

Shrinking small towns in Hungary: the factors behind the urban decline in “small scale”

Gábor PIRISI¹

András TRÓCSÁNYI²

¹PhD, lecturer, Institute of Geography, University of Pécs, Hungary – corresponding author, pirisig@gamma.ttk.pte.hu

²PhD, Associate professor, Institute of Geography, University of Pécs, Hungary

Summary

The phenomenon of shrinking has recently become a central issue in urban geography. On the European continent with a fundamentally ageing population, it is not only an issue of unsuccessful cities, but also a much more general problem. Recent researches mainly focused on bigger settlements, small towns have not traditionally been in the focus of geographers. The decline and the often imagined loss of the associated values have nevertheless triggered a number of scientific reflections. The issue seems to be a typical Central-European problem, whereas the specialities of the settlement-network give them a more significant importance.

The present paper focuses on Hungarian towns formally having the town rank and not having a population more than 30,000 people. We excluded towns belonging to larger agglomerations because of their very different development course; finally, we had a sample of 259 settlements. Demographic decline appeared among them more than a century ago, but the scale of the process increased rapidly during the last decades. However, even if the general demographic trends ducking into the negative regime after 1980 are considered, the decade between the most recent two censuses appears to be dramatic, not merely because of the absolute number of shrinking towns (more than four fifth of all the small towns!), but because of the growing significance of the issue itself: 62% of the small towns lost at least every 20th, and 27% of them lost every 10th inhabitant during this period. Shrinking is only barely depended on geographical position, and is partially based on the outmigration of young and educated citizens, which might lead us to the conclusion that this definite settlement type is in general crisis.

According to the authors' point of view, the small towns' functions are eroded by the transformation of the level of economic connections, the expanding horizons of mobility, and the spatial regression of the state from rural areas. With depopulating and rapidly ageing rural hinterlands of small towns have continuously lost their natural reserves of human resources and traditional costumers of material and immaterial products. Now they are challenged by not only the consequences of globalisation listed above, but the long-term waves of post-socialist transformation too. Since the last decades of the 19th century, the development of the Hungarian small towns have been always closely connected to the spatial administration, redistribution and centrally-planned development policy of the state, as the local resources traditionally mentioned as key factor of their success. Now, these extern impulses are seemed to be exhausted, and a negative spiral, a kind of vicious circle seems to be determining the future of these settlements.

Key words: Hungary, shrinking, small towns, demographic decline, structural crisis

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of shrinking has recently become a central issue in urban geography (Rybczynski and Linneman, 1999; Bontje, 2005; Oswalt and Rieniets, 2006; Wiechmann, 2008; Grossmann et al.

2013). Whereas in the US the issue is present mostly as a problem arising from local factors of cities related with structural transformations (Mallach and Brachman, 2010), in Europe it appears to be part of a more extensive problem. On the European continent with a fundamentally ageing population, it is not only an issue of unsuccessful cities. The project 'Cities Re-growing Smaller' (CIRES – see <http://www.shrinkingcities.eu/>) which has been completed recently analysed population changes of more than 7,000 European cities and towns between 1990 and 2010, and indicated signs of decline in about 1,400 cases. These rates themselves call the attention to the fact that this is not simply a problem of former heavy industrial centres that are forced to undergo structural transformations without success, but instead, a broader spectrum of cities could be affected. The overall European picture depicted by the aforementioned project also shows that Central Europe and Eastern-Central Europe belong to the most severely affected macro regions (Wiechmann, 2013).

This, of course is nothing to be surprised at: the region includes a series of countries with low production rates and high mortality combined with natural population loss, where migration, unlike in Western Europe, does not ease the problem but instead, usually worsens it at the national level. At the time of post-industrial and post-socialist (Kovács, 1999, Hirt, 2013) transitions closely following each other after the political system change, the problem of decaying cities appeared in the former socialist block too, showing up as a peculiar, sharp contrast to the socialist paradigm talking about uninterrupted growth without conjuncture-cycles. In this period, however, the collapse, or at least rapid decline, affected industrial centres primarily: when larger towns or cities were mentioned as decaying or deteriorating ones (Lichtenberger et al. 1995), this feature was normally accompanied by the dynamic development of urban regions.

Small towns have not traditionally been in the focus of settlement geographical research. The essence of small towns can well be the subject of a variety of exciting socio-geographical or socio-historical studies (see for example Hindernik and Titus, 2002; Vaishar, 2004; Courtney et al. 2007), yet small towns are simpler, more homogeneous and compact than the multi-coloured, cosmopolitan, globalising world of large cities, and thus have meant less inspiration to the minds of research scientists from yet another point of view: they have much lower significance in forming the macro-structure of the geographic space, they are highly resistant to changes, and are characterised with conservative structures. Their decline and the often-imagined loss of the associated values have nevertheless triggered a number of scientific reflections (Coats, 1977; Zsilincsar, 2003; Zuzánska-Žyško, 2005; McManus et al. 2012; Leetmaa et al. 2013).

