



Demographic Transformation, Eroding Social Capital and Segregation on Outskirt Areas of Hungarian Cities

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Abstract: *This paper examines a relatively overlooked aspect of the post-socialist demographic transition in Hungary: the socioeconomic changes and segregation processes occurring in the outskirts of urban areas. Outskirts primarily consist of transport infrastructure, agricultural land, and natural spaces and are regulated differently from inner urban areas, which encompass the majority of the urban fabric. However, certain specialised outskirts have become permanently inhabited over the course of history. On the edges of developing urban centres, these inhabited outskirts, which are characterised by a unique mix of amenities and detriments and missing services as well, became a destination for a diverse range of immigrants. Through field research and semi-structured interviews conducted in four Hungarian agglomerations, this study explores the social changes and emerging patterns of segregation in this distinctive part of the rural-urban fringe. The findings point to an erosion of social capital, increasing spatial differentiation, and segregation. The paper also points out that while many interviewees conflated deprivation with ethnicity, this perception is not supported by other evidence.*

Keywords: segregation; suburbanisation; outskirts; social capitals; fringe.



Introduction

In Hungary, as well as East-Central Europe, the political and economic transition after the fall of state socialism led to rising social inequality. Market conditions gave free rein to a spatial reconfiguration based on social stratification, which in turn superseded or reinforced the disparities in urban infrastructure and housing conditions (Boentje and Blinnikov 2007; Farkas et al. 2017). Spatial concentrations of deprived and marginalised people have emerged or stayed intact through three decades of market economy.

These processes are by no means uncharted territory. These phenomena have been studied thoroughly by numerous researchers in Hungary as well as East-Central Europe (Kok and Kovács 1999; Brade, Herfert, Wiest 2009). However, the focus has been on issues experienced by the inner parts of cities (segregation, gentrification) or to population movements crossing municipal borders (suburbanisation) (Szmytkie 2021; Timár and Váradi 2000). In comparison to this, the ongoing processes of marginalisation, segregation, suburbanisation, and gentrification on the outskirts of Hungarian cities has received less attention so far.

An ‘outskirt’ is an administratively delineated spatial category within a municipal area. Making up most of the municipal territory, outskirts are the primary spaces of agricultural production, nature preservation, and recreation. However, as a result of twists and turns of history, some specialised parts of the outskirts now also provide permanent residence to a significant number of dwellers. As we will explore in detail, these areas are like a microcosm of the aforementioned demographic and social processes. However, owing to the lack of data and limited international comparability, only a handful of papers have attempted to explore the recent demographic and social transformation of the outskirts in its complexity.

Our paper aims to address this gap by presenting research results on the social transformation of outskirts on the edges of Hungarian urban centres. Through field research and semi-structured interviews, the focal points of our study were:

- to explore the perception of segregation in local narratives and compare it to the statistically based delineations;
- and to examine the evolving dynamics of internal relationships within local communities, utilising social capital theory as the theoretical framework.

Recent changes in legislation also underscore the relevance of our research. While socioeconomic processes provide significant drivers for immigrants, some laws (e.g. the new real estate registration law of 2021) still consider these holdings agricultural land. Meeting the criteria for agricultural land transactions significantly increases the costs of and prolongs property acquisition (Rosta 2021). Local municipalities also found themselves between a rock and a hard place: how to cater to residents’ growing demand for affordable greenbelt housing while also avoiding the drawbacks of sprawl. Our paper aims to alleviate the latter problem, even if only to a small degree.

Theoretical background

Hungarian municipalities can be divided into their inner areas and their outskirts. These components serve different functions in accordance with construction laws and fall under different land use regulations. Inner areas consist of the original historical settlement cores and their later expansions and mostly contain artificial surfaces (residential areas, industrial,



commercial, and administrative buildings, infrastructure, parks and recreation areas) embedded into a geographically compact urban fabric. Outskirts mostly contain agricultural, semi-natural, and natural surfaces with elements of transport infrastructure and isolated artificial structures, usually connected to agriculture.

