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AN INTERPRETATION ATTEMPT OF HUNGARIAN SMALL TOWNS' SHRINKING IN A POST-SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION CONTEXT

The rapid shrinking of Hungarian small towns became such a general process after the turn of the Millennium, which does not simply reflect the overall effects of the second demographic transition, and could not even be interpreted with local and regional factors. The aim of the present paper is to analyse the shrinking of small towns among the framework of post-socialist urban transformation models and concepts. Many authors have dealt with such transformation issues, but rather focusing on the description of the development of larger cities and analysing the transformation of urban space and society. Despite the evident differences caused by the size of the researched settlements (small urban centres with a maximal population of 30,000 people), some general elements of these concepts give parts of the explanations we looked for. Others are rooted much deeper: our paper finally states that the present day crisis of small towns originates back to the later decades of planned economy, when the forced and somewhat over-dimensioned modernisation of small towns resulted a significant role in the urban network. This modernisation was centrally planned, led and financed, and with the exhaustion of these exogenous sources small towns seem to return to a less intensive development path.

Keywords: small towns, Hungary, shrinking, post-socialist transformation.

Андраш Троксани, Габор Пірісі, Єва Мате. СПРОБА ІНТЕРПРЕТАЦІЇ СКОРОЧЕННЯ УГОРСЬКИХ МАЛИХ МІСТ У КОНТЕКСТІ ПОСТСОЦІАЛІСТИЧНОЇ ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЇ

Метою даної статті є аналіз скорочення малих міст у рамках моделей і концепцій постсоціалістичних трансформацій міст. Багато авторів розглядали такі проблеми трансформації, а скоріше фокусувались на описі розвитку великих міст та аналізі трансформації міського простору і суспільства. Нинішня криза малих міст відбувається у більш пізні десятиліття планової економіки, коли вимушена і дещо переоцінена модернізація малих міст зіграла важливу роль у міській мережі. Ця модернізація була централізовано спланована, очолювалася і фінансувалася, але через виснаження цих екзогенних джерел невеликі міста поверталися до менш інтенсивного шляху розвитку.

Ключові слова: малі міста, Угорщина, скорочення, постсоціалістична трансформація.

Андраш Троксани, Габор Пірісі, Єва Мате. ПОПЫТКА ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИИ СОКРАЩЕНИЯ ВЕНГЕРСКИХ МАЛЫХ ГОРОДОВ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПОСТСОЦИАЛИСТИЧЕСКОЙ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ

Целью настоящей статьи является анализ сокращения малых городов в рамках моделей и концепций постсоциалистических трансформаций городов. Многие авторы рассматривали такие проблемы трансформации, а скорее фокусировались на описании развития крупных городов и анализе трансформации городского пространства и общества. Нынешний кризис малых городов происходит в более поздние десятилетия плановой экономики, когда вынужденная и несколько переоцененная модернизация малых городов сыграла важную роль в городской сети. Эта модернизация была централизованно спланирована, возглавлялась и финансировалась, но из-за истощения этих экзогенных источников небольшие города возвращались к менее интенсивному пути развития.

Ключевые слова: малые города, Венгрия, сокращение, постсоциалистическая трансформация.

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Introduction

The post-socialist transformation was – or maybe, is – a process, which covered literally all aspects of the social systems of the Central- and Eastern European countries¹ (CEE). The controversial and difficult adaptation and integration to democratic and free market based Western Europe with all its different social, spatial and environmental issues has been the lead topic associated with these countries in peer-reviewed journals in spatial sciences for more than 20 years (Altvater 1998; Herrschel 2006; Kolodko 1999; Smith/Rochovska 2007; Smith/Swain 2010; Smith et al. 2008; Stenning/Hoerschelmann 2008).

This multiple transition was triggered off by a sort of overlapping crises of the macro-region. According to its nature, the worsening demographic situation was not among the most important issues forced the transition, but the challenges had been clearly visible before the transformation started. For example, researchers recognised the effects of an early fertility decline in the region in as early as at the beginning of the 20th century (Demeny 1968), but further conclusion and extrapolations were discouraged by the regime's growth and superiority based paradigm. From "Western" point of view, processes – as far the data availability made it possible – were analysed, with special attention to the USSR, where declining fertility and growing mortality became an important factor of long-term geopolitical struggles (Crisostomo 1983). The region (except Poland) was mostly avoided by the real baby boom, and fertility dropped in every affected country quickly in this era, resulting some political reflections with various pronatalist tools (Gregory 1982).

Political and economic changes in 1989/90 accelerated the changes and swept away almost all the benefits of the balanced system of social care. While more urgent problems hid the demographic transition from the attention, the indicators showed dramatic change, with the permanent association of "crisis" or even "catastrophe" (Philipov/Kohler 2001). The falling numbers of fertility, marriage and crude birth rates were primarily connected with the distracted social uncertainty of the political and economic transition (Kohler/Kohler 2002; Marida/Laura 2009; Philipov/Dorbritz 2003; Philipov et al. 2006), or for example in Rumania, the liberalisation of abortions and demolition of similar restrictive regulation and practice of the Ceausescu-regime. Less attention was paid to positive changes, like growing life expectancy (Nolte et al. 2005). The discussion about the demographic effects of transformation was also integrated in the theoretical framework of second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 2010; Lesthaeghe/Van de Kaa 1986; Van de Kaa 1987; 2003), while more and more "postmodern" thoughts of these societies occurred (Hoem et al. 2009; Sobotka 2008; Sobotka et al. 2003). After almost 30 years of political changes, it has become obvious: what-

ever happens to the population of the region, it cannot be seen as a temporary crisis caused by the worsening material and non-material conditions (Philipov et al. 2006) of living. That means demography has become a highly significant factor of post-socialist transformation, affecting the spatial processes both on the level of regions and settlements.

These spatial processes include the transformation of towns and cities, or, more generally, the transformation of the entire settlement-systems in the region. During the era of planned economy, "socialist urbanisation" was determined by a strong, top-down regulated modernisation effort with forced growth of cities with economic priority (Enyedi 1992; Murray/Szelenyi 1984; Musil/Ryšavá 1983; Pickvance 2002). The post-socialist transition had wide-ranged and spectacular effects on functions, structure and social networks of urban places. Therefore, not surprisingly, several papers focused either on the full scope, or on some details of post-socialist urban transition, which could be evaluated today as a well-described, even well modelled issue. (Andrusz et al. 2008; Dimitrovska Andrews 2005; Hirt 2012; Sailer-Fliege 1999; Stanilov 2007; Tsenkov, 2006; Wiest 2012). However, metropolises are rather exceptional, than typical in the region, where generally only the capital cities exceed one million inhabitants, the above models focused on these settlements.

