

SPECIAL SECTION: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

**Editorial: Institute for Regional Studies – Forty years
in regional research, and beyond**

***Bevezetés: A Regionális Kutatások Intézete – Negyven év a
regionális kutatásokban, és ami utána következik***

VIKTOR VARJÚ

Viktor VARJÚ: director, senior research fellow, HUN-REN CERS Institute for Regional Studies; Papnövelde u. 22., H-7621 Pécs, Hungary; varju.viktor@krtk.hun-ren.hu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3954-4518>

VARJÚ Viktor: igazgató, tudományos főmunkatárs, HUN-REN KRTK Regionális Kutatások Intézete; 7621 Pécs, Papnövelde u. 22.; varju.viktor@krtk.hun-ren.hu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3954-4518>

Introduction

The purpose of this preface is to briefly introduce the Institute for Regional Studies (IRS), the “birthplace” of the Hungarian Regional Science Association, one of the co-organisers of the 14th Regional Science Association International (RSA) World Congress in Kecskemét, and to encourage readers to establish further research collaborations with Hungarian regional scholars.

In this introduction, I will briefly summarise the history of the IRS in the light of the changing challenges of spatial development, and then present our main current research directions, which will also shape our future missions.

Historical perspective

The HUN-REN CERS Institute for Regional Studies of the Hungarian, the founder of this journal, celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. Its founder, Professor György Enyedi, established it within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to serve as an institutional basis for regional studies as a newly established discipline in Hungary. The mission of the network-based Institute was to carry out multidisciplinary research on urban and regional issues. Staff with specialised expertise carried out academic research in regional studies and regional science, providing inputs for regional development for local universities, governmental



institutions and various public and private bodies as well. Consultancy areas included, among others, regional, urban and rural development, public service provision and environmental management. The new political-economic situation after 1989 and emerging aspirations for EU membership reinforced the need to study spatial processes and Hungary's position within a changing Europe. Following IRS's founding mission, in addition to theoretical research, it would also undertake empirical analysis concerning local and regional planning to serve the development of regions with locally embedded institutes in a network supporting Hungary's cohesion policy (Horváth 2014).

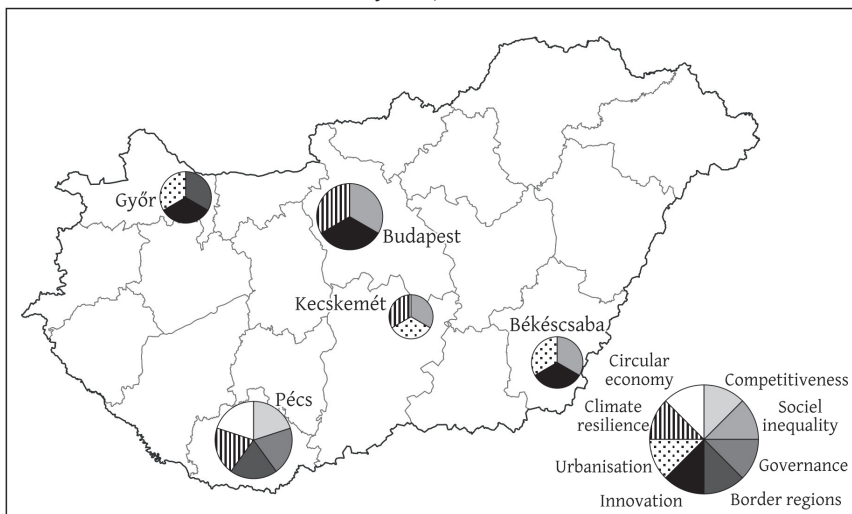
In the 2000s, the Institute extended its pioneering role in analysing Central and Eastern European spatial processes and the macro-region's specific territorial phenomena. It has conducted several joint projects with Bulgarian, Czech and Romanian academic institutes in the framework of the bilateral collaboration programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The institute has also formed long-term partnerships with Polish research institutes (e.g. the Institute of Geography, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw; Jagiellonian University, Krakow). Cooperations with the research units of the Romanian and Slovak Academy of Sciences, as well as Austrian, Serbian and Croatian research units and universities are also very active, resulting in several bi- and multilateral research proposals and projects. The researchers of these and other institutes have frequently appeared as keynote speakers at international conferences organised or co-organised by the Institute (e.g., Pálné Kovács, Scott, Gál 2013; Varjú 2018).