However, some specialised parts of outskirts have become permanently inhabited as a result of their unique course of development. In the Pannonian Basin, scattered farms (*tanyas*) and estates (*manors*) were initially developed for temporary use to cultivate remote lands. *Manors* are smaller estates that have low-quality housing for the workforce in addition to the main building, as well as buildings and barns for agricultural purposes. Nowadays, people live permanently in the original staff quarters and in converted former agricultural buildings, but the main agricultural function has typically ceased by 1990's. 'Vinehills' are specialised areas dedicated to small-scale wine production, featuring vineyards and auxiliary buildings originally intended for temporary habitation. They are typically located in elevated positions, hence the term 'hill' in the name (Balogh and Csapó 2013). The allotment gardens were small plots for vegetable production, but the small cottages on allotment plots were converted to permanent housing like the *dacha* areas in the Baltics (Boentje and Blinnikov 2007). The range of inhabited outskirts includes other genealogical types too (e.g. former Roma ghettos, peri-urban streets), but they all share some common features as a result of their location outside the inner areas. They lack administrative autonomy and are characterised by relatively low infrastructural development and the absence of services, so to access services residents have to commute daily to nearby inner areas (Balogh and Csapó 2013).

When these inhabited outskirts are situated near dynamic urban centres, they may become part of the rural-urban fringe and undergo peri-urbanisation (Simon 2008). Property prices are generally lower in peri-urban areas because of the lack of infrastructure, poor accessibility, and regulatory uncertainties. The lower prices may attract a wide variety of migrants, from price optimising suburban newcomers to people driven out of the city and people moving from a rural periphery towards the centre (Gagyí and Vigvári 2018; Tomay and Berger 2024).

Previous research has revealed that in most outskirts the Roma minority is spatially segregated, while other ethnic groups are not (Farkas et al. 2017; Virág and Váradi 2017). The Roma population, which is generally less educated than the majority society, can be regarded as one of the major losers in the process of market transformation. In the decades following the regime change, unemployment rates were notably high within this group (Hajdu et al. 2021; Siposné Nándori 2021). Deprivation processes—coupled with market-driven forces in the real estate sector—have led to increasingly stronger concentration and ethnic segregation trends both between and within settlements (Kertesi and Kézdi 2016; Málovics et. al 2021).

Research on segregation in Hungary has typically examined the socioeconomic status—related factors of social segregation in the inner city of Budapest and in other Hungarian cities, the stigmatisation of the Roma population, and the role of gentrification in these processes (Virág and Váradi 2017). Geographical research has mainly focused on the spatial aspects and scale of segregation and the relationship between the production of space and segregation (Rácz 2015), while in the past decade increasing attention has been paid to studying the segregation characteristics of medium-sized and small Hungarian towns and rural areas in general (Kertesi and Kézdi 2016; Málovics et. al. 2021). This has also led to a growing interest in understanding the segregation processes of peri-urban areas.



However, the fragmented nature of inhabited areas in outskirt areas prevents the formation of dense segregation patterns similar to those in inner areas. Previous research also highlighted the limited applicability of income and population statistics (Nagy and Timár 2011). Moreover, in outskirt areas, individuals' subjective perceptions of poverty frequently do not align with their actual financial circumstances (Siposné Nándori 2021). For these reasons, some methods for detecting the presence or extent of segregation that can be successfully applied in inner areas can lead to distorted results in outskirts. This is especially true of the unified methodology used to delimit segregated areas for the municipal Antisegregation Plans: according to Government Decree 419/2021, an area is considered segregated if it has at least 50 residents and at least 35% of the working-age population is either unemployed or has attained no higher than ISCED Level 2 education, based on the most recent census data.

