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Spatial dimensions of the foreign resident population in small towns in Hungary

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Abstract

In line with the primary objectives of the journal, which seeks to present significant economic and socio-spatial issues in various types of urban areas, this study addresses a specific category of settlements: the small towns of Hungary. The analysis of rural areas and their small town centres is particularly crucial, as the overwhelming majority of Hungarian settlements has less than 30,000 inhabitants as indicated by the most recent census.

The societies of these small urban areas are strongly affected by general demographic and social trends including extremely negative demographic dynamics (Horeczki et al. 2025), ageing induced by outmigration (Pirisi, Máté 2014), the rise of ethnic segregation (Váradi, Virág 2014), low educational attainment, increasing prevalence of social pathologies such as alcoholism and mental illness, all of which contribute to an overall deterioration in quality of life (Fehér, Virág 2014). At the same time recent years have also witnessed a resurgence in the attractiveness of small towns as residential destinations, driven not only by internal migration but also by international (and return) migration flows, a trend mainly due to COVID-19 pandemic and by geopolitical security risks.

The present paper pursues two primary objectives 1) to assess the proportion and spatial distribution of the foreign-born residents in Hungary's small towns, and 2) to explore whether these changes generate tensions or resilience within the social fabric of these

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communities. While previous research has delineated clear spatial patterns in the distribution of foreign residents within the Hungarian settlement network (Lados-Brucker 2023), the specific role of small towns in this context remains unexplored. Moreover, small-town societies typically exhibit rural characteristics, making it particularly relevant to investigate how newcomers – both international migrants and returnees – into these communities can integrate, and whether historical connections influence settlement choices, as these factors may be critical for long-term population retention.

The research is based on an analysis of statistical data on registered foreign citizens in Hungary and complemented by national census data for the period 2001–2022.

Keywords: small town, foreign resident, population, migration, Hungary

Absztrakt

A folyóirat fő célkitűzésének megfelelően, amely a különböző típusú városi területek jelentős gazdasági és térbeli-társadalmi kérdéseinek bemutatására irányul, jelen tanulmányunkban egy adott településkategóriára, Magyarország kisvárosaira összpontosítunk. A vidéki térségek és azok központjaként működő kisvárosok elemzése különösen kurrens téma, mivel a legutóbbi népszámlálás szerint Magyarország legtöbb településének lakossága 30 000 fő alá csökkent. Ezeknek a kisvárosi társadalmat különösen érintik az általánosnak tekinthető tendenciák: a rendkívül negatív demográfiai dinamika (Horeczki et al. 2025), a kivándorlás miatti elöregedés (Pirisi, Máté 2014), az etnikai szegregáció megjelenése (Váradi, Virág 2014), az alacsony iskolázottság, az alkoholizmus és a mentális betegségek növekvő aránya, valamint az életminőség romlása (Fehér, Virág 2014). Ezen túlmenően a kisvárosok népszerűsége újra fellendülőben, mint lakóhely, nemcsak a belföldi migráció, hanem a külföldi (és visszatérő) migráció szempontjából is, főként a COVID és a biztonságpolitikai kérdések miatt.

A tanulmány fő célja annak bemutatása, hogy a kisvárosokban élő külföldi lakosság aránya és térbeli eloszlása milyen képet mutat, és hogy ez miként jelenik meg a társadalmi szerkezetben. A kisvárosi társadalmak jellemzően vidéki jellegűek, ezért fontos megvizsgálni, hogy a be- vagy visszaköltözők hogyan tudnak integrálódni, milyen (esetleg történelmi) okok vezetnek a településre költözésre.

Kulcsszavak: kisváros, külföldi állampolgár, vándorlás, Magyarország

Small town characteristics in Central-Europe

Almost one-third of the total population of Central-Europe lives in small and medium-sized towns (Eurostat 2024). Despite their demographic significance, the role of these settlement categories in regional development processes is typically underestimated (Steinführer et al. 2016; Vaishar 2004), even though small towns constitute crucial elements of the settlement hierarchy, particularly in predominantly rural areas (Horeczki, Egyed 2021; Pirisi, Trócsányi 2011). This marginalisation is well reflected in spatial research and policies that primarily focus on the metropolitan centres and larger cities while smaller towns receive considerably less attention (Grossmann, Mallach 2021; Servillo et al. 2014; Servillo, Atkinson, Hamdouch 2017).