With the leadership of Professor Gyula Horváth, special attention has been paid to Hungarian-speaking research sites in the Carpathian Basin (e.g., the Forum Institute in Šamorín, Slovakia; the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania; the Sapientia University in Miercurea Ciuc, Romania; or the Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management, University of Novi Sad, Serbia). This mission aimed to spread state-of-the-art knowledge in regional studies, and to integrate ethnic Hungarian researchers into the Hungarian regional studies community. This co-operation resulted in the "*Regions of the Carpathian Basin*" book series, presenting the natural, social, settlement and economic state of regions within the Carpathian Basin. The volumes of the series aimed to assess the changes that have occurred during the transformation period, to contextualise these regions within European economic space, and to present a foundation for development strategies.

Besides building research networks in Central and Eastern Europe, the Institute was also continuously involved in the broader international research community of regional studies and regional science. In 2010, the Institute co-organised the annual conference of the Regional Studies Association (RSA) in Pécs with more than 600 participants (Kovács 2010). In 2022, it was the co-organiser of the Annual Conference of the European Regional Science Association (ERSA), also in Pécs (Páger 2022).

In the 2010s, in addition to the new challenges of institutional change, the Institute had to contend with the transformation of Hungarian regional policy. The developmental autonomy of local and regional bodies interested in using the results of regional research became constrained by the centralisation of public administration; regional development would become a weightless policy in governance; thereby reducing interest in new courses at universities, regional masters, and PhD programmes (Horváth 2014, 11.). In response to these challenges, the previously place-based operating model of the IRS has also been transformed. While continuing to take advantage of its local embeddedness and knowledge, horizontal co-operation between the Institute’s research sites became more and more important, creating new synergies between local specificities and thematic issues in an efficient and credible way (Figure 1). An important outcome of the consolidation of the horizontal network was the creation of Space Workshop (Tér Műhely) in 2015. The joint work focuses on socio-spatial inequalities and the processes that create and reproduce them. Inviting scholars from other universities and research units, the workshop provides a forum for theoretical debates on the causes and drivers of disparities, for methodological experimentation, for the presentation of empirical results, and for the discussion of epistemological dilemmas. The participants in the workshop represent different disciplines, mostly related to social geography, sociology and regional economics, and have so far been involved in the study of spatial inequalities within different theoretical-conceptual frameworks and using different research methods.

Figure 1: Main research foci of IRS branches
 Az RKI osztályainak fő kutatási területei



Source: Constructed for this article by József Lennert; cartography by Tamás Szabó

Current research foci

Following its research strategy, IRS is currently focused on conducting national and international research into socio-spatial inequalities, marginalisation and peripheralisation, regional economic and financial processes, the territorial impacts of climate change, environmental and sustainability-related research (circular economy, renewables, smart cities), border research and territorial governance. A brief summary of notable research programmes from recent years is provided below.

Exploring *different aspects of socio-spatial inequalities* was the focus of two international projects (ESPON PROFECY, H2020 RELOCAL) that concluded in 2021. *Research on shrinking rural areas* explored the macro-regional specificities of shrinkage (c.f. Kovács, Tagai 2021). The analysis demonstrated that most regions in post-socialist countries are characterised by low competitiveness, income deprivation, ageing, and active emigration. The case studies within the research illustrated that, in addition to economic transformation, peripheral status and peripheralisation processes are often independent of location. The historical upheavals of the last 70 years have contributed to shrinkage, particularly in rural areas. The issue of spatial equity is firmly, but not exclusively, linked to shrinking rural regions, as understanding which can help allocate funding and implement local development better. Our research results demonstrate that the state's commitment to spatial justice is key to the effectiveness of place-based development. The research shed lights on the important finding that the contribution of EU cohesion policy to achieving more significant spatial equity, which was previously a core objective of the EU, is limited. Studies on distributive and procedural justice/inequity have shown that programmes aimed at improving local services can also reproduce social and spatial injustices and hierarchical dependencies due to the weaknesses of distributive mechanisms and institutional practices (c.f. Copus et al. 2021).

