

## Formal urbanisation in East-Central Europe

ANDRÁS TRÓCSÁNYI<sup>1</sup>, VIOLA KARSAI<sup>2</sup> and GÁBOR PIRISI<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The East-Central European region has undergone a unique urbanisation process during socialist and post-socialist periods. These peculiarities result from social and economic development delays, which the state has tried to remedy through massive interventions. One such intervention is urban reclassification, where the state promotes certain places it deems crucial, granting them urban status, often without actual development or urban characteristics. Due to its artificial character, this intervention is called formal urbanisation in our approach being a specific local feature of the urbanisation process. The visible result is the growth of the urban population, often only by administrative causes, with the reclassification of villages as towns. The emergence of numerous small towns, which we refer to as newest towns, has significantly influenced urbanisation, altered the concept of towns and cities<sup>3</sup>, and generated significant debates. In this paper, we compare the formal urbanisation of the socialist and post-socialist eras, trying to estimate the added value of formal urbanisation in the latter period. We compare the administrative backgrounds of formal urbanisation in selected ECE countries for similarities and differences. Throughout the research, we analyse their formal urbanisation involving approximately 800 municipalities promoted since 1990 in Poland, Czechia, Hungary, and Romania, trying to identify common and unique features in the processes. Based on historical determination, modernisation, and integration into new spatial processes, considering demographic and functional changes, we developed types of formal urbanisation. Our research has revealed several common factors in the reclassification process, such as local initiatives, while we have also identified disparities between principles and practices and varying levels of control from regional and national actors. The study has also led to a deeper understanding of formal urbanisation in the context of the urbanisation process as a whole.

**Keywords:** post-socialist urbanisation, formal urbanisation, urban reclassification, newest towns, types of reclassification

Received November 2023, accepted March 2024.

### Introduction

The term ‘formal urbanisation’ was initially adopted to describe a particular aspect of urban growth in Hungary during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was discussed by PIRISI, G. (2009), PIRISI, G. and TRÓCSÁNYI,

A. (2009), and had previously been used by KOVÁCS, Z. in a similar context. In our approach, *formal urbanisation is a specific aspect of the urbanisation process. It means the growth of urban population by administrative causes only, with the reclassification* (KULCSÁR, J.L. and BROWN, D. 2011) *of former villages as towns,*

<sup>1</sup> Department of Human Geography and Urban Studies, Faculty of Sciences, University of Pécs, Ifjúság útja 6. H-7624 Pécs, Hungary. E-mails: troand@gamma.ttk.pte.hu, pirisi.gabor@pte.hu

<sup>2</sup> Doctoral School of Earth Sciences, Faculty of Sciences, University of Pécs, Ifjúság útja 6. H-7624 Pécs, Hungary. E-mail: vivi2799@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> As per the European literature, in this study, the term ‘town’ is used to refer to municipalities that are classified as urban but are relatively smaller in size and spatial importance as compared to a ‘city’. Therefore, the term ‘town’ is used exclusively when discussing urban reclassification, as new towns usually fall under the small-town category once they are granted urban status, even if they grow quite populous before or during the reclassification, apart from some exceptional cases such as suburbanisation.

by a legal act. While urbanisation, both the population growth and the functional and social transformation normally happens gradually, *formal urbanisation is a single act that makes a settlement and its citizens urban*, creating a visible and important threshold. The term 'formal' refers to its formality for the citizens involved: they became urban dwellers, but in the short term, nothing changes, unlike the caption on the official letters, coat of arms, and also on the facade of the refurbished town hall.

Because it is a legal act and also a political decision, it makes only sense to talk about formal urbanisation in countries where the reclassification is not an automatic, statistical process. The tradition, of giving privileges to selected communities, dates back to the Middle Ages or earlier, and even though the urban rank does not have the same advantages as before modernity, the highly selective nature of formal urbanisation has survived. *Formal urbanisation therefore is always an attempt to intervene in the urbanisation process with political and legal acts*. It could complete or replace other activities in regional and urban policies, without realising significant and expensive investments.

The term formal urbanisation is a bit more often used in another meaning, contrasting it with informal urbanisation, referring to processes in developing countries (MABIN, A. 1991; ZHU, Y. 1998). Hereby, within this paper, we apply formality not as the contrary of informality but as the metaphor of the direct intervention of the state in the urbanisation process by reclassifying certain places.

Formal urbanisation is a specific part of the overall urbanisation process, however, there is no single and universal theory describing urbanisation itself. While some scholars focus on the transformation of the settlement network and the changing distribution of population, others investigate the development of urban spaces. According to BRENNER, urbanisation involves processes of concentration and expansion (BRENNER,

N. 2013). However, for a long time, scholars mainly focused on the concentration and deconcentration processes, such as spatial distribution and migration of the population. The most influential theory is the urban cycles theory, which still provides a framework for many researchers (KLAASSEN, L.H. et al. 1981; VAN DEN BERG, L. et al. 1982). This theory played an essential role in interpreting the urbanisation of ECE countries (ENYEDI, Gy. 2011). Understanding formal urbanisation requires examining the stages of relative and absolute deconcentration because the reclassification of towns mainly occurs in semi-peripheral, rural spaces, and partly in expanding urban agglomerations.

Since the 1990s, the *model of differential urbanisation* has offered an alternative interpretation of the processes of concentration and deconcentration. GEYER and KONTULY described three stages (primate, intermediate, and small city phases), out of which the third one could provide a background for formal urbanisation (GEYER, H.S. and KONTULY, T. 1993). However, population growth does not necessarily occur in towns affected by formal urbanisation, but the idea is that the focus of urbanisation shifts towards spaces outside the urban cores and agglomeration, which is reflected in formal urbanisation as well. However, empirical results do not always confirm this theory (GEYER, H.S. and KONTULY, T. 1993), and applications for ECE countries are limited (TAMMARU, T. 2003).

There are various theoretical approaches to describe the new trends of urbanisation that are happening outside the core cities. Initially, BERRY introduced the concept of counter-urbanisation which later developed into more complex theories (BERRY, B.J.L. 1980). RICHARDSON's ideas about the deconcentration of industry (RICHARDSON, H.W. 1980) that triggers polarisation reversal in regional and urban development formed the basis of theories of polycentric urbanisation (DAVOUDI, S. 2003). The discussion about the 'borrowed size' of smaller urban settlements claims that smaller towns outside of agglomerations

could grow larger by ‘borrowing’ resources and development impulses from networked primate cities (BURGER, M.J. *et al.* 2015; MALÝ, J. 2016; MEIJERS, E.J. *et al.* 2016) and is also an aspect of urban decentralisation. It is challenging to differentiate between similar concepts. FOLLMANN, for example, describes peri-urbanisation (ALLEN, A. 2003; SIMON, D. 2020) as an ‘umbrella concept’ for similar approaches (FOLLMANN, A. 2022). In his interpretation, peri-urbanisation could be both territorial and functional, and a transitional category for urbanising places, future towns, or semi-urban spaces. Due to its flexibility, this concept is relatively often used for ECE countries (HIRT, S. 2007a; BIEGAŃSKA, J. and SZYMAŃSKA, D. 2013). Efforts are being made not only to adopt the concept of peri-urbanisation to the contemporary processes of ECE countries but also to integrate elements of theory into the still more commonly used model of urban cycles. While investigating similarities and differences between suburbanisation and peri-urbanisation in Poland, ZBOROWSKI and his co-authors concluded that a fifth state must be added to the classical four-state model of urban cycles. The new peri-urbanisation phase finds its place between suburbanisation and desurbanisation and could be characterised by decentralisation above centralisation and alongside slow counter-urbanisation (ZBOROWSKI, A. *et al.* 2012).