Central Europe exhibits a hybrid pattern of urbanization: a coexistence of convergence processes towards Western European models and distinctive regional development trajectories shaped by path dependency, some of which extend back to the pre-socialist era (Taubenböck et al. 2019). Within this macro-region, where rural and semi-urban spatial categories predominate, small towns represent the most accessible and distinctive tier of the urban network (Burdack, Knappe 2007; Konecka et al. 2015; Trócsányi et al. 2018; Vaishar, Zapletalová 2009). However, their relative economic weakness, and limited resource capacities constitute major constraints on regional convergence (Bartosiewicz et al. 2019; Cole, Svidroňová 2021; Horeczki 2021; Molnár 2015).

Sociological studies on small towns conceptualise these settlements not solely as physical entities, but also as socio-cultural units, shaped by patterns of human interaction and service functions (Park 1925; Sombart 1924; Mumford 1961). In this regard, the importance of the human factor is paramount, particularly the capacity of small towns to retain population (Csatári 1986; Tóth 1982). Beyond accessing to basic functions, basic services – education, healthcare, public safety, leisure, shopping – in small towns, it is the local people who are the key factors of shaping a settlement into a town. Maintaining and enhancing inter-personal relationships is an additional strength of rural areas (Fábián 2013). However, all their positive assets, (underutilised resources, green areas, cultural heritage, labour potential, etc.) still present in them today, need also to be kept in mind. In this specific macro-region, where rural and intermediate spatial categories are dominating, small towns constitute the most accessible and distinctive tier of the urban network.

The relative importance of small towns in Central Europe is further underscored by two structural features: low spatial mobility and the comparative weakness of the metropolitan network *vis-à-vis* Western Europe. Small towns therefore perform multiple roles: as central places, as employment hubs, primarily for local residents and returning migrants, and as custodians of cultural heritage. Yet, their inherent vulnerabilities and constrained economic power also act against their closing up. Strengthening functional links between towns and villages is increasingly necessary, as both settlement types are now functional and integrated components of metropolitan agglomerations. A more coherent reorganisation of the development of the urban network is necessary in light of post-socialist transformations and shifting border dynamics. Reconceptualising urban networks could represent a strategic response to persistent territorial disparities, while revisiting past territorial policies is essential to foster innovation in economic restructuring, demographic renewal, and governance.

In terms of territorial growth, several new spatial drivers are likely to shape small-town trajectories: the expansion of tertiary sectors, the increasing number of high-prestige occupations (including those employing many foreign workers), the rise of knowledge-based industries, the spread of digitalisation, and the emerging trends in the labour market due to COVID-19 pandemic, such as teleworking, digital nomads and new types of work space (Bálint, Horeczki, Lux 2024; Danko et al. 2024; Lőrinc, Káposzta 2024b). These dynamic processes may enhance the attractiveness of small towns for return migrants and lifestyle movers, potentially generating multiplier effects on regional development trajectories – albeit with the risk of reinforcing existing socio-spatial inequalities.

The liveability and social sensitivity of rural areas were repeatedly emphasized during the pandemic and in the context of current security risks (Horeczki 2022). Local communities demonstrated considerable adaptive capacity in earlier crises and in this situation, they provided essential support in areas, such as local food supply, healthcare assistance and the transition to digital education (Horeczki 2023). All these assets contributed to population retention in small towns and even to the attraction of new residents. Nevertheless, transport constraints have adversely affected rural areas, and labour-intensive sectors dependent on seasonal and guest workers have been hit hard. From the social risk perspective, higher rates of ageing, insufficient healthcare services, greater distance from hospitals, unfavourable labour market trends (e.g. high share of low-prestige workers), more limited opportunities for teleworking and working from home (often due to inadequate digital infrastructure) remain persistent risk factors for peripheral areas (Horeczki 2021; Lőrinc, Káposzta 2024a). Following the easing of restrictions, rural and small-town destinations experienced an increased number of visitors and movers in.

