

Administrative Eras in the Development of Budapest and its Agglomeration

Introduction

The three cities, Óbuda, Pest, and Buda – especially the latter two –, were aimed to be unified even in the decades and indeed centuries before the official amalgamation. In the case of Pest-Buda, despite the unfavourable constitutional and political conditions during the years of Absolutism (1849–1866), it was possible to lay the groundwork for its development into a major city, relying on the energies provided by the civic development made possible by 1848.¹ It is not surprising that Károly Vörös writes in his monograph that the emergence of civil society brought about “such a profound enhancement of the city that [...] Pest-Buda became increasingly suited within the Hungarian part of the Habsburg Empire for organising the entire Hungarian national market and thus for the multifaceted articulation, expression, and support of all the demands aimed at Hungary’s possible distinctiveness within the empire”.² After the Austro–Hungarian Compromise of 1867, Pest-Buda became the political, economic, cultural, academic, and administrative centre of the country and the seat of national institutions. With the unification in 1873, the rapid development that began positioned Budapest at the forefront of the urban hierarchy in Hungary by the end of the century. Budapest’s administrative structure still reflects this central role today, although its unique administrative system still fails to address many issues effectively. Perhaps the most pressing of these is the connection between the capital and its agglomeration, also from an administrative perspective, as the areas can only be properly managed if treated as a unified whole considering their population size.

1. History of administration from state foundation to the Austro–Hungarian Compromise

Following the establishment of the state, Óbuda became the residence of the kings. Chronicles mention stone houses, a Roman-origin road network, its market, and also that in 1223, a fire destroyed the city along with the cathedral.³ After the reconstruction, a royal castle was built in the area in the 13th century, while in Buda, scattered manorial settlements, ecclesiastical estates, and villages of royal servants developed, where the

¹ BELUSZKY 2014: 52.

² VÖRÖS 1978: 323.

³ GARÁDY 1939: 79.

population primarily lived from viticulture and winemaking. In contrast, Pest – which had Slavic–Bulgarian and Muslim merchant inhabitants in the 10th century – became a flourishing, wealthy German merchant city surrounded by walls by the 12th century, and in 1230, it received a charter from King Andrew II.⁴

The Árpád dynasty kings increasingly convened the diets on the Rákos Field – first mentioned in writing in 1074, and by 1289 already referred to as “the centre of the country”⁵ – and established their court in Buda, where, after the devastation of the Mongol Invasion, King Béla IV ordered the construction of a stone castle.

Louis I (the Great) chose Buda as his permanent residence, while his mother preferred Óbuda, which had become the city of queens until the Turkish conquest.⁶ However, a genuine upturn took place during the reign of King Matthias Corvinus: the royal palace, the library, and the humanist court modelled after Italy gained European fame. By this time, the fates of Buda and Pest were already closely intertwined, as evidenced by the fact that in 1522, the councils of both cities jointly regulated prices.⁷ Buda then had a population of approximately 13,500, while Pest, Óbuda, as well as the market towns of Felhévíz and Szentfalva – together as an agglomeration – totalled more than 20,000 inhabitants.⁸

Following the Turkish conquest and the division of the country into three parts, medieval Hungarian urban administration only seemingly remained intact, as the work of the judges and city jurors serving on the municipal council in Buda and Pest was directed by the Turks, and so they became employees of the Ottoman Empire. The liberation of Buda in 1686 came at a tremendous cost: the castle, the city, and the population were almost entirely destroyed.

The subsequent period was marked by reconstruction, which initially progressed slowly. Pest and Buda regained their rights and privileges as a result of approximately two decades of joint struggles, and their status as free royal cities was not restored until 1711.⁹ This also meant that their leaders, including the mayor, the judge, and the constable, could be elected by the citizens themselves, and the city council was responsible for managing municipal affairs. Buda’s first mayor was Farkas Prenner, whose imperial rank as a constable indicated that the city was still under military administration.¹⁰ In contrast, Pest was managed by a judge for about 80 more years – János Jakab Vátula was only elected as the city’s first mayor in 1773.¹¹ The city leadership, however, extended beyond the city walls to the surrounding areas of Pest and Buda (including Terézváros, Ferencváros, Józsefváros, Lipótváros, as well as Tabán, Víziváros, Krisztinaváros, Országút, and Újlak).

⁴ *Budapest története* [History of Budapest] [s. a.].

⁵ KATONA [s. a.].

⁶ *Budapest története* [History of Budapest] [s. a.].

⁷ VICZIÁN 2018.

⁸ VÉGH [s. a.].

⁹ FÓNAGY [s. a.].

¹⁰ FÓNAGY [s. a.].

¹¹ KOVÁCS 1943: 57.

The following century brought about significant development. This was reflected both in population increase – during this period, Pest’s population rose above 100,000, while Buda reached 50,000 – and in the fact that while Buda became the administrative centre of the country, Pest became the hub of the country’s commerce. The permanent ferry bridge built in 1769, which was exposed to extreme weather conditions, represented not only a symbolic connection between the two cities, but also linked the population of the Great Hungarian Plains and Transdanubia.¹² Pest’s development continued at a rapid pace, and by the mid-19th century, the city had undeniably become the centre of the country. This required a programme addressing all aspects of development and modernisation. Count István Széchenyi was the first to articulate and lay the foundations for this programme. He was also the first to propose the unification of Pest and Buda under the name Budapest in 1829.¹³

Act XXIII of 1848 on free royal towns introduced significant changes to both the internal organisation and administration of Buda, affecting the election of officials and the municipal assembly. The elections took place on 27 May 1848. According to Article 15 of the Act, all eligible voters in Buda could participate in the election of officials based on the principle of popular representation. Accordingly, the mayor, the chief judge, the constable, the deputy captain, the clerks, the public prosecutor, the archivists, the land judge, the treasurer, the chief physician, the chief surgeon, and the chief engineer were elected.¹⁴ Immediately after the elections of officials, the elections for representatives were held. Since Buda’s population exceeded 30,000, it was classified as a city (Article 4), thus requiring its representative body to consist of at least 157 members (Article 21). Ultimately, a body of 167 members was elected through a secret ballot, and 80% of them (134 individuals) were civilians. Their tasks included the division of Buda into constituencies.¹⁵

On 24 June 1849, Minister of the Interior Bertalan Szemere issued a decree on the unification of Pest, Buda and Óbuda. The decree, which appeared in *Közlöny* [Gazette] on 27 June 1849, states that “the unification of the authorities of Buda and Pest, and of Ó-Buda, respectively, is decreed, and the two sister capitals are hereby united as Budapest [...]”.¹⁶ Although the (dictated) Olomouc Constitution of March 1849 stipulated that the governing and administrative functions of Pest, Buda and Óbuda were to be performed by the municipal council appointed by the district high commissioner instead of the elected bodies, the process of unification continued, albeit in a forced manner: Buda and Óbuda were united politically on 8 November 1849 and administratively on 19 December 1849, which was followed by an administrative unification of Pest and Buda on 13 November 1850.¹⁷ However, the organisation of civic administration that began in 1848–1849 was interrupted. After the suppression of the Revolution and War of Independence, in 1850,

¹² RÁCZ 2012: 13.

¹³ *Budapest története* [History of Budapest] [s. a.].

¹⁴ BARACZKA 1943: 243.

¹⁵ BARACZKA 1943: 236.

¹⁶ DOMONKOS 2019.

¹⁷ DOMONKOS 2020.

a municipal council (*Gemeinderat*) modelled after the Austrian system was organised, with members appointed by the district high commissioner of Buda. The diploma of October 1860 restored the legislative authorities of the free royal cities after a decade: the municipal council was replaced by a civic committee, and the ‘departmental system’ was established in Pest, which defined the capital’s official structure for nearly a century.¹⁸

2. The birth of Budapest: The 1873 unification

Following the Austro–Hungarian Compromise, the actual unification of the city was realised when the National Assembly passed Act XXXVI of 1872 on the unified Budapest. Article 1 of the Act stipulated that “Buda and Pest, the royal capitals, as well as Óbuda, a market town, and Margaret Island, with the latter being detached from Pest County, shall be unified into a single administrative entity under the name Buda-Pest”.¹⁹ The bill was submitted by Mór Wahrmann, representative for Pest-Lipótváros, and Ferenc Házmán, representative for Buda and the last mayor of Buda. The unification process, which lasted for a year, ended on 17 November 1873, when, following a ceremonial assembly, the new bodies took over the administration of the city. This marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Budapest and initiating an unprecedented period of growth that continues to be notable to this day. This act established the foundations, framework, and operational possibilities of Budapest’s municipal policy up until World War I.