Contrary to the aforementioned approach, we didn't interpret segregation in the outskirts as an exact spatial category with clearly definable borders. We instead viewed it as a relationship between the inhabitants and their environment, which helps to reveal the values, habits, and behavioural patterns of the local society and the local authorities. In this approach, segregation is conceptualised as a dynamic and evolving discursive category, embedded within a spatial framework that is continually reconstructed in response to the social, economic, and political interests of local actors. Moreover, it also understood as actively contributing to and shaping these reconstruction processes (Harvey 2006; Vincze et al. 2015). It is also up for debate whether people living in segregated areas perceive their own situation as segregated. These subjective perceptions cannot be captured by metrics and are therefore unsuitable as indicators for decision making. They can, however, help to answer the question of whether there are significant differences between segregated areas as defined by external observers and the subjective feelings of residents (Hermann et al. 2014; Siposné Nándori 2021).

To interpret segregation as a discursive category and explore the networks within local communities, we utilised the concept of social capital. In human communities, relationships serve as resources, offering both individual and communal advantages while posing potential harms, particularly to the precariat (Szalai et al. 2010; Málovics et. al. 2021). These connections determine individuals' capacity for action and social mobility and their ability to advocate for their interests to decision-makers.

There are four main categories of social capital. 'Identifying social capital' is built on and maintained through similarities in social identities. 'Bonding social capital' relies on solidarity-based networks within closed communities, and these networks aid in daily survival through reciprocity. However, attempting to break free would result in the loss of essential support networks, which would in turn perpetuate poverty (Málovics et. al. 2021). 'Bridging social capital' encompasses the relationships beyond one's social groups and residential area that enable access to resources. 'Linking social capital' spans different social classes and typically links individuals to those with power. Residents in an area who have an extensive and influential network can advocate for further development while marginalised individuals typically lack the ability to represent their interests. These types of capital also facilitate horizontal and vertical mobility, which means their establishment means developing these forms of capital is essential to eradicate segregated areas, as the risk of failure is increased by the absence of these forms of capital (Szalai et al. 2010; Kovács 2020). The concept of social capital is key to capturing discrepancies between the discourse uncovered in our research interviews and experiences in the field.



Methodology

To obtain generalisable insights applicable to the Hungarian rural-urban fringe, a diverse selection of case study locations was necessary.

The primary criteria for selecting diverse case studies were as follows:

- geographic location within the country (Transdanubia versus the Great Hungarian Plain);
- size of the core city (regional centres versus local centres);
- presence of various types of outskirts (areas dominated by scattered farms versus those dominated by vinehills).

After consideration, the following four urban areas were selected for analysis: Győr, Zalaegerszeg, Szeged, and Hódmezővásárhely. This paper focuses on the insights that can be extrapolated for the Hungarian rural-urban fringe as a whole.

In these four case study areas, the following methodologies were employed:

- field research;
- semi-structured interviews.

The aim of the field research was to gather observations, explore the general characteristics of the four selected case studies, and validate specific statements made by the interviewees.

The purpose of conducting semi-structured interviews was threefold:

- to collect general information regarding the social processes and transformations occurring in the outskirts;
- to identify social issues, as well as conflict situations specific to certain areas;
- to find out which areas are considered segregated or labelled ‘problematic’ or ‘deprived’ in the local discourse.

The interviewees are referenced by the name of the city they are from, followed by a sequential number in ascending order (e.g., Győr1). The interviewees included mayors, local government officials and employees, social workers, and NGO staff. In the initial round (2014–2016), 23 individuals were interviewed. In 2021, follow-up interviews were conducted, preferably with the same individuals, or, in cases such as retirement, with their successors. The goal of these follow-up interviews was to track changes and identify persistent dynamics and characteristics. In alignment with the aims of this paper, we focus primarily on the latter – enduring findings.