The transformation of labour market demands and the evolving economic policy environment following the regime change led to a marked population decline in Hungarian settlements (Beluszky, Sikos 2020). Regional planning policies have also exerted a significant influence on the life of small towns, with the concentration-convenience-comfort model (Enyedi 2012) serving as cornerstones of urban development. The so-called 3C principles were later complemented by the European Union's rural policy which emphasized that local economic development should be based on local values and set catching up disadvantaged areas its target (European Commission 2024). The functioning of local government, the quality and scope of public service provision, the infrastructural, legal regulatory and local fiscal environment available to economic actors, collectively exert a fundamental influence on, or in many cases even determine the development trajectories and growth potential of the society and the economy of an individual settlement or of broader territorial units.

In addition to their residential function, small towns in Hungary fulfil a significant integral employment function. The average employment rate stands at approximately 55% in small towns, although substantially varies depending on geographical location and population size. In terms of service provision and institutional infrastructure only one-third of small towns qualify as functionally urban; the remainder (157) settlements are classified as “ceremonial towns” in the Hungarian National Atlas. These towns typically have populations below 10,000 and they acquired urban status during the post-1990 waves of urbanisation. The vast majority of such small towns are either mono-functional or exhibit mixed characteristics (e.g. dormitory, spa, industrial, small town, etc.). Nevertheless, they play a key role within the urban network, providing a range of essential services that clearly distinguish them from their surrounding rural hinterlands. Such functions typically include primary and secondary educational institutions, nursery schools, and crèches, as well as public amenities such as libraries, civil registry offices, and additional administrative or institutional services (e.g., land registry, cadastral administration, and ecclesiastical functions). Furthermore, they host various commercial establishments, thereby reinforcing their role as service hubs within the broader spatial hierarchy.

Recent trends suggest that the population of small towns in Hungary is becoming increasingly inclusive. Both in absolute numbers and proportional terms the presence of foreigners settling permanently in small towns has become more pronounced. These dynamics will be discussed in detail in the following section.

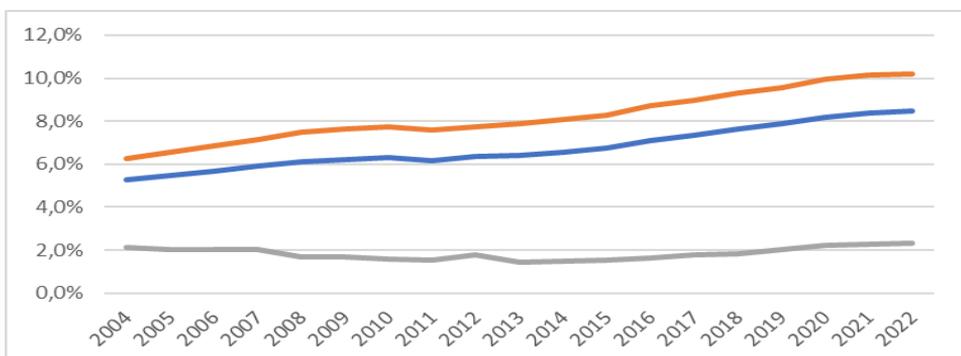
Foreign residents in Hungary and migration trends

The European Union's internal market is one of the most significant achievements of European integration. It guarantees the free movement of all economic elements within the EU, as enshrined in Article 26(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, ‘the internal market shall comprise an area without internal frontiers in which the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital is ensured in accordance with the provisions of the Treaties’. This principle of free mobility encouraged millions of EU citizens to relocate across borders over the past two decades.

In 2022, 37.7 million immigrants were registered in the European Union, encompassing intra-EU migrants and third-country nationals. Together these groups represented 8.5% of the total EU population (*Figure 1*). Following the enlargement of the EU in 2004, the share of foreign residents began to rise notably. Although the 2008–2009 global economic crisis broke this trend, the decline was only temporary. Then, during the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 600,000 people returned to their country of origin, so the decrease in the number and proportion of foreign citizens continued. Nevertheless, it can be argued that one of the EU principles, the freedom of movement between member states, has mobilised the citizens of the community: in 2021 3.9% of the total EU labour force, more than 10 million EU citizens of working age (20–64 years), were residing and working in a Member State other than their own (Hassan et al. 2023).

Figure 1.

Change in the share of foreign nationals in the EU (2004-2022)



Source: own compilation (blue line: EU 27, orange line: Old EU members excluding the United Kingdom, grey line: New member states with the exclusion of Cyprus and Malta).

