

The policy of school autonomy and the reform of educational administration: Hungarian changes in East-European perspectives<sup>1</sup>

The political transformation in most East and Middle European countries has been accompanied by changes in the governance of education. Looking at the criticisms that had been formulated towards the earlier system, one finds similar judgments almost everywhere: excessive unification, rigid and bureaucratic control, dehumanization of the pedagogical practice, the blocking of local initiatives. It is therefore not surprising that one of the first steps taken by the new democratic systems was relaxing central bureaucratic control and enlarging school level and local autonomy.

State monopoly of education has been abandoned, alternative curricula have been authorized, the room for optional activities has been enlarged and the power of educational bureaucracies has been reduced. In certain countries teaching staffs have been given the right to elect new principals. Elected school level bodies have been set up with representatives of parents and other social partners. Market has been given a greater role to play in the allocation of resources.

This trend of market orientation, decentralization and enlargement of school level autonomy seems to parallel those trends that have characterized most Western countries since the second half of the seventies. However, despite the similarities, there are fundamental differences between the Western and Eastern changes. In the West, the motive of decentralization is linked with the recognition of long term macro level economic and political changes and it can be seen as a more or less planned reaction to the economic and social crisis of the seventies. In most East European countries, on the contrary, the changes have been introduced during a revolutionary period, and they have been motivated more by the pressing demand of schools and educators for more freedom than by the recognition of long term macro level problems.

The new democratic systems are now facing a common question: will the new trends survive the transitional period or will they be only an ephemeral phenomenon expiring with the end of political transformation. Will the development of the educational system of the former Eastern bloc countries continue further on the path of decentralization, or will it revert to the earlier pattern of central control? I think that speculating on these questions is crucial for us, since the answers to them will fundamentally influence the future of education in the Eastern part of Europe.

Before trying to formulate some tentative answers to these questions, let me briefly present, as one of the examples my own country's case.

In Hungary, the first major steps toward decentralization were made at the beginning of the eighties. After a decade of considering large scale structural reforms it was in 1982 that a decision rejecting the earlier reform ideas was taken. A few years later, in 1985, a new Education Act was

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adopted. This Act, instead of starting structural changes or initiating new programs, aimed simply at defining the legal framework of the educational system. According to the new frames individual schools became units with a responsibility to define their own goals and to start locally decided activities.

Let me briefly summarize the most important changes following the 1985 Act:

The Act authorized the schools to define "their own educational tasks", to elaborate "their own local educational system" and to devise supplementary curricula. Every school was given the task of preparing its own internal statute and pedagogical program which had to be accepted by the teaching staff after consultation with the representatives of external agencies. Local and regional educational authorities lost their right to interfere in purely professional matters: the only jurisdiction concerning the internal life of schools left with them was to examine whether the statute of the school, the school level pedagogical program and the decisions taken by the staff were contradicting the written law.

The law defined the teaching staff as "the most important consultative and decision-making body of the school". Teachers were given considerable power to influence the selection of their directors: between 1986 and 1991, during six years, they could refuse the appointment of a new director by secret vote.<sup>2</sup> In general, teaching staffs were given the right to decide in all issues related to the organization and work of the school if this was not contradicting other regulations.

School inspection was also radically transformed. The earlier system of inspection, directly subordinated to the regional and local authorities, was suppressed. New regional advisory centres were set up and the former inspectors were transferred to these centres as professional advisors. These advisors could be invited by those schools that needed professional advice. The old paternalistic supervisory model, based on visiting individual teachers, has been gradually replaced by a new model oriented toward global evaluation of particular schools and assessment of learning achievements.

To counterbalance the power of teachers school level consultative and advisory bodies (so called school councils) could be set up with members representing the social environment of the institution.

As to the content of teaching, the 1985 Act did not affect the official central curriculum but opened the way for locally initiated changes. Schools were authorized to choose between alternative curricula, elaborate supplementary programs, to start pedagogical experimentations or to apply so called "particular solutions". Although major local curriculum changes had to be approved by the ministry of education, during the second half of the eighties this approval was given in most cases. As a result the number of initiatives for local curriculum changes has rapidly increased. This was dramatically hastened by the creation of a central innovation fund in 1988 which gave an opportunity to innovative schools to obtain supplementary financial support.

These changes have touched the foundations of the earlier system. Since educational

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<sup>2</sup> Recently this provision has been abolished by the constitutional court

authorities have formally lost their right to interfere in professional matters the institutional basis of central pedagogical direction has ceased to exist. Pedagogical orientation and legal administration have been separated: the new regional pedagogical institutes, which have been given the responsibility for pedagogical matters, had to act without administrative power, while the administrative units had no more pedagogical responsibilities.

All these changes may give the impression of a well-planned and well-designed policy. But this is not the case. The Hungarian reform of educational administration has been, in many respects, a kind of negative policy. It has emerged, in a rather spontaneous way, from incidental responses to current challenges. Leading administrators started speaking about the reform of administration only one or two years after the introduction of the 1985 Act. The Act, at the time of its introduction, was not defined as a reform act and the enlargement of school level autonomy was not designated as its main objective. At that time probably no one would have been able to define concretely the content of school autonomy.