The case of Prague (Sykora 1999; Temelova 2007), Budapest (Kok/Kovacs 1999; Kovacs 1998; 2009), Sofia (Hirt/Staniolov 2007; Tsenkova 2007), Bucharest (Light/Young 2010; Marcinczak et al. 2014), Warsaw (Grubbauer/Kusiak 2012; Weclawowicz 2005) even Belgrade (Goeler et al. 2012; Vujović/Petrović 2007) are studied in details. Moreover, there are also some model-value case studies about medium sized cities – see for example (Maes et al. 2012; Marcinczak/Sagan 2011) (Boros 2009; Cavrić et al. 2008; Kotus 2006). The post-socialist transition took a specific shape and an accelerated pace in the former GDR characterised by a more intensive capital inflow (and population outflow). Becoming part of reunified Germany, these cities, especially Berlin (Colomb 2013; Reimann 1997) and Leipzig (Bontje 2005; Kabisch et al. 2010) seems to be quite "over-represented" among the region's cities (Kubeš 2013).

On this international, credited level of journals, much less attention was paid to small towns, and most of the studies focuses on a specific smaller geographical area (Filipović et al. 2016; Konecka-Szydłowska et al. 2010; Agnieszka Kwiatek-Sołtys 2005; 2006; Slavík 2002; Steinführer et al. 2014; Vaishar 2004; Zuzanska-Żyśko 2005; Pirisi/Trócsányi 2015b; Zamfir et al. 2009), and only a few paper sets more general goals (Burdack/Knappe 2007). Authors are concerned, that there are much more papers published in local languages – see for example: (Frantál/Vaishar 2008; Horeczki 2014; Konecka-Szydłowska 2017; Vaishar et al. 2008) – aside from the language barriers, the availability of these papers are also questionable, and the scoping is predominantly provincial. Nevertheless, according to our knowledge, the analysis of the lower level of urban sys-

¹ Although we find the term East-Central European more exact, hereby we use the acronym CEE to describe this group because of their slightly more intensive prevalence in literature. This covers the countries of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia and the three Baltic states.

tem has hardly ever been framed into the model of post-socialist urban transformation.

Recently, beyond the issues of transformation, shrinking became a central question among the urban researches in CEE –and in a wider interpreted Eastern Europe, too. Although shrinking, and urban decay as a challenge for both research and planning appeared much earlier in Western (European/American) context (*Bradbury et al.* 1982; *Friedrichs* 1993; *Martinez-Fernandez et al.* 2012; *Rybczynski/Linneman* 1999). Later it was also interpreted as a typical CEE-phenomenon (*Haase et al.* 2013; *Oswalt/Rieniets* 2006; *Siljanoska et al.* 2012), and may have become one of the most important analytical framework of urban researches. The term proved to be appropriate to describe the decay of some typical, industrial towns and cities, the “socialist cities” (new towns), therefore widely accepted in CEE countries’ literature. Another continuously problematic and deeply investigated issue has been the fate of rural areas, especially remote and small-units-based ones providing endless work for economists, sociologists and geographers in the past 50 years.

However, what happens to small towns is something new – at least in Hungary¹. Most commonly Hungarian literature had a positive evaluation on them: soon after the 1990s small towns were described as rather winners than losers of the transformation (*Izsák* 2001; *Kovács* 2004), while there were also some differentiated diagnoses taken about them emphasizing the positive signs of the small town urbanisation (*Beluszky* 1999a; *Beluszky/Györi* 1999; *Pirisi* 2009c). In his important, highly influential book György Enyedi sketched the three most probable scenario for the regional development in Hungary (*Enyedi* 1996), but only the worst case with permanent economic crises counted with the further polarisation of spatial structure and with the possible decline of small towns. A decade between 1996 and 2006 have brought us the most impressive and dynamic development of the Hungarian economy since the 1960s, therefore it was rather surprising, when the results of the national census in 2011 revealed the general downturn that was made by almost all of the traditional, central-functions dominated small towns (*Pirisi/Trócsányi* 2015a).

Some characteristics of the phenomenon, for example, the fact that the extent of shrinking has no strong correlation either with the settlements’ size or with the geographical position (East-West dichotomy in Hungary), plus the growing significance of outmigration within the decline in the process beg the question of some kind of general failure (*Pirisi/Trócsányi* 2015a). Such functional erosion of urban settlements would not be unique in Western European literature (*Troeger-Weiß/Domhardt* 2009), however it has not been identified as such in case of Hungarian small towns. Because of the highly different social conditions (economic activity, local capital and entrepreneurship, the different background and effects of ageing, the different mobility etc.),

small towns’ shrinking in Hungary could not be described simply, as they are “the main losers of globalisation” (*Enyedi* 2012). The present study intends to analyse shrinking within the framework of post-social transformation assuming that we can have a more detailed explanation of the process.

Therefore, the paper sets the goal to interpret and analyse the shrinking of small towns among the theoretical framework. Beyond the main intention, the paper sets some important sub-goals. Firstly, the concept and the definition of small town are needed to be evaluated. While small towns are very common, there is hardly any standard for the usage of this term in geography or urban studies. While the traditional classification is based on the number of inhabitants and even on a special pattern of spatial functions, they naturally vary between different countries’ settlement networks, therefore the overall consensus is missing even inside of Hungary (see details and references in next chapter). Secondly, the paper summarises the most important observations about the demographic decline of small towns, focusing on the outmigration as a key-factor of shrinking. The main goal is however, to connect small town shrinking and post-socialist urban transformation, therefore the paper tries to summarise the elements of different concepts within the transition theories, and interpret them from a small town point of view.

The Hungarian interpretation of small towns

Small towns are essential elements of the Hungarian urban network, and it seems that they also play significant roles in other CEE-countries. There are historical and structural reasons, why we suggest that these roles can be more important than in Western Europe (*Pirisi/Trócsányi* 2015a), while the relatively large number of small-town related papers from these countries also seems to confirm this understanding (*Burdack/Knappe* 2007; *Ježek* 2011; *Kaczmarek/Konecka-Szydłowska* 2013; *Konecka-Szydłowska et al.* 2010; *Kwiatk-Soltys* 2011; *Kwiatk-Soltys* 2015; *Slavík* 2002; *Vaishar* 2004).

