The Phenomenon of Socio-economic Shrinking in the Example of the Nagykunság Region

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Motto:

“This is the key to the slothfulness of Hungarians, especially in the Tisza Valley:
there is bread, wine, gammon; pants in the summer, coat in the winter,
and a pair of boots and a hat, squailer in hand
and sometimes a wringing gloomy ditty,
and ‘sweet dreams’, as much as needed ... Why work therewith?”
(István Széchenyi: Fragments of Ideas)

The social-economic changes, which took place in the Great Cumania from the change of the regime, are strongly Janus-faced. The necessary and often dynamic catching up steps (such as induction of gas system, channelling, building of roads and pathways etc.) which are mainly financed by external sources, do not generate “automatically” further development. The default of the local economy’s expected recovery can be even less due to the infrastructural deficiency (as the functional supply of the settlements improved a lot from 1990) but are more due to the lack of the local society’s ability to reformation and due to the lack of the adaptive skills. Improvement of this deficiency is a task much more difficult and long term than that of the replacement of the functional defects. The settlements’ relatively good functional supply will not be maintained for a long time near the local society’s weakening and decaying situation. The contradiction between the maintenance (development) of the central functions and between the social degradation, instability and decadence is more and more sharpened.

Keywords: human resources, shrinking cities, development vs. decadence, Nagykunság
1. Introduction

Worsening demographic problems represent specific challenges to all responsible members of the society both in the post-fordist Europe and in Hungary being a member of the EU since 2004 and struggling to find its way in order to achieve prosperity.

The problems indicated can be deduced to a rather complex and manifold system of subjects whose main nodes are as follows:

The decline in the willingness to have children of the majority impassioned to obtain pecuniary goods, the ageing of the society, the declining production of the national economy, the enlarged regeneration of the underclass masses, the increase of the rate of inactives, classes living settled to be supported by others (today, ca. 3 millions Hungarians of working age stand off, do not generate incomes, moreover, make their living on state benefits, i.e. the population of almost 10 million is sustained by 3.6 million taxpayers (among them, 800,000 are public servants) (Róna [2007]).

Summarised, the social-economic spiral deduced to the above reasons and continuously descending will determine social, economic, political and environmental processes for several decades in Hungary, too—and, having all aspects taken into account, in a negative way.

These large-scale demographic changes will obviously impact mankind’s most endurable creations, i.e. cities. Western European urbanists and decision-makers have been involved in studying the topic of shrinking city for long years (or even for decades): they claim that these demographic changes require an unprecedented transition of cities (Böhmer [2005]). But yet, what is the definition of the shrinking city? “From the point of view of urban development,
a shrinking city can be described by two main processes: on the one hand, by the \textit{loss of population} and, on the other, by a \textit{declining economic dynamics}. This process of demographic or economic shrinking entails the specific consequences of urban development processes at all fields. The resultant processes can be characterised by quantitative and qualitative changes, whose intensity and impacts depend on the extent and temporal proceeding of the provocative processes. Due to the two main (demographic and economic) reasons for shrinking, the usage-specific density of the shrinking city declines. Depending on the intensity of processes, the physical shrinking of the city body is also conceivable.” (Lang–Tenz [2003], p. 130)

Hungary also experiences the bulk of problems featured above with no comprehensive proposals for resolution available. This paper will provide a brief overview on a study of the Nagykunság Region in Hungary severely impacted by the socio-economic shrinking: it intends to give a short introduction to the region’s social situation, the resultant possibilities for the economy as well as the impacts of their consequences on towns.

2. The study area

The Nagykunság Region (officially non-existing neither administratively nor in the development policy today as its settlements were brought into various micro-regions) is difficult to be distinguished from a physical geographical point of view from the surrounding landscapes (Hortobágy, Tiszai Loess Terrain), as it crosses over to them without sharp border-lines. In a historical sense, the Nagykunság is interpreted as the so-called Hatkunság formed following the redemption (1745), i.e. the settlements of Kunhegyes, Kunmadaras, Karcag, Kísújszállás, Túrkeve and Kunszentmárton (Bellon [1979]) (In 1992, Berekfürdő became separated from Karcag, with this the number of Nagykun settlements having increased to seven).