However, the role of small towns in the formation of microstructures is inevitable. It appears that the (partly: desired or potential) influence of small towns on (mostly rural) spaces (Slavík, 2002; Kwiątek-Sołtys, 2011; Burdack and Kriszán, 2013) emerges more boldly in Central Europe, although from time to time there are studies published about particular small town issues of regions outside Europe (Mattson et al. 1997; Besser, 2009). Probably this is not without reason: the authors believe that the countries of the Central European region mostly have a special bipolar urban network in which one side is represented by the generally overweight capital cities, and some other major cities as poles of modernisation, in very limited number (Kovács, 2010, Reményi, 2010), and the other side features a network of towns with a basically small-town nature. The latter is supported not only, and not primarily, by quantitative arguments. There are some descriptive figures giving us a hint about this type of relationship: apart from the national capitals, the big cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants concentrate only about 5% of the total population in Slovakia, 9% in The Czech Republic, and less than 12% in Hungary (Poland with its 24% value stands strikingly out of this group), whereas this proportion is 26% in Germany, 27% in the United Kingdom, and nearly 30% in the Netherlands (authors' own calculations). To a certain degree, this value indicates the relative weakness of the small town level, understood as such within the national settlement network, concentrating regional functions. As a result of the belated, slowly proceeding and historically interrupted process of urbanisation which was also seriously distorted by the socialist system, even the mid-sized towns and large cities carry a number of small town features in their architecture and social character – this fact being our qualitative argument –, since it was only the urged urbanisation of the socialist era that lifted them up to their current size category. As a consequence, normally they do not interlink to form

continuous large town spaces: we hardly find any of such in the Visegrad countries (except from Upper-Silesia); EUROSTAT's revised urban-rural typology categorises these as "urban", together with the NUTS3 units forming around the capital cities, but all the remaining towns are categorised as "intermediate" or "rural". It is probably not an exaggeration to say that because of the weak representation of the large town level, the role of small towns in spatial organisation is substantially increased. It is exactly in this respect that we consider our findings about Hungarian small town crisis to be particularly worrying.

2. Considerations of nomenclature and methodology

Firstly, it is essential to clarify what we consider a small town. Here it is important to note that town status is a formal, legal category or sort of status in Hungary (similarly to other countries in the region – Kocsis, 2008), and "certainly" the pool of towns formally understood as such does not coincide with those towns that are perceived as ones actually carrying urban functions (Trócsányi and Pirisi, 2012, Gyenizse et al. 2011). In earlier studies, the authors have formulated the definition that they consider to be valid for small towns, i.e. *"the small town is a settlement that excels from its environment through the density of social, and/or economic and infrastructural elements, offers a city-like way of living, and defines itself as a city, in whose spatial relations locality dominates"* (Pirisi, 2009).

Most certainly, this definition has to be made suitable for being applied in practical investigations, therefore in this study we are now following our earlier methodology and consider those settlements that had "town" legal status on 1st January, 2013, with populations less than 30,000 inhabitants (numbering altogether 259). The number of such units was reduced by excluding settlements that were categorised by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office as capital city or as one of the agglomerations in the countryside. Most of them rose from village to the small town level as a result of the suburbanisation effects of the past two decades, meaning that they are not typical from the point of view of our analysis. Their mostly dynamic growth would mask away the problems of small towns representing their own kind more typically, and we do not consider them to be meeting our own theoretical definition criteria either. The smallest member of our aforementioned sample had a population of almost exactly 1,000 inhabitants, but settlements with less than 5,000 inhabitants are infrequent in the sample. The pool of small towns understood as such contains functionally diverse groups of settlements: in addition to small towns with typical, so-called full or partial mid-level centre function, there are ones with predominantly industrial function, and (mainly spa) resort towns with significant tourism.