The manifestation of small towns is a quite attention-grabbing issue in literature: one can find a kind of consensual usage of this term/concept without an exact definition, or either a universally accepted upper and lower population limit or a functional character (*Niedermeyer* 2000). As being an everyday concept, everybody – even researchers – has some kind of mental image about small towns, however associations could be quite diverse (*Burdack* 2013). In some of our former papers (*Pirisi/Trócsányi* 2015b) we gave a possible definition that we consistently used in our researches about Hungary. Highlighting the most important element of these definitions, we suggest that small towns are places with a limited number of town-forming factors and with dominantly LAU-1 units² functional interaction network. The population size of settlements according to this definition can be highly various depending on re-

¹ The authors have gained first-hand experience and studied the literature of the former GDR, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania and the Baltic states, however, presently will focus on the Hungarian examples offering more detailed data and literature available for them.

² LAU (Local Administrative Unit) is a low level of the European Union’s territorial, administrative division system. LAU-1 is equivalent to the former NUTS-4 level and consist local administrative units over the level of single municipalities (LAU-2). In Hungarian LAU-1 units are called „járás” (district)

gional geographical and historical factors (like physical geographical environment, specialities of historical development, local ways and traditions of agriculture etc.). In Hungary, researchers interpret and circumscribe small towns in various ways from a clearly functional point of view (Beluszky 1999b) to an upper limitation of some kind of population size, including 20,000 people (Kovács 2002), 25,000 (Tóth 1996), or even 30,000 (Kőszegfalvi 2004). None of these limits are perfect, however based on our previous researches (Pirisi 2009b), we consequently use the limit of 30,000 inhabitants. It is unquestionably higher than usually used in literature where 20,000 or even 15,000 inhabitants seems to be a more common option (Heineberg 2014; Vaishar 2004; Zuzánska-Žyško 2005). Our main arguments voting for this option root in some structural characteristics of the Hungarian urban network. Due to some historical and to certain recent elements in the territorial administrative system, beneath Budapest we can classify four explicit levels in this system:

a) Regional centres (n=5): with spatial functions covering NUTS-2 level regions and a with population exceeding 100,000 (Győr, Pécs, Miskolc, Szeged, Debrecen with population from 128,000 to 203,000);

b) County seats (n=13+5): medium sized cities with NUTS-3 level administrative and other spatial functions and with population from 33,000 to 118,000 inhabitants. We can also attach five more cities to this group with a population of 46,000 to 65,000 people: practically a size of an average county seat, legally classified as “county rank cities”, but owning only limited administrative functions.

c) Low-level centres (n=152) with LAU-1 level administrative functions, with 2,000 to 40,500 inhabitants.

d) Towns without administrative functions (n=170): settlements are legally classified as towns, with strikingly various level of urbanity in functional, morphological and social sense, with a population between 1,000 and 29,000 people.

Small towns should be found in categories c) and d), but there are some relative bigger urban places among these centres, former (historical) county seats with still significant size and spatial roles, traditionally classified as mid-sized towns (like Sopron, Pápa, Baja and some others)(Beluszky 1999b). Although there are surprisingly few experiments to define small town in a complex way, including social, economic and/or cultural factors in Hungary (Bánlaky 1987), the authors try to interpret small towns as communities with various, but often unbalanced central functions, locality-dominated spatial connections and urban identity (Pirisi 2009b). To fulfil the goals of this research according to the small town shrinkage, we excluded one important group of small-sized towns: the ones belonging to larger urban agglomerations. Theoretically, these settlements may fulfil the criteria of urban identity, but as suburbs, they are usually weak in central functions, and their connections are more dominated by the metropolises than the local “hinterlands”. Practically, including these settlements with their dynamical growing population through suburbanisation the investigation of shrinking would be very difficult.

According to the deliberations above, authors used the following criteria by selecting the researched settlements:

- Settlements need to have town rank in 2011 (census year),
- Must have a population under 30,000 by the census of 2011,
- Towns officially categorised as parts of urban agglomerations are excluded.

If applying the above criteria, our investigated pool of small towns includes 259 elements.

Shrinking small towns in a (demographically) declining country

When evaluating the small towns' shrinkage in the post-socialist Hungary, we need to take into consideration that Hungary is among the countries with the largest population decrease in the world. According to the population statistics of the United Nations¹ there are only four (all Eastern-European) countries of the world listed with lower level of natural decrease than Hungary (-3,8% between 2010 and 2015). The turning point arrived in 1981 (Hungary was among the first few countries in the world with natural decrease in peaceful times), since then, every year has brought more death than live births. In this meaning, political transition does not appear as a turning point – the decrease has been continued relative consistently. Between 1990 and 2001 a population of 175,000 people, between 2001 and 2011 218,000 people “disappeared” from Hungary. According to the latest data available, on 31st December 2015, the country has 9.823 million inhabitants², which means a total loss of 577,000 people in the last 25 years (this figure has been modified by the migration balance, without that the natural loss is calculated to reach 922,000 between 1990-2015!). The rate of natural decrease reached -4.1‰ in 2015, which is definitely worse, than the average of 1990-2014 (-3.5‰).

The total fertility rate dropped from 1.84 (1990) to the lowest of 1.24 (2011), with a drop back to 1.53 until 2016. The very low level of fertility rate is quite universal among the CEE-countries (Philipov/Kohler 2001), with some divergence in long-term values. In Hungary, the fertility rate had fallen under the 2.1 reproduction level as early as in 1959/1960, but pro-natalist initiatives (around 1968 and 1973, 1986) resulted minor positive changes in the number of births and fertility rates (Daróczy 2007). The present-day increase in fertility is with high possibility an effect of the postponed family-founding from the previous years of economic crisis, and probably does not influence the number of births, as the decreasing number of women in fertile years erodes the possible gain. Interesting however, that despite of a generous policy of family-support (in 1990 the expenditures for supporting childbearing and child rearing reached 4.32% of the GDP, which was one of the highest ratio in Europe (Gábos 2000)) the continuous efforts of reaching

¹ Population Division (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) United Nations World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision. File POP/3: Rate of natural increase by major area, region and country, 1950-2100.

² Official data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office – see <http://www.ksh.hu/gyorstajekoztatok/#/en/document/nep1512>

a sustainable level of fertility have failed. The situation of the recent years is more worrisome if we consider that thanks for above efforts, the cohorts born between 1973-1979 are relative populous. When these cohorts leave the fertile period, the number of births will significantly decline without the drop of fertility – this effect is clearly visible right now. Therefore, the new government – in power since May, 2018 – of Hungary itself emphasize the importance of a “demography-based governance”, setting focus on the increase of births, planning the further expansion of family support sources.

