

University of Pécs
Faculty of Sciences
Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences
Doctoral School of Earth Sciences

Human Geography Programme

**The impact of formal urbanisation on settlement development in
Hungary – Motivational factors in development directions**

theses of the PhD-research

Viola Karsai

Supervisor

Dr. habil. András Trócsányi PhD



Pécs

2023

Name and address
of the doctoral school: University of Pécs
Faculty of Sciences
Doctoral School of Earth Sciences
H-7624 Pécs, Ifjúság str. 6.

Head of the doctoral school: Prof. Dr. habil István Geresdi DSc
professor
University of Pécs
Faculty of Sciences
Institute of Geography and
Earth Sciences
Department of Geology and
Meteorology

Name of the doctoral programme: Human Geography Programme

Title of the doctoral thesis: Settlement and Human Geography

Head of the Doctoral Theme Group: Dr. habil. András Trócsányi PhD
associate professor
University of Pécs
Faculty of Sciences
Institute of Geography and
Earth Sciences
Department of Human Geography
and Urban Studies

Supervisor Dr. habil. András Trócsányi PhD
associate professor
University of Pécs
Faculty of Sciences
Institute of Geography and
Earth Sciences
Department of Human Geography
and Urban Studies

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of towns and cities is something that most disciplines do over and over again, from their own point of view. The fact that our settlements are in a state of constant change makes it necessary to research them from historical, demographic, administrative, economic, and technical aspects, without claiming to be exhaustive.

In addition to studying settlements, it is also necessary to know the society (inhabitants) that lives and uses them and to trace the changes that affect society in order to understand why a given settlement is the way it is, where it has developed from and where it has developed to. Besides, whether we are looking at longer or shorter-term planning and development, we need to know the characteristics (composition) and needs of the population in order to make the best decisions at the level of municipal governance with the impacts they cause.

A geographic approach is used to integrate all the above areas and aspects into the research. This provides a complex picture of the framework within which the settlements under study and their development potential operate, as a dynamic interaction of natural, social, infrastructural and economic spheres (Tóth, 1981).

Many researchers have studied urbanisation – more specifically, in the context of the present dissertation, small towns – and have examined the effects of urbanisation, the possible specific features of the phenomenon and the significance of urbanisation in East-Central Europe (without claiming to be exhaustive: Enyedi, 1988, 1996, 2012; Szelényi, 1996; Szirmai, 1988, 2017, 2019; Erdei, 1961, 1971, 1972; Tóth, 1976, 1978; Beluszky & Györi, 2004; Beluszky, 1999; Karsai & Trócsányi, 2019; Konecka-Szydłowska, 2016; Küle, 2014; Vaishar et al., 2015; Horeczki & Egyed, 2021; Benedek, 2006; Török & Veress, 2016; Veress, 2016; Mitrică, 2014; Pirisi & Trócsányi, 2009; Krzysztofik & Dymitrow, 2015). Due to Hungary's specific position (the meeting of East and West), this issue is still an important topic today. As a member of the European Union, we are linked to the Western system, and a significant part of our development is due to this group, but at the same time, in terms of the content of the concept of the towns (and the relevant regulations), the development of settlements, the attitude towards settlements, and the content of the towns are closer to the post-socialist countries (e.g. Romania, Poland) (Kocsis, 2008; Konecka-Szydłowska et al., 2018; Trócsányi et al., 2007; Trócsányi & Karsai, 2018).

Urbanisation is one of the most powerful processes affecting settlements: more than 50% of the world's population can now be considered urban dwellers (United Nations, 2021), so research (either in a subset or a comprehensive way) is always relevant. Generally, research on urbanisation looks at quantitative and qualitative changes in settlements. Being an urban

has always been considered a privilege and becoming a city – in Hungary at any rate – has always been based on the current interests and decisions of the authorities (Beluszky & Gyóri, 2004; Beluszky, 1996, 1999; Konecka-Szydłowska et al., 2018). However, the status and its theoretical content are not always directly proportional to the type and quality of the – 'urban' – functions that a given settlement (town) can perform.