The polycentric urban development model suggests that small and medium-sized towns outside of the central agglomeration will experience population growth due to differential urbanisation and counter-urbanisation. However, the overall population decline and significant outmigration in the ECE region make it difficult for even these transitional spaces beyond the metropolitan borders to experience local growth. This demographic situation creates a clear difference between the urbanisation of ECE countries and that of Western European countries (STEINFÜHRER, A. and HAASE, A. 2007).

To gain a better understanding of urbanisation processes in countries beyond

major cities, we should shift our focus from population changes and migrations to the social, functional, and symbolic transformations that occur. The concept of peri-urbanisation, which describes the areas outside of urban centres, can be used to help us understand these processes. In China, the term ‘semi-urbanisation’ is often used to describe the unique aspects of their urbanisation processes, which are characterised by an intermediate position between urban and rural areas (CHEN, M. *et al.* 2019). This term not only applies to the population living in these areas but also to the landscapes that blur the lines between towns and villages (LIU, S. *et al.* 2004). Similarities can be seen between China’s urbanisation processes and those of formal urbanisation, particularly in the nationwide rural settlement consolidation projects that have been conducted (QIANYI, W. *et al.* 2023). These processes have led to social transformations such as modernisation and changes in lifestyle and habitus, which are collectively referred to as ‘in situ urbanisation’ (GINSBURG, N.S. *et al.* 1991; ZHU, Y. 1998, 2002).

Urban reclassification reached such a scale in Hungary at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that, in addition to the intense interest in politics and public opinion, it attracted the professional attention of several disciplines. As one visible result of that scientific debate, the use of the term formal urbanisation itself dates back to this period. In this context, Kocsis reviewed the European practice of urban reclassification around the turn of the millennium, and it became clear from this study that post-socialist Europe in its transition was following a fundamentally different path from the West (KOC SIS, Zs. 2008). The question then became a focus of the authors’ interest (TRÓCSÁNYI, A. and PIRISI, G. 2009.), and a closer look at the practices of post-socialist countries followed. Our analysis showed that in this region it was still – or again – becoming a noteworthy practice, with varying degrees of intensity, to elevate

some constitutionally equal municipalities to a higher administrative level by individual and unquestionable decisions of central power (KONECKA-SZYDŁOWSKA, B. 2016; VERESS, N.Cs. 2016; KONECKA-SZYDŁOWSKA, B. et al. 2018; KARSAI, V. and TRÓCSÁNYI, A. 2019).

Our research is centred around five countries that form the core of a region that is difficult to define. This region is located between the current Russian border and the former Iron Curtain and overlaps with various historical and geographic regions of Europe. Despite the four decades of state socialism, these countries' common roots and path dependencies go much deeper. We acknowledge Szűcs's concept of East-Central Europe (Szűcs, J. 1983, 1994), which recognizes the joint historical development of the region. It is a historic macroregion of Europe where local societies have successfully adapted norms and models from the core countries of Western Europe. Even though the later development of these societies was primarily influenced by the powers of the Eastern and South-Eastern peripheries of the continent, East-Central Europe retained its essential similarity to the core region and fundamental differences from the Eastern peripheries.

In this paper, the authors try to explain the significance of formal urbanisation in selected East-Central European (ECE) countries, focusing on the post-socialist era. We will argue that formal urbanisation is an integrated part of the overall urbanisation process before and after the political and social transition of 1990. After the political transformation, formal urbanisation became a part of the urban deconcentration processes, overlapped the processes of sub- and counter-urbanisation and contributed to forming a peri-urban space. The authors think formal urbanisation has not yet been contextualised about socialist or post-socialist urbanisation trends and models. In our work, we attempt:

1. to compare the formal urbanisation in the socialist and post-socialist era,

2. define the importance and calculate the added value of the formal urbanisation in the post-socialist era,

3. highlight similarities and differences in the administrative background of formal urbanisation in the selected countries,

4. describe different types of the newest towns generated by formal urbanisation.

The Hungarian Government ensures the actuality of the paper, the once largest creator of 'newest towns'<sup>4</sup> (KONECKA-SZYDŁOWSKA, B. et al. 2018) silently decided to put a drastic end to the wave of promotion, and the number of towns has plateaued since (with only two new towns since 2013). It is not the end of formal urbanisation, but probably the beginning of the end, after years of being chroniclers of a contemporary process, that gives us a perfect chance to take a wider distance and scope and attempt to interpret formal urbanisation as a part of the overall urbanisation process of East-Central European countries.

## Data and methods

The paper analyses the formal urbanisation of five selected East-Central European countries: the four Visegrad countries completed with Romania. The selection was somewhat arbitrary. Formal urbanisation played an essential role in all these countries except Slovakia, creating a significant pool of the newest towns in the post-socialist era. The data needed for the most fundamental analysis were available for these countries, and some earlier results also helped the interpretation. The limitation of the research to these countries results from a compromise. One can find the newest towns in other European post-socialist countries, too. Still, the different historical backgrounds (Post-Soviet and Post-

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, we use the term 'newest town' to distinguish them from previously physically newly developed or created counterparts, the new towns of the post-war period. Their novelty does not refer to their existence, but merely to their urbanity and legal classification.

Yugoslav development) and difficulties in building up a comprehensive database guided the authors to narrow this selection.

The study makes the difference between the socialist and post-socialist eras. Although 1989–1990 (with the fall of the Iron Curtain) is widely accepted as the turning point in history, and by the end of 1990, every selected country had a democratic, elected government, we count post-socialist formal urbanisation with 1991 as a starting year. Data collection happened in 2022–2023, and the latest population data usually refer to 2022.

The list of the newest towns and the year of their promotion has been compiled from various secondary sources: the official list of national statistical offices, with direct data service to the authors (Czechia, Hungary), publications (KRZYSZTOFIK, R. and DYMITROW, M. 2015), websites (Poland: *Nadania...*, 2023), and legal sources (Romania: *LEGE nr.351; Lista oraşelor...*), and it reflects the status of the first half of 2023. Despite all the efforts, the database may contain minor mistakes in specific cases, but according to our knowledge, it represents the general view of formal urbanisation correctly.

This paper has used statistical data based solely on population numbers. These figures were sourced from various online databases, such as the 2021/2022 census or other yearly data services (INS 2021; CZSO 2022; Statistical Office of the SR 2022, Statistics Poland 2023).

Most countries use a multi-level concept of urbanity in their public administration. Differences between cities and towns (*municipiu* and *oraş* in Romania, cities with *powiat* rights in Poland, statutory cities in Czechia, etc.) or between towns and market towns (*město* and *městys* in Czechia) were not taken into account, and all of them was treated as urban places.

### **Historical background: formal urbanisation during the socialist era**

Is there a specific socialist urbanisation in the countries of East- and East-Central Europe?

The existence of a ‘socialist city’ is usually not a matter of much doubt. Not only because urban planners of the Eastern bloc used this term to describe their efforts and struggle to create the utopistic spatial framework of the socialist society. But the phrase has also been used widely by researchers from both East and West (TURNOCK, D. 1974; FRENCH, R.A. and HAMILTON, I. 1979; DEMKO, G.J. and REGULSKA, J. 1987a; HAUSLADEN, G. 1987) while the socialist city, not only in prototypical, ‘green field’ form but the more standard version of transformed cities were doubtless existing realities, the question of their urbanisation is much more complicated. Was there a unique ‘socialist urbanisation’ or just an ‘urbanisation under socialism’? In their famous paper, KONRÁD and SZELÉNYI published the theory of ‘under-urbanisation’ and became one of the most cited authors of socialist urbanisation (KONRÁD, Gy. and SZELÉNYI, I. 1974). Later, more papers confirmed the concept of underurbanisation and emphasised the unique nature of socialist urbanisation (KANSKY, K.J. 1976; FUCHS, R.J. and DEMKO, G.J. 1979; FUCHS, R.J. 1980).