An outstanding project of the recent period has been the refinement of the *National Adaptation Geo-information System* (NAGiS) (Czirfusz, Hoyk, Suvák 2015). During the second phase of the project concluded in 2018, in collaboration with the Research Institute of Agricultural Economics, our colleagues analysed the *impacts of climate change* from various aspects – land cover, demography, labour market, health and agriculture – and potential adaptation strategies (Farkas, Lennert 2019; Lennert 2019). The main research outputs include a district-level registry on climate change sensitivity, and a district-level analysis of the impacts of climate change on internal migratory processes along various climate scenarios. As a methodological innovation, researchers used a self-designed program integrating multiple theoretical and practical approaches in modelling and forecasting. This enabled the authors to make demographic projections up to 2051 through a simultaneous assessment of the natural movement of the

population and migratory movements, generating a total number of 24 scenarios (Lennert 2019).

Following the climate change investigations, a large-scale representative population survey covering 7,000 individuals was also carried out between 2021-2023 as part of a project on the potential for climate change adaptation in Hungary (c.f. Grünhut, Varjú, Bodor 2023). In the framework of the research, expert interviews were also conducted to explore the opportunities for climate adaptation, and based on available databases, a *mapping of spatial disparities of climate change vulnerability* was conducted.

Besides climate change, the social aspects of environmental policy challenges are also in the scope of the Institute. Among others, *the circular transition*, and its territorial and social aspects are under investigation. The social utility of the research lies in the fact that the transitions are located within a "socio-technological space", which contains a heterogeneous set of factors, including cultural and normative values, and (place-based) environmental problems (Varjú, Bodor, Grünhut 2023).

Theoretical insights in regional research were investigated within two research projects. "Contemporary theories of space and spatiality in the Central Eastern European context" examined the practical relevance of concepts used in *spatial theory in a Central-Eastern European context* (Farágó 2019), while the research titled "Institutional and individual responses to state restructuring in different geographical contexts" assessed, through quantitative methods, the characteristics of lived space (also) shaped by various actors such as the state or local governments (Timár, Nagy 2019).

A research funded by the National Research, Development, and Innovation Office (NRDIO) aims to explore how, and to what extent *lifestyle migration* of European (pre-)retirees (mainly from Germany and the Netherlands) and (pre-)retirement migration of ethnic Hungarian from Transcarpathia transform peripheral rural settings in Hungary. The impacts of this migration may be perceived and evaluated as ambiguous by locals and migrant retirees, as well as by experts. However, the research has identified rather positive effects in the peripheral areas which have been facing demographic and economic decline, as well as social challenges. In demographic terms, (pre-)retirement migration might mitigate the speed, extent, and consequences of local population decline and selective outmigration. In the case of the ethnic Hungarian elderly of Transcarpathia, (pre-)retirement migration can also indicate the migration and settlement of younger generations into Hungarian rural areas. In economic terms, the demand for public and private services and the expenditures of (pre)retirees may generate additional income for service providers and entrepreneurs; thus, these migration flows have the potential to sustain local/regional economies. In social terms, economic effects can be grasped in the form of seasonal or permanent job opportunities for the local Roma and non-Roma

poor, which might mitigate poverty and, in the long term, prevent the further ghettoisation and exclusion of peripheral settlements.

An ongoing research also financed by the NRDIO, conducted by the Border Research Workshop, has analysed *the roots of contemporary geopolitical processes*. In the monograph titled "State Formation Processes in the Carpathian Basin in the 20th Century" (Hajdú 2023), the author summarised the team's findings covering not only the Carpathian Basin, but also the neighbouring areas. The research has identified the unresolved territorial and border problem spots of the macro-region, including the Balkan states and Ukraine. These issues have not been resolved since the end of the project, and at the time of writing, each of them is coming to the fore in an increasingly acute way.

Based on previous antecedents (c.f. Keller, Virág 2023), an important NRDIO-financed research relating to inequality has just been launched to investigate *the innovation capability and potentials of local actors in the periphery*. The results of this social innovation research can be a major input for Hungarian cohesion and innovation policy by presenting the special governance and educational needs of marginalised areas and communities.