In Hungary, too, towns have historically been privileged places (settlements with an additional civilisational meaning), which have always been conferred with this title and the associated obligations, duties, powers, and possible advantages by the higher power (currently the presidential power of the republic) (Beluszky, 1996, 1999; Trócsányi et al., 2007; Konecka-Szydłowska et al., 2018). Over time, the changes in the number and proportion of towns have matched the natural or forced pace of urbanisation, and have therefore not attracted much research interest, but after the political transition (1989-90), partly related to changes in the regulatory environment, the process of urbanisation accelerated as a result of reclassifications (formal urbanisation – which is urbanisation without functional background). Given that, according to the researchers' perceptions and experiences, the upgraded settlements did not always 'hit' the level of what was considered urban, a series of professional debates were launched to explore possible solutions to the devaluation of the urban title (Tóth, 2008, 2009; Kőszegfalvi, 2008; Kulcsár, 2008; Csapó & Kocsis, 2008; Zsótér, 2008; Dövényi, 2009; Németh, 2009; Pirisi, 2009, Pirisi & Trócsányi, 2009; Szabéni & Nagyvárad, 2009; Faragó, 2009; Csapó & Kocsis, 1997; Horeczki, 2019; Szabéni & Nagyvárad, 2009; Kiss et al., 2012; Németh, 2013; Kristóf A. 2014). Regardless of this, the extensive regulatory changes made at the time of the creation of the Fundamental Law (2011-2012) tightened the relevant requirements – Government Decree 321/2012 (XI. 16.) on the spatial planning procedure (in 2012 and its amendment in 2016) – while leaving some elements partly flexible, thus leaving the right of individual discretion to the decision-maker.

Along these lines, the number of elements of the urban network doubled over the last 30 years and then seemed to come to a halt after the last amendment to the regulations mentioned above. This may be due to the (unclear, not precisely known) intentions of the decision-maker on the subject, or to the fact that the potential population of municipalities (as well as a significant proportion of municipalities already with urban status) is not able to meet the legal requirements.

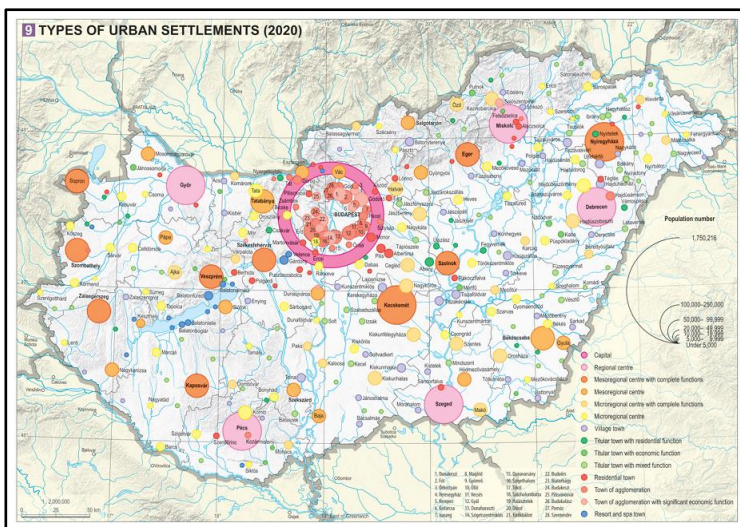


Figure 1: Emergence of titular town as an expression and Category in literature. The municipalities mentioned as 'village-town' can be compared with these in further research.

(Source: National Atlas of Hungary, Volume 3 – Society)

In light of these developments and their visible consequences, and of the three decades that have passed, the last few years have seemed an appropriate period to examine the issue, towns and potential candidates, not only from the existing statistical point of view but also through the experience of local leadership, partly from a more subjective perspective, which, with its "softer" character, seemed able to shed light on the actual reality behind the numbers.