ENYEDI, however, somewhat later interpreted the process much more like urbanisation during socialism as an integral part of the global urbanisation model (ENYEDI, Gy. 1990, 1996). Therefore, the stages of the global urbanisation process (VAN DEN BERG, L. et al. 1982) would also appear in this region – only with an unavoidable delay and asynchronous even among the ECE countries.

What was the role of formal urbanisation in this era and region? Its significance is clear by numbers only. According to the data given by Kovács, Z. (2010), during the socialism until 1990, the number of officially classified towns tripled in Hungary, increased 2,5 times in Bulgaria and had spectacular growth in Romania (70%), Slovakia (64%) and Poland (20%). Exceptions were the historically most developed and urbanised regions of the Eastern Bloc: the (contemporary) Czechia and the (late) GDR.

Many of these newly recognised towns are matter-of-fact new towns, products of central planning and design. The number of new towns founded in the era could exceed 200 in the ECE countries excluding the Soviet Union (SZIRMAI, V. 2017), but these are still the lesser part of the growth concerning the urban 'stock' (which is about 450 units between 1945 and 1990).

In the mid of the 1970s, KONRÁD and SZELÉNYI interpreted the gap between the non-agricultural employees and the urban residents as a sign of under-urbanisation, highlighting the enormously increased number of commuters, who are not to be confused with the subjects of the later suburbanisation (KONRÁD, Gy. and SZELÉNYI, I. 1974). Living in rural places and working in the urban industry: SZELÉNYI described this group as the new working class (SZELÉNYI, I. 1981). Therefore, both the decrease of the rural and the growth of the urban population were slower than expected, and even the 'changing definition of urban areas' (in our words: formal urbanisation) took a part in it (FUCHS, R.J. 1980). The original concept of underurbanisation emphasised limited rural-urban migration and moderate population growth; however, from the 1970s, the discrepancy between the rank and function of certain places became more and more visible in Hungary (TÓTH, J. 1980, 2008; BELUSZKY, P. and GYÓRI, R. 1999). Under-urbanisation, therefore, gained a partly different, new meaning, too: the lack of officially recognised, 'urban-ranked' places compared to places with central functions and dominantly urban, non-agricultural populations. In the 1980s, these functionally urban places became beneficiaries of the accelerating reclassification process and were gradually promoted to towns.

However, with all these connections to under-urbanisation, formal urbanisation in these decades let itself be interpreted according to ENYEDI'S abovementioned approach. If we focus on *the two identified major groups affected by formal urbanisation*, the type of socialist cities, more accurately

socialist small towns<sup>5</sup> and the functionally and economically strengthened more traditional small towns, they not only symbolise two different stages in the spatial planning of socialist countries but also could be connected to two different stages of the urbanisation model. *The first group* is connected to a decent rural-urban migration with intensive concertation of people, mainly the industrial workforce. It, therefore, could be interpreted as part of the first stage of urbanisation. *The second group* could be linked with the second phase of urbanisation: the relative deconcentration, where ENYEDI emphasised in his approach that the deconcentration is not equal to suburbanisation but affects the less urbanised, rural hinterlands, wherever secondary cities and small towns became local poles of urban growth (ENYEDI, Gy. 2011). Similarly, the theory of 'differential urbanisation' (GEYER, H. and KONTULY, T. 1993) highlighted the role of intermediate and small cities in the later stages of urbanisation. In our case, a typically moderate migration from surrounding ruralities to the small centres/towns occurs, and a minor but essential migration of white-collar workers and intellectuals from cities to towns (SZELÉNYI, I. 1981). Comparing the two groups, formal urbanisation is a collateral effect in the first case when the town was built around an investment; the rank had secondary importance: a milestone and a reason for a celebration, but not the key to further development. In the second case, however, the positive correlation between rank and development, as described above, could be crucial.

<sup>5</sup> A list of new or socialist towns could be cited from the block like Komló (gained town rank in 1951), Várpalota (1951) Kazincbarcika (1954) in Hungary; Partizánske (1948), Detva (1965) Nová Dubnica (1960) in Slovakia; Tychy (1951) in Poland; Victoria (1954) in Romania, etc. In fact, in the years of gaining the town rank, the majority of promoted settlements were rather rural, although the later (industrial, infrastructural and housing development projects granted them rapid (urban) growth.

### *The post-socialist urbanisation*

Even if 34 years have passed after the political changes in the forerunner countries of East-Central Europe, and even if a significant number of papers are published on this field, the research of the post-socialist urbanisation remained imbalanced both geographically – ECE countries dominate the discourse – and thematically, thus, case-study bases approaches dominate the analyses (SÝKORA, L. and BOUZAROVSKI, S. 2012; FROST, I. 2018).

The earliest case studies focused on capital cities: Prague (SÝKORA, L. 1999; TEMELOVA, J. 2007), Warsaw (BOURDEAU-LEPAGE, L. and HURIOT, J.M. 2002; WECLAWOWICZ, G. 2005), and Budapest (KOVÁCS, Z. 1998, 2009a,b) are pretty overrepresented in scientific literature, and later other capital cities (Bucharest, Belgrade, Sofia) joined this analysis (VUJOVIĆ, S. and PETROVIĆ, M. 2007; HIRT, S. 2007b, 2008; LIGHT, D. and YOUNG, C. 2010; MARCIŃCZAK, Sz. et al. 2014). Much less attention was given to smaller cities (YOUNG, C. and KACZMAREK, S. 2008; HAASE, A. and RINK, D. 2015). The transformation was conceptualised mainly based on the processes and problems of the capital cities (KOVÁCS, Z. 1999; SAILER-FLIEGE, U. 1999; TOSICS, I. 2005; STANILOV, K. 2007; HIRT, S. 2013; BERKI, M. 2014; FARKAS, R. and KLOBUCNIC, M. 2021). The transformation of the housing market, the effects of privatisation, the changing role and practice of planning, the change of public and symbolic spaces and the switching patterns of urban land use are the main elements of the theoretical concepts of post-socialist urban development (EGEDY, T. and SÁGVÁRI, B. 2021). The overall transformation of the urban system including the emergence of new towns of reclassification got much less attention (PIRISI, G. and TRÓCSÁNYI, A. 2012; SZILÁGYI, F. 2012; MITRICĂ, B. et al. 2014; BOCHEŃSKI, T. 2023).