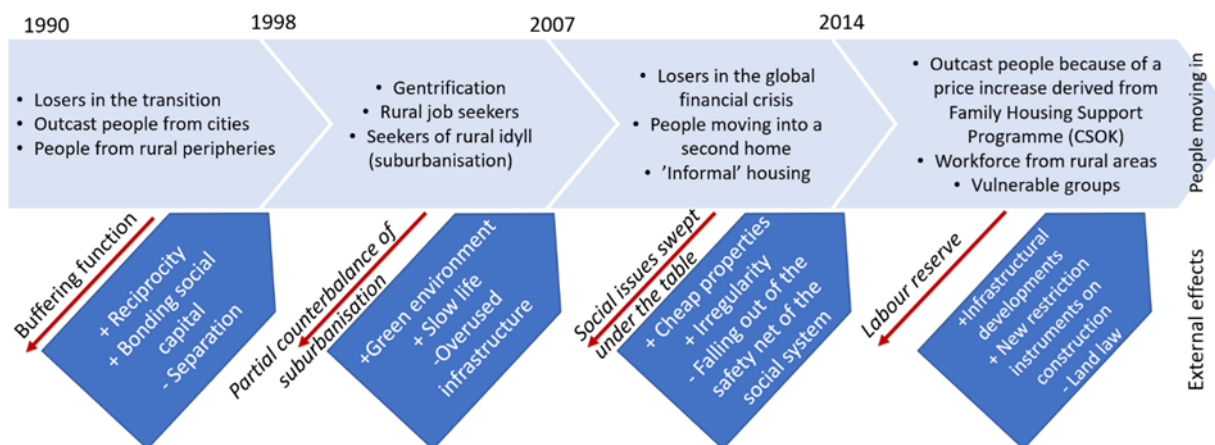
Finally, it should be noted that the methodology and the results form part of a larger, ongoing research framework encompassing statistical analysis, questionnaires, and field surveys of dwellings and infrastructure, with a strong focus on spatial and temporal variations. A detailed discussion of the resulting insights falls outside the scope of this paper; however, these findings have contributed to our understanding of the processes within the case study areas.



Results

The interviews provided ample information about the residents of outskirts (Figure 1). As a result of different waves of migration, the present-day population is diverse in terms of both social status and ethnicity. Residents with strong ties to agriculture are dwindling in number and are ageing; their residency can usually be traced back to the socialist era. They differ in characteristics from the newcomers arriving in the outskirts of urban agglomerations from both the core and from rural peripheries. Based on the motives and characteristics of their migration, this process can be identified as suburbanisation –even though these migrants did not cross municipal boundaries. The flow of suburban migrants was especially high in years of prosperity (1997–2006, 2014–). On the other hand, a significant number of newcomers are from the lower social strata. Jobseekers from rural peripheries who cannot afford the rent and multi-month deposit for a flat in the inner area settle in the outskirts instead. Less affluent migrants from the city core are diverse, but they are connected by their deprived status: impoverished, unemployed, divorcees, addicts, and people pushed out by gentrification. Many of them decided to move in order to sell their valuable property in the inner area, buy a cheap plot in an outskirt, and live off the difference. The number of less affluent newcomers usually peaks in crisis years (1990–1996, 2007–2009). These different backgrounds are reflected in spatial disparities in income (Győr¹, Szeged¹, Szeged²). The composition of these residents is also diverse in terms of ethnicity: many areas have diverse populations, but only few outskirt neighbourhoods have a clear Roma majority. This is consistent with the findings of studies conducted in the Hungarian rural-urban fringe (Balogh and Csapó 2013; Gagyí and Vigvári 2018, Vámos et al. 2023).

Figure 1: Timeline of the transformation of the rural-urban fringe in Hungary based on interviews



Source: Authors, based on the answers of the interviewees.

During the interviews, respondents trended to identify the same neighbourhoods as segregated, with variations observed only in the geographical extent of these areas among local stakeholders and decision-makers. In total, they identified 31 potentially segregated neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods do not match the ones officially identified as segregated, because, as discussed above, legal regulations only require that segregated areas with a population of at least 50 be assessed, whereas most of the areas identified by respondents had between 10 and 40 inhabitants (23 on average).