Significant regional disparities exist in the spatial distribution of foreign residents across the European Union. The overwhelming majority of immigrants are concentrated in the old Member States, where they account for one-tenth of the total population exceeding 35 million inhabitants. By contrast, in the new Member States that joined after 2004, the share of foreigners remains marginal, slightly above 2% (2.3 million people). Among the old Member States Germany hosts the highest number of immigrants (nearly 11 million residents of foreign origin), while Spain, France, and Italy each accommodate approximately 5 million. Conversely, Lithuania, Croatia, Malta, Slovakia, and Bulgaria record the lowest absolute numbers among the post-2004 Member States.

A different pattern emerges, when considering the proportion of foreigners relative to the total population. Luxembourg exhibits the highest share, with nearly one in two residents being foreign nationals. This is a figure that – not surprisingly – reflects the country's central role within the EU and its institutional configuration. This proportion is exceeding 10% in some of the EU's smaller countries (Cyprus, Estonia, and Latvia) and in the main destinations such as Germany, Austria and Spain. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the new EU Member States remain predominantly labour-absorbing economies, with foreign residents typically constituting only approximately 1–2% of the total population (as observed e.g. in Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary).

The distinction between EU and non-EU nationals perhaps further underscores the heterogeneity of migration within the EU. Approximately 95% of the 14 million EU migrants live in the old Member States, whereas fewer than 600,000 settled in the post-2004 accession countries. Although EU citizens collectively outnumber third-country nationals (22 million in total in 2022), only 1.6 million of these non-EU migrants will reside in the newer Member States. This is partly due to immigration flows from neighbouring countries reflecting historical migration linkages, although the recent inflows of labour migrants from the Far East (East and Southeast Asia) have further increased their presence in the region.

Regarding Central and Eastern Europe, Germany stands out as the most attractive destination for labour migration. It hosts 72% of Croatian migrants, 51% of Hungarians, 50% of Poles, 49% of Czechs, and 42% of Serbs and Slovenes. Austria is another important destination for those leaving the region, with 36% of Slovenes, 25% of Serbs and Hungarians, and 17% of Slovaks and Croats registered in this Alpine country. In contrast, Ukrainian and Romanian labour-migrants exhibit a stronger preference for Italy, whereas Germany is comparatively less appealing to these groups.

Overall, migration destinations for residents of neighbouring countries and of the broader Eastern and Central European region are closely correlating with the general

EU patterns, where the majority of migrants relocate to the old Member States – particularly to Germany. It is the Czech Republic that represents the sole post-socialist Member State to emerge as a significant destination country, with Ukrainians forming the largest expatriate community there, numbering approximately 171,000 in 2022.

Foreigners in Hungary

An analysis of the origins of foreign working-age residents in Hungary provides a highly heterogeneous picture. In 2021, a total of 333,000 foreign nationals aged 15 to 50 years held residence permits in Hungary. In terms of their geographical origin, the picture is very diverse, comprising individuals from neighbouring states, other EU Member States, as well as a substantial contingent from Asian countries and, to a lesser extent, Africa. The overwhelming majority of foreigners originate from Hungary's immediate neighbourhood (two-thirds of all registrants, 225,000 were born in a neighbouring country), and among them, a significant proportion – approximately 170,000 – also hold Hungarian citizenship. However, pronounced differences emerge among the principal sending regions by country of birth and citizenship (*Table 1*). Among those without Hungarian citizenship, the largest groups are Ukrainians, Romanians and the Chinese, and they are followed by a notably large number of Slovak, German and Vietnamese immigrants living in the country.

Table 1.

Country of origin of foreigners by citizenship and country of birth (2021)

| | <i>By citizenship</i> | | <i>By country of birth*</i> |
|-----------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Ukraine | 22,821 | Romania | 116,647 |
| Romania | 13,053 | Ukraine | 45,679 |
| China | 11,171 | Serbia | 24,382 |
| Slovakia | 9,607 | The Soviet Union | 17,857 |
| Germany | 7,340 | Germany | 15,119 |
| Vietnam | 5,004 | China | 10,890 |
| Indonesia | 2,850 | Slovakia | 9,303 |
| Russia | 2,781 | Vietnam | 5,459 |
| Turkey | 2,631 | USA | 4,739 |
| Italy | 2,621 | Czechoslovakia* | 4,080 |

