

CRISIS SIGNS OF THE HUNGARIAN SMALL TOWNS

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INTRODUCTION

Our research team has been dealing with the comprehensive study of the Hungarian small town network within the scope of a national project.

At the start of our studies it could be perceived that the settlement network, and within it the small towns, would be seriously affected by the deepening economic and social crisis of socialism. It can be generally stated that considering the whole process of urbanization the growth of the large cities decreased, with the decrease in investments the economic progress stagnated, the migration possibility of the rural population narrowed. The central political power became weaker and in the village-town relation the importance of small towns grew. Their population growth became faster than the average of the towns and their number according to their legal codification, though the professional and scientific arguments are missing, grew very fast. In January, 1989, 41 settlements were established as towns in Hungary asked by their own councils. In this way the number of Hungarian small towns, having fewer inhabitants than 30,000, increased by one third: from 84 to 125.

The following points will be highlighted in the present report:

- the definition of this settlement group;
- their changing position in the Hungarian urbanization process;
- some features of their integration into the settlement network;
- and their types.

AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE THE SMALL TOWNS

The international technical literature from Christaller to Davis uses several definitions, first of all according to size and function. They are quite different in terms of historical settlement progress features. The small town, according to society, is an ideal settlement type, which can provide a favourable and well-arranged place for human life, having urban social organizations. With their multi-sector economy and institutional network, they have more comfortable life conditions than villages. Small towns have, without any doubt, a specific gracefulness or charm, settlement character and intelligentsia organized in social groups. Observing from the view of settlement geography, their main character

is that they are situated at a central place. They are on the first level of town hierarchy attracting first of all the rural areas providing them with certain goods and services.

Of course, architecture, sociology or even administrative law may have their own small town definitions widening and colouring the above mentioned. In this way, instead of purely theoretical definition, it is better to say: a small town is a settlement judged as such by its inhabitants and its regional (functional) role accepted by the surrounding rural society.

The settlement geographer's task is to reveal, analyze and show these 'factors', to follow their changes and understand that small towns are really special elements in the settlement network. Having a distinguished situation, they offer different ways to solve the crisis of a given area.

Their factors to be investigated are as follows:

- population and society of small towns;
- local economy and its relation system (particular and co-operative relations);
- the most important elements of the small town institutional network (secondary school, hospital, court of justice, administrative offices);
- marketing and service centre functions;
- the small town as intellectual leading and organizing centre.

In my opinion all the five factors are equally important to judge small towns. Their harmony can be proved by their inner progress and can moderate the regional dispersities making proportional the distribution of the town goods over the whole settlement area.

THE POSITION OF HUNGARIAN SMALL TOWNS IN THE URBANIZATION PROGRESS

The historical town progress entered into the modern urbanization process after the Industrial Revolution has exact periods and cycles. The 'waves' characterizing this development "reached" the small towns later or in a particular way, especially in Central Europe. The most important causes are:

- economic underdevelopment;
- one-sided agrarian character;
- lack of middle classes or rather late development of bourgeois mentality;
- the 20th century historical cataclysms and their consequences on town and regional structure.

Observing the 20th century Hungarian town network, the River Danube is a sharp border line. Western Hungarian small towns are far more developed, industrialized, and have taken more on bourgeois habits. The Great Plain, at the same time, is characterized by agro-market towns, which have not any rural zone of attraction but large fields and a

system of scattered farms. However the so-called "peasant-bourgeois" mentality developed in these towns, too, bound on the private property of the field and resulted in several changes (e.g. secondary school network) suggested by the profit of the market and progressing the agricultural activity.

Considering the decisive criteria in addition to the above mentioned two main groups, there are small towns at the natural border of the mountain and plain regions, having first of all marketing and transport centre functions and missing the features of the two main groups.

After 1920, the 'centrally conducted' development of the Hungarian small towns became typical. After the new borders had been cut across some counties, several small towns became provisional county seats, and during the 1930s their institutions were being built up quickly financed by central sources (county offices, hospitals, court of justice, secondary schools etc.). Most of them were completely missing the other factors of town development (economy, intellectuals, attraction zone etc.). But there were former county seats having great traditions, which were degraded to small towns without any background. (Maybe the new border cut the town itself into two parts.) This "artificial urbanization wave" shows that the small towns had to run a forced course because their development was decided first of all by outer and not inner forces.

This process became stronger after World War II mainly because of the administrative reform: in 1950 the Soviet-type council system was introduced. The forced "socialist industrialization" created new (workers') small towns disrepairing others led mostly by rich peasants and the new, provisional county seats established after World War I.

Both of these "artificial urbanization waves", investing significant sources into the (chosen) towns, were exhausted by the end of the 1950s and the development of Hungarian small towns has stagnated for twenty years. The new wave effects first of all the big cities—the capital and the regional centres—and the county seats having a main role in the distribution of the central funds. Between 1956–1978, only very rarely were any settlements established as towns; the central funds were practically totally taken by the county (political power) centres.

A new period of small towns begins at the end of the 1970s. It is a more comprehensive urban process lasting even in our days. Its main feature is that the omnipotent, plan-directed settlement network development model was uniformized, neglecting the local historical, social and architectural tradition. It was not interested in the small towns' demand for inner harmony. We can say this wave was started on a voluntary basis. Socialist decentralized industrialization, centrally supported workers' flat building and institutional establishments were the first steps but the infrastructure, transport and telecommunication system were hardly changed. There was only a minimal development of the small town society, local community, publicity and achievement of bourgeois mentality. The quality conditions of the quantity progress were nearly completely missing.