Exceptions are papers focusing on internal migration, population concentration, and deconcentration. Especially in Hungary (BROWN, D.L. et al. 2005) and Poland (ZBOROWSKI, A. et al. 2012), these processes

are well described and analysed. Results are similar in both countries: the surplus in the migration balance was significant in the 1970s for the major cities and entirely disappeared by the end of the 1980s. Deconcentration of the population has started, and the rural settlements have become net gainers of the restructuring. The crisis of the cities, especially some industrial and/or artificial, planned new towns, is among the reasons moving back to rural areas was a possible reaction of the lower classes to the economic distress (BROWN, D.L. et al. 2005). But mainly, it is 'classical' suburbanisation which was to be observed all over the ECE countries and was responsible for the – relative – deconcentration of the population (KOK, H. and KOVÁCS, Z. 1999; TIMÁR, J. and VÁRADI, M.M. 2001; HIRT, S. 2007a; SŁAWOMIR, K. et al. 2015; OUŘEDNÍČEK, M. et al. 2019). Also, especially after 2010, there was evidence of counter-urbanisation as part of the rural restructuring processes (Šimon, M. 2014; CSURGÓ, B. et al. 2018). However, the deconcentration processes did not affect all rural areas, not even many small towns, where shrinking was typical in Hungary (PIRISI, G. and TRÓCSÁNYI, A. 2014) and occurred in Poland, too (BARTOSIEWICZ, B. et al. 2019). Also, deconcentration did not last too long: in Hungary, the migration balance of Budapest (and the other cities' and towns' aggregated value, too) turned to positive in 2006, and in 2016, it became slightly negative once again – probably affected by the government's specific decision in its new housing policy. Reurbanisation (and gentrification) in the whole region became a spectacular and scientifically well-represented phenomenon, not only in capital cities but in regional centres, too (KOVÁCS, Z. et al. 2013; HAASE, A. et al. 2017; KUREK, S. and WÓJTOWICZ, M. 2018; SŁAWOMIR, K. and WÓJTOWICZ, M. 2018).

Suburbanisation, counter-urbanisation and reurbanisation – processes that represent stages of the Western European urbanisation. Is there anything unique in the local processes at the scale of the urban

system? As we have seen, most of the research focuses ‘explicitly’ on post-socialist urbanisation, selecting the scale of the (large) city and finding a sort of regional peculiarity as a result of multiple transformations (SÝKORA, L. and BOUZAROVSKI, S. 2012). Other approaches emphasise the hybrid nature of ECE-urbanisation (TAUBENBÖCK, H. *et al.* 2019), and some researchers reject the post-socialist context and emphasise the global nature of the post-socialist processes using the uneven development approach (TIMÁR, J. 2007; SMITH, A. and TIMÁR, J. 2010). This debate affects the heart of the modernisation of the region. The adaption of competing approaches of traditional, homogenising modernisation, multiple modernities defined by path dependencies and entangled modernity give various possibilities of different interpretations (WIESE, K. 2012).

If we accept that the East-Central European countries’ modernisation path was somewhat different from the Western European countries and their current urbanisation has some unique features, we may also accept the term post-socialist development and urbanisation. It is unnecessary because all the contemporary phenomena need to be interpreted as a consequence of the era between 1945 and 1989: path dependencies may go deeper into the history of the semi-peripheries of Europe. Formal urbanisation, as we interpret it, also preserved some archaic features. However, formal urbanisation was part of both socialist and post-socialist development. In many ways, the post-socialist formal urbanisation is closely related

to the era of socialist development. Therefore, in this case, we believe the term post-socialist urbanisation is the best framework for the analysis – at least at the stage that followed but not necessarily derived from the urbanisation of the socialist era.

The role of formal urbanisation in the post-socialist era has been affected by the changing demographic conditions, which have not been favourable for urban growth. According to SOBOTKA, T. and FÜRNRKRAZ-PRSKAWETZ, A. (2020), the natural population decrease has become the most important factor in Hungary, Romania, and Poland, and this has been accompanied by significant outmigration, especially after the EU integration in some of these countries. *Table 1* provides more information on this trend.

The comparison of the total and urban population change reveals some differences among the selected countries. In Hungary, the urban population figure grew, even with a 6 percent natural decrease in the population, while in Slovakia, we found a decreasing urban population in a growing population figure. The rate of urbanisation moderately decreased in Poland and Czechia, somewhat more in Slovakia, while Romania was able to realise a minimal and in Hungary a significant increase.

This visible divergence in the countries’ urbanisation (with Czechia, Poland and Slovakia on the one, Hungary and Romania on the other hand) has to be reasoned at the ‘lower end’ of the urban hierarchy: the population change of the large and middle-sized cities is very similar, except

*Table 1. Demographic aspects of post-socialist urbanisation in selected countries, 1990–2020)*

Selected countries	Ratio, 2020/1990			Rate of urbanisation, %	
	Total population	Urban population	Population of cities/towns over 20,000	1990	2020
Czechia	1.01	1.02	0.92	75.2	74.1
Hungary	0.94	1.03	0.95	65.8	71.9
Poland	0.99	0.97	0.80	61.3	60.0
Romania	0.83	0.85	0.97	53.2	54.2
Slovakia	1.03	0.98	0.97	56.5	53.8

*Source:* Based on authors’ calculation. Total population data: Eurostat database, urban population data UN World Urbanization Prospects – definition of urban hereby refers to national classifications. Population of cities/towns over 20,000 – limitation refers to 2020, data taken from citypopulation.de.

Table 2. Formal urbanisation after 1990 in selected ECE countries

Selected countries	Total number of urban settlements		Reclassified settlements between 1991 and 2022		Population of reclassified settlements		
	1990*	2022	Number	Share to urban settlements, %	Total	Share to urban population in 2022, %	Average size
Czechia	434	837	403	48.15	673,258	8.82	1,671
Hungary	164	348	184	52.80	1,211,246	17.63	6,582
Poland	824	979	155	15.83	468,222	2.05	3,020
Romania	259	319	60	18.80	487,196	5.30	8,120
Slovakia	135	141	6	4.25	29,217	1.05	4,869
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,816</i>	<i>2,624</i>	<i>808</i>	<i>30.79</i>	<i>2,869,139</i>	<i>5.83</i>	<i>3,551</i>

\*Including towns promoted in 1990. *Source:* Authors' calculation, based on the national statistical offices' data services. Urban population is calculated as the sum of the population of settlements with urban rank. In the case of Czechia, all types of urban settlements (statutární město / statutory cities, město / towns, městys / market towns) were considered.

Poland. Therefore, looking at the effects of formal urbanisation, it may be visible in the gap between the change in the rate of urbanisation and the conversion in the population of major cities and towns.

Slightly more than three decades after the political transition, more than 800 settlements have been reclassified as towns in the five investigated ECE countries (Table 2). These 808 newest towns had more than 2.87 million inhabitants in 2022, which exceeds 5.8 percent of the total urban population of these countries. Therefore, formal urbanisation became the primary source of growth that replaced the traditional urban population increase after 1990. The case of Hungary is emergent, but there is a significant contribution in Czechia and Romania, too. These nearly three million new urban residents created by formal urbanisation halved the decrease of the urban population in the region. Even though differences between countries are apparent, the average population size of the newest towns varies from 1,671 (CZE) to 8,120 (ROM).

#### *Similarities and differences in the regulation of formal urbanisation*

In addition to the countries analysed above, formal urbanisation can be found in almost

the entire post-socialist region. Its formal nature means that it is defined by a legal framework, which we have tried to explore through an attempt to understand the practice in a dozen countries<sup>6</sup>. Its formal nature means that it is defined by a legal framework, which we have attempted to explore through an attempt to understand the practice in a dozen countries. For reasons of geographical proximity, we also looked at Austria's administrative system and the regulation of urbanisation, which showed markedly different characteristics, thus, confirming the phenomenon's post-socialist nature. The following conclusions can be drawn after studying the formal urbanisation frameworks of the countries under study.