The decision-makers we interviewed clearly considered the segregated areas to be predominantly inhabited by the Roma population. However, the responses from social workers and NGOs, as well as our own experiences in the field, did not confirm this. Instead, the population structure in the neighbourhoods in question was ethnically mixed, with the common denominator among the population being poverty and some degree of exclusion. According to one of our interviewees: *'There are life situations, such as divorce, when money runs short, and people are pushed out to the outskirts. I think this process will increase in the short term.'* (Györ1)

During the economic crisis in 2008–2009, a significant number of impoverished individuals moved to these residential areas: *'Mostly they move in because here they can at least maintain a semblance of their previous lifestyle, but 80 percent of those who move to the outskirts are, at most, from the lower middle class, and they are afraid of sliding down.'* (Szeged1)

'We have an organisation that helps the disadvantaged, and they do 98% of their work on the outskirts. I think this says it all about who is moving there. Urban poor, and poor from all parts of the country. The original homes of some countryside immigrants are hardly worth enough to buy a shack in our vinehill.' (Györ1)

The identified segregated neighbourhoods are located in the remotest parts of outskirts, have low quality properties that have not been recently renovated, and have unfavourable transport conditions (a lack of paved roads). According to the interviewees, their median official income could be as low as half of the the national average. But owing to low utility costs, low income can *'be sufficient to make ends meet, if they have a few chickens, and don't have to buy some of their eggs and meat'* (Szeged2). The situation looks less bleak when we consider that official earnings are supplemented with income from the informal economy, with many locals engaged in seasonal agricultural work or unregistered businesses. However, this also brings about greater uncertainty, especially because of the higher seasonal variability in expenses. Winter is particularly financially burdensome for rural residents, as many families face the dilemma of *'either eating or heating'* (Szeged3).

The interviews and field research provided insight into the different types of social capital. Traditionally, these residents share strong identifying social capital based on their similar socioeconomic backgrounds and mutual challenges, fostering supportive bonding capital based on interdependence. Their limited bridging capital makes it difficult for those who leave to form new connections elsewhere, often resulting in a return migration. Nevertheless, recent rapid demographic changes have eroded this traditionally strong bonding capital, since newcomers from both the high and low ends of the social spectrum still identify with their former community.

Newcomers don't form ties with their new neighbours and interdependence is consequently replaced by coexistence. As one interviewee put it: *'nowadays you can't even ask for a little sugar from your neighbour'* (Györ3). More affluent individuals tend to distance themselves from the disadvantaged, leading to internal marginalisation, segregation, and social conflicts (Györ3, Zalaegerszeg2).

Moreover, residents of the outskirts can be characterised as having weak linking social capital. They often have problems visiting public service offices and dealing with 'paperwork'. According to one social worker, a learned sense of helplessness is to blame: *'they don't believe they can do anything on their own, so they never try to'* (Hódmezővásárhely1). This lack of resources and data has led some local governments to



avoid taking responsibility: *'the people living in the outskirts are basically hiding out of shame'* (Zalaegerszeg1). Since the residents don't use even their limited ability to lobby and ask for help, local governments and personnel often only have superficial information about their problems and needs.

Discussion and conclusions

Our investigation revealed that patterns of segregation vary across different levels. Because of new immigrants, the extent of spatial segregation typically decreased at the micro level (especially between 1990 and 1998, and then after 2015). New immigrants moved in mosaic patterns, into properties that had just been put up for sale or were priced affordably (Győr4, Szeged2, Zalaegerszeg3). However, differences between individual outskirt neighbourhoods are increasing. This is consistent with other findings (Csatári, Farkas and Lennert 2013; Malý et al. 2020). The differentiation is determined by accessibility, existing infrastructure, and amenities.

The most accessible neighbourhoods, with a pleasant environment that includes allotments and vinehills, attract the most affluent newcomers. The transformation processes experienced by these neighbourhoods are somewhat similar to the similar to the suburbanisation that villages in the agglomeration ring are undergoing. A key difference is that property prices in the outskirts are relatively more affordable. This also enables the lower middle class to participate in this migratory movement. In recent years, the process of moving into outskirt areas has also been accelerated by the state mortgage programme (CSOK).