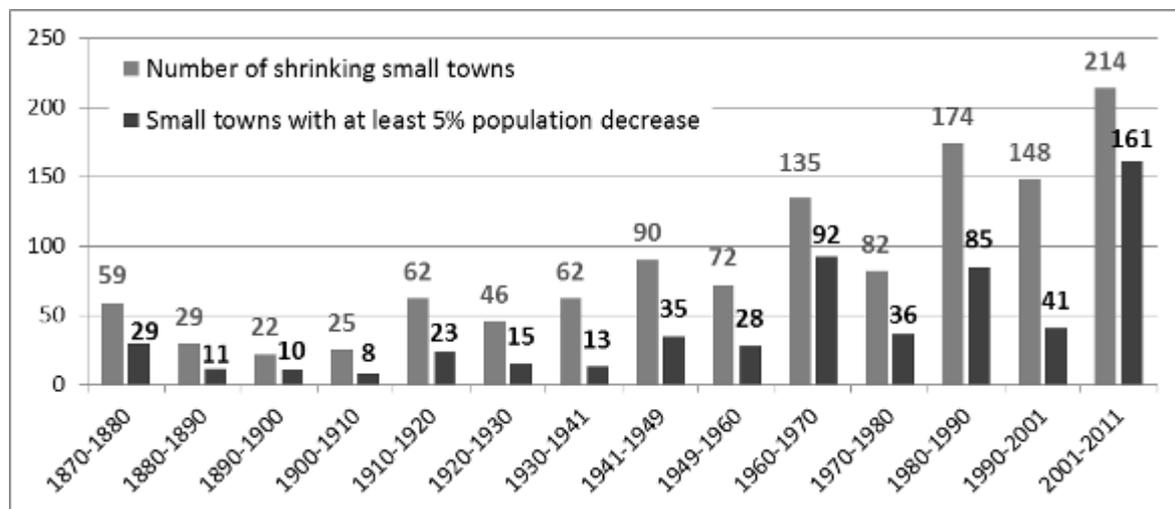
Shrinking, as the authors interpret it, is not only a change in population size, but indeed, demographic decline is a cause of a number of problems, and the most obvious symptom of a more deeply rooted crisis. Our population data originate from the national census and information database managed by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. For mapped data representation, the MapInfo software was used.

3. Shrinking, as reflected by statistics

Strong demographic dynamism has never been typical of small towns throughout their development in modern history; on the contrary, they are examples of stability and very slow increase rates. Since the first modern population census in 1870, the demographic changes of small towns have more or less followed the national average, and substantially lagged behind the average growth rates of towns. In the period starting with the 1870 census and ending with the one in 2011, there are 33 small towns whose current population is less than the value 140 years ago, but there is not a single one that kept shrinking all the time during this period. There are only three settlements that showed an increase in every decade, all the remaining small towns went through at least one decade with population decrease, altogether five such decades in average. Showing these figures in a chart it appears that,

although the process is not a new one at all, the change in its scale in recent times certainly justifies the relevance of dealing with the issue (Fig. 1.).

Figure 1 Number of shrinking small towns in the periods between two censuses



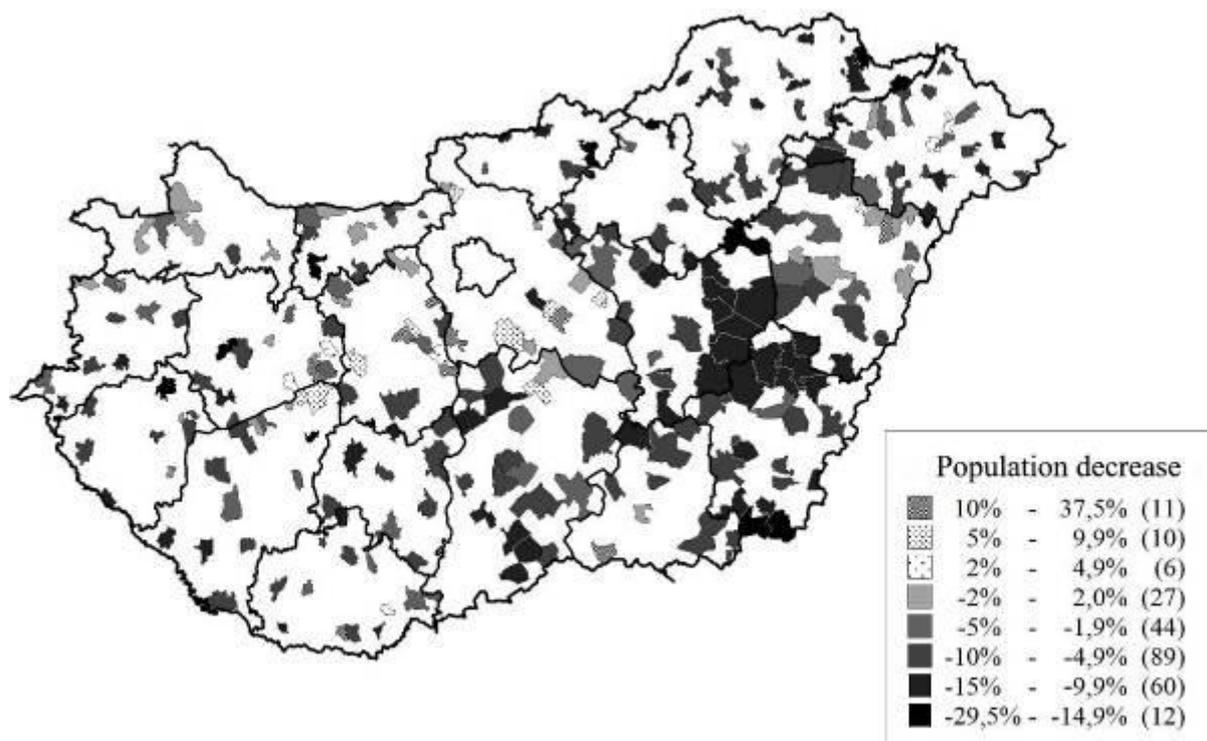
Source: Edited by the authors, based on census database of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office

