with the literature, the high level of government support for church institutions and their substantial expansion in primary education. In contrast with the aforementioned 'distrust' of the state institutional system, the attitude towards the educational activities of the churches is characterised by government 'trust'. This is explained by the ideological commitment of the churches and their institutions and the (supposed) guarantees of value-oriented education, which is considered by government policy to be of paramount importance in basic provision—providing further evidence of the role of power-political considerations overriding policy decisions. Priority government support translates into financial resources that substantially exceed those available for state education, development grants, significantly greater pedagogical freedom, much wider options for organising groups and classes, which, together with the 'freedom' to select between applicants, opens up the possibility that within the services available, there could be a distinction between services offered to families from different social groups, social backgrounds and ethnicities.

The empirical research on the expansion of church institutions shows that the initiators of the specific decisions leading to the increase in the number of church institutions and the reasons behind them present a diverse and complex picture. In line with this, my own empirical research also draws attention to the fact that in addition to the bureaucratic mechanisms of everyday operation and management, the local characteristics that influence the implementation of the most important changes in the education system referred to above play a decisive role in the concrete local manifestation of these changes. Local specificities are mediated by local political and social elites and by the (management and teaching staff of) educational institutions towards de-concentrated bureaucratic educational governance with limited, but still some, room for manoeuvre. The development of these processes is thus determined by the relationship and the willingness to cooperate between three actors: the local elite, the bureaucratic administration and the staff of the schools.

Based on local conditions and traditions, this could mean supporting the organisation of church school education, initiating the establishment of branches in public schools, i.e., consciously differentiating the local education system and expropriating higher-quality courses. It can also mean choosing a better-serving training place in another municipality, i.e., acknowledging the deterioration of the local training system and abandoning it. Alternatively, of course, in the absence of other options, it may mean making the local school suitable for the quality of education required, which may also involve some consideration of the interests of other local residents. In the latter case, therefore, local actors consciously limit school segregation, seeing the collective development of the school as a means of pursuing their own interests, and thus selection within the institution is also characterised by the dominance of pedagogical considerations and is determined by the objectives of quality and effectiveness of education.

The accelerating differentiation of available services, on the other hand, results in a self-expanding process, which is reflected in different choices depending on the social situation and the attitude towards schooling, knowledge and learning. High-interest, high-status groups seek to organise good services for themselves, or to access them in other localities. This goes hand in hand with the segregation of families by social background, increasing elitism, which may include the exclusion of lower-status people, restricting their access to "selected" institutions offered to higher-status people. Parents who are less sensitive to knowledge and learning tend to continue to prefer the district school, but if they consider its social composition and facilities to be dangerous, they seek escape routes and take their children to schools that are offered and available to them, but less favoured by the elite. In addition, elitist schools and those that provide escape routes tend to close rigidly to children from the worst-off families, who are then pushed back into the worst district schools. This further accelerates the differentiation of services and distributes pupils between schools (sites, classes) according to social background. This process is particularly

sensitive to ethnic differences: where there are large numbers of Gypsies and sharpening social polarisation, the impact is even more rapid and dramatic.

Thus, the earlier coy pro-integrationist approach of state education management, which sought to limit spontaneous segregation by administrative means, has been replaced by a position that takes social polarisation for granted and openly acknowledges school selection and segregation. This is particularly evident in the legislative change in the classification of disadvantaged and cumulatively disadvantaged pupils (Farkas 2015), and the disintegration and slow erosion of previously established provision systems to compensate for disadvantages.

Thus, by nationalising public education, the state has taken over the responsibility for organising primary school services from the local community, but by emphasising the responsibility of parents and families, it has also abdicated the responsibility to provide high-quality services for all citizens, and is merely seeking to meet the service needs of parents for their own children. Those who want little get little, those who want more can get more if they put their minds to it, but there are limits to what they can get within the framework of public services. In other words, if one wants more than what the state institution provides, one can opt for church institutions, which are more highly subsidised because of their ideological commitment, and if one wants even more, they can choose from complementary market or private services, which are paid for.

The clear winners of these changes are the social groups that not only have access to but also benefit from higher levels of public services. For them, it is therefore of paramount interest to conceal and render invisible the growing inequalities, i.e., the extent of selection and segregation, which is reflected in the limitation of the data documentation of the phenomenon, specifically in the transformation of the legal regulation of disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged situations, and in the re-development of the institutional framework of early diagnosis and development. The hidden nature of the mechanisms responsible for growing social inequalities can ensure that they are acknowledged and accepted.

The radical change in approach of the state, which is clearly opposed to European mainstream education policy, is based on three considerations serving power-political goals: (1) the control of central budgetary expenditure, (2) the establishment of state control as broadly as possible (nationalisation, centralisation, unification, control) and (3) and the "ideological struggle" (illiberal-national-conservative turn, church education, uniformity, committed content regulation, limitation of alternative programmes).

The increasingly widespread disruption to publicly funded education is leading to a gradual expansion of market services, forcing the whole system to respond as competition to get into higher education intensifies. For example, the differentiation of alternative, irregularly structured grammar schools and the competition for outstanding schools is accelerating. Additionally, only those who go beyond the publicly funded education services and use complementary market services will be able to compete successfully, i.e., families with the financial resources to do so.

Accelerating differentiation and unleashed self-interest seem to be pushing well-off families with a strong interest in knowledge and learning towards a market-based escape from state control, which could be called a spontaneous neoliberal turn. At the other end of the scale, it also deprives the children of low-status families in disadvantaged areas of the chance to move on.

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Notes

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