Beyond the fertility and births, the demographic crisis in Hungary has some other “local” specialities. The decreasing or slightly growing life expectancy and increasing mortality was an overall phenomenon in CEE-countries (Chenet *et al.* 1996; Cockerham 1997; Velkova *et al.* 1997), but in Hungary – especially by the male mortality – the problem became surprisingly heavy, and more often has been connected with the ineffectiveness of healthcare system, also characterised by large urban-rural (and regional) disparities. (Pál/Boros 2010; Uzzoli, 2008).

International migration was an important balancing factor, at least between 1990 and 2011. The opening of the western borders did not affected significant emigration, while the economic gap between Hungary, Romania and Ukraine in these years, and the uncertain geopolitical situation in Serbia accelerated the immigration of mostly ethnically Hungarian population of neighbouring countries. That ensured a surplus of 325,000 people in the migration balance, playing important role in the maintenance of labour force and the system of social care. Analyses made in the years of EU-integration underlined the importance of these effect in future demographical prospects (Hablicsek 2004). In the past 6-8 years the situation has changed basically, as the Hungarian employees appeared on the common European labour market, especially in the United Kingdom, Germany and Austria. Hungarian population statistics have not been able to provide data about this phenomenon, and only a few scientifically valid estimations were published – one of them give a number of 335,000 for Hungarian citizens living permanently abroad in 2012 (Kapitány/Rohr 2014)¹. The dominant majority of these people were probably registered in Hungary by the census of 2011 as “permanent residents” in their home settlement, which could mean that the present, “real” population of the country could be with 350-400,000 people less, than the official figure of 9.8 million.

In the recent years authors have described the phenomenon of small town shrinking in details (Pirisi/Trócsányi 2015a). In this paper, the goal is to give an overlook about the most impressing elements of it.

Small towns have always formed a less dynamic group among urban settlements. The traditional towns, with a long history of centrality and bourgeois develop-

ment could also be defined as the “residual” elements of urban network, as they remained small towns while other similar places has grown to a bigger size and has evolved to a higher level of urbanity. The population of small towns accelerated significantly only in the 1970s (see Fig. 1), when the yearly growth rate reached 0.6%, which is still not a data to be confused with an urban explosion. Although the population of small towns started to decrease in the 1980s when the overall demographic trends – as it was discussed earlier – turned to be negative, the shrinking did not seem to be a serious problem for the next two decades. The change of population is not far from zero, and if we take into consideration, that the growth of larger urban places also stopped, it could underline that small towns could “hold the line” successfully during the turmoil period of transformation. Soon after the political transformation, small towns reached a small surplus from migration, which could almost balance the effect of natural decrease.

In the period between 2001 and 2011 the situation changed significantly (Fig. 2), and outmigration became in some years the more important factor of demographic decay.

The small towns’ shrinking between 2001 and 2011 turned out to be more intensive compared to any other categories in the settlement network, including the enormous loss caused by suburban migration from Budapest (and some other larger cities). Altogether, 214 out of 259 surveyed towns have lost significant amount of population, the average decrease was 6.2%/10 years, which means that 140,000 people ‘disappeared’ from small towns. One major finding of the former researches was, that shrinking and its scale are not entirely independent from geographical position: settlements in the eastern, less developed parts of the country are affected more intensively (Pirisi/Trócsányi 2015a). However, it would be a dangerous oversimplification to interpret the shrinking of small towns as a reflection to regional problems only. The pattern suggests a much more diverse picture: we can find heavily affected small towns in dynamical north-western regions, and some quiet resilient ones even in the most problematic north-east. It seems, that some local factor (presence of some larger enterprises, maybe more effective local development initiatives, or even the management of municipalities) could be more important than regional determinates.

Until 2007, both natural and migration loss increased permanently. The turn was spectacular in outmigration, and happened parallel with the economic crisis. Therefore it is easy to interpret it as a sign of lower fragility of small towns, or even connect it to their higher resilience in the era of economic downturn. This might be an incorrect interpretation, because the remission of the outmigration from small towns happened in the same time, when generally the national emigration became very dynamic, and the estimated minimum number of Hungarian citizens living permanently abroad reached 330-350,000 people² in 2013 (Blaskó/Gödri 2014).

¹ The lack of accurate or even approximate official data opens wide space for estimations and even politically determined interpretations, indicating the number of the foreign-living Hungarian citizens between 350,000 (the government’s opinion) and 600,000. These are probably the lowest and highest possible numbers.

² The estimation is about the number of people between the age of 18 and 49.

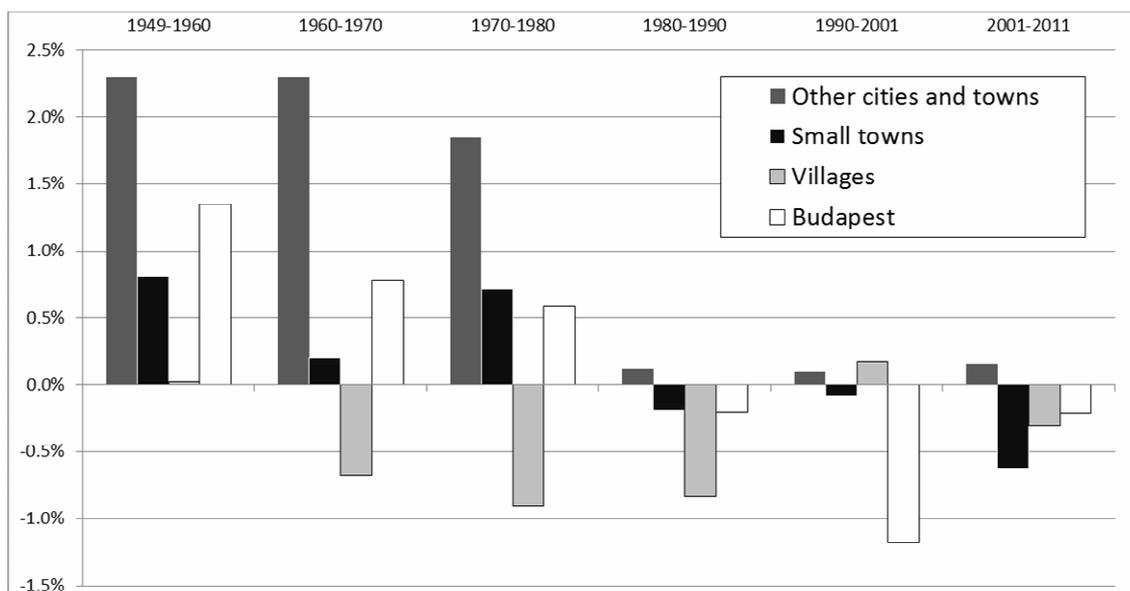


Fig. 1. Yearly average change of population in different settlement categories in Hungary, between 1949 and 2011
Based on the authors' own calculation using the data of Hungarian Central Office of Statistics