The demographic decline between 1870 and 1910 proved to be exceptional, which can be explained partly with regional and partly with local factors. After 1910, the phenomenon became more frequent, and after 1960 it became almost dominating. It is important to note that in Hungary it was in 1981 that the former natural population growth turned into population loss, whereas the positive migration balance kept contributing to the improvement of the overall picture until quite recently.

However, even if the general demographic trends ducking into the negative regime after 1980 are considered, the decade between the most recent two censuses appears to be dramatic, not merely because of the absolute number of shrinking towns (more than four fifth of all small towns!), but because of the growing significance of the issue itself: 62% of the small towns lost at least every 20th, and 27% of them lost every 10th inhabitant during this period. There was even a settlement in which population decrease reached 29%, this town not even being a deteriorating industrial centre: Kisbér in Komárom-Esztergom county (Northwest Hungary) is located in a dynamic region of the country, near the national M1 highway, formerly known as one of the most highly developed centres of Hungary's agricultural economy.

It is particularly striking that although similarly unfavourable birth and mortality rates were prevalent in the 1990s, the situation was not that dramatic. As it appears in Fig. 2, population growth has become exceptional and shrinking has become general on the level of small towns recently. Growing small towns or even ones with stagnating population, are found only on the fringes of the agglomerations (excluded from our analysis), in the Balaton region, and in the economically dynamic northwestern region. When interpreting the chart, one must consider that regions in the southeast are in a much worse demographic situation than the average, with much faster population ageing, very low birth rates and intra-regional (and increasingly: international) emigration characterising almost all of the settlements. In addition, a special dichotomy is observed in the network of small towns: whereas in the western areas of the country the traditional small towns are situated in the nodes of the Christaller-type spatial attraction zone systems, in the eastern, Great Plain region such are absent. In the latter, towns originally with agrarian function (or villages having grown to gigantic sizes, as interpreted by some) are adjacent to each other, being similar in size and function.

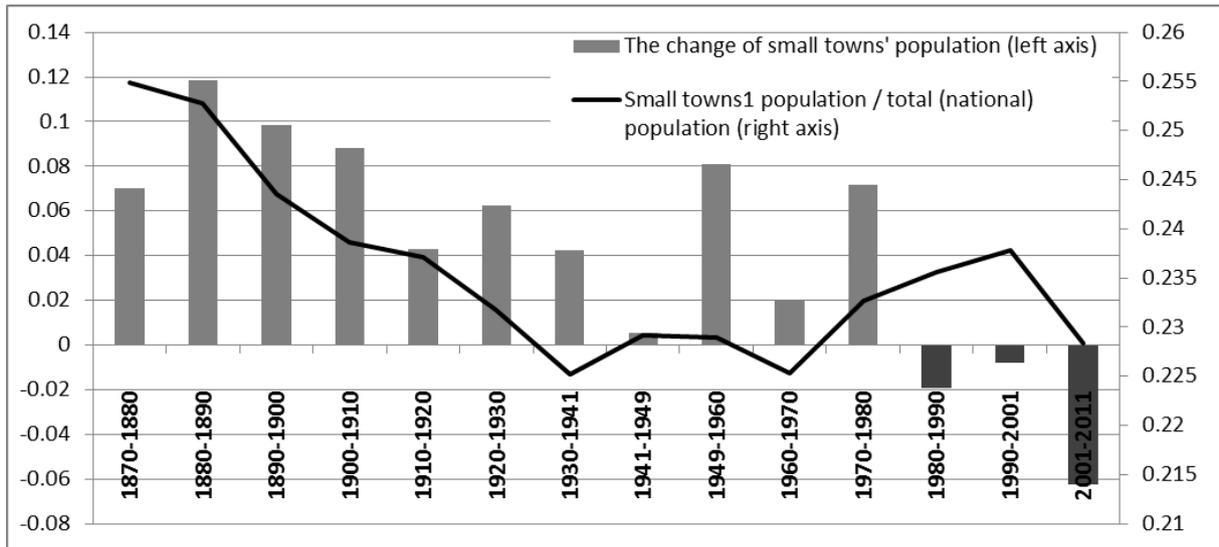
Figure 2 Population Changes of small towns (2001-2011)



Source: Edited by the authors, based on census database of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office