3. The socio-economic development of the Nagykunság region until the redemption

Cumans had settled in the 13th century, later dislodged then resettled, in Hungary represented a special socio-economic group at that time (ethnic society, nomadization); their integration to the Medieval Hungarian state order commenced after the devastation by the Mongols (Bellon [1979]), and basically concluded by the 16th century.

\footnote{5 ‘Release, salvation’ (Latin)}
According to sources, during the era of Turkish occupation, the Nagykunság—with the exception of the settlements of Karcag and Madaras—was virtually destroyed. At the time of thraldom, only the so-called khász-towns receiving feudal snugness guaranteed by the sultan could develop into extensive market towns with large outskirts and with a high number of inhabitants (e.g. the towns of Karcag, Kisújszállás), however, in terms of the occupation of citizens and settlement functions, they were not different from the villages (Baranyi, B. [2004]). As claimed by researchers from the period between the two world wars, in some of the towns of the Great Hungarian Plain that had become basically independent from the manorial power, “community life, the economic efforts and the whole tendency of the society were civil-rural” (Erdei [1937], Féja [no date]), as at these times, nobility was not decisively the governing and leading class of market-towns.

To the area, sometimes basically left merely abandoned as a consequence of wartime devastations and the later multitudinous escapes, peasants from other regions were called as early as the beginning of the 17th century: many settlers came to the Kunság as well as land was given here to the descendants of foreign folks. This was also supported by the Turks, for their own economic interests, with securing the freedom of religion; during the time of counter-reformation, it was especially favourable to those disturbed at their original domiciles, at the ‘catholic sea’ due to the otherness of their religion. Cumans originally had not become catholic, moreover, much had been retained from their old pagan faith and, in the first half of the 16th century, the entire population of the Nagykunság Region got protestant. At the time of the Turkish occupation, this religion became inveterated and could never be overcome by the counter-reformation (Bellon [1979]).

At the late 17th century, after the Turks were expelled from the area of the Kunság and the areas re-conquered were regarded by the Habsburgs as domains obtained through war: certain areas were traded in order to cover military expenses, this is how e.g. the Hármaskerület (Nagy- and Kiskunság, Jászság) was obtained by the Teutonic Order (Bellon [1979]). The Order started to make use of the Jászkunság Region after the subjugation of the Rákóczi War of Independence in 1711: in connection to this, no data is available on whether the Order would have sustained private manors cultivated through socage in the region. It is important to note: the later, specific socio-economic settlement in

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6 At the time of Turkish thraldom, significant population changes took place: many fled and were often replaced by foreign ethnic groups. Referring to the altered ethnic composition, the Habsburgs, after having the Turks expelled, considered the former Jászkan privileges cancelled. Within his rights, in 1702, Leopold I. sold the Hármaskerület (Three District) to the Teuton Order in the meantime, also abolishing the ‘eternal privileges’ of the Cumans and Jász with this, having them come down to villeinage. The Order sold their rights to the area in 1731 to the Physical Monastery of Pest.
the Nagykunság Region was partly based on the fact that the region’s inhabitants were villeins, imibursing ‘only’ manorial roll, who lived in a self-defined order and opposed to their landlords not as individuals but as community. This community, i.e. the region’s special internal autonomy emerged in the first half of the 18th century represented a special formula of the Nagykunság Region; their self-dependence seemed to be obvious and their self-defence functioned also adequately against the lords (Bellon [1979]).