II. RESEARCH AIMS

Hungary's municipalities are autonomous under the current legislation because of the country's location, they have a unique historical past and similar settlement (network) characteristics to the surrounding post-socialist countries. Following the political transition of 1989-90, settlements, including the towns with a smaller population – typically 1,000–10,000 inhabitants – (and villages that can be considered close to them in terms of development), became legally independent and practically equal (Act LXV of 1990 on Local Self-Government, Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on Local Self-Government in Hungary). However, they have followed very different paths

in terms of development over the last 30 years, depending on the (geographical, economic) context in which they are located and how they have been able to make use of it. In many cases, no positive factors have helped them to develop, and many (small) settlements have become quite vulnerable in the new environment.

The aim of this research is to study small Hungarian settlements through a narrower group of villages, based on statistical data and professional experience. The sample includes both towns and (large) villages in terms of their legal status, but all of them can be said to be at a similar level of development. On this basis, we sought to answer the following questions:

1. Where – along which characteristics – is the border between villages and towns located?
2. What are the characteristics of the settlements located in the border zone?
3. What are the characteristics of the settlements in the border zone: modern villages, towns that have become rural, or, as a new category, are they in fact 'rural towns'?

Our starting point was the contradictory situation in the perception of municipalities that have been granted urban status since a significant number of the small towns concerned (according to the 2008-9 discussion papers cited above) are considered by researchers to be "not even at the level of being considered as towns". Instead, in their opinion, the post-transition reclassification wave has resulted in a devaluation of status, which could and should be addressed at the level of regulation or conceptual correction.

As mentioned, there was some change in the regulation in the early 2010s, but the process came to a halt (it seemed to stop between 2013 and 2021), and the earlier momentum in terms of denominations has stalled. Given that, despite the legal framework, the decision is ultimately the prerogative of the President of Hungary, and thus practically independent of the regulation, it is not clear what the almost 10-year period of non-designation is due to: the consolidation of stricter criteria or perhaps a political decision.

However, municipalities have faced several challenges both since the change of regime (they are still in the process of adapting to independence) and due to the global impact of recent regulations (the Covid19 pandemic and the economic crisis caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war starting in 2022). The length of the decades since the change of regime and the upgrading of the status of the municipalities, which seems to have stagnated, have combined to provide an opportunity to examine the above-mentioned group of municipalities in the light of the issues raised, and to illustrate our experience with the challenges that have since then affected their daily life and functioning.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The research involved both primary and secondary methods. As a secondary method, the relevant literature (urbanisation, small-town research) was reviewed. In addition, in preparation for the primary research, several data (primarily relevant to and related to reclassification) were analysed. As a result of this, and partly building on the professional experience of previous research (Tóth & Trócsányi, 1996; Hajnal et al. 2009), the municipalities were identified, and the main results of this dissertation were based on their analysis.

After the delimitation, a series of 73 questions covering eight themes was sent online (in spring 2021) to 348 municipalities (222 municipalities with urban status and 146 communes or large municipalities), in response to the aforementioned questions, due to the restrictions of the coronavirus epidemic. The questionnaire was structured according to the following model (Figure 2).

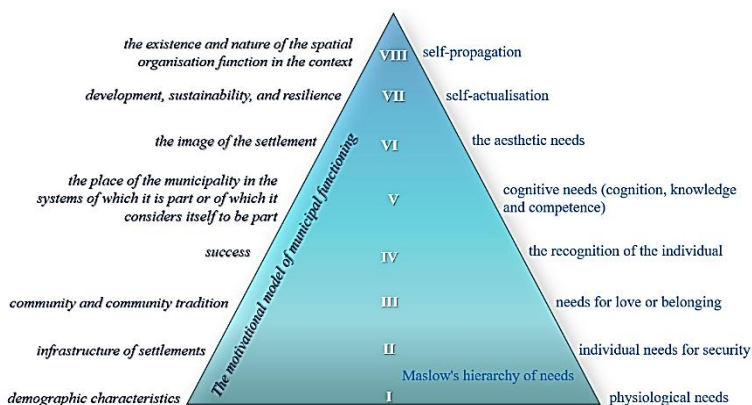


Figure 2 The motivational model of municipal functioning compared to A. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Karsai, V. & Trócsányi, A., 2020)

The model – and with it the assessment criteria – is based on A. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and its additions by many researchers since its creation. The research was intended to identify urban characteristics and possible specific perceptions by means of questions assigned to the topics.