A delegation of 34 representatives was elected from the three cities, with twenty from Pest, ten from Buda, and four from Óbuda’s municipal representation (Article 134). Led by Mihály Széher, the Pest representative, the delegation developed the district division, established the constituencies, determined the committee structure of the assembly, designed the city symbols, and decided on the method for electing council officials.²⁰ The *Lord Mayor* was chosen for a six-year term from among three candidates proposed by the king (Article 68). The Lord Mayor, as the representative of the executive power, was responsible for overseeing the metropolitan local government and safeguarding the interests of the state administration conveyed by the authority – essentially performing representative functions. The first Lord Mayor of Budapest, and later re-elected four times, was Károly Ráth, who was loyal to the government. Meanwhile, Károly Kammermayer was elected as the *mayor* and chairman of the committee, thus becoming the actual leader of the city.²¹ He held his position for 23 years during which he played a major role in the development of the administration and the organisation of the new district administrations. During his tenure, Erzsébetváros was separated from the

¹⁸ ANTALL 1953.

¹⁹ Act XXXVI of 1872 on the establishment and regulation of the Buda-Pest metropolitan legislative authority.

²⁰ *Múlt-kor* 2015.

²¹ Károly Gerlóczy was appointed as deputy mayor, which is why this era is also known as the era of the ‘three Károlys’. HORVÁTH 2021.

previous District VI and established as a new District VII, while Kőbánya²² was formed as District X, incorporating the former outer areas of Józsefváros. The rules for electing the joint municipal administrative authority were established, and the bodies of the General Assembly were also set up.

Under Article 22 of the Act, the metropolitan legislative authority was represented by the metropolitan *committee*, which exercised official powers on behalf of the authority. The committee consisted of 400 members, elected for a six-year term. The first elections for Budapest were held on 25–26 September 1873. The first representative body of Budapest was freely elected by about 16,000 eligible citizens, who chose 200 members, while another 200 were selected from among the 1,200 largest taxpayers. Ten departments were established, each headed by a councillor, with the mayor's secretariat (i.e. the presidential department) led by the chief city clerk.²³ *With this, the complete administrative structure of the capital city was established.*

According to Act XXXVI of 1872, the foundation of the capital's legal status was the recognition of its extensive government. The representative body could exercise its municipal rights through *general assemblies* regulated in Chapter III of the Act, which were held at least twice a year (in spring for the closure of the previous fiscal year and in autumn for the approval of the new budget), with the possibility of convening extraordinary assemblies as needed (Article 57). Its responsibilities included, among other things, the drafting and adoption of ordinances; the definition and delimitation of administrative districts and constituencies; the adoption of measures related to the capital's roads, streets, utilities, public works, and construction projects; establishing, amending or abolishing taxes; acquiring or alienating fixed assets; electing officials, boards, and committees; supervising officials; relieving them from responsibility, suspending them, ordering preliminary investigations into disciplinary matters; and determining officials' salaries (Article 58). Additionally, it had the right to discuss national political issues, take positions on them, and, if necessary, address the National Assembly directly.

The act also sanctioned the division of the capital into districts, which were created with consideration for the constituencies established based on the needs and functions of the committees. The determination of the number and size of the districts was delegated to the General Assembly's authority. Each district was headed by an appointed prefect, along with a suitable number of jurors as assistants to form a prefecture. The prefect and the jurors together constituted the district prefecture (Article 82). The district prefectures directly reported to the city council, and were not allowed to interact directly with other authorities, and were only allowed to receive instructions from the city council.

Chapter VII of the act regulated the election of officials. Metropolitan officials included the mayor, deputy mayors, councillors, the chief clerk and his deputy clerks,

²² Vörös 1998: 2–3.

²³ These are 1. the Department of Legal and Personnel Affairs; 2. the Department of Public Constructions; 3. the Department of Private Buildings, Land Surveys and Regulation; 4. the Department of Orphans and Guardians; 5. the Department of Taxes and Fees; 6. the Department of Health; 7. the Department of Finance and Economics; 8. the Department of Education; 9. the Department of Industry, Law Enforcement and Poverty; and 10. the Department of Military Affairs.

the chief prosecutor and his deputy prosecutors, the chief engineer, the chief physician and district physicians, the chief auditor, and those given similar official status by the General Assembly. The committee elected them for a term of six years, while the chief archivist and the director of the statistical office were appointed for life (Article 106).

Interestingly, Margaret Island already had a special legal status at this time, as Article 140 of the act stated: “The royal minor benefits previously exercised on Margaret Island, which is a separate private property, shall remain untouched even after its unification with the capital”, and it was exempt from tax obligations (“as long as it serves as a public recreational area, it remains exempt from the municipal supplementary tax on land, buildings, and income, except for law enforcement contributions”). This unique constitutional status is still reflected in the currently effective act on municipal governments.

In this established system, the proper co-ordination of local and governmental interests was achieved, and the system was balanced. This was considered a significant accomplishment – not only by the standards of the time but also in comparison with modern standards. This was further supported by so-called constitutional safeguards:

- The capital city had the right to:
 - refuse to comply with government or ministerial orders that sought to impose taxes or conscription numbers not approved by the National Assembly or to issue related orders
 - protest against any government decree it deemed unlawful and prohibit its implementation by its staff
- The Lord Mayor had the right to directly control the metropolitan apparatus if a given decree (even if maintained against the capital’s objections) was issued by a minister with reference to endangered state interests. In such a case, the representative body could only subsequently file a complaint with the National Assembly.²⁴

3. Towards World War I

The first period of urban development, which began with the city’s unification, came to an end around the turn of the millennium. A significant milestone in this process was that, in 1892, Budapest became a second imperial capital, on par with Vienna in all respects. During this period, an unprecedented construction boom began, and by the end of the century, Budapest had grown into a global city: by 1890, it had risen from 17th to 8th place in the ranking of European capitals. However, this rapid development was challenging for the city’s policies and administration to keep up with, although institutional frameworks remained in place until World War I.²⁵ The reason was that over the few decades since

²⁴ VÖRÖS 1998.

²⁵ A notable sign of change was the increasing participation of citizens in the elections for representatives of the capital in the National Assembly. Although voting conditions remained unchanged until World War I, social changes and inflation expanded electoral participation. Growing discontent among the petty

1873, rapid technical progress had shifted the focus to technical issues (as opposed to the previously predominant legal and administrative matters), and new areas of concern such as public education, social policy, and urban economics emerged, addressing issues typical of large metropolitan areas.

The inevitable administrative reform eventually took place in 1911. Mayor István Bárczy submitted his proposal to the General Assembly in June for the re-organisation of central administration, which was approved without changes. The most significant elements of this reform included the following:

- The number of deputy mayors was increased from two to three, and a significant majority of the decision-making and supervisory powers were transferred to the deputy mayors, thereby relieving the mayor of most of the ongoing administrative tasks.
- The number of departments was increased, and they were divided into three groups, each under the direct supervision of one of the deputy mayors.
- In the General Assembly, each department's relevant area of expertise came under the oversight of a specific committee (except for the finance committee, which retained jurisdiction over the entire administration).

The Greater Budapest concept is also attributed to István Bárczy. In 1906, inspired by the writings of Ferenc Harrer, he introduced the idea, and two years later, the Bárczy–Haller proposal was elaborated.²⁶ However, the conditions for its implementation were not yet in place at that time. They had recognised early on that Budapest had reached a stage of development where unified regulation had become inevitable. The interrelationships among administrative and settlement policies, public health, transportation, and food policy were no longer manageable within existing constraints, necessitating a unified framework.²⁷ This period of development was interrupted by World War I.