With peace coming around, along with the resettling native inhabitants, immigrants also came as more rational conditions and better possibilities for living attracted those living as villeins somewhere else. Those newly arrived—who, according to their names were mostly Calvinists from the very surroundings of the Nagykunság Region—received support from both the native inhabitants and lords urging settling and not intervening into religious issues. At that time, abundant pasture-lands to be parcelled were available that represented an opportunity for ascension: the basis of property here was grazing animal husbandry. Economic developments, social consolidation and, together, the establishment of the later redemptus identity were advanced by the use of pasture-lands not being restricted in the Nagykun settlements during the decades of villeinage.

The possibilities of economy were promising to all residents in the first half of the 18th century, thus basically all were participants of the redemptus efforts. This—initial—uniformity of economic interests also advanced conjugation processes taking place at other sectors. Traditions and the value orders were established by the native residents and the incomers together which later became the internal laws of the community. The years of villein dependence, in the meantime, also represented the accomplishment of economic development and community development (Bellon [1979]).

During this half a decade (the early and mid-18th century), in the Nagykunság Region, productive forces underwent a significant level of developments: an economic development based on animal husbandry was experienced on which the repossession of old (political) privileges could be built upon. The social background for redemption was also established: the inhabitants now financially consolidated, with the absence of control by their lords and the free status resultant from the rental system could become the beholders of the initiatives for independence. In order to have their public affairs administered in the most effective way, a body responsible for the governance of the community was elected from among themselves—obviously always of the wealthiest citizens (Bellon [1979]).

The possibility for development was given for the society of the entire Nagykunság Region when privileges were returned. In 1744, the precedent initiatives for redemption proved to be successful at last: a petition was send in the Council of Procurators in order to have a sum of pledge settled. Apparently,
some conditions were also imposed by the residents of the Nagykunság Region in which it was ascertained that the sum of pledge for them would only be paid off when these terms accomplished: a palatine should have jurisdiction over them, they should never be traded, the three districts should remain to make up one administrative unit and they should have full power to handle their own affairs.

At last in 1745, their rights were given (back) to them: no customs are paid, they choose adjudicator, captain, anyone could be settled here and all residents received equal privileges in the region. Although the struggle to redeem privileges provisionally unified the society (Bellon [1979]), the ulterior balk of the Nagykunság Region was forecasted by the fact that the social basis of preparation was greater than the number of those later enjoying the benefits of the struggle.

4. The socio-economic consequences of the redemption of 1745

After 1745, ordinance of the entire proprietary community predominated the council; actions taken in organising farming, production and marketing and observing the community regulations (or having them observed) were democratic. After having the old-new freedom obtained, however, negative tendencies also began from the middle of the century: dispossession of the irredemptus began. In the meantime, differentiation in property status, inner conflicts for tenure possession or retaining those already obtained also started to take place among the redemptus. Then, by the end of the 19th century, local power was obtained by the rich redemptus, and during the 19th century their interests were conceptualised in the local regulations, too (Bellon [1979]). Despite the disadvantageous processes commenced, the development of the Nagykunság Region’s society peaked during the turning of the 18th and 19th centuries: sitting tenants became unified, the ‘Nagykun’ (or rather redemptus) identity consolidated and consummated (Bellon [1979]). The life of irredemptus, by then, conformed to that of servants.

As the most important social consequence of the redemption, residents were now divided into two groups, i.e. redemptus and irredemptus. The redemptus soon realised the threat would have been resulted in the increase of number of those remained without property, thus relegated foreign servants after having their work accomplished even if married here, in the region. This was also a typical attitude toward craftsmen and merchants, therefore—causing, negative socio-economic and impacts in the region in long-term, with consequences probably ere now—their wealthier class producing for the market had not

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7 They were a segment of inhabitants who did not absorb paying their (theoretic) part of the fee of redemption.
evolved. As due to the rigidity (blindness) mentioned above, craftsmen and merchants could only satisfy the direct demands of the inhabitants, consequently no centres of trading and industry producing for the market could be developed in the Nagykunság Region, thus nor their stimulative-generative power on the development of a later modern civil society could predominated here.