The first four levels of the original hierarchy are the deficiency needs, of which the so-called physiological needs (nutrition, rest, etc.) are the basic pillars, the fulfilment of which is the minimum for individual

development. In terms of society or the society of settlements, this can be equated with *demographic characteristics*, the population itself, since a group of people is a necessary condition for the existence of settlements. It is not just the number of inhabitants that is important in this case, but also their dynamics and composition. In our case, the *infrastructure of settlements*, which provides the basic conditions for life in a settlement through technical elements (utilities, roads, etc.) and institutional facilities, can be matched to individual needs for security. At the level of the needs for love or belonging, there are the components of *community and community tradition* that give a sense of belonging to a group, of helping each other. The recognition of the individual by the settlements and the settlement society can be identified with the concept of *success*. It is difficult, however, to judge from the outside what a given settlement (society) considers to be successful locally, but this interpretation of the concept alone is revealing for the purposes of analysis.

The second quadrant of the hierarchy contains the elements of growth needs. After the first four needs have been met, the next level in Maslow's system is the existence and fulfilment of the cognitive needs (cognition, knowledge and competence). All this provides a sense of the individual's "usefulness", determining his place and perception in society. At the level of municipal society, this means *the place of the municipality in the systems of which it is part or of which it considers itself to be part*: on the one hand, in space (e.g. in terms of its position in the spatial structure or its role in the spatial context), and on the other, in the social system (e.g. in terms of its capacity to assert its interests). The aesthetic needs of the settlements are interpreted in relation to *the image of the settlement*, i.e., the focus is on the layout of the settlement, the characteristics of its buildings and the image of the settlement, in order to examine the image of the settlement and its perception in the mind. Self-actualisation covers the issues of *development, sustainability, and resilience* in the context of settlement development, given that development is taking place under a range of external and internal conditions, usually with locally defined objectives, but also with factors that affect settlements in crisis situations, thus posing major challenges for the settlement itself and its society. At the top of the pyramid, and therefore at the highest level of municipal development, is self-propagation, i.e. the functions and services of municipalities beyond their own needs. As geographers, we have examined *the existence and nature of the spatial organisation function in the context* of the fact that, in addition to their basic functions, municipalities can also take on a number of additional tasks that ensure a higher level of care for their own population but can also (partly) serve the needs of a wider area. However, given the high number of elements, which foresaw a diverse range of municipalities, in addition to the perceived or actual spatial organisation functions, the question was also what framework was in place for creating all these, what possibilities were or

would be provided to enable a given spatial organisation function to be operated effectively in the municipalities. In addition to this, it is an interesting question as to whether cooperation will emerge or whether the municipalities will seek to achieve these goals independently.

The questionnaire was completed by the leaders of 45 urban and 33 non-urban municipalities, and the results of the survey summarise their experiences and opinions. Due to the sample, the set of questions and the quantity of results obtained, this research is a comprehensive study, but the results obtained will ultimately serve as a starting point for further research on several (sub)topics of a deep-drilling nature.

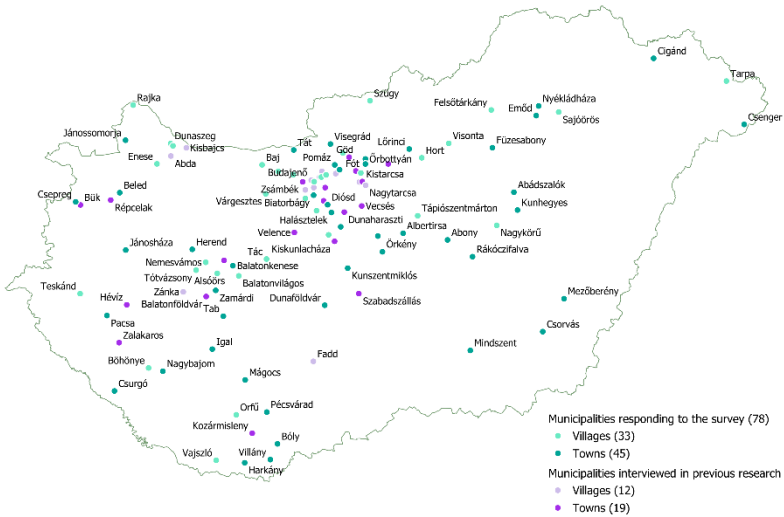


Figure 3 Municipalities participating in the research by answering the questionnaire based on the model (ed. Karsai V., 2023)