If we add that small towns in the aforementioned period lost 6.2% of their initial 2.44 million population, i. e. nearly 170 thousand people, then it becomes obvious that what we see is not just a consequence of the general national demographic situation. This population loss in itself could count for 77% of the total loss of the country's population, meaning that the decline of small towns is much faster: they shrink not only in absolute values, but relatively, too. Fig. 3 shows this process: small towns, despite their relatively dynamic growth in the periods before World War 2 (typically between 0.6-1.0% annually), kept losing from their relative significance. In this period, urbanisation mainly happened in Budapest and in a few large city centres. In the next period (1941-1980), these towns had lower growth rates, yet they were able to stabilise their share. This was due to the fact that settlement politics practised by the one-party state – even if small towns were considered to be middle-class-like and less suitable for building the socialist society – did create and raise a few socialist (industrial) large towns that remained in this size category, and also because the rearrangement of incomes and development funding sources had the worst impact on Hungarian villages: urbanisation rate increased from 50% to 65% between 1950 and 1990. When centralised settlement politics relying on industrial development ran out of power and the pace of the aforementioned rearrangement slowed down, there were two decades after 1980 when the share of small towns grew, even if accompanied by slight overall population decrease. It is here that we can best see the trend-turning character of changes in the period after 2001, although it is still quite unsure whether it is the start of a very new period, or it is just a transitional stage.

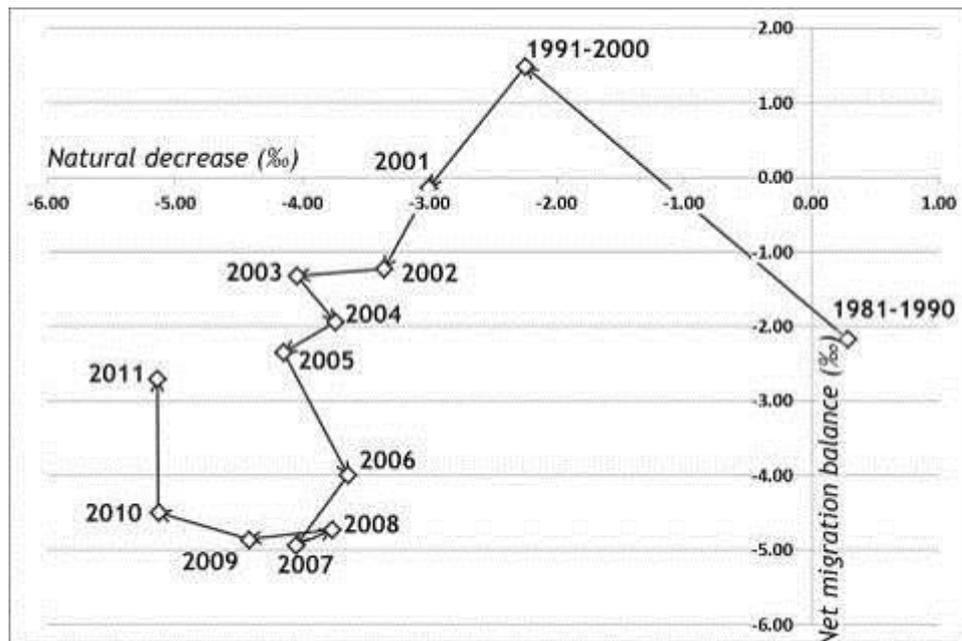
Figure 3 The total population of small towns and their national share (1870-2011)



Source: Edited by the authors, based on census database of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office

In Fig 4, we analyse two factors of demographic changes in the period between the two most recent population censuses. The last time there were more births than deaths was in the 1980s, and natural population loss – following its merciless logic – becomes more and more intensive. The true, big reason of changes is emigration: after the positive migration balance of the 1990s, the number of people moving away annually from small towns grew continuously between 2001 and 2007. From the data, it appears that a correction process occurred in 2008-2011, which is considered by the authors to be because of the effects of the economic crisis. This correction is not because small towns suddenly started to produce better figures, but instead the pull-factors of migration decrease, probably as the formerly dynamic large town spaces become less attractive due to the crisis.

Figure 4. Natural population growth/decrease of small towns and their migration balance



Source: Calculated and edited by the authors, based on census database of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office

4. The small town settlement type – is it in a crisis?

Having observed the most important figures of population shrinking, the question is raised: can we state that the reasons are different in each individual case, or the small town settlement type is undergoing a general crisis? Shrinking does not show geographic bias (although there are differences spatially), and it is not related with the population size of small towns either (the correlation coefficient between the rate of population change and population size itself is -0.01). We can also see that shrinking is less prominent mostly in settlements that are atypical small towns, possessing extra roles such as significant tourism function or location at the margins of an agglomeration, which make these settlements more attractive places to live. It appears that the more a settlement meets the criteria of the small town idea, having important regional influence through its mid-level institutions, services and enterprises, the more it is exposed to possible decline.