While official statistics are more or less reliable of measuring the internal migration (residents moving to another settlement eventually need to register themselves at the new address by the authorities of their new place), the Hungarian official statistics are unable to measure the international emigration, because migrants do not register their leave by the local, Hungarian authorities. Although they later appear somewhere by the tax offices or social care system of the selected, new country, these registrations have no feedbacks to the Hungarian statistics. Therefore, the decreasing figure of migration loss (see Fig. 2. by the year of 2007) shows only that the migration target presumably changed from domestic to foreign directions. In this case, statistics still have a belief about people practically missing from small towns, and the population of small towns is over- and the intensity of shrinking is underestimated. If we accept the above estimation about the number of recent emigrants from Hungary (350,000 people), and suppose, that this shows a balanced pattern through the main categories of settlements¹ than the number of foreign-living small town-citizens could exceed 80-85,000 people. This is 3.7% of the total population of small towns in 2011, and more than 66% of all population loss suffered between 2001 and 2011. Moreover, if this estimation is correct, almost 9% of small town residents of 18-49 years have chosen the European emigration. (Pirisi/Trócsányi 2015a).

The progress in the migration balance could not only been interpreted as a result of foreign migration instead of the more measurable domestic one. There are

at least two factors to be mentioned causing real positive change. First of all, in the recent years, despite of the lack of an adequate policy in this field, return migration has appeared and become visible for researchers (Lados/Hegeđús 2016). Typically, the young emigrants return in some – but in limited number of – cases when their children start their school at the age of 6 or 7. The second possible reason of the decreasing migration loss could be an immigration to small towns from surrounding villages, where economic, social and institutional structures have been eroded such in an accelerating pace that it pushes people to smaller centres (Máté 2017).

Shrinking is not a demographic problem only, but it appears as a loss of significance and functions in many other aspects of social and economic life. In this sense, shrinking means more often a relative decline of small towns, the decreasing share and weight inside Hungary. There are not any direct data available about the change of the economic output of small towns, but we have some indirect signs of relative, and sometimes even the absolute decline of them. First of all, the number of small towns had a 22% share in the pool of enterprises employing more than 50 staff in 2000, 17.9% in those employing more than 250. These figures decreased to 18.9% and 15.6% respectively, which means a loss of 241/71 firms in each categories by 2010, as reported by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. (Pirisi/Trócsányi 2015a) If we compare this data with the fact, that 45% of the Hungarian GDP is produced by enterprises over 250 employees (Hungarian Central Statistical Office), we can draw the conclusion that small towns' share within the national economic output also declined. This is not reflected directly in employment statistics: between 2001 and 2011 the number of workplaces in small towns grew by 5%, which was still a relative decline as the overall increase in Hungary in the same period was 6.8%. In a growing labour market, the

¹ Distributing the number of migrants according to the share of the total population may seem to an immoderate simplification, but former researches (see Pirisi, G. (2009c), *Differenciálódó kisvárosaink, Földrajzi Közlemények*, 133(3), 315-325.) suggests, that many of the qualitative parameters (like number of people with higher education degree, employment and unemployment, knowledge of foreign languages etc.) are very close to the national averages. Therefore, we suppose, that the factors determining migration are similar.

spatial role of small towns in employment slightly decreased. The balance of incoming and outgoing commuters was negative and has fallen since then. Only every third small town has a positive balance in commuting,

and in the investigated period this balance became worse in 170 cases. It means that there is a tendency of both growing incoming and outgoing commuting in small towns.

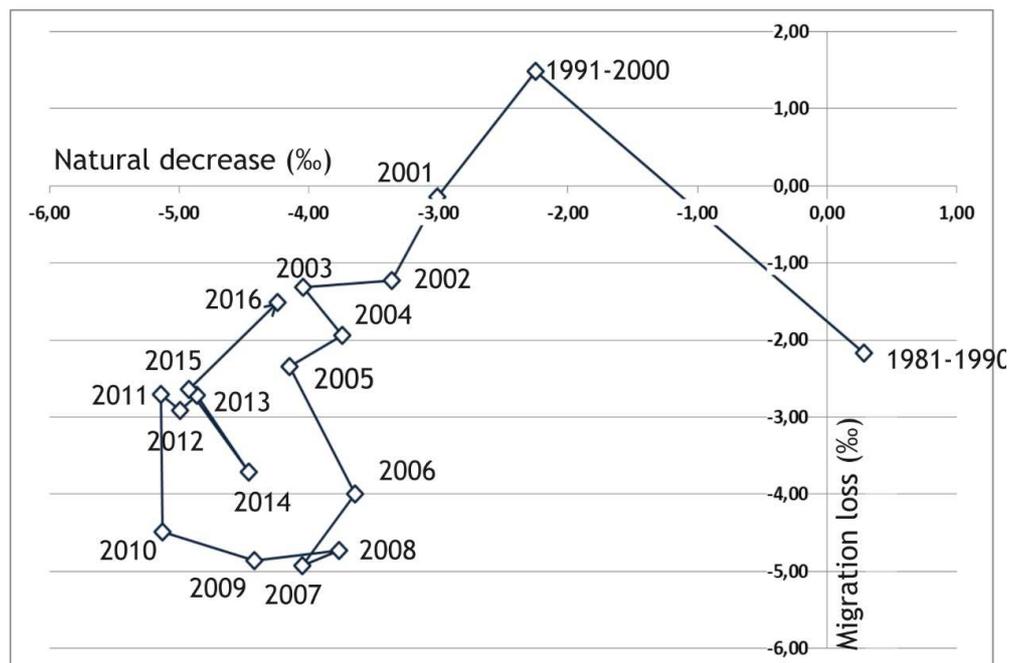


Fig. 2. Natural decrease and migration loss in small towns (1981-2016)

The authors' own design and calculation

There are some other sensible signs of economic shrinking, one of them is quite threatening for the future of small towns. The share of small towns in Hungarian flat constructions was 26.5% in 1990, 22.8% in 2001, which dropped back to a mere 9.4% by 2010 (of course accompanied by the collapse of the entire Hungarian market of newly built flats, due to the economic crisis). At such a rate the entire replacement of flats in small towns would take 400 years (the proportion of newly built flats compared with the total number of flats is 0.23%).