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had an impact on personal visits to the affected areas and local experience. Finally, among the previously planned additional fieldwork in one Western European country and one Central and Eastern European country, we managed to conduct interviews in Romania (Transylvania) with the mayors of three small towns that have been titled since the regime change: the mayors of Sângeorgiu de Pădure (Erdőszentgyörgy) and Miercurea Nirajului (Nyárádszereda) in Mures County and Săcueni (Székelyhíd) in Bihor County, before the global epidemic. (We also visited seven other small settlements in Transylvania and Partium, in some cases also talking to locals.) It is somewhat nuanced that,

due to language barriers, we were only able to meet with the leaders of mainly Hungarian settlements, but their insights are also important contributions to the material in this dissertation on the similar regulatory environment, the shared history, and the consequences of living through the accession to the European Union. The study visit to Western Europe was cancelled for the reasons mentioned above, but the urbanisation of this region is well covered in the literature and has been relied upon for background information.

IV. SUMMARY

More than half of our towns gained their status after the political transition, at the time and after the establishment of local government in its current form. This is what our municipalities have been trying to learn over the last 30 years, at a time when globalisation – and urbanisation as a result – is having a powerful impact. These effects are increasingly being felt at the lower levels of the hierarchy, blurring the boundaries that were 'comfortable' for studies – turning them into boundary strips. At the same time, new opportunities, but also challenges, are emerging in terms of everyday life – management for management, liveability for the population, framework conditions for economic operators – to which many actors have an interest and a long-term objective to respond in some way. Locally defined objectives and, at the same time, external and internal conditions must be set in order to create an environment in these municipalities that is suitable for a population with modern needs and for the small and large businesses that are profit-oriented and that are desirable. All this in a regulatory environment which, despite the promise of legal stability and (support for) municipal autonomy since the change of regime, has – at least in the recent period of multiple crises – been less favourable to the achievement of their objectives, as the leaders of the municipalities under study have told us.

The present dissertation examined where and along which characteristics this boundary, blurred into a border zone, is drawn in eight thematic areas, based on the logic of A. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Its significance was not to be explored for the purpose of further categorization, but rather to find the characteristics and aspects that would allow us to see what needs, situations and reactions exist in a modern world (the infiltration of globalization into lower hierarchical levels, as well as in different strata of society).

For these reasons, the time period of the research was defined as the starting point of the transition mentioned above, which was later supplemented by the municipalities declared urban in 1989. As regards the main themes of this dissertation, given the small number of replies to the questionnaire from this group, their responses were not analysed separately, as originally planned. This seemed permissible, given that these

municipalities did not show a statistically significant difference with those that were later declared towns, partly since cities that would have been eligible for the title after the transition were also granted it after 1989, and they belong to the group of those that were declared "late".

The image of the town and the village in people's perceptions are clearly delineated, and the essence of the town can be summed up in almost every aspect by the words "more" and "better": more inhabitants, more space, more institutions, and better infrastructure, more and better opportunities for work and leisure. However, what this ultimately means in each size category in Hungary today (in East-Central Europe) was a central question at the start of the research. In part, these aspects were also reflected in the themes of our model.

In terms of population, we found that most municipal leaders are satisfied with the population, but also – and mostly – that they are not aiming for a numerical increase. Growth measures (such as various benefits or image-building measures) are more likely to be aimed at attracting young people to move in (or stay in), thus ensuring the survival and functioning of the municipality in its own right. In some cases, typically in the conurbations, mayors ('if they had a choice') would prefer to see a slight reduction in the intensity of the population, but less so because of the problems caused by the sudden and rapid growth in the population (e.g., conflicts between residents, lack of transparency in the demands made on the local authorities).