4. The administration of Budapest between 1918 and 1945

After World War I, the political role and significance of Budapest continued to grow, despite the government's efforts to reduce the city's internal governance. During the 1920s, several minor acts were enacted (such as the Act IX of 1920, which was in effect for only three years), but more comprehensive changes had to wait until the 1930s. The *Act XVIII of 1930*, concerning the administration of Budapest as a royal city, brought about radical changes by significantly modifying the district divisions.²⁸ According to Article 2, Paragraph 5, 14 districts were established, including four new ones numbered

bourgeoisie contributed to the opposition's victory in the 1906 elections. This shift was evident in Budapest, where the opposition won in all districts except Lipótváros, the stronghold of the bourgeoisie.

²⁶ SZEGŐ 2010.

²⁷ GYÖRGY 1993: 2.

²⁸ This Act was later modified by Act XII of 1934 amending certain provisions of Act XVIII of 1930 on the administration of the capital city of Budapest.

XI–XIV.²⁹ Districts XI and XII were created by dividing District I into three parts on the right bank of the Danube, in the former Buda area, and were officially established from 1 March 1934 (District XI) and 1 July 1940 (District XII). Districts XIII and XIV were formed on the left bank of the Danube, in the former Pest area, by separating and dividing the outer city area bounded by Dráva Street – Arena Road (now Dózsa György Road) – Kerepesi Road – the then city boundary (northern ring railway) – Danube into two parts along the Vác railway line. The western part became District XIII (officially from 15 June 1938), and the eastern part became District XIV (officially from 15 June 1935).³⁰ Additionally, the city’s area increased as the state port area from Csepel (as part of District IX) and the forest area owned by the city from Budakeszi (as part of District XII) were annexed to Budapest [Art. 3(2)].

This act also provided for the alteration of Budapest’s flag and coat of arms.³¹ Act XVII of 1930 also established that the responsibilities of the capital’s municipal authority were threefold: local government, the mediation of state administration, and the discussion of national affairs. The regulations of the 1930s included significant administrative restrictions (such as Act XII of 1934 and Act III of 1937), but despite these, Budapest retained control over its own assets, conducted independent financial management, and was able to count on a portion of city taxes among its revenues. In 1937, Act VI on the ‘city planning and building’ assigned the task of organising 22 communities³² around the capital and reforming their administration to the Council of Public Works. In 1934, the powers of the Lord Mayor were significantly expanded, with the appointment being made directly by the Head of State on the proposal of the Minister of the Interior, bypassing the municipal General Assembly. This period also saw the evolution of a suburban agglomeration ring around the capital – detailed in point 11 –, incorporating smaller and larger villages and municipalities that had already very closely linked to the capital city. Kispest, for instance, was granted city status in 1922, Pesterzsébet and Rákospalota in 1923, Budafok in 1926, and Pestszentlőrinc in 1936, while additional settlements such as Pestszentimre, Rákoshegy, Rákosliget, and Sashalom were upgraded to municipalities. Using peculiar solutions, suburbs tried to create integration clusters in this period. Notable examples include the efforts of Újpest, Pestújhely, and Rákospalota to establish a city with municipal authority, or the planned Kispest–Pestszentlőrinc merger. But these were not the only unsuccessful attempts: it took a few more years before a ‘Greater Budapest’ was created.

²⁹ Act XVIII of 1930 on the administration of the capital city of Budapest.

³⁰ *90 éve történt* [90 years ago].

³¹ The red–yellow–blue colours were replaced by a red–yellow–blue tricolour. See FLIER 2020.

³² These settlements are Újpest, Rákospalota Pestszenterzsébet, Pestszentlőrinc, Kispest, Budafok as towns, as well as Alag, Albertfalva, Békásmegyer, Budatétény, Cinkota, Csepel, Mátyásföld, Nagytétény, Pesthidegkút, Pestújhely, Rákosszaba, Rákoshegy, Rákoskeresztúr, Rákosliget, Rákosszentmihály, and Sashalom.

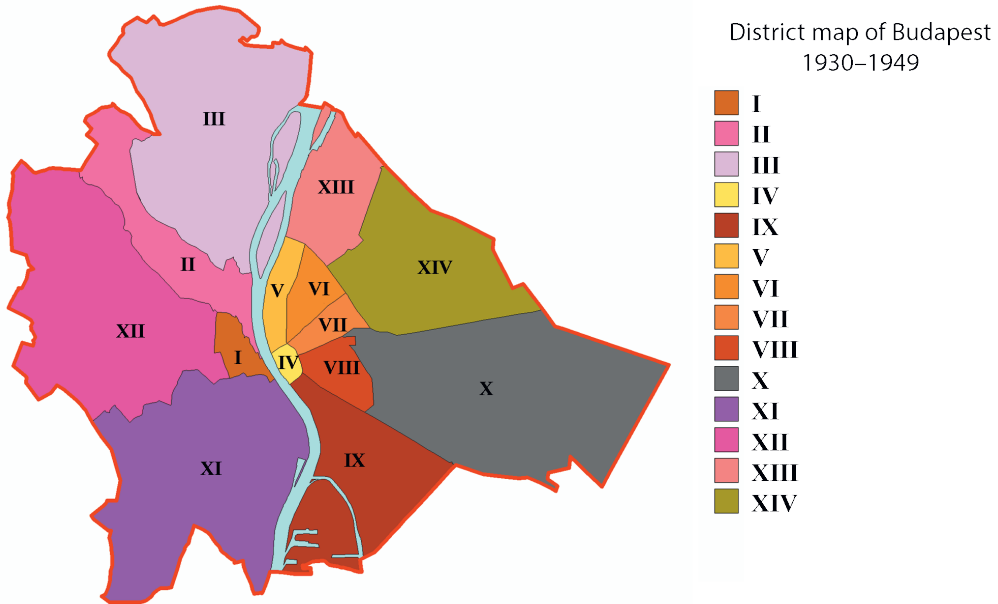


Figure 1: Districts of Budapest, 1930–1950

Source: 90 éve történt [90 years ago]

5. The years of the greater Budapest concept and centralisation

With the introduction of the Soviet-type council regime in 1950, the development of public administration definitively broke with the traditions of democratic evolution, and centralised leadership allowed no room for local interests. At the same time, the political conditions for the creation of Greater Budapest were closely linked to the ideas of the Hungarian Communist Party (HCP), which saw that the administrative unity of Greater Budapest would provide an opportunity to strengthen the power of the two worker parties and, within that, to achieve the HCP's dominance. Act XXVI of 1949 on the new boundaries of Budapest³³ – adopted based on the proposal 'The Borders of Greater Budapest' by architect Gábor Preisich and coming into effect on 1 January 1950³⁴ – marked a significant era change. It established Greater Budapest as “an administrative unit comprising cities and municipalities forming an economic unit with the capital”. The previously 14-district Budapest was expanded to include 23 surrounding municipalities (7 towns and 16 large villages),³⁵ and the city was divided into 22 districts. The new districts were numbered

³³ It was János Kádár, as the competent member of the government, who submitted the proposal to the National Assembly.

³⁴ Act XXVI of 1949 on the re-establishment of the territory of the capital of Budapest.

³⁵ Article 1a of Act XXVI of 1949 on the re-establishment of the territory of the capital of Budapest: The county towns of Budafok, Csepel, Kispest, Pestszenterzsébet, Pestszentlőrinc, Rákospalota and Újpest, Albertfalva, Békásmegyér, Budatétény, Cinkota, Mátyásföld, Nagytétény, Pesthidegkút, Pestszentimre,

between XV and XXII, and District IV was also extended. As a result, the area of the capital more than doubled (from 207 sqm to 525 sqm), and its population grew to 1.6 million.³⁶ This reform is rightly referred to as the *second city unification*.³⁷

However, the Greater Budapest concept was fundamentally different from the ideas of the early 20th century, such as those proposed by Ferenc Harrer, István Bárczy, Károly Szendy, István Egyed, Kálmán Oszoly, József Fischer, and Pál Granasztói. While these concepts varied significantly, they all shared one common aspect: respect for the existence of Hungarian local government and the preservation of autonomy. This is precisely what was missing from the act adopted in 1949. The council regime abolished the administrative traditions that allowed for meaningful debate on mutual benefits and drawbacks, resulting in Budapest completely losing its economic independence. The government controlled its revenues, and within the country's planned economic system, the capital required material resources from central sources for its operation. Addressing the issues of the Greater Budapest agglomeration also increasingly burdened the city. The act also stipulated that matters which, at the time of its enactment, were within the competence of municipal bodies in the capital and state administrative bodies in the cities and municipalities integrated with the capital, would henceforth be managed by specialised state administrative bodies acting as the capital's authorities. The new representative body of the capital was the Metropolitan Council, headed by the Executive Committee, which was more of a political than a professional body, lacking in expertise. Act IX of 1954 on the election of council members and Act X of 1954 on the council attempted to ease the excessively regulated state control with limited success. Thus, Greater Budapest, as an administrative city, resembled only in name the city that had failed to emerge over many decades.

