

Changing peripheralities and centralities in Central and Eastern Europe Editorial

Változó perifériák és centrumok Közép- és Kelet-Európában Szerkesztői előszó

ERIKA NAGY, GÁBOR LUX, JUDIT TIMÁR

Erika NAGY: senior research fellow, Institute for Regional Studies, Centre for Economic and Regional Studies; Szabó Dezső u. 42., H-5600 Békéscsaba, Hungary; nagy.erika@krtk.hu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9706-4841>

Gábor LUX: senior research fellow, Institute for Regional Studies, Centre for Economic and Regional Studies; Papnövelde u. 22., H-7621 Pécs, Hungary; gabor.lux@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0948-3718>

Judit TIMÁR: senior research fellow, Institute for Regional Studies, Centre for Economic and Regional Studies; Szabó Dezső u. 42., H-5600 Békéscsaba, Hungary; timar.judit@krtk.hu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5275-6905>

NAGY Erika: tudományos főmunkatárs, Közgazdaság- és Regionális Tudományi Kutatóközpont, Regionális Kutatások Intézete; 5600 Békéscsaba, Szabó Dezső u. 42.; nagy.erika@krtk.hu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9706-4841>

LUX Gábor: tudományos főmunkatárs, Közgazdaság- és Regionális Tudományi Kutatóközpont, Regionális Kutatások Intézete; 7621 Pécs, Papnövelde u. 22.; gabor.lux@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0948-3718>

TIMÁR Judit: tudományos főmunkatárs, Közgazdaság- és Regionális Tudományi Kutatóközpont, Regionális Kutatások Intézete; 5600 Békéscsaba, Szabó Dezső u. 42.; timar.judit@krtk.hu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5275-6905>

East and Central European spaces and places had been subjects to academic inquiry as scenes of radical structural changes after the collapse of state socialism and of multiple processes of unfolding peripheralisation and uneven development up until the early 2000s. In the past decade, the unfolding crises of finance, economy, environment, political institutions, households and subjectivities have repositioned the region in global flows and international political arenas, and entailed new centralities and peripheralities within CEE. Many consequences of past and current crises, such as changing state agency, (re)emerging social polarities, and rallying political extremes in the European (semi)peripheries have been discussed widely and analysed in depth (see e.g. Hadjimichalis 2017; Scheiring 2019; Förtner, Belina, Naumann 2021). Nevertheless, scholars are still catching up to grasp the complexity of structural changes and multiple agencies in the current stage of capitalism and reconceptualise key terms for researching spatial dynamics such as uneven development, spatial justice, peripherality/centrality, polarity, rurality, etc. in the (semi)periphery and beyond (see e.g. Peck 2016; Rodriguez-Pose 2018; Görmar et



al. 2019; Benedek, Ursu, Varvari 2022; Torre 2022). We consider the eastern semi-periphery of Europe as a source of knowledge and alternative definitions for which, the journal 'Space and Society' could be a forum – giving stimuli also to the debates at the 60th ERSA Conference in Pécs.

This special issue contributes to ongoing debates by adopting a specific thematic and (a related) epistemological focus. (1) We aim to exhibit and discuss the diversity of the European semi-periphery, the structural (narrative, institutional and material) constraints they face and the multiplicity of agencies that reflect upon/counteract those limits in a dependent and vulnerable position that emerged more explicit and harsh in times of external shocks. We do so to enrich our knowledge on the complexity of the socio-spatial transformations in the eastern semi-periphery of Europe (CEE) and beyond, in spaces that are undertheorized yet possess transformative power and could be sources of understanding and developing new concepts of spatial dynamics (Boatča 2006; Willett, Lang 2018). (2) Accordingly, this special issue – and the journal 'Space and Society' – is meant to be a forum of scholars researching and writing about CEE from different social contexts and positionalities. We believe that confronting various understandings and translations of powerful concepts that are stemming from different ontological contexts and positions in academia should stimulate two powerful processes. (i) Unpacking theories and concepts of socio-spatial dynamics by relating them to the realities of the semi-periphery could allow us to define the limits of actual frameworks of our thinking and develop new heterodox – interdisciplinary, theoretically and spatially integrative – projects for reconceptualising spatial research (see also Peck 2016 on this issue). (ii) Moreover, by discussing key terms critically, the powerful narratives guiding European and national development policies could be scrutinised and challenged to struggle against the destructive social and environmental consequences and the long-term threats of regional economic trajectories unfolded in CEE after the transition, such as lock-in, vulnerability to macro-scale shocks, external agents' strategies, and the multiplicity of socio-spatial polarisation processes (see also Hadjimichalis, Hudson 2014; Gál, Lux 2022).

The papers published in this volume are arranged thematically around strategies, relations and practices of powerful groups of actors shaping socio-spatial change such as the state, various fractions and agents of capital, the media, the local society and the natural environment. Such agencies are discussed with varying scalar focus, i.e. local (from small towns to metropolitan regions), regional/subnational, national and European, yet relationally, highlighting how CEE spaces are shaped by interlinked strategies and practices of institutions, firms and networks of production and political power.