From an infrastructural point of view, its shortcomings are more critical than the shortcomings in services, and the municipalities surveyed are still in a kind of "catching-up" situation. There is a shortage of resources for development, with state subsidies more or less sufficient for basic running costs, while development is almost always possible from EU funds or, in the more fortunate municipalities, from (business) tax revenues (the latter temporarily not flowing to the municipalities during the epidemic of the coronavirus). In addition, the emergence of urban needs and the expectations of the population in relation to them mean that they are constantly lagging behind. Although the progress made in this respect since the change of regime is generally considered to be good, the perception of 'there is still room for improvement' is almost ubiquitous.

In terms of local community cohesion and identity, managers' experience shows that smaller settlements, and those less affected by the sudden population growth due to suburbanisation, are more satisfied with the attitude of residents. In municipalities where population growth is faster, there is a tendency towards the characteristics of larger towns/cities, including alienation and a lack of community participation, and there is scope for civic organisation, as described above. In terms of values and habits, the municipal leaders perceive significant gaps both in terms of age groups and in terms of the time gap between the older population (old residents) and the

younger population (newcomers), and they would welcome active participation in the life of the municipality, and cohesion would also be important in terms of defining long-term goals.

The judgement of success (or failure) – to what extent – is influenced by a combination of factors. Historical background ("path dependence" – Beluszky, 1999), geo-economic conditions and, to a significant extent, the subjective perception of the person being evaluated. The questionnaire was conducted in the initial period of the pandemic, so it was not possible to examine the longer-term consequences of government decisions taken in the meantime and their (presumably mainly) negative impact, but the responses – and here we are referring to the entire questionnaire – highlighted the importance of economic and financial stability. Municipal leaders agree that development and the desired stability is a time-consuming process, shaped by several (success) factors. Moreover, it is not a linear process: despite their internal endowments and their statutory autonomy and management approach, municipalities are influenced, slowed down or even diverted from their objectives by external factors, often unexpected situations (such as the crown virus epidemic). A common point is that they consider it appropriate to define and implement development paths along conceptual lines. The importance of status was the most divisive issue in this area, but at the end of the day, the acquisition of status is and would be seen as a success by the leaders.

In the regulation of reclassification, the capacity to organise space is a specific and explicit condition. The central role is similarly emphasised by the leaders of the municipalities in our study across a range of aspects – certainly in terms of urban characteristics. They are looking within themselves for opportunities to strengthen their microregional (and in some cases wider) relevance. This is a feature defined as a kind of cornerstone for stability and long-term survival. Although the municipalities are (also) legally autonomous, the stability and competitiveness of the region are also decisive for their development and long-term (central) role, as Romanian municipal leaders also pointed out in the interviews.

For the outside observer, the image of the village and the town is the primary striking, often dividing line between village and town. In addition, the image, the image that is desired to be seen, is often combined with this kind of perception. In our research, the most salient elements in this respect were the perception of suburban settlement areas (in terms of image) and the atmosphere of a 'rural', peaceful, tranquil neighbourhood (in terms of image). Suburban settlement areas are associated with positive quality of life characteristics associated with villages in towns and are identified as a clear sign of small-town development in villages. In the same towns, the positive yield of a "village" atmosphere is a measure of liveability, while in villages

it is a characteristic that can overcome all the relevant negatives of the big(ger) town or city.

The themes of development, sustainable operation (mainly according to the research) and resilience, although presented as separate themes, were implicitly – obviously – present in several other places. Development and sustainability are goals of all municipalities, but the extent, way, and end point of this varies according to what they see as an opportunity. These expressions are mostly couched in economic terms, but they are also a pronounced issue in terms of population (see nationally ageing, migrating population vs. the desired young, educated, more 'civic' population). The municipal leaders see conceptual development as a welcome development, which they believe is also the basis for making the municipality resilient to challenges. However, both in the absence of economic stability (while at the same time being exposed to external causes such as politics and crises) and in the face of changes in population size (and quality), this is a major challenge.