The architect Gábor Preisich had another element in his general plan for Greater Budapest that could not be realised in that historical period. According to the 'petty-bourgeois concept', the densely built-up inner area (up to the line of Dózsa György Road – Orczy Road – Haller Street in Pest) would have formed a closed unit, surrounded by a green ring extending from the Danube to the Danube (which would have been created by connecting the City Park, the racecourse, the Kerepesi Cemetery, and the Népliget, and by developing new areas). The outermost ring would have been formed by garden suburbs made up of small settlements.³⁸

6. Budapest during the council regime

Following the suppression of the 1956 Revolution, the centre of control remained Budapest. Both state and party bodies were based in the capital, which continued to develop

Pestújhely, Rákoscsuba, Rákoshegy, Rákoskeresztúr, Rákosliget, Rákosszentmihály, Sashalom, and Soroksár.

³⁶ SZEGŐ 2010.

³⁷ National Geographic 2020.

³⁸ ABLONCZY 2020.

the administrative structures that had already been initiated. Under this new system, only minor changes were made prior to the regime change.

Under the council regime, municipal governments were reorganised in the Soviet style, with the newly formed local councils functioning as local organs of socialist state authority. Budapest was granted county status, and independent councils were established for the districts, although they lacked genuine autonomy. In this centralised system, it was impossible to mitigate territorial inequalities, and the administrative boundaries became extremely rigid. The regulations of the council regime did not account for the unique characteristics of the capital and instead sought to align its position more closely with that of the county council and local councils. The duties of the Budapest Council included the development of the entire city, as well as fulfilling fundamental local council responsibilities related to the population and services. In this role, it exercised all powers typically granted to county councils and managed local council duties that affected multiple districts simultaneously. The functions and powers of the district councils in the capital generally mirrored those of local councils, however, the districts established and maintained institutions and enterprises on a scale far exceeding basic population needs, addressing significant local demands even at that time.³⁹ To curb the 'excessive power' of the Metropolitan Council, regulations stipulated that for significant issues concerning the development and provision of services in the districts, the opinions of the district councils had to be sought in advance. Additionally, when regulating the competencies and organisation of the metropolitan and district councils and their respective organs, it was required to take their specific circumstances into account.

The 1980s brought a turning point in the development of administration, both nationally and in Budapest, with steps taken towards establishing a local government system in 1984 through the abolition of rural subdivisions and the relaxation of the rigid council regime. A solution also needed to be found to integrate the administrative connections between the capital and its surrounding areas, which had become inseparable entities over the past forty years.

7. The beginning of a new era: 1990

In 1990, following the civil democratic elections, the newly formed National Assembly established the framework for the current system of local government by amending the Constitution and enacting Act LXV of 1990 on local governments along with other related legislation. The preamble of the Local Government Act further emphasised the significance of the principle of local government declared by the Constitution, defining it as the independent and democratic management of local public affairs by the residents of the municipality.⁴⁰ Based on one of Europe's most liberal municipal acts, the 1,420 municipal councils were restructured into 2,905 local governments, leading to a fragmented system

³⁹ WALTER 2007.

⁴⁰ Act LXV of 1990 on local governments.

predominantly consisting of small villages. This pattern also applied to Budapest, where in addition to the 22, later 23 districts, 67, and eventually 102 independent and isolated local governments were established within the Budapest agglomeration.⁴¹ Naturally, following the regime change, the efforts for autonomy among local governments were understandable; however, many problems could have been avoided if municipalities had recognised the benefits of associations earlier. Unfortunately, Act CXXXV of 1997 on the associations and co-operation of local governments did not bring the anticipated breakthrough.⁴²

The elements of local government administration were established by Act XX of 1991 on the duties and powers of local governments and their bodies, as well as the commissioners of the republic and certain central subordinate bodies. Also known as the ‘Transitional Act’, this legislation largely adopted a straightforward approach by automatically converting the powers of the old council regime into those of the new local government system. Consequently, many roles were simply renamed: the former council body (executive committee) was rebranded as the ‘general assembly’, the council chairman became the mayor, and the executive committee secretary was renamed the clerk, or chief clerk.

The capital city became a city with an independent, two-tier administrative system similar to that of a county. The administration of the districts and that of the capital city were separated from each other. Thus, Budapest had 22 districts along with an additional administrative unit, and by 1996, when Soroksár became an independent district, there were 23 districts and one additional unit, making a total of 24 local governments. The primary administrative body of the capital, responsible for municipal duties was the Metropolitan General Assembly. Between 1990 and 1994, the assembly had 88 members elected through a two-vote system:⁴³ 66 representatives were chosen directly from party lists, and one representative was delegated by each of the 22 district governments.⁴⁴

The significance and complexity of the capital’s administration led to the creation of a separate act to regulate the local government system of the capital and its districts. Act XXIV of 1991 on the local governments of the capital and the capital districts designated Budapest and its districts as local governments with equal status but differing duties and powers. As a general rule, duties related to basic public services were assigned to the district governments, while duties that exceeded the competence of the district governments or related to the capital’s unique national status were assigned to the metropolitan government. The act thus positioned the district governments at the centre of regulation, primarily endowing them with powers related to municipal government, and rejected the concept of a unified administrative approach for the capital. To ensure interchangeability

⁴¹ PERGER 2002: 184.

⁴² *Az önkormányzatok fejlesztési célú központi támogatásainak problémái, módosítási igények* [Problems of Central Development Aid to Local Governments, Needs for Change] 2003.

⁴³ In practice, this meant that the capital’s voters received three ballots: one for the district’s individual candidate, one for the district list, and one for the list of members of the capital city’s general assembly.

⁴⁴ The threshold was then 4%, i.e. a party or social organisation had to obtain 4% of the total valid votes to be eligible for a mandate.

between duties, the act stipulated that with the capital's consent, district governments were allowed to assume the organisation of public services falling within the capital's competence; conversely, the General Assembly could also initiate the transfer of duties and powers.⁴⁵

Thus, a distinctive model emerged, combining the unified, integrated capital model with a federative model based on the loose association of districts. In this model, the metropolitan government was established as a unique territorial level, incorporating some decentralised features (regarding the legal status of the districts). However, none of the participants was satisfied with this system. Among its grievances, the metropolitan government noted that the districts frequently avoided addressing issues affecting Budapest as a whole, or even obstructed the implementation of the metropolitan government's initiatives. The internal districts argued that they were unable to manage resources generated in their areas according to their specific needs. In contrast, the external districts complained that they did not receive adequate support to match the infrastructure and service levels of the inner districts.⁴⁶

The legal status of the metropolitan government also had unique characteristics. The Constitutional Court highlighted this by stating that "the division of duties and powers between the metropolitan government and the district governments fundamentally differs from the division of duties and powers between municipal governments and county governments. Consequently, the legal status of the metropolitan government and district governments also differs from that of other local governments."⁴⁷ It was noted that this difference in legal status stems from the capital's unique status within the country and the fact that the entire capital constitutes a natural geographical unit, a municipality. In the new system, the administrative separation of the capital and the agglomeration was maintained, with the municipalities of the agglomeration remaining part of Pest County and continuing to form a territorial unit with the local governments there. The local government system failed to provide a solution for public services and urban development crossing municipal boundaries. While there was an option for voluntary co-operation, in practice, it could not fill the gap created by the absence of regional co-ordination.