One of the significant demands of the political changes around 1990 was the abolition of central regulation of spatial processes, the demand for territorial decentralisation in general, and the increase of municipal autonomy, which was enacted into law in almost all countries until 1995, sometimes linked to the constitution (e.g., in Hungary, the fundamental rights of settlements are equal), sometimes within the framework of a comprehensive law on

<sup>6</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine.

local governments, in other cases supported by sectoral regulations, but generally with a permissive attitude to make up for the earlier shortfall and with a nomenclature adapted to international urban concepts or the spatial development system in the spirit of EU harmonisation. A common feature is that, although the decision to award the town rank is taken at the highest level (president, parliament, ministries), the right and the possibility to take the initiative rests with the municipality/settlement/community concerned. In some countries studied, the town rank confers privileges (differentiated state support, a share of tax revenue, state institutions, the right to self-government or other authorities) and responsibilities. Still, the scope of these advantages seems to be generally thinning, and the rank is increasingly becoming just a title.

Each of these regulations considers the town a complex phenomenon, so in addition to size, it usually prescribes/assesses development, dynamism, infrastructure, spatial structure and, finally, additional specific characteristics. In Hungary, there is – in theory – no minimum population threshold; in Lithuania 500, in Bulgaria 1,000 for holiday resorts and 3,500 otherwise, in Poland 2,000, in Lithuania and Slovenia 3,000, in Czechia 3,500, in Romania and Slovakia 5,000, while in Croatia, for example, a population of 10,000 is required. Despite this, one can find tiny, small towns in the region<sup>7</sup>, and even some of the newest ones of the post-socialist period (Pálháza, H – 1,048, Kiten, BG – 1,131, Přebuz, CZ – 73, Wiślica, PL – 477, Opatowiec, PL – 313 inhabitants).

Development is usually measured in terms of infrastructure (percentage of

paved roads, sewerage connections, rate of fully comfortable housing units) and less and less in terms of population (education, employment), but it is also usually measured in terms of institutional facilities (hospital, high school, police station, commercial accommodation, etc.). In connection with geographical concepts of the towns and cities, the regulations usually require a spatial organisation function that extends beyond the municipality's boundaries. This can be reflected in the organisation of public administration (regional centres, town centres), institutions (hospitals, decentralised public institutions, etc.) and employment (commuters' share). Tourism, which is difficult to define but often appears as a significant regional role, is subject to differentiated regulation and/or permissive practices in the countries studied. Partly linked to tourism, heritage elements are a link between present practices and the (glorious) historical past. An even stronger connection is the fact that no country takes the title/rank away – not any downgraded municipalities for non-compliance with the law<sup>8</sup> – from settlements that have lost much of their role, economic power and not least their population, so that it is possible that Melnik in Bulgaria, for example, with its 234 inhabitants, is still a (museum) town today. A specific (post-)socialist (or East-Central European) feature is that there are defined exceptions everywhere in the legislation (for historical, political, economic, territorial, geographic, and territorial-political reasons). Still, the criteria are generally so soft or flexible that even with fixed thresholds, the decision-makers on the award of the town rank have sufficient leeway. In this way, formal urbanisation has also become a scene for political games. Although the urban title is worth less and less in practice, not all

<sup>7</sup> Quite small towns (villages with urban status) can be found in many places in Europe, from Germany to Croatia, from the Netherlands to Bulgaria, and from France to Czechia. A fundamental post-socialist feature, however, is that while the less populous towns of the West have sometimes dwindled over the centuries, retaining their former status, their tiny counterparts in the East have recently gained their urban status due to modern developments.

<sup>8</sup> The only example in the region in Romania is Băneasa in Constanța county, which reclaimed its municipal village status 13 years after being reclassified to a town. It held the town rank between 10 April 2004 and 17 January 2019, when it was reclassified (back) following a local referendum held on 11 June 2017.

players realise this, and many municipalities are still making considerable sacrifices to be reclassified.

### *Types of formal urbanisation*

The range of settlements that have been promoted to urban status by formal urbanisation is sufficiently numerous to attempt to identify internal characteristics and structural types. This is attempted below (Table 3).

During the socialist development, modernisation through industrialisation was the primary driving factor for formal urbanisation, however, it was not the only driving factor. The development paths of the newly promoted towns were convergent but not identical. On the other hand, post-socialist formal urbanisation is characterised by a high level of heterogeneity in the settlements involved, and their development is also divergent. The region has a unique position, transitioning from a sort of socialism to a form of global capitalism while integrating into the European Union. It is part of the global core but still considered the periphery of this centre, demonstrating a real semi-peripheric nature. The formal urbanisation of the area reveals delayed development, anachronistic attitudes, vulnerability and resilience amidst deep structural crises, and successful adaptation to global challenges. Despite the complexity and chaos of this process, we have identified

three types of formal urbanisation: a historically determined path, a type resulting from delayed modernisation, and a type of new spatial polarisation.

### *Historical determined formal urbanisation*

In the countries under investigation, modernisation was closely tied to the struggle for a nation-state during the 19<sup>th</sup> and partly 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only a few regions of the investigated area (Hungary and the historical Romanian regions of Oltenia, Muntenia and Moldova) belonged to the same country for the entirety of the century. The frequent changes in government led to ongoing administrative reforms, which sometimes resulted in the revision of urban ranks and privileges. This meant that towns and cities were sometimes stripped of their urban status. For instance, in Poland, many towns were demoted in 1869–1870, widely interpreted as the Imperial Russian authorities' repression of local autonomy (SOKOŁOWSKI, D. 2014). More towns were downgraded in 1934, and some were stripped of their status shortly after World War II. Out of the 828 towns that were once degraded in Poland, 240 were restituted until 2015 (KRZYSZTOFIK, R. and DYMITROW, M. 2015), and 56 have been restituted since then. In other words, our calculations show that over 80 percent of newly promoted Polish towns have a *restitutional background*. Restitution is sometimes part of administrative changes,

Table 3. *Types of post-socialist formal urbanisation*

Indicators	Historical determined	Delayed modernisation	New spatial polarisation
Population change	Low and shrinking	Stagnating or shrinking	Growing, even booming
Functional changes	Lack of general central functions except in some exceptional cases	Conserved functions with growing microregional importance	Improving central functions in particular, but not every aspect
Subtypes	Restitutional towns	Small rural towns	Suburban towns
	Heritage/Image towns	–	Recreation towns
	Ghost towns	–	New company towns

where former amalgamations have been dissolved, and new, independent towns have been promoted. Restitution in Poland has resulted in the smallest new towns in the region: Opatowiec, with its population of 313, can be compared with smaller villages; however, a dozen other small towns population from this category are not reaching the population of 1,000.

Restitution is a well-discussed issue among urban geographers in Poland, and the process is documented in detail. However, in Czechia, there is hardly any analysis available on formal urbanisation and restitutions. Even though historical reasons could also play a significant role in the Czech formal urbanisation. The category of 'městys' (market towns) is unique and seems to be a fitting category. Individual town histories refer in almost every case to the administrative change as the place 'regained its town status'. These places typically have low population figures, even lower than the Polish average. A representative example is Lipnice nad Sázavou, a market town with less than 700 inhabitants in Kraj Vysočina. It has a spectacular castle founded around 1310, and the town rights were granted in 1370. Later, however, it remained a small rural town completely burned down with a castle in 1869 and lost all town rights. Its market town status was regained in 2019 based on historical foundations. In Slovakia, four of the six promoted towns had some historical urban privileges until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it seems it was not the primary factor. In Hungary, restitution has never been an explicit goal in formal urbanisation. However, town candidates must describe in their applications their roles in the administration throughout history. This may refer to the fact that historically, there was a significant cut among the places with urban privileges in 1871/1886. Therefore, there is a relatively high but never specified ratio among the newly promoted towns with an urban past.