Figure 4-5 Themes to be targeted for development in case of free resources (based on the answers to question 65 of the questionnaire) – villages (green figure) and towns (blue figure), 2021 (ed. Karsai V.)

In the light of the above, it is understandable why it is not possible to clearly define what the respondents consider to be "extra" functions and spatial organisational elements. This is partly due to the above-mentioned exposure to external and internal influences, and partly to geographical position. The closer a settlement is to a larger (more) urban area – this is particularly true for settlements in the Budapest agglomeration – the more pronounced the impact of the fact that a certain role considered as an extra service cannot be implemented in a cost-effective way, so that even if it is considered as a possibility, it will not be a goal (at most in the long term). The majority perceive a micro-regional centrality about themselves. This also means, in part, that their similarities mean that they can cover the same scale with one or other of their features (be it administrative, labour market), what can be highlighted is their tourism potential, which can be seen as a larger area-wide role, and in the case of some municipalities a national role. In addition, these municipalities see each other as competitors, which is caused – and supported – by the framework (regulation and the legacy of the past). The ones that are able to emerge from this are those that have at least a county surplus, but more likely a regional or national (mostly tourism) surplus. In addition, at the micro-regional level, municipalities that think beyond themselves, beyond their own population, beyond their own borders – where management tries to go beyond the literal administrative or theoretical framework – can also be considered successful in this respect, from the perspective that their population is no longer absolutely fixed, whether for work (commuting) or leisure.

Overall, we can speak of differentiated, broad-spectrum characteristics when we look for the border zone between rural and urban aspects in the settlements studied. These settlements are at similar levels of development, have similar potential and face similar challenges. All this in a specific regulatory context, which in many respects also determines the room for manoeuvre they have – despite all the incentives to leave the framework that exist in most cases.

János Kornai (1992) described Hungary as a "premature democracy" after the transition, mostly as a result of it. Our settlements also bear the traces of this. Some of our towns are in this sense "premature cities", whose development raises the question of when they will be able to catch up with their "premature" counterparts.

Due to the amount of primary data and information available, this dissertation and its results (and the questions it raises) serve as a starting point for further research, and in the present framework a comprehensive review of the model logic has been carried out for the sampled municipalities, based on the experience of the Romanian study visit. Further studies can and should be continued, both territorially and on the basis of all or part of the criteria, in order to further outline the municipalities on the edge of urbanity and their

development directions and ways of ensuring their expedient and effective implementation.

PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE TOPIC OF THE THESIS

Karsai, V., (2021). Társadalmi konfliktusok a várossá nyilvánítási folyamat kapcsán a rendszerváltás óta várossá lett településeken. (Szakdolgozat.) PTE Állam- és Jogtudományi Kar, Pécs.

Karsai, V., Trócsányi, A. (2019). Aki kimarad(t), lemarad(t)? – A település sikeressége és a városi cím. *Földrajzi Közlemények*, 143(4). 339–357. <https://doi.org/10.32643/f.k.143.4.4>

Stefán, K.J., Alpek, L.B., Karsai, V. (2019). The Appearance of German Direct Investment in Connection with the Presence of German Minority in Hungarian Small Towns. *Deturope*. 11(3). 250-263. <http://doi.org/10.32725/det.2019.036>

Karsai, V., Trócsányi, A. (2018). Statisztikailag város – Városiasság a várossá nyilvánítások tükrében. In Fazekas, I., Kiss, E., Lázár, I. (szerk.), *Földrajzi tanulmányok 2018*. (pp. 279-284.). Debrecen: MTA DTB Földtudományi Szakbizottság, Debrecen.

Karsai, V. (2018). A magyar város és vidék a népsűrűség vonatkozásában. In Alpek B. L. (szerk.), *Földrajz, diverzitás, csomópontok: Tanulmánykötet a 70 éves Dövényi Zoltán professzor tiszteletére*. IDRResearch Kft./Publicon Kiadó. (pp. 81-90)