Besides the above, a horizontal research cooperation within the Institute focuses on *territorial competitiveness, innovation and urban development*. In 2022, the research examined the spatial problems of Central and Eastern Europe's FDI-led development model at multiple spatial scales (in the Visegrád countries, and at subnational levels). Special attention was paid to the evolutionary processes of FDI, local-global interactions, and the phenomena of territorial embeddedness and upgrading within global value chains (c.f. Gál, Lux 2022). Another line of inquiry of the research team, conducted in the scope of a COST project, focused on the transformation of urban innovation milieus. *Coworking spaces*, increasingly important in urban labour markets and workplaces, were scrutinised in a peripheral context during the Covid-19 pandemic. We explored the centre-periphery relations of new work spaces and the institutional embeddedness and resilience of these spaces (c.f. Bálint et al. 2023 and Bálint, Horeczki, Lux 2024 present issue). Furthermore, the research group investigated *the culture of trust in the context of innovative societies*, providing a synthesis of the conceptual and methodological issues of trust research, contrasting the situational approach of trust research with the concept of trust dispositions. A critical comparative analysis of large-scale procedures for measuring social trust was made, comparing content validity of standard trust variables through the use of systematic questionnaires. The research team has thus formulated new conclusions on entrepreneurial behaviour, linking specific value contents and value sets that characterise the culture of trust with entrepreneurial personality traits (perceptions, mindsets, routines, etc.). The research has delineated four distinct value groups within the value preferences of European entrepreneurs (c.f. Grünhut, Bodor, Erát 2022).

We also conduct territorial research related to the *structural transformation of industry*. The aim of the research is to explore the strategies, scope, structural constraints and opportunities of local actors in European industrial regions outside the catchment areas of large cities, but which have become the sites of investment and economic restructuring in the last decades. Comparative research in the project has shown that processes in local spaces can only be understood in a relational approach. Strategies based on local resources lead to further lock-in and increased dependency and exploitation in spaces in structural crisis. Thus, without strategic coordination between local and external actors, and the transparency of bargaining and involvement of local communities, we should expect an increase in socio-spatial inequalities. Furthermore, it has been revealed that a “strong” state with centralised decision-making and resource allocation is a source of social disparities and political conflicts even if they remain hidden; the marginalisation of local actors does not help the integration of external actors (investors), and is explicitly against the long-term interests of local communities. Finally, industrial areas in crisis do not lack agents of change. Their resources and scope for action are evolving and changing as a result of the role of the local economy in global value creation processes, the national frameworks for power sharing (especially the spatial organisation and functioning of state power), and links with European institutional structures. This explains the different development trajectories of regions facing similar structural constraints, while at the same time, it is a warning about the limits of policies that unilaterally rely on and exploit local resources (Nagy et al. 2021; c.f. Görmar et al. 2023).

And beyond

Despite the many changes, the research, reflections and theorisations of regional studies and regional science are indispensable in the face of today's turbulent challenges. Social Science and Humanities (SSH) disciplines and multidisciplinary approaches are also increasingly prominent in the European research agenda. In addition to the blue-sky research approach, the need for applied research has again become more important not only at the European but also at the Hungarian level. There seems to be a revival of Hungarian regional development, in which Hungarian regional studies and regional science also play an important role. Demand for such studies from a re-established Ministry for Public Administration and Regional Development has been very strong over the last year or two. The past and the future therefore point in the direction that regional studies and science will have a higher role to explain the socio-territorial processes and give solutions for stakeholders and decision makers. In case you would like to have a look at on the current trends, come along and celebrate with us on the 29 and 30 May, 2024 in Pécs, where we will hold a conference on the occasion of

our 40th anniversary, or follow the event at <https://rki.krtk.hun-ren.hu/en/conferences/rkk40/>.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank his colleagues who contributed to the creation of this article with their valuable inputs.