It seems that traditional central functions, public services financed from state sources are the less fragile elements of small towns' economy right now. The mean volume indicators of healthcare (for example the number of active beds in hospitals) or education has hardly shown any decline. Even the staff employed in public administration remained almost untouched, even when the frameworks and structures have changed often and lately significantly. Small towns have managed to keep almost all the secondary schools (in several cases in somewhat reorganised forms), however the number of children enrolled into secondary education reached a peak in 2005 and has started to decrease since then. Therefore, many of small towns' secondary schools have, and much more of them will have serious difficulties to fill up the classes and in absence of children, it will be hard to keep up the institutions and the crucial "white-collar-jobs".

Summarising the paragraphs above: after many decades of stability and slow but balanced development,

small towns found themselves on a very slippery slope around 2001. This is primarily exposed in their population-decrease, but it remarkably endangers the role they played in a spatial system. During the coming chapters the authors analyse the role and share of post-socialist transformation within the above negative tendencies.

Evaluation of post-socialist urban development models from small towns' point of view

The modelling of the post-socialist transformation is mainly based on well investigated cases of capital cities and some other cities, like Leipzig representing the former GDR-urbanisation. As Karin Wiest underlines, individual analysis dominates post-socialist urban debate, wherever case studies rather compare cities to some kind of Western, or even North American models, than to each other (Wiest 2012). However, the main features of the post-socialist transformation are hardly disputed (Hirt 2013) and there are some well-known papers, which give a theoretical models of the transformation (Hirt 2012; Kovács 1999; Sailer-Fliege 1999; Sýkora/Bouzarovski 2012; Tsenkova 2006). These models however, are focusing on big cities and analysing especially the transformation of urban spaces, giving hardly any hints for implementation of small towns.

Among the drivers and factors listed above, there are some elements that could be crucial for small towns as well; however, many of them do not appear at this level. In the political field, small towns gained a real widespread freedom in local decision making and planning, which was only questioned by the permanent lack of independent (non-governmental) financial sources,

and the under-financed nature of the whole system (Vigvári 2011). For the smaller and newly “promoted” towns this independence provided a great opportunity and the quality of leadership became an important factor of development. Other towns, having formal central roles in LAU-1 units, suffered some loss of spatial influence after the radical decentralisation of local govern-

ance. A new cycle of centralisation has just started in 2010/2012 and presently it is not still clear, how the re-organisation of administration, i.e. the rebirth of járás/district would affect the long-term development of small towns. Right at the end of year 2015, it seems that it can be a factor of polarisation between district-centres and other settlements.

Table 1

The most important common issues of post socialist urban transformation concepts

Factors & drivers	Effects in overall post-socialist transformation	Significance for and effects on small towns
Political transformation, democracy	Increasing role of local municipalities, decentralised decision making	Important, but divergent effects
Economic transformation	Introduction market economy, liberalisation and privatisation	Very important, leads to growing regional differences
	Deindustrialisation	Selective, but in average more problematic, than larger cities
	Growing importance of tertiary sector and especially retail	Selective and less important, than in larger cities
Social transformation	Unemployment	Significant
	Social polarisation, growing inequalities	Less significant, but segregation and social exclusion appears
	Individualisation, internationalisation	Less significant
	Demographic change, second demographic transition	Decisive factor
Spatial transformations	CBD/city-commercialisation, CBD-formation	Less significant
	Suburbanisation, urban sprawl	New small towns/No significance
	Decreasing scale of civic places, shift toward individual spaces	Less significant
	Privatisation of housing stocks, increasing costs of housing	Less significant
	Urban decay and brownfields	Less significant, but locally important problem
	Regeneration of downtown, gentrification	No significance
	End of visual uniformity, weakness of planning	Significant

Based on authors' own compilation

The economic transformation in Hungary left numerous and divergent effects behind on small towns. On the frequently analysed level of major cities, transformation mostly cited as a success story (Nemes Nagy 1994; Pavlínek 2004), however the collapse of the oversized heavy industry and the doubted development paths (Trócsányi 2011) have led to only questioned results. The significant failures of these transformation mostly associated with former monofunctional districts of heavy industry, composing region-size rust belts throughout the CEE-countries (Lintz et al. 2007; Lux 2009; Péntzes 2011).

The structural change of the economy, led by privatisation seriously affected small towns' previous role. In a survey of 2008 we found that 21% of leading industrial branches in small towns (with production sites over 200 employees each) disappeared completely during the transformation and by further 35%, activity reduced significantly (Pirisi 2009a). Other data, like the continuous erosion of the number of large employers – see former chapter – suggest, that economic transformation in these settlements was relatively slow, but painful, and less

successful process. Small towns' industry could be characterised by some dominant branches (food processing industry, some elements of light industry, affiliates), which proved to be extremely exposed to crises as economic “modernisation” during the 1970s and 1980s took shape in the form of one or two plants, giving these settlements a monofunctional character. The examples of modernisation and preservation of traditional industries are rather exemptions (Molnár 2014), old structures have been partly substituted by new investments. Several studies underlined two important facts about the connection of economic renewal and direct investments: the lack of human capital and therefore the weak capabilities for adaptation of innovations meant extensive barriers for restructuring (Csizmadia/Rechnitzer 2005; Rechnitzer et al. 2011; Rechnitzer et al. 2014), their overall competitiveness is low (Péntzes 2014). On the other hand the geographical position (proximity to the western borders, to the dynamic agglomeration of Budapest or to the main traffic axis of motorways) are almost the only “capital” of small towns, which they could successfully transform into economic growth (Nemes Nagy 1995).

The emerging dominance of tertiary sector also means something different than in larger cities. The scale and volume of service sector is restricted, the market is very narrow. Until 2002-2006 retail sector contained only the surviving units of the planned economy system and a sort of newly founded small shops according to the viral expansion of small enterprises. After the Millennium retail revolution (*Garb/Dybicz* 2006) reached the Hungarian small towns. Today, a typical small town with 10,000 inhabitants houses at least one general (smaller) hypermarket, 2-3 larger supermarkets, and a continuously reducing number of small shops. The number of shops in small towns dropped with 13% between 2001 and 2011. This pace is twice quicker than the national average, so beyond the melting purchase power of the economic crisis, we can also experience the consequences of outmigration and maybe the structural changes as well. Within the tertiary sector public services play significant role, the share of the public sphere in the employment has even been increased during the transformation (*Pirisi* 2009a).