Historical paths play a significant role in determining formal urbanisation beyond

just the restitution process. In Hungary, heritage sites such as Visegrád (former royal castles) or Pannonhalma (first abbey founded in 996) have become towns that refer to their historical heritage. In Romania, where restitution was unimportant, regional policy goals determined formal urbanisation, resulting in many towns with *important historical heritage* or past cultural functions, such as Tismana<sup>9</sup> and Săliște. Additionally, recent history can also influence urbanisation. For instance, some villages in the socialist era were industrialised but not formally urbanised. Promotion in these cases happened after the collapse of local heavy industries as a form of compensation or an attempt to break the negative trends. Such towns, mixed in society, spatial structure, and retaining some elements of their bright past, are unique elements of the urban network. Examples of this type include Bélapátfalva (former cement industry), Sajóbáony (chemical industry, explosives) in Hungary, Tułowice (porcelain factory closed, city status granted later in 2018), and Wojkowice (promotion preceded the collapse of mining and cement industry) in Poland.

It is perhaps an exaggeration to call *ghost towns* the settlements experiencing the most intense depopulation, yet they are probably

<sup>9</sup> Tismana represent a specific historic route of urban development. During the Byzantine era, Nicodemus of Tismana built a monastery in the 1300s, which made it an important religious centre. Tismana boasts traditional craftsmanship and a beautiful natural setting, with some of its areas belonging to the Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park and also bordering the Retezat National Park. In 1973, the Minister of Tourism declared Tismana a 'tourism village' to repair the degradation of its status as a climatic locality at the village level. However, until that order, Tismana was not open to foreign tourists due to the Securitate's prohibition against accommodating them in private homes. Nonetheless, the 'tourism village' title enabled slow development, with the preservation of the historical heritage, even during the Ceaușescu era, providing a good foundation for the subsequent development. Tismana gained the town rank in 2004, and now administers ten villages and is home to 1,903 people, with a total population of 5,027 people.

the ones that most clearly mark the dichotomy of glorious past and decaying present. There are no classic ghost towns at the municipal level among the newest towns, but there are some among the new ones. Pripyat is a clear example of the broader region, with a population that once approached 50,000 but has now officially fallen to zero, making the once thriving industrial town an emblematic abandoned city. However, in each of the countries in the region under study, there are sectors of settlements, usually far from the centre, in well-isolated, hidden, defensible areas and where, for example, the former Soviet army has established mini towns (military barracks, airfields, ammunition depots etc.). After the withdrawal of the Soviet military, these formerly artificially kept alive settlements became deserted ghost towns. Perhaps the most typical example of this type is Kłomino in Poland, once home to 5,000 people, now with around 12, according to statistics.

Even though some places have lost and regained old privileges due to turbulent history or late compensation for interrupted urbanisation, the historical type characteristically implies low population figures. Many of these towns do not qualify as a relative concentration of population in rural areas. Moreover, if formal urbanisation is based on historical merits or traditions, new towns usually decline in population. In Poland, between 2011 and 2021, 77 percent of the newest towns that were restituted had a decline in their population. Non-restituted new towns had a small, aggregated population growth, while the restituted ones had a slight aggregated loss.

#### *Formal urbanisation and delayed modernisation*

The second type of formal urbanisation is essentially a later iteration of socialist urbanisation that was extended into the 1990s and beyond. As mentioned, formal urbanisation in the planned economy era was not restricted to new industrial towns.

*Small rural centres* could also undergo urban reclassification in the second half of this period.

After the political changes, the trend towards formal urbanisation continued, but the reasons behind it became more complex. In Hungary and Romania, regional development policies encouraged the establishment of further newest towns, but the justifications for doing so varied. In Romania, the goal was to increase the rate of urbanisation to meet EU standards (BENEDEK, J. 2006). This led to a wave of formal urbanisation in 2004, with more than half of the newest towns in the country being promoted as part of the preparation for European integration (SĂGEATĂ, R. 2010). Hungary had a similar situation, with around one-third of the newest towns belonging to this type. Examples of these new towns include Bátaszék, Enying, Csákvár, and Gyöngyös, which typically serve as the centre of their micro-region, performing various administrative, educational, or retail functions (TRÓCSÁNYI, A. et al. 2018). These places are functionally weak and socially mixed, combining rural and urban attitudes and values (VERESS, N.Cs. 2016). There is still much debate about the level of urbanity and the taxonomy of these official urban places (DÖVÉNYI, Z. 2005).

There is a significant overlap between this type and the historical one above. This is because the restituted towns in Czechia and Poland also serve as rural centres despite having a limited population (KONECKA-SZYDŁOWSKA, B. 2016). Like many larger Hungarian rural centres, the newest towns with restituted backgrounds sometimes have a more (inherited) urban-built character.

These semi-urban places sometimes face the problem of shrinking (BARTOSIEWICZ, B. et al. 2019), and they do not serve even as small-scale centres of population concentration. However, it does not imply that the newest towns classified under this type are entirely unsuccessful. In 2008–2009, the European Union's regional development sources became available in larger quantities,

which helped some towns to improve their spatial position by investing in renewing public institutions and infrastructure and creating a more urban character (VAISHAR, A. et al. 2015; HORECZKI, R. and EGYED, I. 2021). Although these investments were typically insufficient to prevent the towns from shrinking, they did help to stabilise their positions in terms of public services and other tertiary functions. Moreover, these newest towns are the most resilient elements of the rural landscape and can sustain most of the social structures and urban functions, while the surrounding villages are depopulating and becoming isolated, resembling urban mesas in the eroding rural wasteland (MÁTÉ, É. 2017; ALPEK, B.L. et al. 2022).

#### *The urbanisation of the new spatial polarisation*

Restitution based on past development and small rural centres also represents a concept of 20<sup>th</sup>-century urbanisation. The political transformation coincided with globalisation, which fundamentally transformed the framework and possibilities of urbanisation, too. Authors sometimes defined it as a new stage of the urbanisation cycle (ENYEDI, Gy. 2011) and emphasised the dominance of the global processes and globalised core-periphery relations over the post-socialist roots (NAGY, E. 2005; NAGY, G. et al. 2012), furthermore, interpreted these processes based on the theory of uneven development (TIMÁR, J. and VÁRADI, M.M. 2001; SMITH, A. and TIMÁR, J. 2010).

The primary and most spectacular process has been the relative deconcentration of the population around the major cities. *Suburbanisation created new types of urban spaces including the newest towns.* Suburbanisation in the ECE countries did not begin after the political transformation but was somewhat constrained and suppressed during the decades of socialism. As a result, a 'suburban revolution' (STANILOV, K. and SÝKORA, L. 2014) emerged after 1990 and was powerful enough to create numerous suburban places,

leading to the reclassification of some of the newly emerged places – which was only an exceptional phenomenon before 1989.

Like the industrial towns of the 1950s and 60s, suburban types are the most typical elements of the post-socialist era. The population growth resulting from the migration is extreme, at least on the ECE scale. Among the newest towns, for example, Veresegyház in Budapest agglomeration has grown from 6,300 (in 1990) to 20,600 (2021); Gyömrő from 11,500 to 20,500; Halásztelek from 6,200 to 12,000. Králův Dvůr (in the vicinity of Prague) from 5,600 to 10,000; Siechnice (next to Wrocław) from 4,000 (2002) to 10,000 (2021); Popești-Leordeni (Bucharest-South) from 15,000 (2002) to 53,000 (2021). Despite the advance of formal urbanisation and rapid population growth, some settlements have resisted reclassification or have not gained the central government's support; therefore, the largest villages<sup>10</sup> in the study area are primarily over 10,000 inhabitants and dominantly belong to the suburban type. A striking example is Florești (Cluj-Napoca agglomeration), with its population of over 50,000 and a poorly managed mix of urban and rural characteristics.