Conflicts increasingly arose both between the metropolitan and the district administrations, as well as between the capital and the surrounding agglomeration. In the former case, issues included resource distribution, urban development, and public services, while in the latter, concerns such as urban and regional development, transport, education, healthcare, and municipal problems became prominent. Recognising these issues, the metropolitan government established three expert groups in 1992, which presented various solutions in 1993. The Research Centre for Political Science, led by Géza Kilényi, proposed a plan entitled 'Budapest – A City Model'. This proposal envisioned a unified administration for Budapest, with district bodies having advisory,

⁴⁵ It is worth adding that the district could refuse to do so if the assumption of its mandatory tasks would jeopardise the performance of those tasks or if the conditions necessary for their performance were not available.

⁴⁶ PERGER 2002: 185.

⁴⁷ Decision 56/1996 (XII. 12.) AB.

propositional, and derived powers, along with several compulsory areas of co-operation. The ‘Active District – Strong Capital’ model, advocated by the Metropolitan Research Institute, focused on a strong metropolitan government, with district governments given significantly narrower autonomy and primarily tasked with administrative functions.

The novelty of the proposal was the establishment of a new, intermediate-level local government type called the Budapest Region. The third concept, developed by City Consulting Bt. and Péter Szegvári, became known as the ‘city concept’. Its essence was that although the city centre (‘city’) and the outer districts were distinct from each other, they formed a unique association.⁴⁸

8. Changes after 1994

Following these developments, the Local Government Act was amended in 1994. The amendment aimed to centralise administrative organisation to create a more unified management of the capital, however, despite this intention, the changes did not significantly alter the existing two-tier local government system.

The ‘metropolitan act’ was repealed and its content was incorporated into the Local Government Act as Chapter VII. This chapter included special provisions that differed from other chapters of the act. A defining feature of the amended act was that it continued to classify the capital as a municipal local government and did not treat it as a special or priority local government in terms of its legal status.

The newly created system did not strictly follow any of the three models outlined earlier, although it resembled the second proposal in most aspects. If we were to briefly characterise the period between 1990 and 1994, we could use the term ‘strong districts, weak capital’, while the period between 1994 and 2010 could be described as ‘weaker districts, stronger capital’. Concurrently, while up until 1994, the system was characterised by ‘consensual resource allocation’ and a ‘majoritarian electoral system’, after 1994, ‘capital-dominant resource allocation’ and a ‘consensual electoral model’ became the prevailing features.⁴⁹

While the legal equality between the metropolitan government and the district governments, as well as the two-tier administration, remained intact, the *new regulations were marked by the metropolitan government’s predominance*. The latter was still not allowed to directly interfere in district decisions but could do so indirectly. For instance, the metropolitan government could implement resource allocation, fund some district developments through grants, and compel districts to align their regulations, or make decisions on territorial development issues. The act also emphasised a ‘stronger capital’ by stipulating that although the metropolitan government was required to consult with the district governments on numerous issues, the district administrations were required to accept the final decision made by the metropolitan government. The change in the

⁴⁸ SZEGVÁRI 2016: 100.

⁴⁹ SZEGVÁRI [s. a.].

composition of the General Assembly of Budapest also reinforced the metropolitan government's predominance. District governments could no longer delegate representatives, reducing the General Assembly's size to 66 members, with the Lord Mayor becoming an *ex officio* member. To channel district interests, district representatives appointed by district governments participated in the General Assembly with advisory rights as district delegates. This change was necessary because Hungary had signed the European Charter of Local Governments, which would have been inconsistent with the indirect election of municipal bodies. The method for electing the Chairman of the General Assembly, the Lord Mayor, also changed: the previous indirect election was replaced by direct election, and deputy lord mayors were elected from among the members of the General Assembly to assist in its work. There was no difference between the two levels regarding the exercise of ownership rights, economic and business freedom, independent regulation, and state oversight of decision compliance. However, the scope of action for metropolitan and district local governments significantly differed in terms of financial opportunities and resources, as well as the level of proprietary revenues. The automatic allocation of municipal government tasks to district governments was also abolished. Instead, the act specified the tasks that must be performed by the municipal, the district, or the capital government.

The 1994 amendment created an unusual model of metropolitan administration that gave the metropolitan government responsibilities similar to those of the regulating, redistributive role of states. However, there was still room for conflict, for example, due to the means left in the hands of the district administrations, such as the refusal to issue building permits, but also the obligation to consult with the district governments. The 1998 change in government brought about a shift, as the central government, being a strong ally of the district administrations, was able to influence the local governments' situation directly through regulation. However, the greatest flaw of the amendment was considered to be the unresolved issue of connecting the capital with the agglomeration.⁵⁰ The Budapest Transport Association was to be established to address this problem, but it was hindered by disputes over the distribution of duties among the parties involved.⁵¹ Although another initiative, the Budapest Agglomeration Development Council (BAFT), established by the 1996 act on regional development, was promising, it remained ineffective due to a lack of resources and inadequate composition (the Budapest districts, for example, had no representative). The Central Hungary Regional Development Council, established as the successor to the BAFT, was inherently not a suitable framework/organisation for connecting the capital with its agglomeration – particularly because out of its 18 members, only one represented the capital city, and one represented all the districts. Thus, the administrative connection between the capital and its agglomeration remained unresolved.

⁵⁰ PERGER 2002: 189.

⁵¹ 24.hu 2005.

9. Budapest today: After 2010

Following the 2010 elections, an intensive period of legislation began, with the adoption of the Fundamental Law being the first and most important element. The legislation also affected local government regulation, as the National Assembly enacted a new act: Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on local governments in Hungary (LGA).⁵² The new Fundamental Law moved away from the community-centred approach to local government and instead emphasised the importance of close co-operation between local governments and state administration. In the new system, which differed significantly from the previous state organisational structure, the relationship between local governments and state administration also underwent a necessary transformation. The system of local government responsibilities shifted, placing greater emphasis on mandatory tasks and transitioning from normative to duty-based financing for local governments. The role of the mayor as a single leader was strengthened compared to the representative body and the city clerk.

According to the new regulation, the two-tier local government system of the capital continued to exist, and a unique institution was inserted between the local governments of Budapest and of the districts: “Margaret Island, directly managed by the metropolitan government”, which, as a unified administrative area, came under the direct control of the Metropolitan Government [LGA, Article 22(4)]. The new legislation is grounded in the island’s significant tourist value.⁵³ In addition to highlighting the capital level, the new regulation provides clearer provisions regarding the relationship between the metropolitan and the district governments. However, this act does not include any provision related to the agglomeration either.

The 2014 amendment to the LGA brought about significant changes to the local government system of the capital by increasing the influence of the districts and moving the Hungarian model towards a kind of association model. Act XXIII of 2014⁵⁴ modified the composition of the Metropolitan General Assembly. Previously, the 34 members of the assembly were elected through a proportional, party-list system. However, following the amendment, the assembly now consists of the Lord Mayor of Budapest, the 23 district mayors, and 9 additional members elected from the capital’s compensatory list [Article 2(c)]. These 9 compensatory members are designed to address disparities between the districts’ populations. Another significant change involves decision-making, which is now also influenced by the number of inhabitants. The amended Article 47(3) of the LGA stipulates that, in addition to the required simple or qualified majority, “the mayors of the districts of the capital with a combined population of more than half of the total population of the capital shall also vote in favour”. *Figure 2* summarises the complex decision-making system thus established.

⁵² Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on local governments in Hungary.

⁵³ NAGY–HOFFMAN 2014: 79.

⁵⁴ Act XXIII of 2014 on the amendment of certain acts related to local governments in connection with elections.