On the other hand, the least accessible neighbourhoods, with substandard housing stock and an unpleasant environment (e.g. desolated buildings), serve as a destination for lower-strata immigrants from rural peripheries as well as from deprived urban ones. These areas somewhat resemble remote rural crisis areas in terms of the composition of the population, patterns of behaviour (e.g. learned helplessness, addiction), and quasi-involuntary residence in the area out of a lack of better choices. However, a key difference is the proximity of suburbanising and segregating neighbourhoods. This is especially true for the largest vinehills and allotments, where newcomers from both ends of the social spectrum settle based on microlevel conditions, even though allotment plots are not designed for permanent living.

In theory, this proximity could provide deprived groups with opportunities to improve their situation, but this is not the case. This can be explained by the lack of social capital. The traditionally strong bonding capital of residents of the outskirts, which was supported by their inwardness and shared identity, is eroding. On the other hand, the bridging capital is weak, which makes it harder to overcome class differences. Since newcomers usually maintain their contacts with their former social circles, they don't try to integrate into their new neighbourhood. Among the less well-off, their perception of deprivation increased, because the significantly higher-income newcomers became their new reference point for comparison. This hinders both sides from forming contacts with each other. In the worst case, the wealthy newcomers drive out the less well-off and original inhabitants by outpricing them, similar to the gentrifying of inner-city neighbourhoods.

An important finding is that in outskirt areas officially designated as segregated do not align with those identified by the respondents as segregated. This discrepancy stems from the methodology used to officially define segregated areas, which is regulated at the national



level and is primarily suited for inner areas. Another notable finding is that regardless of the actual number of Roma living in an outskirt, the interviewed decision-makers associated the segregated areas with the Roma population. This is not confirmed by our field research. According to local social workers, most of these outskirts are mainly inhabited by residents from the ethnic majority. They identified areas where segregation is an acute issue, but they think *'it's based on income'* (Győr3). They more typically described the inhabitants as single-parent families, dependents, and people displaced after having defaulted on a mortgage (Győr2, Győr 5, Szeged4).

Our understanding is that, in local discourses, perceptions of segregation and poverty do not necessarily match actual spatial processes. This is also supported by the existing literature (Rácz 2015; Siposné Nádori 2021). The terms 'segregated area' and 'gypsies' were used as synonyms of poverty but did not necessarily indicate the actual presence of the Roma minority or the ethnic homogeneity of residents. That is why social workers, who are in direct contact with the people living in these areas, expressed themselves in a much more differentiated manner. Although they identified every area discussed in the study during the interviews, but they did not use labels like *'Roma ghetto'*. Instead, they characterised the areas using phrases such as *'problematic place'* (Győr2) or *'some poor people live there'* (Szeged4). Therefore, a difference in perspective is also evident, as the interpretation of social workers (bottom-up) and decision-makers (top-down) differed significantly during our interviews.

The lack of information is also contributing to a superficial understanding of the dynamics of the outskirts. Only the once-in-a-decade census provides ample data on the composition of the population, with no intermediate updates. The lack of data hinders the updating of relevant urban development documents. Antisegregation plans for the period after 2020 (the 2021–2027 planning period) were still based on the 2011 census data. Moreover, many inhabitants do not appear in the registered population. This is in line with the findings of studies on similar areas in East-Central Europe. Czech and Polish studies (Ouředníček 2007; Szmytkie 2021) have also reported that the actual population in these areas may be 10-25% higher than the registered population, with a significant role played by those displaced from cities and the precariat migrating from rural areas.

Because of the poor state of roads and the lack of public transport and cars, most residents in segregated outskirt areas rarely travel to the centres. Representatives of local authorities also find it difficult to reach these areas, creating a kind of *'no man's land'* (Szeged5). However, there are also good practices to address the special issues of the population who live in outskirts. In the poorly accessible scattered farm areas of the Great Plain, the presence of specialised social workers dedicated to outskirts is necessary for *'at least partially preserving the quality of life of those living there'* (Hódmezővásárhely2). In scattered farm areas, this service has been able to meet the needs of locals; but this service is not available in allotments, manors, and vinehills. Extending the social safety net for all types of outskirts is an important value-based issue for the future settlement and social policy.

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