Shrinking itself is obviously not part of the natural life cycle of a settlement; moreover, population decline in itself is not necessarily a sign of crisis either. In societies where the current stage of demographic transition is characterised by natural loss, a small town with shrinking population could also gain relative importance within the settlement network. Emigration, in itself, is not a crucial issue either: for example, if it happens as part of suburbanisation, then it is more of an issue of urban spatial expansion rather than true crisis (however, it is obvious that tax payers moving outside the boundaries of a town due to administrative subdivisions can cause crisis symptoms, but in this case it is emigration that causes the crisis and not the other way round). In the case of small towns, however, neither of the above two conditions are present. First, there is obviously no suburbanisation taking place (or at least not in the same sense), and secondly, as we have partly demonstrated it regarding the population changes, small towns decline faster than what would be justified by the situation of the country, although this has serious emigration causes in the background.

Losing from relative significance is seen in fields other than just demographic changes. For example, 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, but these figures went down to 18.9% and 15.6% respectively, in 2010, as reported by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. 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%). The latter is a particularly obvious shrinking, calling our attention to the weakness of life perspectives in small towns. The lack of newly built flats indicates that there is no immigration, there are few people deciding on long-term investments, and also the vertical social mobility of the existing population is negligible. We do not have appropriately processed data about how the social structure develops in these settlements. In his studies, Zsolt Németh (2011), elaborating on the 2001 census data and population figures in the 1990-2001 period, concluded that this category of settlements (interpreted by him somewhat differently) is categorised by the high proportion of people born locally, and that migration does not bring about fundamental changes regarding neither immigrants nor emigrants. From the aspect of our studies, there is yet another, even more important statement by the same author, namely that people leaving small towns towards Budapest, medium-sized towns and large cities have a higher social status than the local average, and they are replaced by immigrants with lower social status, usually from villages. It is practically a certain type of selective demographic erosion whose details have not fully been explored. This phenomenon, even in itself, indicates the presence of structural problems. Essentially, what we see here is a crisis of population attracting and population-keeping capacities, which strengthens the effects of the fundamental crisis meant by the exhaustion of the reserves of small towns themselves, and of the rural regions that traditionally serve as their demographic hinterland.

5. Factors of crisis

Accepting the assumption that it is the small town settlement type that has become subject of the crisis in Hungary after the turn of the centuries (or at least this was the time when the crisis became explicit), we must ask the question: which are the factors responsible for this situation? Obviously, if the crisis is thought to be such general, then we must find some reasons that are associated with the basic functions of small towns.

Small towns are usually envisioned as places with strong local roots, relying on local resources. How much they have relied on external impulses during their process of urbanisation is less obvious, however. From one aspect, this means that their attraction zone has served as a sort of demographic hinterland: natural reproduction in former village type settlements became a basic source of migration towards small towns. It is not without reason that agrarian towns in the Great Plain region that did not have an extensive attraction zone of villages due to special features of the settlement network, started off much earlier (maybe a century earlier) on a declining demographic trend, compared with their Transdanubian counterparts. By today, however, all these reserves have run out: simply the number of children born here, who could later base their existence in the small towns, is very low.

The other cause, as we believe, is much more complex, and is rooted in the fundamental characteristics of Hungarian urbanisation. Gentrification in the country – and in the region, too, in a broader sense – was a belated and delicate process, whether one looks at its medieval beginnings or at the period in the 19th century, which was more critical from the aspect of development. In recent times, Hungary has continued to be an agrarian country characterised with the scarcity of capital, and with limited population of citizenry who have relatively low incomes (Beluszky, 1990). It is thus not surprising that our mid-sized towns (and in some of their features the large cities, too) have small town components in their character and architecture, whereas our small towns carry quite a few village features.

We believe that urbanisation in Hungary has a particular “top-down” character: much more typically, it is the state – having transformed in its governmental structure and ideology many times but having preserved its urge to modernise – that tries to expand urbanisation onto the rural areas rather than the other way round (i.e. gentrification proceeding in rural areas urging the modernisation of the state). At middle-size town level, it was county seats, at small town level it was mostly district seats where central intervention occurred, but other settlements, too, had the central power as an important factor in urbanisation. Such measures included the establishment of the institutions of public administration, reaching down to secondary schools serving as units of the uniform state public education system, but also the construction of auxiliary railway lines assisted by central funding, which were the first to open up doorways leading beyond the local level for small towns. The second wave of catalytic central interventions occurred in the 1960s and even more in the 1970s, in the form of the combination of several different factors mutually strengthening each other. On the one hand, as work force reserves ran down in Budapest and the large towns, small towns started to have higher importance as settlements that are capable of concentrating the resources of rural areas, and became targets of centrally managed industrialisation. On the other hand, especially after the National Settlement Network Development Concept in 1971 organised settlements in a highly strict hierarchic order and also defined the array of services to be allocated to the various levels, the planned development of the traditional central functions (hospitals, educational institutions, small trade units) also started off, many times associated with the architectural modernisation of settlements, and with investments of smaller housing blocks with large town character. Finally, also related with the aforementioned processes, formal urbanisation also accelerated, more and more small towns, formerly existing administratively as villages, were awarded town rank, which, in that era, assured important advantages of position.

