

Somody, Bernadette*

Review of István Hoffman's "The Recent Past and Present of Local Self-Government Through the Lens of Human Public Services"

István Hoffman's monograph, *Human Public Services and Local Self-Government – Transforming Responsibilities in a Rapidly Changing System* (*Humán közszolgáltatások és önkormányzatiság – átalakuló feladatok egy rohamosan változó rendszerben*), was published in 2023 as part of the Scientific Series by the Faculty of Law of Eötvös Loránd University and ORAC Publishing House. The book's detailed subtitle provides a clear indication of what readers can expect. The author primarily addresses welfare, educational, and cultural public services, focusing on their evolution in the Member States of the European Union and other welfare states from the last third of the 20th century to the present. Naturally, all the sectors that are examined share the feature that other state organs and private institutions, alongside local governments, also participate in the provision of these services. The study, however, focuses on the role of local governments.

The first part of the work summarises the methodological and conceptual foundations. Although this section constitutes almost one-third of the book, its length is not unwarranted. The presentation of the methodological framework, which extends far beyond laying the groundwork for the subsequent analysis, serves as a valuable reference for future studies. The introduction to comparative administrative science and the methods for the comparative examination of local governance serve as a robust starting point for future analyses. In this regard, the book also sets a course for such studies with its multidisciplinary administrative science approach, employing methods from law, political science, sociology, and economics. According to the author, this complex perspective is indispensable as "many characteristics of local government functions and operations cannot be uncovered using legal methods alone".

Recent developments have reinforced for researchers in the field of administrative law that understanding political, economic, and social contexts is essential for accurately evaluating whether certain legal institutions fulfil their intended functions. In comparative studies, it is particularly important to avoid misleading conclusions drawn from examining legal institutions in isolation from their broader legal and

* Somody, Bernadette Habil. Associate Professor, ELTE University, Faculty of Law, somodyb@ajk.elte.hu

socio-political contexts. The author highlights numerous relevant factors beyond administrative law concerning the role of local governments in providing human public services. These include the constitutional status of local governments, traditional frameworks of local government regulation, sectoral policy approaches, local-territorial spatial structures, and systems for organising public services.

In addition to methodology, the book's first part discusses the concept and scope of human public services. Hoffman adopts a narrower interpretation of public services, excluding the public authority activities of the state. However, he applies a broader interpretation of human public services, encompassing healthcare services, social welfare, educational services, research organisation and support, and cultural public services. This section also includes the interpretation and classification of local government responsibilities, outlining the conceptual framework for distinguishing between local government responsibilities and tasks performed by local governments, as well as defining the essence of local government.

The second part of the book examines the responsibilities of local governments related to welfare public services, while the third part addresses their role in cultural public services in the broad sense. Across four chapters, the author methodically guides readers through a comprehensive analysis of local-territorial government responsibilities concerning social, health, educational, and cultural services. Each chapter discusses the effects of European Union law and policies, which are limited due to the primacy of national competences. The dissertation delves into the sectoral subtopics with remarkable meticulousness, presenting a wealth of data and information supported by an extensive body of literature, yet ultimately, it still reveals the 'big picture': the starting point in every case is the service delivery models, and the outcome of the study is a comprehensive model formulation.

In the fourth part, Hoffman summarises his findings, concluding that over the past two decades – driven by the 2008/2009 economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, globalisation, and the rise of populist movements and hybrid regimes from 2010 onward – centralisation trends have emerged worldwide. These factors, especially crises, have led to the centralisation and standardisation of public services globally, resulting in what Hoffman describes as the "thinning" of local self-government in human public service systems. These centralisation tendencies manifest differently across countries. In Western and Northern Europe, top-down reforms have primarily aimed at modernisation, restructuring municipal scales, and creating larger service units within the framework of local government. These regions experienced a form of creeping centralisation through regulatory or soft-law service standards. Similarly, the centralised organisation of data systems has led to latent centralisation, as digital solutions for public service management often require centralised infrastructure. By contrast, Southern and East-Central European countries are characterised by direct

centralisation, with the partial 'nationalisation' of previously municipal public services – that is, their organisation under direct state administration.

Beyond organisational perspectives, the author analyses welfare disparities, positing that the gap in public service quality has widened between core and semi-peripheral countries. This division aligns with the duality identified in centralisation trends.

The question arises whether it is possible to identify enduring models in Europe, which is marked by diverse local government organisational structures and public service policy approaches. In addition to this fragmentation, as highlighted in the subtitle, we are in an era of rapid changes, as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent crises. Regarding local governments' human public service responsibilities, Hoffman ultimately distinguishes two main European models while allowing for further subgroupings. The northern model, characteristic of Northern, Western, and some Central European countries, has featured relatively broad local government responsibilities and softer centralisation trends in recent decades. In contrast, the southern model, typical of Southern, East-Central, and Southeast European countries, has entailed a narrower conception of local governance and pronounced centralisation alongside reduced public service expenditure.

The natural target audience of István Hoffman's dissertation includes those engaged in human public services, whether as administrative lawyers or as representatives of other academic disciplines. Each chapter organises and analyses a significant volume of information and knowledge concerning the four sectors under examination – social, healthcare, educational, and cultural services – on an individual basis. Moreover, through the lens of human public services, the book provides valuable insights into the evolution of local self-governance over the past five decades and its current characteristics, including the weight and role of local governments in Europe and in our narrower region.