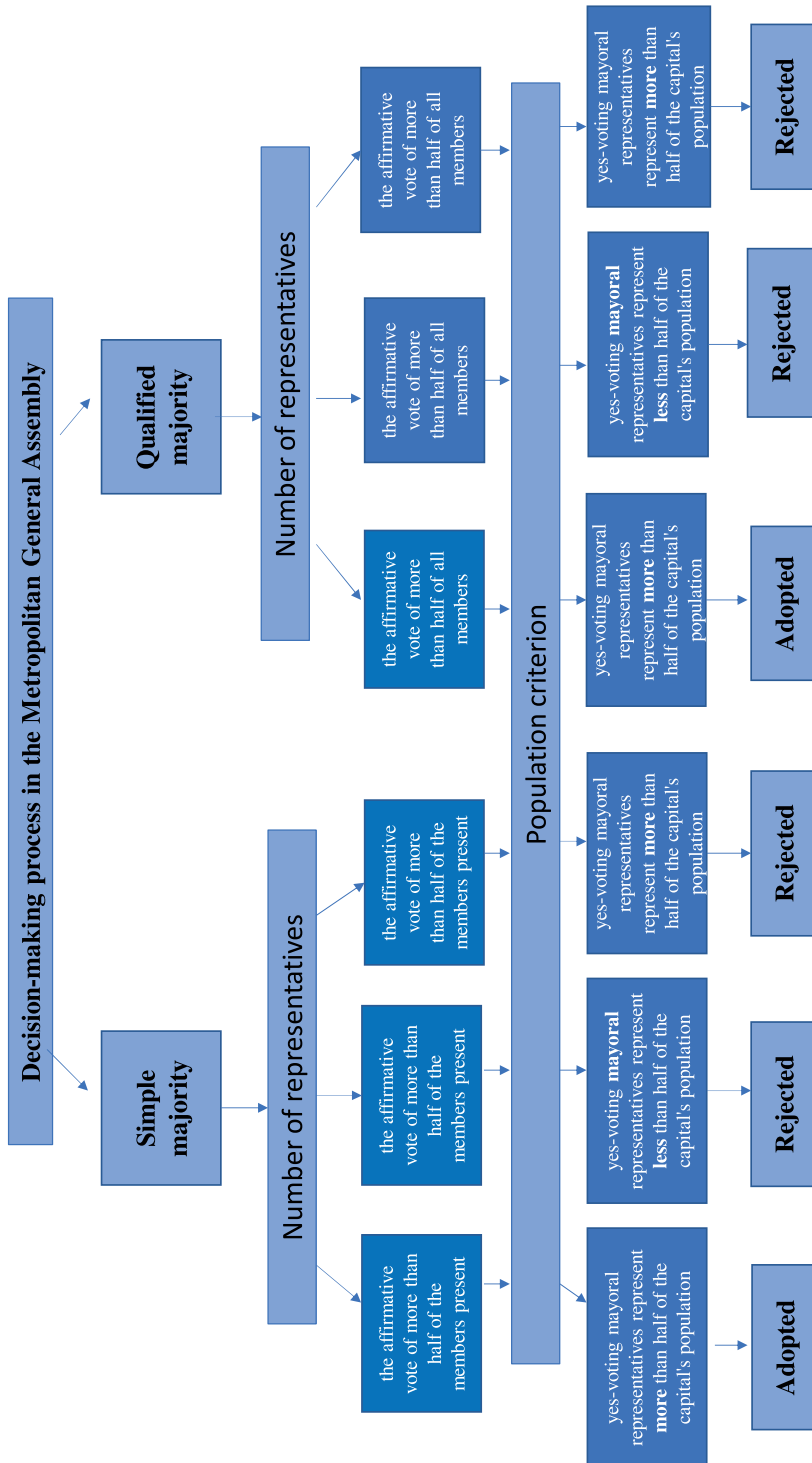


Figure 2: Decision-making in the Metropolitan General Assembly
Source: HOFFMAN 2014: 3

10. The troubled fate of the agglomeration

The 1960s witnessed the beginning of a series of top-down reforms in Western Europe aimed at linking cities and agglomerations and at making the resulting municipal structure more reflective of the region's interconnections and more consistent with the spatial structure. As a result, several Western European regions adopted federative solutions in their regional governance systems.

However, in Hungary – specifically concerning the only agglomeration, Budapest – the situation is different, and it seems as if the agglomeration is treated as a stepchild.

The development of suburban areas took place in four phases leading up to the creation of Greater Budapest.⁵⁵ Until 1850, only two smaller suburban settlements emerged (Albertfalva and Újpest), and the smaller towns on the Buda and Pest sides had not yet been integrated into Buda or Pest in a cohesive manner. In the second phase, lasting until 1870, conditions were created that allowed for the subsequent agglomeration processes to begin. On the Pest side, Újpest, along with Rákospalota and Rákoskeresztúr, became the 'growth towns' due to their population explosions. With the merging of the cities, a new era began: the migration process toward Budapest started. In the third phase, lasting until 1895, the population of the capital increased by 200,000, which directly led to suburban development. New communities were established on previously uninhabited lands from which later municipalities and city districts developed (such as Pestszentlőrinc or Pesterzsébet). The first land parcelling also began during this period, in what would later become Kispest and Erzsébetfalva. During this time, the influence of the capital was already noticeable beyond the future boundaries of Greater Budapest (for example, in Pécel, Csömör, Törökbálint, Budakeszi, Dunakeszi, Solymár). The fourth phase, leading up to 1950 and the birth of Greater Budapest, saw the establishment of suburban transportation, thereby eliminating obstacles to daily commuting. This had an almost immediate impact not only on demographic processes but also on the social composition, and the development of suburban industrial zones also began.⁵⁶ By the end of the 19th century, the city's service area had already reached, and even exceeded, the boundaries of Greater Budapest, incorporating more distant regions such as the Galga and Tápió areas into the capital's supply network. After World War I, as Budapest's development stalled, the agglomeration explosion gained new momentum in terms of both population growth and economic development. In the 1920s, the population of agglomeration settlements grew by 4.4% annually (while Budapest grew by only 0.8%), and by 1940, the population in the zone had already exceeded half a million.⁵⁷ The process of urbanisation was also significant: Újpest, Kispest, Pesterzsébet, Rákospalota, Budafok, and Pestszentlőrinc were granted city status. However, the agglomeration process did not stop at the narrow ring boundary but also affected geographically more distant settlements. Thanks to

⁵⁵ BELUSZKY 2002: 122.

⁵⁶ Four major industrial centres have developed in the peripheries of Budapest: Újpest, Kispest–Pesterzsébet–Pestszentlőrinc, Csepel and Budafok.

⁵⁷ BELUSZKY 2007: 177.

the railway network, it extended north to Vác, northeast including Fót, Csömör, and Veresegyház, towards the Great Plain encompassing Isaszeg, Pécel, Ecser, Maglód, Gyömrő, Üllő, and Vecsés, and south to Dunaharaszti and Taksony (Figure 3). On the Buda side, the process of agglomeration was more cumbersome at this time, primarily due to unresolved transport issues. The problem of managing municipalities that remained outside the boundaries of Greater Budapest, established in 1950, was not yet addressed.