By the end of the 19th century, an increase of the number of smallholders and of those without propriety, however just due to the relative backwardness, at least compared to the more developed parts of Hungary, of farming, farms stood this period out without major concussions. ‘This sound economic structure secured the peasant-civil manner to the holder’s society in the Nagykunság until the late 19th century.’ (Bellon [1979], p. 191)

The 19th century, in comparison, was already the time of introversion and fallback: the society became ossified. The initially positive self-defence mentality, scale of values and norms by then rather represented an obstacle (Bellon [1979]). This stiff system was slightly deflected only in 1876, with the abolishment of the Jászkun privileges, however not really effective socio-economic changes took place even then (Bellon [1979]).

Summarized: one of the essential factors preserved for centuries of this above-mentioned phenomena as particular socio-economic interrelationship was the specific duality represented by ‘the inadequacy of the social and economic level of development’, by the relative high level of development of the society’s structure compared to the economy (Beluszky [1992]).

5. The first shock of the 20th century and the Nagykunság region

As a result of the border alterations due to the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, significantly more areas lost their centres of catchment areas on the Great Hungarian Plain than at the Northern or Western part of Hungary. Consequently, the integration of the centreless Great Hungarian Plain regions into these new frameworks proved to be rather difficult (Hajdú [2001]). Actually, this was primarily experienced directly and intensively at the new cross-border areas, the events mentioned above mainly had ‘only’ indirect impacts.

6. The socio-economic-spatial movements in the socialist era

After having an analysis carried out, by complex socio-economic indicators, for the towns of the Nagykunság Region, the general conclusion can be made according to which the 1970s were characterised by ‘the particular urbanisation of rural areas’. One of its main features was the relatively rapid urbanisation of middle-sized and small towns under the hierarchic level of the county seat that, along with the settlement of the rural (so-called divisional) industry in the
economy reduced migration, however in the meantime, *commutation* became admitted. Due to some planned interventions, the institutional system of (small) towns with central role required to regional supply function broadened, too (*Csatári [2005]*).

Mainly the same essential processes of settlement formation continued and predominated during the 1980s. The introduction of *normativity* (per capita subsidy, settlement development contribution, etc.) proved to be a crucial step in the system of settlement development and management (*Csatári [2005]*)

7. The proceeds of the changes of regimes

Reactions to the radical socio-economic changes taken place after the *changes of regimes*, the towns of the Nagykunság were (are) like from a whole, quasi ‘living organism’ in a strongly determined was as resultant from their positions. It is nearly impossible to characterise the settlement-transformation of the transition taking place in Hungary now for two decades, however it is certain: the former system of centralized plans abolished, and the local governments of the settlements intended to start their new ‘independent’ lives. These great changes of settlements and regions were accompanied by the fact that the *large-scale decentralisation of decision-making competencies was not or hardly followed by the task-proportional expansion of sources for settlement management and development* required. Such problems were further worsened by the fact that some kind of ‘market economy conform’ viability of the settlements did not imbibed the changes in an adequate way (*Csatári [2005]*)

Alterations already taken place in the Nagykunság Region are rather Janus visaged. It was well-proved that the required and often intensive *steps of reinforcement*—mostly financed from external sources—(installation of gas, canalisation, road and pavement constructions, etc.) do not induce further development ‘automatically’. The *failure of the expected development of the local economy can be less interpreted* by the lack of infrastructure (as the functional supply of settlements has basically improved since 1990), but rather by the *lack of potentials of the local society for renewal and adaptation*. Improving these is more complicated and long-term task than replacing the lack of settlement functions (*Csatári [2005]*)

8. Socio-economic problems in today’s Nagykunság region

Local society, in the past two decades, failed to give real and actual answers to the changes resultant from the changes of regimes. Not a strong local structure has evolved but, on the contrary, processes indicate toward the consolidation of an abnormal ‘wrecked society’—with such processes becoming even more
intensive nature character during the past years. Two characteristic groups fundamentally influencing the social processes in the Nagykunság Region were classified by a researcher of the region, Julianna Örsi in her study of 2004:

- **Slowly advancers**: this group includes those who were mostly able to retain their jobs or moreover, during the compensation, possessed some pecuniary increment (e.g. certain workmen, merchants, the more extroverted representatives of the local black-coated class). They (at least, partly) put the family fortune into active use, and among them, some bias towards innovation can be traced (however as this does not attain the critical mass, no real innovation is found in the region as the Nagykun society as a whole is not capable of handling this). This class and its representatives are not capital-abundant, nor has any external injection of capital of a significant extent. As forgoers, there are still family traditions remaining as well as agriculture and folk art represent some kind of prosperity.

- **Laggards**: they represent the larger (and, unfortunately ever increasing) group that includes those having their jobs, prestige and faith after the changes of regimes. Previously most of them were trained men and underworkers, for whom today, the ambiguous undeclared work means a narrow living with also a dramatic decline in health among them (Örsi, [2004]). It can really be claimed for them that they feel, their future has already gone …

With the above considered, it can be concluded that due to the economic transformation during the decades following the changes of regimes, the difficulties for adaptation, the emigration of a segment of the population with mobility as well as the negative demographic processes, the number of qualified (youth) men who, with their skills and work could contribute to the development of their settlement is ever decreasing. Nor represents a promising forwardness that a decisive part of full-time producers at the settlements examined works at the agriculture exhibiting only minor signs of modernisation so far (mainly in large-scale maize and heat growing or piggery). The provision of quality devices promoting production is inadequate; however the majority of farmers have received some kind of, especially not refundable, subsidies (Krizsán [2004]).

It stands for the Nagykunság Region, moreover for the whole Great Hungarian Plain that the historically developed specific ‘Great Plain way’ of social development described above with carrying the features of both the backwardness and a relative level of development, has stagnated during the historical-economic-social changes of the past 50-60 years. The bases for the former dual development, the ‘dissimilarity’ of the society of the Great Plain and, above all, the favourable impacts of the most valuable facts of the ‘historical syndromes of the Great
Hungarian Plain has been abolished during the past somewhat more then half a century whereas new ones, that would bring development have not yet evolved … As a summary for the above-described facts, it can be claimed, unfortunately as the sad truth that having the opportunities offered by the changes of political regimes forfeited, the (re)civilisation of the Great Plain regions has not come off.

9. The cloudy horizon of the future

It is a great threat that settlements or regions with an unstable or declining society, without an improvement of the economic renewal and revenue generating potential on the merits, will give up more and more of their central functions under the conditions of the market economy that would cause enormous deficiencies to the country, too (Csatári [2005]). In the region, in addition to the weakening, declining situation of the local society, the relatively rich functional supply of settlements seems to be sustainable in long-term; among the sustenance (development) of central functions and social erosion, lumpenisation, lability and decline, there is an apprehensibly ever harsh contradiction.

In addition to these, the identity disorder or loss of image of the historical-ethnographical group of the Nagykunság Region divided into micro-regions can also eventuate. Of this formerly characteristic group, the towns of Törökszentmiklós, Tiszafüred and Mezőtúr are gaining a higher share with playing a greater role in the micro-region and thus weakening the Nagykunság Region whereas 'one of the keys to the development potentials of the Nagykun settlements could be… maintaining an independent image preserving the cultural heritage' (Örsi [2004] p. 357). But will this succeed and will there ever be a Nagykun resurrection?

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8 The functioning of the peasant-civil-market town development, the presence of a relatively developed market town network of institutions and the progressive-civil wings of the reformed church, the large-scale social mobility, ‘innovative’ rural mentality, etc.

9 Their fundamental features are that a great number of youth tend to leave their settlements, those participating at the higher education do not return here, the local society is ageing and requires social help.


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