The first paper, authored by *André Torre* (2022), takes a broad view on the growth opportunities of peripheries through the lens of smart development. After multiple generations of EU policies have failed to meaningfully reduce the gap between developed and lagging regions, questions arise about the future and

place of peripheries. Widening gaps and growing discontent – blithely dismissed as ‘populism’ and political extremism – suggest that development policies tailored for the needs and capabilities of core regions do not reach, or do not significantly help the peripheries, while seemingly neutral policy measures by central governments have a disproportionately negative impact on Europe’s ‘forgotten places’. In his investigation of alternate solutions, Torre highlights the importance of locally embedded non-technological innovation, which often falls outside the purview of elite policy consensus, but often has the ability to reinvigorate localities through local mobilisation and capacity-building. This is, in a sense, a hopeful message: where uniform development recipes cannot reach, local ingenuity and social ties can achieve much if fostered and allowed to flourish – there are, in fact, development practices which can be of help. A return to the EU’s ‘forgotten’ principle, of subsidiarity, lies at the heart of this agenda.

James W. Scott (2022) places the concept of borderland society in focus as an ontological context that is a source of understanding socio-spatial dynamics and its multiple drivers. Accordingly, border regions are considered as ‘multilocal socio-political arenas’ linking and confronting various agents’ strategies and practices that allow scholars to relate power relations – that manifest in political discourses and institutional arrangements at various scales – to everyday social practices in border regions. In this vein, the author gives a historical overview of Hungarian border studies as reflections of border regimes, the geopolitical position of the country, and the changing social practices in relation to national borders. By doing so, he also highlights how the ‘border society’ as the lived reality for many Hungarians and as an analytical lens for Hungarian scholars entailed conceptual diversity, engagement with critical theories, unfolding interdisciplinarity, and finally, challenging earlier hegemonic narratives in national and European discourses. This overview also gives an insight how/why the accumulation of knowledge on national borders repositioned Hungarian scholarship in border (thus, spatial) studies by “uncovering relationships between domestic development challenges, shifting geographical notions of regionness, the development of regional neighbourhood and Hungary’s politics of borders” (Scott 2022, 42.).

József Benedek, Cosmina-Daniela Ursu and Ștefana Varvari (2022) establish a link between the ontology of spatial inequalities and peripheralisation, a particularly strong trend in CEE, with epistemological issues aimed to facilitate the grasping of the spatial planning ideas and efficiency of the state. Their study focuses on the Romanian revival and rethinking as well as the applicability of the growth pole concept originally developed in France and bearing relevance to the centre-periphery relationship. Using quantitative methods, their aim was to provide a critical analysis of the spatial impacts of growth pole investments in the metropolitan areas of the seven Romanian growth poles. By studying two scales of spatial changes, they revealed a differentiated socio-spatial dynamics of the metropolitan areas, and an intra-metropolitan deconcentration process. The

authors concluded that the growth pole as a spatial planning tool failed to reduce inequalities in Romania even though the challenges of uneven development are growing and the state placed the traditional economic view of growth pole policy in a broader perspective. In their opinion, the unfolding multiple crisis can be supplemented by the crisis of spatial planning.

Zoltán Gál and Gábor Lux (2022) place state-capital relations in the focus which they discuss in the context of post-socialist neoliberal model of economic transition. They interrogate the investment policies in CEE that entailed highly dependent relations to core (capital-exporting) economies and a growing vulnerability of economic trajectories unfolded from the late 1990s to external shocks and strategies. In this vein they give a critical account of investment policies that are blind to structural weakness and imbalanced power relations of CEE as an industrial periphery. Nevertheless, the authors also propose a strategic turn in CEE economic policies envisaging their limits yet also their scope to promote trajectories that are more resilient to crises and has potentials for to rebalance power relations. The new trajectories could rest on (i) making use of FDI-led path through incremental development of capacities and capabilities of local/regional actors; (ii) the rise of the CEE version of the development state, focusing on selected agents and sectors of the national economy to support stability and boost innovation potentials; (iii) enhancing domestic SMEs' potentials by improving access to resources (e.g. financial, relational and knowledge) and their capacity building. To take this turn, the authors propose a shift from the currently hegemonic narrative of state-capital relations (FDI/industrial policies) as a prerequisite to changing regional paths.

Dániel Kuttor's (2022) contribution contextualises Chinese capital investments in CEE space on the example of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (BAZ) county, a transforming Old Industrial Region in Hungary. The investigation focuses on how Chinese capital has emerged as a special form of East Asian FDI, considering its position within the massive industrialisation of China, and its rise as the leading global industrial producer. In this respect, Chinese outward FDI can be seen as an important element of the country's state-led development efforts, and a crucial pillar of its 'Go Global' strategy and 'Belt and Road Initiative' to modernise and diversify its export-based branches while maintaining its global market positions. The strategic considerations behind similar investment projects are investigated in BAZ county, where an ecosystem of investment deals was helped along not just by Chinese expansion, but Hungary's efforts to diversify its export markets towards East Asia ('Eastern Opening'), and reduce its unilateral dependency on the European Union (c.f. György 2017). In the county's previously crisis-struck heavy industrial complexes, a small number of large-scale strategic investments were followed by a range of smaller projects, helped along by the emerging Chinese-Hungarian policy nexus, as well as mergers and acquisitions on behalf of Chinese capital. The paper suggests this concentration has led to a

regional clustering of industrial activities, while serving as a bridgehead for further East Asian investment in the region and broader CEE.