* former states that have since dissolved (e.g. The Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia)

Source: Ministry of Interior, 2021

Several clearly visible patterns emerge when observing the spatial distribution of all residence permit holders in Hungary. The absolute attractiveness of Budapest and the Budapest agglomeration is unequivocal, accommodating nearly 154,000 inhabitants (which represents 46.3% of the total registered foreign residents) living in the capital and its wider surroundings. In contrast, the number of foreigners settled in other urban regions (see KSH 2014) remains comparatively low, with 12,395 in Szeged, 11,923 in Debrecen, 8,074 in Győr, and 7,393 in Pécs. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the least attractive urban agglomerations are Szekszárd (793), Nagykanizsa (469) and Salgótarján (405). Overall, these metropolitan areas serve as the primary destinations for immigrants, with 86% of those registered (286,392 inhabitants) are concentrated in these regions.

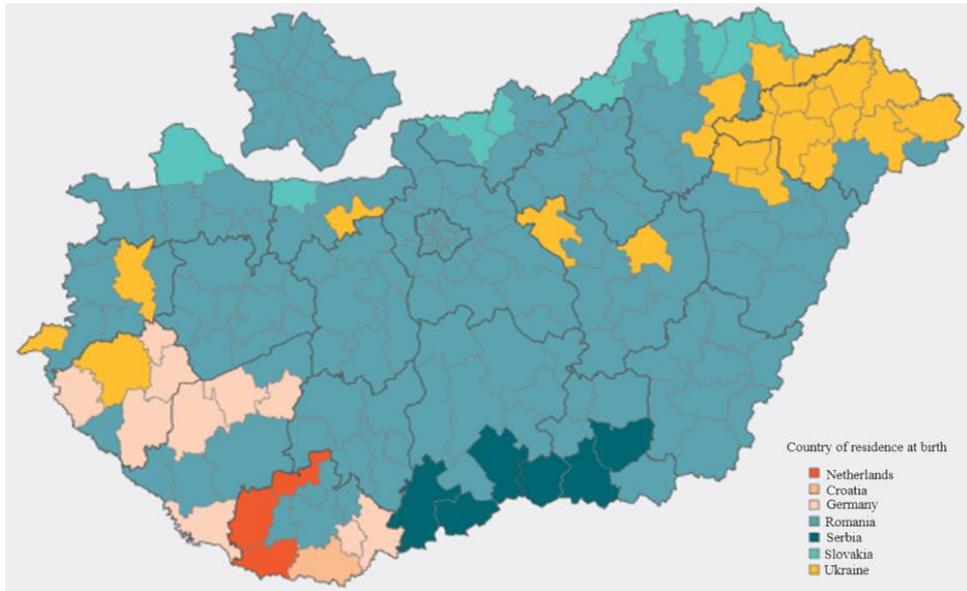
Gender composition also reveals characteristic differences: the majority of foreigners are male (54.3%): this pattern is consistent across urban areas (male: 53.6%; female: 46.4%). The most pronounced gender imbalance appears in Győr (57.7% and 42.3%), while Pécs stands out as the only major urban centre with a female majority (48.3% male and 51.7% female).

Age structure provides a further insight into spatial patterns. Dividing immigrants into two cohorts (15–24 years and 25–50 years) suggests distinct motivations for migration. The younger group, likely arriving primarily for higher education, demonstrates a strong concentration in cities: 61.2% of individuals in this category (42,000 out of 68,000; 61.2% reside in urban areas). This trend matches with the distribution of Hungary's four medical universities: Budapest (21,000), Debrecen (4,800), Pécs (3,700) and Szeged (3,400). In contrast, the 25–50-year-old cohort – presumably migrating for employment – shows an even greater reliance on Budapest (77,000), with Szeged (9,000), Debrecen (7,100) and Győr (6,400) also functioning as major regional centres.

Within this settlement network, small towns are in a specific situation: they are traditionally associated with the ideal of a liveable rural environment (Csurgó 2013). Although the precise definition of “small town” remains debated, this study adopts the classification proposed by Horeczki (2020). Based on this definition, among the 286 small towns with populations fewer than 20,000, the total number of registered inhabitants exceeded 51,000, of whom only 14,415 held foreign citizenship. The highest concentrations of foreign residents were observed in Komárom (1,060), Sárvár (808) and Tiszaújváros (514).