Among the factors mentioned by the social transformation processes, the effects of the second demographic transition played the most important role in the shrinking of small towns, however, according to our present knowledge, there are minor differences in the most important elements between small towns and larger urban places. The total fertility rate in 2011 was 1.28 in small towns while the national average (1.24) did not differ too much. Even if there is some minor negative deviation at the number of marriages (3.58 in small towns versus 3.82 in Hungary per 1000 people in 2014), and probably the number of children born outside a marriage is somewhat also higher, than the national average (46.2%), the processes seems to reflect the overall situation in Hungary. The same can be observed by the factors of unemployment: the value of small towns changed parallel with the national, with very high local variety.

The role of some “soft” factors of social transformation (individualisation, polarisation etc.) seems to be much more difficult to be evaluated. There are well-known issues from international researches, first of all the famous “Bowling alone” (*Putnam* 2001), which suggests, that the small town crisis is interconnected with the changing role and content of social capital. Except some relative early researches focusing on the transition of local elite (*Medgyesi* 2005; *Utasi* 1995; *Utasi et al.* 1996), the detailed surveys about the change of social capital in Hungarian small towns have not been conducted. Although both common talk and some publications (*A Gergely et al.* 1986; *Bánlaky* 1987) described small towns with well-developed and somewhat closed (even narrow-minded or provincial) local communities, in a former research we failed to find statistical evidence of higher intensity of (formalised) civil activity (*Bucher/Pirisi* 2010). The compactness of these inherited social structures surely decreased with the manifest occurrence of poverty in the 1990s. While opposite to larger cities, we have no accurate picture about the spatial order of social structure, some case studies proved the presence of segregation also at the level of small towns (*Fehér/Virág* 2014), however, the real dimension of rural segregation is still the disparity of small towns and vil-

lages, or smaller inhabited rural settlements (*Nagy et al.* 2015). The former compactness has remained in one very important dimension: Hungarian small towns are still nearly homogenous structure in the sense of ethnicity – if we neglect the presence of predominantly Hungarian speaking Roma population. The cities with foreign investments and newly with foreign students may become really more international, but – with the exemption of some touristic resorts – the Hungarian small towns have remained intact from international migration. According to (inner) spatial processes, most of the factors, which were evaluated in details in case of larger cities, are either unrevealed by small towns, or seems to be inadequate at this level. We hardly have any relevant data about the sensible architectural-morphological renewal of small towns fuelled by the growing availability of EU-funds from 2004. New public investments mainly have focused on the urban renewal of town centres and resulted in some identity-building significance, however the overall level of rehabilitation is definitely low. In the course of suburbanisation – being one of the most spectacular changes of urban areas in the transition countries – small towns have played only a passive role: some of them have become target of suburban migration. Though towns of agglomerations were excluded from this research, at this point we need to invoke, that this has been the only intensive migration to a specific group of small towns. In other words, being a well-located and attractive place for living proved to be the “easiest” way to avoid shrinking.

Hereby we would like to draw attention to one more aspect: in all similar analyses, the privatisation of housing stock is a decisive element of the post-social transformation. In Hungary, the share of state-owned flats was 19% before the privatisation started, in Budapest this number was slightly over 60% (*Czirfusz and Pósfai*, 2015). The share of non-private ownership in small towns in some cases (industrial and mining new towns) could be even higher than in Budapest, but on an average, it hardly exceeded 10-12%, which covered mainly the new block of flats erected as symbols of modernisation in the 1970s in almost every town. These have been almost totally privatised, and the share of people living in their own property could be very high, even over 90%. In other words: there is a significant inflexibility in local property markets, which – according to our understanding – does not help the renewal of small towns or the keeping the younger generations inside the towns.

Towards a conceptual interpretation of small towns' shrinkage in Hungary

Although we could confirm, that some elements of the urban transformation concepts play significant roles in small towns' development, we still do not have the framework we looked for. Shrinking, of course, is not an unknown situation in the CEE-countries. Many analyses of European city-shrinking highlights the special involvement of post-socialist countries (*Mykhnenko/Turok* 2008; *Turok/Mykhnenko* 2007), Annegret Haase and her co-authors have even called the post-socialist transformation as “caused and catalyst” of shrinking (*Haase et al.* 2013). In case of small towns we also need to remember, that some signs of small towns' crisis were reflected decades ago in “Western” literature (*Coats*

1977; *Simon/Gagnon* 1967), and, in some cases (at least by the demographic issues) we need to look back to the era or planned economy or even behind.

Among the papers having a long-term perspective for the region many underline the fact, that the urbanisation (in meaning of growth of the population of cities) has been stopped after the political transformation (*Kovács* 2010; *Tsenkova* 2006). The rate of urbanisation has still increased in Hungary during the last 30 years, but it has been the result of the so called “formal urbanisation”, the reclassification of settlements, when former rural municipalities acquired town rank (*Bujdosó et al.* 2014; *Kulcsár/Brown* 2011; *Pirisi/Trócsányi* 2009). Of course, this legal act hardly can be seen as a real transformation from rural to urban, but it might be an indicator or milestone of the “real” or “functional” urbanisation as well. On the other hand, the “cease of urbanisation” also needs to be interpreted in other ways. The settlements (villages and towns) of the Budapest agglomeration gained 218,000 new inhabitants between 1990 and 2011, which is more than 40% of their population of 1990. Despite the spectacular (national) decline, the capital and its agglomeration preserved almost all its population and therefore the very important human resources. This is the cause, why cities like Budapest were able to increase their economic influence (*Kovács* 2010) during statistically spectacular decline. The slowdown of urbanisation became visible in the 1980s, without any sign of the deconcentrating of population. We totally agree with argumentation of *Brown* and *Kulcsár*, who interpreted this process as a sign of “the nation’s overall decline”, which phenomena indisputably concentrated in smaller settlements (*Brown et al.* 2005).

The overall condition of decreasing population since 1981 has meant fewer opportunities for small towns: the shrinking of human resources has become a general issue. The question however remains open: what happened to the small towns after a relatively successful period of late socialism and early post-socialism?

Not only our previous research (*Pirisi* 2009c) found at least some of the small towns successful during the transformation. Researchers like *Beluszky* underlined the stability of these small urban places during the crisis (*Beluszky* 1999a), moreover, *Kovács* even described the growing strength and importance of small towns as a unique character of the “Hungarian way” within the socialist Europe (*Kovács* 2010). This strength and stability is rooted deeply in the (partly) successful decentralisation experiments of the 1960s, which was further supported by the National Development Concept of Settlement System (1971 giving key roles to small towns in the rural hinterland of the country).