After the post-communist political transition, these factors weakened out. Privileges associated with the town rank ceased to exist in the new constitutional framework, and the rank itself suffered serious inflation and loss of prestige due to the accelerated process of formal urbanisation. Moreover, the lower-middle ('district') level of regional administration (LAU 1), a natural spatial organisation unit for small towns, was discontinued in a series of steps. Although the system was partly re-established when European accession commenced at the turn of the centuries, its importance was not nearly the same as before. As a result, the power of small towns in influencing mechanisms of regional redistribution was greatly reduced.

Even if not that speedily, the crisis of economic functions also came along in a dramatic way. The first conspicuous change in this respect was the collapse of small-town industrial plants that had been established in the centrally planned economy era. Local producing units usually became independent and privatised, but only few could stay viable, or if they did, the scale of production was substantially reduced. The absence of state investments was compensated by the appearance of private capital only in a spatially selective way: a fundamentally machine-industry-based process of reindustrialisation could commence only in small towns related with dynamic regions of advantageous location. In association with this, a special type of tertiarisation is witnessed in which the weight of service branches increases significantly – undoubtedly a positive achievement in itself –, yet their internal structure is nowhere near ideal. Growth is mostly relative; services have not increased but only maintained their employment numbers before the political transition. Among these, it is public utility services that increased their weight in small towns: the proportions of people working in education, social services, public administration and law enforcement was 21.5% in 1990, which figure increased to 25.5% by the time of the 2001 census. Although the corresponding data from the 2011 census have not been published yet, we have good reason to assume that due to the crisis this rate has grown even higher, possibly reaching 27%. As we understand it, this means that competitive private service sectors in small towns have been less able to gain space; moreover, the settlements are more dependent on state redistribution, on the existence and financing of the institutional system.

It is exactly this phenomenon that is worrisome: the welfare state has obviously gone into a crisis in the region. Even if today what we are witnessing in Hungary is that the state takes over responsibility for an increasing number of duties, financial unsustainability nevertheless seems apparent. Several other symptoms of the regression of the state could be mentioned. A less conspicuous aspect, for example, is associated with demilitarisation after 1990: as military forces were cut back on, more than 50 garrisons in small towns were eliminated that had earlier played important role in the economic life of these settlements. The future of small town hospitals as inpatient health service institutions has been quite uncertain for years now, partly because of cost implications predetermined by the fragmented structure, and partly because of the uncompetitiveness of their services (sometimes simply due to improper instrumental supply). The first expected victims of the transformation process that has been going on in higher education since 2011 is the few small-town higher education training institutions, but the demographic depression questions the sustainability of even the secondary education institutions.

Besides the lack of external impulses, another issue is that relations with settlements in the rural spaces around small towns are loosening. In this respect, a particularly serious problem was that food industry, an important branch for many small towns, belonged to the victims of the transformations, although this sector was one that used to have strong local roots. Following the deterioration of former traditional markets decades ago – which was seen by György Enyedi (2012) as one of the major reasons of the decline of small towns – another important factor is the disruption of local production chains. No matter hypermarkets were built in the outskirts of small towns, too, if they do not fit organically into the system of local economy, then what remains in the particular settlements, as benefit is only the low added value of sales, in the form of wages and local taxes.