Figure 2.

The distribution of the predominant country of birth among foreign population across the districts of Hungary, 2022



Source: Hungarian Statistical Office Census data - Visualization

Focusing exclusively on foreign-born residents without Hungarian citizenship, approximately 135,000 persons residing in Hungary held residence permits in 2021 (Table 2). Several patterns emerge when examining settlement types. The capital retains a dominant position, hosting nearly half of foreign citizens (47.7%). Villages rank second (14.6%), slightly surpassing regional centres (14.4%), and they are followed by medium sized towns (12.5%) and small towns (10.7%) (Table 2). It should be noted, however, that these figures are strongly influenced by spatial location, as a substantial proportion of villages are located within metropolitan agglomerations.

An analysis of gender composition reveals a consistent male majority across all settlement types, with the most pronounced disparity observed in small towns (64.3% male vs. 35.7% female). Among foreigners under 25 years of age, the smallest gender gap is observed in large towns (51.3% male vs. 48.7% female), while a female majority was recorded in only one instance.

Age distribution further highlights demographic trends: over two-thirds of foreigners fall within the working age group (71.6%). The influence of higher education institutions is evident, as the prevalence of those under 25 appears only in the largest cities (52.3%).

Table 2.

The distribution of foreign citizens in Hungary (2021)

| | Under 25 years | | | 25–50 years | | | Above 50 years | | |
|---|----------------|--------|--------|-------------|--------|--------|----------------|--------|---------|
| | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female | Total |
| Budapest | 9,167 | 8,402 | 17,569 | 28,016 | 18,821 | 46,837 | 37,183 | 27,223 | 64,406 |
| Big cities (100,000– 200,000) | 5,219 | 4,960 | 10,179 | 5,732 | 3,565 | 9,297 | 10,951 | 8,525 | 19,476 |
| Medium-sized towns (20,000– 99,000) | 2,384 | 1,604 | 3,988 | 7,938 | 4,987 | 12,925 | 10,322 | 6,591 | 16,913 |
| Small towns (below 20,000) | 1,830 | 1,150 | 2,980 | 7,437 | 3,998 | 11,435 | 9,267 | 5,148 | 14,415 |
| Villages | 2,231 | 1,409 | 3,640 | 9,885 | 6,239 | 16,124 | 12,116 | 7,648 | 19,764 |
| Hungary (Total) | 20,831 | 17,525 | 38,356 | 59,008 | 37,610 | 96,618 | 79,839 | 55,135 | 134,974 |

Source: own compilation from the data of 2022 Census of Hungary

Within the urban population, regional centres attract a significant share of foreign workers because of their job opportunities. However, it should also be noted that a significant number of foreigners are already choosing small towns as their permanent place of residence. When the lower categories of the medium-sized city are also taken into account, it becomes evident that the two edge categories of the small town category attract a proportionally higher share of foreign nationals. In absolute terms, small towns with populations between 10,000 and 20,000 – the functional, core small towns – host the largest number of foreign residents (*Table 3*).

Table 3.

Population of small towns, share of foreign population, 2022

| <i>Population size category</i> | <i>20,000– 30,000*</i> | <i>10,000– 20,000</i> | <i>5,000– 10,000</i> | <i>2,000– 5,000</i> | <i>below 2,000</i> |
|---|----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Number of small towns | 29 | 78 | 106 | 95 | 9 |
| Population (number of inhabitants) | 723,788 | 1,085,563 | 740,866 | 335,727 | 14,093 |
| Foreign population (number of inhabitants) | 10,610 | 12,953 | 6,671 | 4,119 | 367 |
| Foreign population (%) | 1.47 | 1.19 | 0.90 | 1.23 | 2.60 |
| Average number of foreigners per small town | 365.9 | 166.1 | 62.9 | 43.4 | 40.8 |
| Min. | 81 | 10 | 6 | 4 | 4 |
| Max. | 1,303 | 904 | 350 | 404 | 101 |

Source: own compilation from the data of 2022 Census of Hungary (*this category of towns occupies an intermediate position between small towns and medium-sized towns. The principal characteristics of this settlement category have been discussed in our previous analyses; therefore, they will also be incorporated into the present study.)