The negative and even ambiguous character of the policy of school autonomy appears the most manifestly in the field of curriculum policy. The 1985 Act did not alter the former central curriculum and new alternative programs were offered only in a few fields. In fact, after the introduction of the Act, schools had to follow the same central curriculum as before, with only one major difference: there was no longer anyone to formally control whether they did or not.

The conceptualization of a new curriculum policy, adapted to the conditions of school autonomy, was started only years after the 1985 Act, on the initiative of a group of curriculum experts. This activity has never received full official support and its legitimacy has always been uncertain. The proposal for a national core curriculum, as a result of this activity, was elaborated and submitted to public debate only in 1990.<sup>3</sup>

Some measures that most educationalists would see as indispensable elements of a policy of school autonomy have never been taken, although their importance has been recognized. No real efforts have been made to set up new evaluation mechanisms in order to monitor the liberalized system. No attempts have been made to start appropriate management programs that would have prepared the leaders of the autonomous schools for their new role. And neither have serious measures been taken to create a textbook and program market that would have given schools a real possibility of choosing between alternative programs. It is thus not surprising that what many people call positively as the policy of decentralization and school autonomy is seen by others, negatively, as a simple decline of control.

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<sup>3</sup> The main principles of a new curriculum policy as proposed by the experts elaborating the draft of the national core curriculum:

1. Two level regulation by a central frame curriculum, on the one side, and locally adapted or elaborated local curricula, on the other.
2. The definition of broad areas of knowledge instead of subject matters.
3. The independence of the curriculum from the vertical structure of the system
4. The emphasis put on output requirements instead of concrete activities to be done
5. External control by evaluation of achievements rather than by inspection of activities

In fact, during the second half of the eighties a great number of teachers and educationalists experienced a period of uncertainty and disintegration. The political centre was not able to establish well defined rules and to prepare the local actors for the conditions of autonomy. While a growing number of schools have benefited from the greater freedom, the majority of them have simply had the feeling that the state did not assume its responsibility and left them alone with their difficulties.

The policy of school autonomy in Hungary therefore cannot be seen by any means as a well-planned and well-designed policy. Begun without appropriate positive elaboration, its legitimacy has continuously been questioned. This policy, many years after its being put on way by the 1985 Act, has not yet become a fully legitimate policy paradigm in Hungary. The question of whether we have to go forward on the way that has been opened by the 1985 Act or turn back to the earlier administrative patterns has come recently into the focus of educational debates.

Similar debates can be observed today in most of those East European countries that have started decentralizing their educational system. Almost everywhere we can encounter opinions in favour of "restoring the order" and going back to the traditional pattern of central control. What is the reason of these opinions becoming more and more frequent?

The most important reason, I think, is that, contrary to the West, in Eastern Europe decentralization and school autonomy did not appear as a planned response to systemic problems but rather as a reward of the fight for political freedom. As a consequence, policies of decentralization have not been properly elaborated and their psychological conditions have not been created. The comprehension that greater freedom means greater responsibility, greater involvement, and often more work may lead to disappointment. Uncertainty caused by increased autonomy also makes people feel the desire to go back to the well-known order. This uncertainty and feeling of being left alone is especially strong if the enlargement of school autonomy has not been accompanied by the development of professional support services. Those governments that are not consciously committed to the objective of decentralization, cannot resist this suddenly rising desire for more central control.

Another reason is certainly to be found in the fact that the new inexperienced political leaders, when facing uncontrolled local changes, have often the feeling that things are going out of their hands. Decentralized systems must be governed by the indirect means of general rules and not by direct instructions and orders. This requires a certain capacity to foresee how the autonomous local units will react to the general rules. This is possible only on the basis of experience and knowledge gained by practicing government. Local autonomy brings positive changes only if the rules of the game are well defined. Yet, this is not the case in the new Eastern European democracies. The lack of appropriate legal frameworks and the lack of time to create them also pushes politicians and administrators to use direct methods, that is orders and instructions instead of creating or modifying rules.

The temptation to use direct methods is reinforced by the well-known weakness of civil society and the low level of professionalization of teaching in the East European countries. Local

autonomy is meaningful only if there are real local needs. No legitimate policy of school autonomy can be imagined if the only defenders of autonomy are teachers who are anxious about their freedom or labour conditions. Only parents who demand the right to influence their children's schools, citizens who exert pressure on governments to make education more accountable and professional teachers offering high quality work can convince a society of the importance of local freedom. The weakness of the civil society is especially felt in the field of vocational education. Many of the big state enterprises that had played a decisive role in vocational training prior to the political changes are now entering bankruptcy and have not yet been replaced by new actors.

Sometimes it is the radicalism and idealism of the defenders of autonomy that raises resistance. The content and scope of autonomy being not well defined it appears as irresponsibility and a simple pretext for maintaining low quality work. This alienates those who are interested in raising quality and effectiveness and pushes them to the camp of the defenders of strong central control. There are indeed serious risks in local autonomy, like increasing local provincialism. Tolerating the short term negative consequences of local freedom is certainly not easy, and the demand for the interference of the state seen as an enlightened agency is still tempting.