Ernő Molnár, Feyruz Ahlam Saidi and Katalin Szabó (2022) focus on the agency of productive capital in peripheral spaces. Relying on the concept of global production networks (GPNs) and ongoing discourses on their multiple impacts on spatial dynamics, the authors scrutinise the potentials and limits of strategic coupling in regions which lack institutional capacities and suffer from population loss. They reveal how the financial/economic crisis has raised the appreciation of low-cost spaces by lead firms and how such strategies met the priorities of national economic policies targeting macro-scale balance by supporting FDI, and how this entailed a dependent/cost-driven regional embedding of GPNs. The analysis also shed light on how the shrinking power of local agents – primarily, the centralisation of public services and development policy – hinder upgrading dynamics and potentials for changing a region’s position within the production network, particularly in spaces hit by outward migration and institutional thinness. However, the authors also show that regional relational capital and still-existing capacities in peripheral regions are mobilised effectively to improve labour and infrastructural capacities and support coupling processes. Through the in-depth analysis of the embedding of a small town in GPNs, the authors not only de-centre the dominant spatial focus of GPN literature, but illuminate the risks of over-centralisation in and the potentials of regionally/locally embedded networks of various agents that could be source of stability in non-core spaces. The implicit message on decentralisation complement and resonate with Gál and Lux’s conclusions on the risks and sustainability of current economic development policies in CEE.

Centre–periphery relationships do not simply manifest in material dimensions: they permeate the spheres of symbolic power and intangibles, the imaginaries through which societies are often seen and ordered. In their contribution, *Jan Sucháček and Jaroslav Urminský (2022)* scrutinise how uneven mass media coverage reinscribes spatial differences on the national consciousness, and reinforces existing images about selected regions. This study, which investigates national TV coverage on the example of Czechia, showcases how the highly selective agenda-setting and selection bias of central actors affects the peripheries, extending to a variety of areas. These centre–periphery relationships, not dissimilar to how CEE as a whole has often been portrayed from the global core (c.f. Domański 2004; Kuus 2004), subject localities to central agenda-setting, while often obscuring real regional economic and social patterns behind pre-constructed and highly selective media narratives. To quote the authors, “superficial and simplified images of reality may arise” (Sucháček, Urminský 2022, 161.), to the detriment of a more rich, differentiated reality.

Studying urbanisation, suburbanisation and accelerated urban sprawl helps understand changes in the interconnection between centralities and

peripherality in Central and Eastern Europe during the current crisis. The paper by *Tamás Hardi* puts a perspective on these multiagent-shaped spatial processes that helps to underscore their potential impacts including, in particular, those on the natural environment. Its objective is to identify the differences in and similarities of urbanisation trends in part of the post-socialist region by studying extension of non-water-permeable, i.e. impervious surfaces (as built-up areas) and the changes in the numbers of population. It compares three countries (Slovakia, Hungary and Romania), their respective capital cities, the agglomerations of the regional centres and their rural areas, as well as the scenes of four case studies (Győr, Kecskemét, Nitra and Cluj-Napoca). Diversity in certain trends of urbanisation/urban sprawl in the CEE region studied is clearly identifiable, but at the same time the growth of the investigated built-up areas is uniformly much faster than that of the number of their population, and the gap between them has been widening. This poses a major challenge to regional policy and spatial planning.

Finally, with the help of interviews with two of our authors, we tried to support the conceptual pillars of this thematic issue from the perspective of subjectivity.

Relying on the experience gained from intersecting border and regional studies, *James W. Scott* with a strong commitment to Centre for Economic and Regional Studies (CERS) that issues the journal ‘Space and Society’ seeking to facilitate international opening thinks that while familiarity with the conditioning role of the state is still indispensable, “interesting work remains to be done in linking borders and regions with everyday border-making practices” (Scott in Balogh, Rácz 2022, 202.). In his opinion, the presence, in terms of both weight and activity, of the Hungarian and CEE border research community has been increasing in the European Border Studies Community, which has to carry out internationally comparative research on an ongoing basis.

In order to facilitate international knowledge exchange, CERS provides location (Pécs) for the ERSA Congress, which is another motif for publishing this thematic issue. The interview with *André Torre* (Páger 2022), president of the ERSA, as if linked to the foregoing (i.e. to the issue of ‘everyday practices’), highlights the importance of the local scale while addressing the research topics, approaches and methods of regional science. He insists that existence of a multidisciplinary environment and an inclusive approach is indispensable for this. We hope that the topics and problems in a CEE context raised by regional science and addressed in this thematic issue will inspire a discussion with an approach like this.

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