Although suburban-type newest towns appear in every researched country, in Hungary and Romania are considered the most typical countries for this type of formal urbanisation. This is not necessarily an indication of the intensity of suburbanisation itself in these countries but instead reflects the structure of their suburban space and also their national practices of formal urbanisation. For example, the number of suburban newest towns can also depend on previous reclassification, as only a few settlements in Hungary and Romania had town status before 1990. Additionally, there are well-studied cases where suburbanisation occurs within the city limits and does

<sup>10</sup> Florești in Romania – 52,735 (2021), Kozy in Poland – 13,024 (2017), Solymár in Hungary – 10,951 (2022), Smižany in Slovakia – 8,838 (2021), Bystrčice in Czechia – 5,291 habitants (2023).

not result in suburban towns (KUBEŠ, J. and NOVÁČEK, A. 2019; SZMYTKIE, R. 2021; VASÁRUS, G.L. and LENNERT, J. 2022). It is important to note that suburban areas are not limited to the capitals but can also be found in less complex agglomerations around second-tier cities, such as Świątniki Górne next to Kraków, Modřice South of Brno, or Kozármisleny next to Pécs.

Several of the latest suburban towns have relatively diminutive, traditional rural cores, with the former villages nearly vanishing into the vast expanse of new residential areas. Conversely, some towns possessed or still possess small urban centres before their suburbanisation growth. Although these communities experience growth, success and affluence theoretically, they often encounter difficulties rectifying their unbalanced development, addressing environmental issues (KOVÁCS, Z. et al. 2020), enhancing their infrastructural capabilities, and improving their urban functions.

The second typical form of the urbanisation of the new polarisation involves the development of recreational functions. *Recreation and tourism* have had a complex role in urbanisation, as tourist attractions and recreational opportunities in rural areas can drive economic growth and create employment (LEŚNIEWSKA-NAPIERAŁA, K. and NAPIERAŁA, T. 2017). This can help make tourism-affected communities more resilient to demographic decline. However, this does not necessarily mean that these holiday resorts become the subject of intense population concentration due to rural-to-urban migration. Property prices in these towns are often high, indicating a permanent demand from urban residents. The trend typically begins with summer or second homes (HOOGENDOORN, G. and VISSER, J. 2010; LEETMAA, K. et al. 2012), followed by permanent migration (MAKOWSKA-ISKIERKA, M. 2015) and gentrification of these towns (DONALDSON, R. 2009). However, the incoming population is usually much older than the traditional demographic composition. This type of urbanisation,

which places the focus on the well-being of citizens, seems to be an emerging trend in overall small-town development (JEŽEK, J. 2011; KWIATEK-SOŁTYS, A. and MAINET, H. 2014; FERTNER, C. et al. 2015; MAJEWSKA, A. et al. 2022). The relative population growth might have been quick after the transition, but these towns are still small (Harkány with a population of 5,060; and Zalakaros 2,234 in Hungary, Krynica Morska 1,183 in Poland; Geoagiu 5,000 in Romania; Lázně Toušeň 1,400 in Czechia) – partly, because larger spa towns gained urban rank before 1990, especially in Czechia.

Spa towns are great examples of in situ urbanisation from three different perspectives. Firstly, tourists and seasonal residents demand services not usually available in smaller settlements, such as middle-sized supermarkets, specialised health and beauty services, real estate agencies, and better transport accessibility. Even though these services may be driven by seasonal demand, they are also available in the winter and serve permanent residents. Secondly, local governments invest in physical upgrades to improve the appearance of towns and create new public spaces and parks, which are visible signs of urbanisation or the desired urban image. Thirdly, the involvement of local citizens in the tourism industry as employees or entrepreneurs accelerates the spread of urban habits and lifestyles, leading to improvements in the private built environment, language skills, business experiences, and personal contacts with foreigners. Spa towns used to be pioneers of the private economy during the socialist era and have remained outposts of urbanisation in rural areas even after the transition.

The reindustrialisation of the region characterizes the third sub-type. This process of spatial restructuring has been a significant part of the region's economic transformation (GORZELAK, G. 1996), resulting in the emergence of new types of core-periphery relations (PAVLÍNEK, P. 2004; PÉNZES, J. 2013). During the reindustrialisation

process that began in the mid-1990s, some places emerged as winners of this structural change. While the tertiary sector dominates significant cities, *these newest towns gained new functions as industrial hubs* (NAGY, Cs. et al. 2020), and a few even have become part of the most industrialised settlements. The sudden increase in economic activity and employment, therefore increased tax revenues, accompanied by essential infrastructure development, has brought rapid and specific modernisation to these places. There is a significant overlap between the suburban newest towns and the industrial ones, with many of the suburban towns becoming economic centres, primarily in transport and logistics, sometimes in the assembly industry. A notable example is the town of Göd, Northeast of Budapest, which gained town rank in 1999 and currently hosts one of the largest plants in Hungary's rapidly expanding EV battery industry.

Location, i.e., proximity to large cities or dynamic economic regions and access to the highway network and/or regional airports, is a significant factor contributing to this development type's success. In Hungary, examples of such successful types include Újhartyán and Jánossomorja; in Romania, Ghimbav (near Braşov) and Tăuții-Măgherauş (near Baie Mare); and in Poland, Rzgów (near Łódz). Additionally, smaller-scale examples like Nesvady (near Nitra) in Slovakia demonstrate this type's effectiveness. Apart from location, successfully mobilising local resources and endogenous social capital has also played a crucial role in the economic development of specific areas, such as Bóly in South-Western Hungary (HORECZKI, R. 2014).

Industrial newest towns experience a gradual increase in population and undergo changes in the labour market. In the past, residents used to commute to larger cities for industrial jobs, but now, these towns attract not only commuters but also temporary residents. As a result, these towns face the challenge of integrating newcomers into their closed society shortly. This issue is

not limited to people from different regions but also from distant countries since the domestic labour market is fully utilised due to well-known demographic trends.

## Discussion

This paper attempts to analyse formal urbanisation as an integral component of post-socialist urbanisation. By highlighting certain aspects of pre-1989 development, we argue that formal urbanisation has deep roots in the region's history. Due to a delayed economic and social progression and a semi-peripheral position in Europe, modernisation has been (and may still be) imperative for the countries between the Baltic and the Black Sea. Historical events have interrupted and slowed urbanisation, and in some cases (in Poland), it even reversed. Central governments have used formal urbanisation as a tool to regulate and fine-tune spatial processes in their efforts to modernise<sup>11</sup>. The process of socialist urbanisation was both overdue and forced, and these characteristics are reflected in formal urbanisation as well. In some cases, particularly in Hungary, formal urbanisation was a *subsequent development*, where awarding the urban rank was a late recognition of urban development. In the post-socialist period, this appeared in the form of the restitutive type. However, in the socialist era, *concurrent* and *pre-emptive* approaches also appeared, and they were fulfilled in the post-socialist decades. The concurrent formal urbanisation closely follows the trends

<sup>11</sup>The semi-peripheral nature of formal urbanisation is confirmed by the fact that trends in Portugal are very similar to those in Romania and Hungary. Portugal, which is easily comparable in size and development to Hungary, has 581 municipalities with urban status, of which nearly 300 were granted the rank after accession to the EC, while until then the process was relatively modest. The Portuguese urban reclassification legislation is also very similar to the practice in the countries investigated in that it includes the freedom of the final decision-maker and the possibility of flexible interpretation and exceptions.

of general urbanisation, which involves population, economic growth, and societal transformation. The types connected with the new spatial polarisation could be interpreted as recognising current processes among the post-socialist models. In this case, gaining the town rank is both a recognition of recent development and a designation of the further path. Pre-emptive action spans the period before and after the changes of 1990, and in both eras, it is seen by the governments as an opportunity for development. Before 1990, it meant a spatial focus for domestic socialist development objectives, while after the changes of 1990, it has opened the way for channelling EU funds, mainly in Romania and Hungary.