The above concept of the modernisation included a hierarchical reordering of central functions, modest industrialisation and (a highly controversial) architectural renewal. The political changes and the economic crisis interrupted this process: small towns in 1990 still preserved something premodern character. In many cases, this was not based on civic traditions of small-scale urbanity, but was quite archaic and rural: in 1990 17% of all small-town jobs employees found a job in agriculture.

This modernisation was initiated centrally, and hence was a real top-down process with significant re-

allocation of resources, effected important investments on health care, secondary (in some cases even tertiary) education, infrastructure and built environment. The development and strengthening of classical central functions (the concept was strongly based on central place theory) was much more long-lasting than the industrial development: jobs created that time survived the transition with higher chance, and the institutions founded then are still the basis of local intellectuals. However, the “product life” of that modernisation most likely reached its end around 2000-2010: the infrastructure was no longer capable to serve the community and the new intelligentsia was looking for wider horizons. Moreover, after the disappearance of youngsters (born around 1975) of the last demographic crest the declining population size may question the ability of local communities, and the commitment of central decision makers for maintaining a sort of public services.

Despite all difficulties, modernisation could continue after 1990 partly because of the impetus of recent reorganisations and investments, partly as the effect of general euphoria about the transition. Although state resources disappeared, the direct investments at least in some sectors (and in certain small towns) helped to create or improve urban conditions in retail and other services. However, the inflow of new investments in a typical small town was not enough to counterbalance the losses of deindustrialisation. The long-lasting economic crises (the restrictive economic policy started in 2006 and the dynamism of economic growth did not really return until 2014) used up local resources when less and less central help was given.

The position of small towns was not only challenged from financial aspects after the Millennium. The transition placed small towns into the free market where decision about new economic locations were made in a much wider context, and their chances for influencing these decisions were rather poor. The problem became even more serious, when the opening of the EU-labour market created another horizon of decision: the small-town born and educated young adults started to consider their perspectives in a European scale. Until that point, small towns were more or less able to show some attraction compared to larger cities in Hungary, but presently it seems, that it is clearly not enough against the new competitors.

Each of the above described factor on its own would have been enough to endanger the position of small towns, however many of them have occurred simultaneously. The obsolescence of the late modernisation coupled with the constant demographic decline have resulted a less attractive location for both investors and population. The free market conditions have not favoured small towns; the post-socialist transition has placed them on an entirely new and unknown track either in the form of deindustrialisation or in the form of competition for investors. The long expected European integration has brought limited sources for small town renewal, but on the other hand with offering foreign perspectives for youngsters unfortunately has degraded many of small towns to one-sided human resource pools.

Conclusion

After attempted to evaluate the shrinking in Hungarian small towns in a post-socialist context, some generalised conclusion can be formed. First of all, factors of shrinking contain a sort of overlapping, and interfering structure: clear chains of causes and consequences are very hard to forge. If we turn back to the basics of our argumentation: the crisis of small town taking shape in shrinking has been caused both by demographical and economic coefficients, however, the absence of any of these could prevent the decline. While the second demographic transition with global, regional and Hungarian determination have been mostly responsible for natural decrease, the functional emptying and economic decline are the main causes of continuous outmigration.

What small towns need(ed) to face in the recent and following years, is a kind of superposition to global, regional and in many times local challenges. Global factors influencing small towns in a very similar way than the influence other locations, however small towns being weak and 'small' suffer severely from the globalised competition for resources.

Although there are several ways, how post-socialist transformation influenced small towns, via changing social structure, political frameworks and spatial structures, the authors would place the main emphasis on the economic transformation. Post-socialist transformation in economy has been determined by deindustrialisation, a contradictory transition to a post-industrial structure. While in larger cities, even in late-industrialising CEE-countries there has been elapsed a century or at least half of a century between the establishment and reduction of large-scale industry, in case of small towns this time span often have covered only 30 years – a period being too short to build up a stabile base of competitive economy. Industrial development in small towns of Hungary was delayed and centrally coordinated, resulted top-down structures and thin network of local connections. These delayed and weak structures have become in large numbers victims of transition, and their replacement with other structures has been only partially successful.

This argumentation lead us to a point, which is might be the most general lesson of the analysed transformation of small towns. The Hungarian small towns' development and successes in the framework of the socialist modernisation proved to ephemeral and somewhat artificial due to its central-led and financed nature, as the whole urbanisation of the CEE-countries was somewhat accelerated (Murray/Szelényi 1984). From this point of view, the present shrinking process is nothing else than compensation, the return of a non-supported (endogenous) development path. The lack of resilience toward challenges of transformation and globalisation many

smaller post-socialist cities and towns showing today can be only a kind of "withdrawal symptom" in absence of formerly available, central channelled resources of development.

The drying up of resources and the overall lack of investments has led to the permanent shortage of well-paid and higher qualified jobs. The real challenge in most of the cases is not the present unemployment, but the permanent outmigration of young adults, who do not see any perspectives in small towns. The shrinking would remain in a more manageable path, if the natural decrease occurred. With a very strong feedback to reproduction and economic renewal capabilities, the permanent outmigration seems to be most decisive strike not only on the small towns, but probably on the majority of post-socialist cities.

Finally, we have to raise the question: is there a way back for shrinking small towns? Although recent literature seems to explore the beauty, the advantages of shrinking (Klemme, 2010) or even the possibility of planned shrinking (Hospers, 2014), these concepts are mainly based on surveys conducted in large, dense populated cities with a wide range of urban functions. The danger in case of small towns seems to be somewhat greater: the urbanity of these places is based on only limited functions, and the effects of demographic decline in the short run directly threaten many of them.

The small towns' reaction to this challenge is somewhat controversial. By analysing the planning activities (documents) of shrinking small towns (Pirisi/Máté 2014) we concluded that even the recognition of the crisis is problematic in many cases, moreover the reflections and planned actions are in many cases unrealistic and inadequate. After the EU-integration within in the first budgetary period of 2007-2013, European sources were mainly used to complete or strengthen some of the goals of the stagnating modernisation. In order to accomplish these goals their main task is to maximise the amount of sources can be acquired. This is once again a field and activity more familiar for these settlements. However, this is a kind of paradox resilience in Hungary: the key to success is to build good political and governmental connections, to insure the flow of centrally distributed sources in a country, where still (and again) ad-hoc and individual decisions dominate the policy making. The paradox of these efforts is naturally the growing dependence of small towns from the central government, i.e. on external developmental energies. Not surprisingly, the fear among small towns from a spatial "regression" or "restructuring" of their present status is regrettably much more intensive, than from the real and rapid demographic decline.

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