References

- Bálint, D., Horeczki, R., Kalman, J., Lux, G. (2023): Coworking places in Hungary during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In: Akhavan, M., Hölzel, M., Leducq, D. (eds.): *European Narratives on Remote Working and Coworking During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Springer, Cham, 107–114. <https://doi.org/mhc2>
- Bálint D., Horeczki R., Lux G. (2024): Közösségi munkavégzési terek és kreatív gazdaság egy periférikus nagyvárosban. *Tér és Társadalom*, 1., 183–209. <https://doi.org/10.17649/TET.38.1.3518>
- Copus, A., Kahila, P., Dax, T., Kovács, K., Tagai, G., Weber, R., Grunfelder, J., Meredith, D., Ortega-Reig, M., Piras, S., Löfving, L., Moodie, J., Fritsch, M., Ferrandis, A. (2021): European shrinking rural areas: Key messages for a refreshed long-term vision. *TERRA: Revista de Desarrollo Local*, 8., 280–309. <https://doi.org/mhc3>
- Czirfusz M., Hoyk E., Suvák A. (eds) (2015): *Klíímaváltozás-társadalom-gazdaság: Hosszú távú területi folyamatok és trendek Magyarországon*. Publikon, Pécs
- Faragó L. (2019): *Téri lét: Társadalmi fordulat a térelméletben*. Dialóg Campus, Budapest
- Farkas, J. Z., Lennert, J. (2019): Future prospects of land cover change in Hungary: Modelling and forecasts. In: Bański, J. (ed.): *Three Decades of Transformation in the East-Central European Countryside*. Springer, Cham, 309–333. <https://doi.org/mhc4>
- Gál, Z., Lux, G. (2022): FDI-based regional development in Central and Eastern Europe: A review and an agenda. *Tér és Társadalom*, 3., 68–98. <https://doi.org/k52q>
- Görmar, F., Grillitsch, M., Hruška, V., Mihály, M., Nagy, E., Píša, J., Stihl, L. (2023): Power relations and local agency: A comparative study of European mining towns. *Urban Research & Practice*, 4., 558–581. <https://doi.org/gpsgxf>
- Grünhut, Z., Bodor, Á., Erát, D. (2022): Value patterns of entrepreneurs in Europe: Does the legacy of the transition still matter? *International Journal of Sociology*, 5., 352–369. <https://doi.org/mhc5>
- Grünhut, Z., Varjú, V., Bodor, Á. (2023): Climate concern and pro-environmental behaviour in the light of trust. *Sustainability*, 19, 14430. <https://doi.org/mhc6>
- Hajdú Z. (2023): *Államosodási folyamatok a Kárpát-medencében a XX. században*. Typotex, Budapest
- Horváth Gy. (2014): A Regionális Kutatások Központjának harminc éve. Sikerek és kudarcok egy új tudományágazat megteremtésében. *Tér és Társadalom*, 4., 3–14. <https://doi.org/mhc7>
- Keller, J., Virág, T. (2023): Drivers of place-based community development. In: Fritsch, M., Kahila, P., Németh, S., Scott, J. W. (eds.): *Spatial Justice and Cohesion: The Role of Place-Based Action in Community Development*. Routledge, London, 92–106. <https://doi.org/mhc8>
- Kovács, K., Tagai, G. (2021): Shrinking rural areas: Demographic and broader interconnections of population decline in Hungary. *TERRA: Revista de Desarrollo Local*, 8., 415–441. <https://doi.org/mhc9>
- Kovács S. Zs. (2010): Beszámoló a Regional Studies Association 2010. évi nemzetközi konferenciájáról. *Tér és Társadalom*, 2., 147–152. <https://doi.org/mhdb>
- Lennert J. (2019): A magyar vidék demográfiai jövőképe 2051-ig, különös tekintettel a klímaváltozás szerepére a belső vándormozgalom alakításában. *Területi Statisztika*, 5., 498–525. <https://doi.org/mhc10>

doi.org/mhdc

- Nagy, E., Gajzágó, G., Mihály, M., Molnár, E. (2021): Crisis, institutional change and peripheral industrialization: Municipal-central state relations and changing dependencies in three old industrial towns of Hungary. *Applied Geography*, 136, 102576. <https://doi.org/hkv6>
- Páger B. (2022): Beszámoló az ERSA 61. Konferenciájáról, Pécs 2022. augusztus 22–26. *Tér és Társadalom*, 4., 190–194. <https://doi.org/mhdd>
- Pálné Kovács, I., Scott, J.W., Gál, Z. (eds.) (2013): *Territorial Cohesion in Europe: For the 70th Anniversary of the Transdanubian Research Institute*. Institute for Regional Studies, Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pécs
- Timár J., Nagy E. (2019): Állam és tértermelés: „Új” értelmezési keretek a tértudományokban - Szerkesztői előszó. *Tér és Társadalom*, 4., 3–16. <https://doi.org/mhdf>
- Varjú, V. (ed.) (2018): Socio-economic, Environmental and Regional Aspects of a Circular Economy: Abstract Book of the International Conference for the 75th Anniversary of DTI, 19-20 April 2018, Pécs, Hungary. MTA KRTK RKI Transdanubian Research Department, Pécs
- Varjú, V., Bodor, Á., Grünhut, Z. (2023): How does place matter in circular/waste management transition? Comparison of five European peri-urban regions from the view of stakeholders' perspective. *City, Culture and Society*, 34, 100523. <https://doi.org/mhdg>