Their development and urbanization are only illusive. Our small towns seem to be only concentration centres: a lot of people have moved into them from the damaged surrounding villages, although these towns could be reached in 15 minutes with a good traffic network.

Compared to their earlier level, they are increasing too quickly. It is marked by a quan-

titative and not qualitative concentration of urbanization. The loss of inner harmony is piled onto the growth of their regional attraction because they cannot satisfy the needs of the increasing number of inhabitants. For this reason the small towns are under-urbanized in view of their economy, society and regional role. In this way they are hardly suitable for organizing an up-to-date settlement development based on a modern market economy.

THE POSITION OF SMALL TOWNS IN THE SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

Some characteristic data: The number of small towns under 30,000 has become four times as that since 1960. In 1990 there are 125 small towns in Hungary, which altogether make up 75% of legal towns but only 16% of the Hungarian population live in them and only 26% of town folks.

Looking up the data from the first national census (1870), it can easily be seen that the population increase in small towns was nearly the same as that of the whole country.

It shows that the rate of people living in small towns has changed only +0.2% since 1870. It proves that there has not been a bigger small town urbanization wave for 120 years. Respectively, the changes have equalized each other in the observed 125 settlements. The important role of the small towns is significantly proven by the fact that at present 1879 villages and joint-villages are connected to them, containing 68,425 km², more than two thirds of Hungary.

The key question of their settlement network position is whether the rural population of their region recognizes them as towns, and whether they are able to fulfil central functions: to collect and affect the best assets of a small region.

I think most of the small town crisis signs can be found in this respect.

If a town is regarded as the centre of the economic, technical and social spheres in the settlement network, we can go on to observe them in detail as mentioned above in the title.

Their economy, first of all their industry, is mostly made up of auxiliary firms. Since 1982, the number of employees has been decreasing both in the state and co-operative sector of industry. It can be expected that after the change of their inner structure a great many of the firms will not be able to exist independently and their bankruptcy will cause serious unemployment not only in small towns but among the people of surrounding villages as well, who travel to work in the towns every day.

The backwardness of technical infrastructure seems to be just as typical of this settlement group as that of the whole country. The main problem is that small towns cannot ensure suitable conditions for modern firms. Out of the 125 settlements there are only 59 having direct telephone connections. Their transport system is also in a critical condition, though there is no village from where a legal town cannot be reached within 30 minutes. But the quality of these towns is very different. This is exactly the main problem of their integration into the settlement system: the dissension of the small towns' region-supplying function.

During our research there were four institutions and functions whose existence or absence proved to be decisive: the secondary school, a hospital or at least polyclinic, a department store as well as a shop network better than the village average, and strangely

enough the court of justice, a prosecutor's office or at least a notary public and a police station.

I would like to show some correct data on our investigations in Szolnok and Bács-Kiskun counties. From Baja to Tiszafüred it can easily be seen that rural people often visit small towns; it belongs to their everyday life. Of course, there is no time to speak about it in detail but some characteristic data will be provided. There are big differences in the village-town connections. E.g. Szolnok, Kecskemét and Baja have got over 1,000 relations in the field under our survey (administration, shopping, education, public health care, basic services, transport). Medium-size towns (e.g. Kiskunhalas or Jászberény) have got 700 and the small towns between 200–500, depending on the development of their region-supplying function. Bácsalmás and Kunhegyes, for example, can be characterized by 204 such relations. Kalocsa, the traditional small town on the Great Plain, has 508 and it can be explained with the hospital and the secondary school town function.

If these relations are compared with the different rates of the supplied population concerning the features of connections, the picture is far more tinged. Medium-size towns are visited by 35,000 to 70,000 rural people, small towns with developed functions by 20,000 to 30,000, while with the settlements recently established as small towns 10,000 to 15,000 rural people have regular relations. It can be found out from the data that retail trading and services are the most important; they contain 40 to 45% of the relations investigated. The smaller and less developed a small town is, the higher this rate is, reaching up to 50 to 60%. They cannot provide any other things or services, so it is not worth visiting them for other reasons. The financial condition of small towns is hard, moreover critical, just considering the role of their region-supplying function which is so important for rural citizens.

To sum it up, the integration of Hungarian small towns into the settlement network is rather imperfect. It can be said to be proper only by looking at the map. They have a hardly any role in the regional and settlement development policy because the old concept does not work any more and there is not a new one yet.

TYPES

To judge the role of small towns during recent economic and social changes, a cluster-analysis was carried out investigating their population, economy and infrastructure with revealing data. There are six main groups expressing on different levels the above mentioned inner and outer attraction zone harmony:

- (1) The first group consists of the traditional (or historical) small towns found mainly in Transdanubia and at the foot of the North Hungarian Mid-Mountains. They have a developed institutional network.
- (2) The small towns of the Great Hungarian Plain (former agro-market towns) can be divided into two further groups. Those retaining their agrarian character can hardly integrate into the settlement network, while

to the other group belong settlements with new and modern industry, and tourist centres.

- (3) The third characteristic type is the so-called socialist small towns with well-developed infrastructure, underdeveloped social structure and a modern attraction zone.
- (4) There is a regional (functional) type, the satellite small towns in the agglomeration of Budapest.
- (5) Settlements having become known for their planned and conscious town development form the fifth type. They can be divided into a more developed and a marginal sub-group.

SUMMARY

The situation in small towns reflects their crisis, too. It results not only from the centralized socialist social-economic model of the last forty years but also from the late regional and economic development of the whole area compared to developed regions.

In order to undergo a real and organic urbanization and fulfil their expected role, small towns need a complete, social-political-economical, systemic change. They have fewer possibilities, so their future fate depends on whether their many-sided importance is recognized by the whole society.