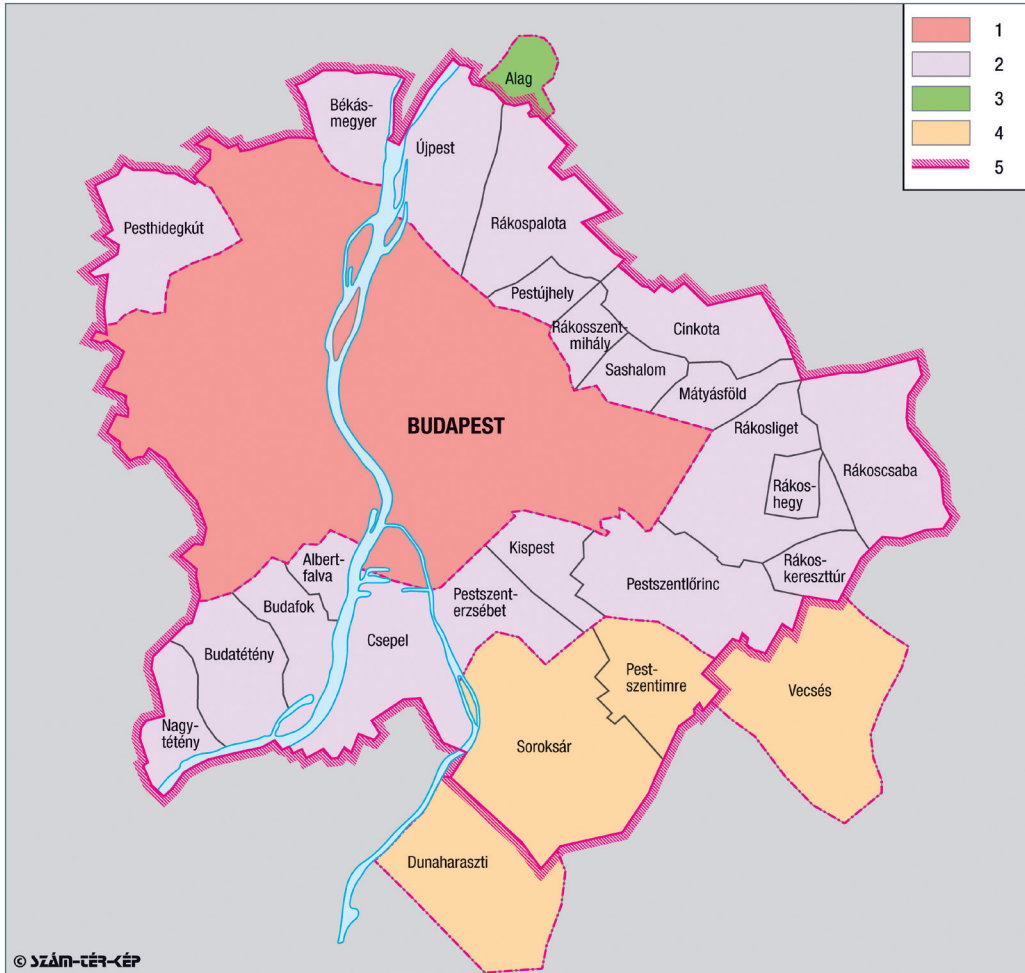


Figure 3: Evolution of the agglomeration ring

Source: BELUSZKY 2014: 117

Notes:

- 1 = The area of Budapest between the city unification (1873) and 1950
- 2 = Area of Greater Budapest as planned in 1930; annexed to Budapest in 1950
- 3 = Village included in Greater Budapest in 1930, subsequently merged with Dunakeszi (Alag)
- 4 = Villages added to Greater Budapest by Act VI of 1937, beyond the 1930 plan
- 5 = Budapest's boundary after 1950

In the 1960s, measures were introduced to restrict settlement in Budapest, which caused many people yearning for the capital to move to the surrounding smaller towns, thereby shaping and expanding the agglomeration. At that time, however, the relationship remained one-sided: residents of these smaller towns could find suitable job opportunities only in the capital and could access even the most basic public services exclusively there.

A key document of the era was Decision 1007/1971 (III. 16.) of the Council of Ministers on the National Urban Planning Concept, which was in force between 1971 and 1985. Essentially serving as an urban development framework, the document outlined rigid development strategies based on urban hierarchy, with particular focus on the Budapest agglomeration. Although the concept made efforts at mitigating Budapest-centricity, it did not take into account the unique functions and the central role of each municipality in the district, nor did it set specific development goals for Budapest itself.⁵⁸

The boundaries of the Budapest agglomeration were first established in 1971 by designating 44 municipalities surrounding the capital, with the approval of Government Resolution 1005/1971 (II. 16.) concerning the general planning scheme of Budapest and its surroundings.⁵⁹ At that time, the delimitation was based on the extent of commuting, transportation links, and recreational opportunities, however, due to subsequent development, this delimitation soon required revision. In 1997, the Central Statistical Office significantly expanded the agglomeration ring, designating 78 municipalities,⁶⁰ which was later extended to 81 municipalities by Act LXIV of 2005 on the Spatial Planning of the Budapest Agglomeration. Appendix 1/1 of this act includes the current state.⁶¹ (For the development, see *Figure 4*, and for the current administrative situation, *Figure 5*.)

The integration of the agglomeration with the municipal administration of the capital remains unresolved to this day. Although the Fundamental Law introduced the mandatory institution of municipal associations and territorial planning is a central element of territorial municipal tasks, the process of managing the agglomeration still does not function effectively within these frameworks.

⁵⁸ BIBÓ 1986.

⁵⁹ *Budapesti agglomeráció általános információk* [General Information on the Budapest Agglomeration]. [s. a.].

⁶⁰ This was laid down in Government Decree 89/1997 (V.28.).

⁶¹ Act LXIV of 2005 on the Spatial Planning Plan of the Budapest Agglomeration.

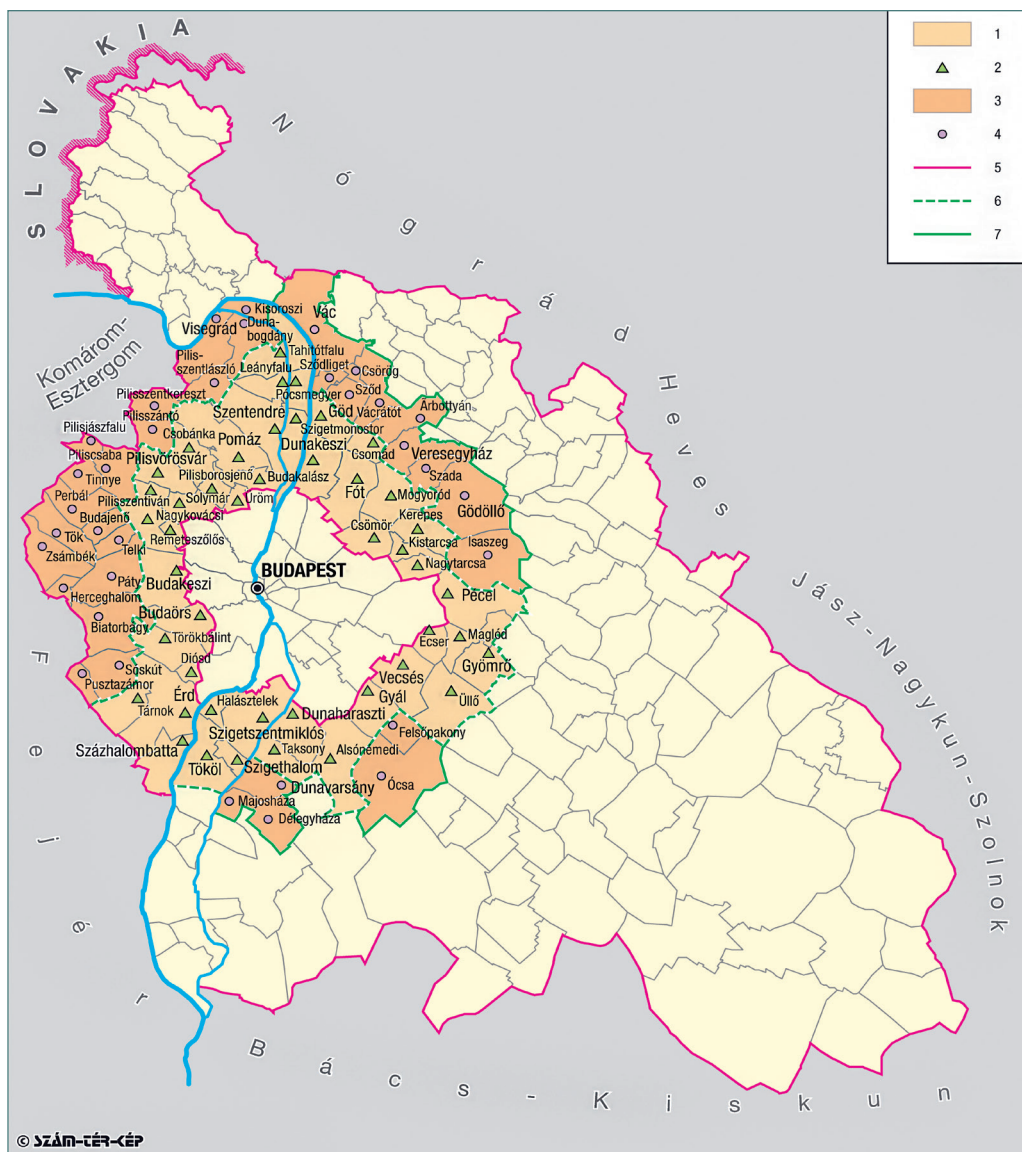


Figure 4: Municipalities in the Budapest agglomeration in 1971 and 1997

Source: BELUSZKY 2014: 141

Notes:

- 1 = Area of the Budapest agglomeration according to the 1971 classification
- 2 = Municipalities within the agglomeration in 1971
- 3 = Area of the agglomeration after the 1997 modification
- 4 = Municipalities newly included in the agglomeration in 1997
- 5 = Regional boundary
- 6 = Boundary of the agglomeration in 1971
- 7 = Current boundary of the agglomeration

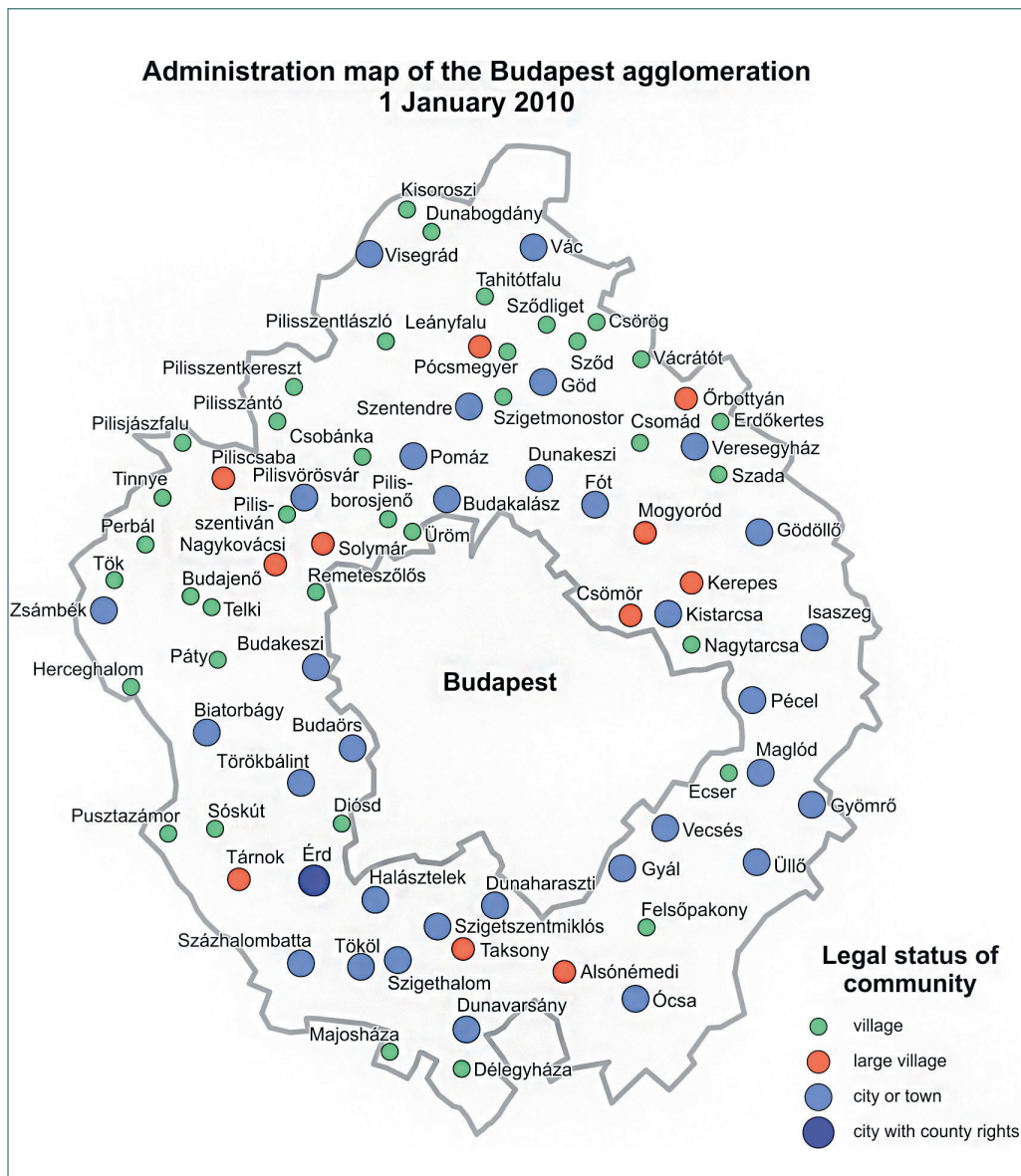


Figure 5: Municipalities in the Budapest agglomeration today, based on administrative classification, in our days

Source: Budapest agglomeration [s. a.]

The issue is compounded by the lack of legal regulations, but it is also essential to highlight the problem that *the spatial structure of the capital and its agglomeration does not align with the current administrative boundaries*.⁶² Budapest and its conurbation, while having a ring-like structure,⁶³ is also radially structured due to the segmentation of major transport routes, and this dual structure defines the sectors of the region. When examining specifically the separation according to municipal functions, the duality is also apparent: while some tasks (such as environmental protection or transportation) require co-ordination across the entire agglomeration, other ‘intermediate-level’ tasks (such as education or healthcare) assume co-operation among different groups of municipalities.⁶⁴

Closely related to this is the issue of regional organisation. Among the seven statistical regions, the remaining region of Central Hungary is uniquely defined by the special duality of Budapest and Pest County and it also has a different administrative structure compared to other regions. Unlike the other regions, which have three large territorial local government units, Central Hungary has only two: Budapest and Pest County. Within this area, aside from Érd, which has county rights, there are only city and municipal local governments. Various proposals have been put forward to better align the regional level with the municipal level. At the regional level, options include creating a bicameral regional government, either with separate sections for metropolitan and territorial areas or with a combination of directly elected representatives and territorial delegates. Alternatively, a unicameral body could be formed, consisting solely of directly elected list representatives. For the municipal level, there are several possibilities: establishing a unified metropolitan administration led by the Metropolitan Government; or abolishing the Metropolitan Government and transferring its responsibilities to the district governments; or treating the inner districts of the capital as a single entity (‘city’) with one local government, while organising municipal governments only in the outer districts.⁶⁵ However, these proposals aim to find solutions to the current, inherently flawed regional division rather than changing the regional delineation itself. A likely solution would be the establishment of a separate region for the Budapest agglomeration (although this would leave unresolved the status of municipalities in Pest County). In the early 2010s, several plans emerged that analysed the interactions between the capital and its surrounding agglomeration, based on a ring structure with distances of 25, 50, and 100 km. Despite these plans, it remains uncertain, which of the proposed scenarios will actually materialise by the middle of the century. Specifically, it is unclear whether urbanisation or suburbanisation processes will prevail and which direction they will take.⁶⁶

⁶² PERGER 2004: 215.

⁶³ There is a clear distinction between the city centre, called the ‘city’, the periphery, the narrow agglomeration and the wider agglomeration.

⁶⁴ PERGER 2004: 223.

⁶⁵ PERGER 2004: 231–240.

⁶⁶ For more on this, see *Budapest Region Draft Structure Plan. Restructuring the Metropolitan Landscape* 2011.

Summary

The problems of the post-regime change administrative structure are rooted in the creation of an overly decentralised system of municipal government as an excessive counterbalance to political influences, resulting in upsetting the balance of the emerging local and territorial administrative system. In contrast to the more integrated metropolitan structures found in Western Europe, the Hungarian system remains fragmented, with a pronounced divide between district municipalities and the surrounding agglomeration of the capital. As a result, coordinating the three levels – district, capital city, and agglomeration – has been an ongoing challenge for over three decades, one that remains unresolved. The two-tiered municipal system of Budapest is unique even by Western standards, and there is no well-functioning model available for comparison. To develop a more effective administrative structure, the capital's system must have distinct characteristics and the general territorial administrative rules cannot be applied to it. It must be borne in mind that only a flexible administrative system can keep pace with the specific and rapidly changing problems and complexity of the tasks of the Budapest agglomeration.

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