From a central perspective, both subsequent and concurrent formal urbanisation represent minimal interventions in spatial development, as they only serve to reinforce and recognise existing processes. However, political choices regarding selecting potential new towns can be instrumental in influencing the central government's approach to urbanisation. This involves deciding which communities should be promoted and supported and which should not. The practice in Eastern Europe shows that even if there are strong professional governmental ideas about the role and importance of urbanisation, these are often overridden by current political processes, which makes it very difficult for the researcher to explore the essence of urbanisation policies.

Pre-emptive formal urbanisation paves the way for a more substantial intervention in spatial development. It was a common practice in the era of socialist new towns and has recently been found useful as a tool for development, too. In this case, the *newly acquired status itself should create urbanity*. Promoting rural communities with limited central functions does not recognise successful development but rather the lack of it. *It does not simply support overall urbanisation, but sometimes the formal changes are the only visible signs of it.*

The creation of the newest towns, even if it is unofficially suspended in Hungary, cannot come to an end and perhaps remains part of political discussion in the future, too. Besides the antagonistic interests of the stakeholders involved in the process, it is also a theoretical issue, which makes socialist and post-socialist formal urbanisation different. During the decades of socialist urbanisation, there was a significant and explicit difference between urban and rural spaces. The post-socialist transformation resulted in *deconcentration of the urbanity* in all aspects, significantly washing out sharp differences, and smoothing the once definite step between urban and rural spaces into a gentle slope.

Formal urbanisation has a connection with the urban deconcentration process through suburbanisation and peri-urbanisation. The polycentric development of post-suburban spaces, including emerging edge cities, is part of the suburbanisation process (SZABÓ, T. et al. 2014; KOVÁCS, Z. et al. 2019). As KUBEŠ and OUŘEDNÍČEK highlighted, suburbs in ECE countries usually have a mixed character and could be described as “village-core suburbs” (KUBEŠ, J. and OUŘEDNÍČEK, M. 2022). In these places, formal urbanisation speeds up certain places' transformation into semi-suburban or suburban small towns. Formal urbanisation also leads to the formation of peri-urban spaces, which FOLLMANN interprets as a transitional category or rural-urban transition zone (FOLLMANN, A. 2022). Although these newly urbanised towns may not be able to concentrate enough population to avoid their shrinking, they are *catalysts of the social transformation of rural spaces* (HALAMSKA, M. and STANNY, M. 2021; HEFFNER, K. and TWARDZIK, M. 2022), and they spread the urban habitus (JÓVÉR, V. 2023).

When we evaluate formal urbanisation as a *spatial development tool*, we can observe that it has become a less effective intervention. Formal urbanisation played a crucial role in counterbalancing the overall decline of towns during the transition period and was responsible for the significant growth of the urban population, particularly in Hungary and

Romania. Earlier implementations of formal urbanisation also helped to slow down the outmigration from small towns and perhaps contributed to reducing the concentration of population in major urban regions, although it is challenging to prove this hypothesis. Upon reflecting on the uncertain effects on regional development, it is necessary to reconsider two further factors when seeking the true meaning of formal urbanisation.

Firstly, from the perspective of central governments, formal urbanisation may not be considered a powerful, but rather *a cost-effective tool in regional policy*. Upgrading villages to towns does not usually impose a significant financial burden on them (KARSAI, V. and TRÓCSÁNYI, A. 2019). It is important to note that formal urbanisation, in normal circumstances, could serve as a tool for spatial development. Still, it should not be relied upon as the sole solution, as it happened in some instances.

Secondly, formal urbanisation has been *a significant field of local initiatives*, even during the era of centralisation, beyond the goals and possibilities of central governments. After 1990, formal urbanisation accelerated significantly because local governments were provided more political freedom. This interpretation suggests that formal urbanisation is a bottom-up process, and the right question to ask is not 'Why does the country need more and more towns?' but 'Why do local communities initiate an often-unsuccessful process of assessing their development at a national level through the urban reclassification process?' As governments shifted their attitudes from subsequent to concurrent and pre-emptive urbanisation, the role of local communities also changed from passive to active and later to proactive approaches.

Our preliminary research shows that local communities do not always see a significant net financial gain after promotional efforts. While individual political ambitions may sometimes be a factor, the popularity of achieving town rank suggests more profound influences at play. It is possible that collective memories from the socialist era,

when town rank could impact its finances and development, as well as historical experiences with proximity to power, may contribute to these attitudes. Achieving town rank places communities on the map, secures them a seat at the table with government representatives, and opens up new avenues for public investment. By maintaining close ties with the central government, these communities in East-Central Europe can increase their resilience.

## Conclusions

Urbanisation in East-Central Europe was once delayed, resulting in a less urbanised spatial structure and society than Western Europe's benchmarks. This relative lack of urban centres is linked to overall weaknesses in spatial development, which persisted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The artificial acceleration of urbanisation was a tool used in central planning and spatial policies during both the socialist and post-socialist eras. Formal urbanisation, which involves the reclassification of settlements and their promotion to towns, can be interpreted as a kind of in situ urbanisation that leads to an increase in the urban population without migration or natural growth. Although not exclusively, this phenomenon is typically seen in East-Central Europe and carries some anachronism. During the planned economies era, formal urbanisation was strictly controlled by the state and was mostly limited to the rise of socialist new towns in most countries. After the transformation of 1989/1990, formal urbanisation was liberalised and gained a different focus, creating many more newest towns than expected.

Formal urbanisation became the primary driving factor of urban population growth in Romania and Hungary due to a decrease in overall population or a slow increase in other countries, as well as the emergence of suburbanisation, which caused larger cities to decline. In the five studied countries, over 2.87 million people and 800 settlements

were involved in this process, resulting in a 30 percent increase in the number of urban settlements. This means formal urbanisation has had an even more significant impact on the region than during the socialist era, leaving a lasting mark.

Our research has discovered several common factors in the reclassification process, such as local initiatives, disparities between principles and practices, and varying levels of control from regional and national actors. Furthermore, we have identified characteristic types of formal urbanisation through qualitative analysis of motives, goals, and parameters. These types reflect different stages and challenges of urbanisation in the region. We believe promoting so-called restitutional towns, heritage, or image towns is a post-fact correction of the former urbanisation process. This is because many of the newest towns are historically determined. In the second type of delayed modernisation, reclassification tries to extend and complete the efforts of spatial policies of the planning economy based on the development of central places. Finally, new spatial polarisation is evident in formal urbanisation through the reclassification of certain places that are increasingly connected to new economic structures.

In recent times, there has been a shift in the approach towards formal urbanisation. Previously, the central government regulated and controlled it as part of the overall spatial policy. However, now, it is more locally governed and tends to precede or replace direct spatial policy. Although the effectiveness of the entire formal urbanisation process can be debated, its significance is more prominent at the local than at the national level.

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