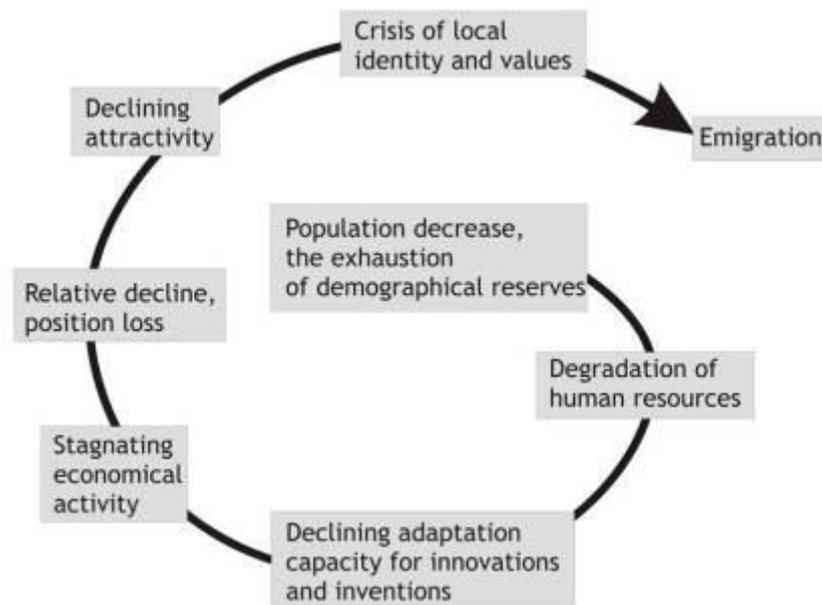
Paradoxically, the position of small towns was considerably damaged by the increase of the level of general mobility. In everyday life, this on the one hand, meant that it became possible to bypass small towns: in villages too, the horizon of mobility became wider for more active people with relatively higher purchasing power. Services offered by mid-size towns and large cities were easier to

access, and the retail trade offer in small towns is unable to offer a competitive alternative regarding product and service differentiation. The general crisis of local economy also brought about the decrease in employment too, with more and more small towns characterised with a negative commuting balance, i.e. local people having to find employment in larger settlements. Even in non-economic types of central functions, decline is observed. The traditional institutional framework of educational-cultural functions fell apart, and demand for a number of typical small town services decreased significantly. However, the most important element of this group of problems appeared in education: the expansion in higher education after the political transition (the number of students quadrupled during the course of 15 years) re-arranged the values of particular qualification types in respect of labour market potentials. The secondary level qualification forms that were available in small towns before 1990 used to represent the maximum of desires as well as possibilities for local young people, and ensured the smooth integration into the “world of labour” (labour market *per se* was still not present at that time). The fact that lower degrees in college education and later in the Bologna system became generally obtained meant that young people having completed secondary school necessarily moved, even if only temporarily, towards middle-size or large towns with higher education opportunities. Based on experiences it is seen that relatively few of these young people return to their original place of residence, moreover, emigration many times occurs as early as at the secondary level: schools in larger towns offering better quality education drain off the cream of the local young population. This type of migration has stepped forward as one of the most significant factors of selective demographic erosion mentioned a few paragraphs before.

6. Conclusion: the vicious circle of shrinking small towns

The factors of small town crisis act together in a way that their effects are amplified, moreover they serve as mutual causes and effects to each other. The central issue is demographic decline, which is measurable not only quantitatively, but causes changes in quality, too. Besides the decrease of population size, the deterioration of social capital must be faced, too. Emigration brings about lower qualities of human resources, but beyond that, we have observed the disintegration of the characteristic organisational frameworks of small town life: because small towns are no longer able to offer sufficient numbers of employment opportunities, the network of enterprises are also in the process of disintegration, the schools have started to decline too, and the commercial functions of small towns are fulfilled less completely. These together cause shrinkage not only quantitatively, but they fundamentally ruin the identity and community values of small towns. In other words, what is going on in Hungary is not only the crisis of particular small towns, but also the crisis of small town existence as a whole. Development strategies should have a special focus on this type of settlements; however, the problem itself needs a complex approach, which is not strongly present in our current planning practice.

Figure 5 The vicious circle of shrinking small towns in Hungary



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Abstract

The phenomenon of shrinking has recently become a central issue in urban geography. The aging population of Europe transformed this issue from the problem of cities to a general phenomenon to be discussed. Small towns have not traditionally been in the focus of geographers; however the decline and the often imagined loss of the associated values have motivated a number of reflections. Shrinking seems to be a typical Central-European problem, whereas the specialities of the settlement-network give them a more significant importance.

The present paper focuses on Hungarian towns formally having the town rank and not exceeding the population of 30,000 people. We excluded towns belonging to agglomerations because of their very different development course; finally, we had a sample of 259 settlements. Demographic decline appeared among them more than a century ago, but the scale of the process increased rapidly during the last decades. Shrinking is only barely depended on geographical position, and is partially based on the outmigration of their young and educated inhabitants, which might lead us to the conclusion that this definite settlement type is in general crisis.

In order to investigate the phenomenon of shrinking properly population dynamics of 259 were studied in details for the period between 1870 and 2011. Focusing only on population change could result false conclusions therefore other (demographic, migration, economic etc.) statistical data of the investigated group of settlements were studied. Our population data originate from the national census and information database managed by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. For mapped data representation, the MapInfo software was used.

According to the authors’ point of view, the small towns’ functions are eroded by the transformation of the level of economic connections, the expanding horizons of mobility, and the spatial regression of

the state from rural areas. Now, the external impulses are seemed to be exhausted, and a negative spiral, a kind of vicious circle seems to be determining the future of these settlements.

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