In those countries, as it is the case in Hungary, where local and central authorities are controlled by opposing political forces, the central government might be in favour of centralization on purely political basis. Another obstacle to decentralization may be lack of trust of the new political leaders in the teaching profession. Teachers in the former Eastern bloc countries have been criticized by certain politicians because of their "loyalty" toward the earlier regime. The new leaders are reluctant to give autonomy to those teachers who, as it was stated not long ago by a leading Hungarian politician, "miseducated" generations.

Deteriorating financial conditions also put an obstacle in front of the enlargement of local autonomy. The lack of local resources, the often huge regional and school level differences as well as the state remaining the only important revenue holder prevent not only the spreading of private institutions but also the introduction of local financial management schemes. The introduction of those methods of financing that are based on block grant subventions calculated on the basis of per capita costs, raises serious tensions since they may result in dramatic decline of services at certain places.

Finally, the greatest opposing force in many countries is the appearance of nationalistic or religious fundamentalism as a legitimate state ideology. This reinforces efforts to maintain strong central control as a tool to make this ideology prevail in schools. Ethnic and religious conflicts that cannot be solved at local level force state authorities to interfere. In those countries that have recently regained their national autonomy, the new national political elite soon loses its former interest in local autonomy. Whereas local autonomy was seen earlier as a tool in the fight against the oppressing foreign power, after regaining independence it becomes a threat for the new nation state that tries to assimilate its own ethnic minorities. Educational policy, in these countries, is soon subordinated to the goal of strengthening national integrity and identity.

These factors, I think, are present in the educational policy of most countries in the East European region. It is in the light of these factors that we have to raise again the question: will the recent changes of increasing school level autonomy and decentralization survive the political transition period or not. At the time being we certainly are not able to give a definite answer to this question. Some assumptions, however, can be formulated.

I think that despite all the factors pulling us back to centralization there is no returning to the traditional model of central control. The social and political context of education has changed too much for that.

The most obvious obstacle to going back to centralization in certain countries is the fact that primary and secondary schools are no longer run by the central state. In Hungary the overwhelming majority of schools is owned and maintained by local authorities that have constitutionally guaranteed autonomy. The central government cannot apply other principles in the field of education than those applied in the field of general public administration. Because of this responsibility must be shared between central and local governments.

Another obstacle to centralization is to be found in the economic conditions and the financing capacities of the state. Centralization could be legitimated by major development programs implemented by the state. But, at present, no one can see such programs appearing. Actually, central governments in Eastern Europe are not able to finance properly even the existing services.

In the case of Hungary, the greatest obstacle to going back to centralization has been created by time. Schools have been living in the conditions of autonomy for more than six years. After the most difficult first two or three years, characterized by uncertainty, schools have learnt to live together with the challenge of autonomy. This period was characterized not only by the disintegration of the old system, but also by rising professionalism and strengthening civil society. The number of professional organizations that are capable of safeguarding the interests of different teacher groups has increased dramatically. New ideas and concepts have emerged, and autonomy has become intellectually possible for more and more people. With the time element things have become irreversible.

It seems that important fractions of the new political leadership understood that after several decades of quantitative and qualitative expansion, the educational system has become too complex to be governed by direct means from one centre. The crisis of governance and policy integration has appeared in all East European countries long before the political changes started. Let think only of the well-known problems of adapting the educational system to the rapidly changing manpower needs of the economy, of the problems of adapting teaching to the extremely differentiated learning needs of children or of the difficulties of forcing homogeneous socialization in a culturally differentiated society.

Modern educational systems, surrounded by complex societies and by a rapidly changing economic world cannot work as they could four or five decades ago. Possibilities for local and

school level adaptation must be maintained: otherwise accumulating tensions will lead to uncontrollable explosions and further disintegration. In a period of economic austerity, the most important source of energy for further development is in the local initiatives of individuals and communities. Only freedom can open this source of energy.

The new East European political leaders have to, and I think will understand that restoring the old patterns of central control will lead, in the long term, not to greater order and stability, but, on the contrary, to disorder and loss of control. They have to understand that instead of restoring the old order under new colours, they have to make efforts to construct a new order, based on autonomy limited by well-defined rules. They have to start working on inventing these rules, and to let these rules regulate the action of the actors instead of telling them all the time what they have to do.

The most urgent task of the educational leaders of the new East European democracies is therefore, in my opinion, that of filling in the legal vacuum created by the political transformation. New education laws must be enacted as soon as possible, even if in a period of transition they will probably be often amended. But the creation of the appropriate legal frameworks is certainly not enough. Local actors must be prepared for their new roles, and taught how to use freedom. Local autonomy increases dramatically the demand for training, advising, professional support, and other services. It creates a huge demand for new ideas, concepts and theories. I think, it is in this field that the West can offer the most important assistance to the new Eastern democracies

It is obvious that comparative education may have a serious contribution in this field. The creation of the theoretical and psychological basis of school autonomy and decentralization cannot be achieved without the knowledge of the experiences of other countries. This knowledge is indispensable not only to find the better solutions but also to avoid the mistakes others have made. I am convinced that this conference will contribute to the improvement of this knowledge.