When examining small towns by functional classification, it becomes evident that foreign-born residents are predominantly concentrated in the urbanisation zone of regional centres or in small towns with specific functions (*Table 4.*). A higher presence (mainly among retirees) can be observed in small towns associated with recreation, tourism and spa activities, whereas working-age foreigners tend to concentrate in small towns with strong industrial functions. As noted earlier, the availability of jobs represent the most decisive factor influencing settlement patterns, a trend clearly reflected in the absolutely high number of foreigners residing in small towns with industrial functions. In contrast, within small towns with mixed functions (owing to their high number) the foreign population remains dispersed, typically limited to a few households, with only sporadic instances of higher concentrations. These exceptions, often originating from historical factors (e.g. Ormánság or the eastern border region), do not constitute a significant share of foreign population living in small towns.

Table 4.

Classification of small-town residents by functional category

| <i>Category by function</i> | <i>Small towns with tourism, spa towns</i> | <i>Small towns with industrial functions</i> | <i>Small towns with residential functions</i> | <i>Small towns with mixed functions</i> |
|---|--|--|---|---|
| Number of small towns | 20 | 58 | 111 | 106 |
| Population (number of inhabitants) | 138,380 | 493,593 | 971,132 | 794,239 |
| Foreign population (number of inhabitants) | 3,208 | 6,554 | 9,199 | 7,318 |
| Foreign population (%) | 2.3 | 1.3 | 0.9 | 0.9 |
| Average number of foreigners per small town | 160.4 | 113.0 | 82.9 | 69.0 |
| Min | 5 | 5 | 4 | 4 |
| Max | 276 | 904 | 412 | 350 |

Source: own compilation from the data of 2022 Census of Hungary

Based on census data, it is remarkable that 60 of the small towns with population below 20,000 doubled their foreign population between 2001 and 2011. The most pronounced growth occurred in Zalakaros, where the number of foreign residents increased from 10 to 239 permanent inhabitants. However, by 2022 this figure slightly decreased to 215. The increase is considered exceptional compared to the other settlements, but the population growth in this town exceeded the national average, rising from 1,345 in 2001 to 2,407 permanent residents in 2022. Among these 60 small towns only half demonstrated overall population growth across the observed period, whereas six exhibited population decline at a rate more than three times the national average and eight recorded decreases below the national average. Across the full set of small towns one-third of them experienced an increase in both intercensal periods, while 16% showed a consistent decrease in the number of foreign population in both intercensal periods. Of the 46 small towns that registered loss in their foreign population between 2001 and 2022, the majority are settlements with an overall declining population. Only three towns – Hajdúhadház, Hajdúsámson and Bicske) displayed minimal yet positive population growth over the same period. In all the three cases, the residential function remains the most dominant, as classified by Beluszky, Sikos T. (2020).

When examining the share of foreigners relative to the total population, it is notable that half of the 10 small towns with the highest shares are located in tourist destinations, predominantly spa towns (*Table 5*). In the Hungarian context, a proportion exceeding 5% is significant in absolute terms, given the highly fragmented nature and constant decline of the urban population.

Table 5.

Small towns attracting the highest proportion of foreigners

| <i>Small town</i> | <i>Category by function</i> | <i>Popula- tion change 2001– 2011 (%)</i> | <i>Popula- tion change 2011– 2022 (%)</i> | <i>Foreign population change 2001–2011 (%)</i> | <i>Foreign population change 2011–2022 (%)</i> | <i>Share of foreign popula- tion</i> |
|-------------------|--|---|---|--|--|--|
| Zalakaros | Spa town, tourist centre | 30.6 | 37.1 | 2290.0 | -10.0 | 8.9 |
| Hévíz | Spa town, micro-regional centre | 9.4 | -3.2 | 532.5 | 59.7 | 8.9 |
| Igal | Small town with mixed function | -4.9 | 11.5 | 788.9 | 26.3 | 7.1 |
| Battonya | Small town with mixed function | -11.2 | -15.7 | 267.3 | -2.8 | 6.9 |
| Sárvár | Small town with an industrial function | -4.8 | -3.5 | 32.9 | 832.0 | 6.3 |
| Harkány | Spa town, micro-regional centre | 21.3 | 16.2 | 69.2 | 16.2 | 4.9 |
| Gönc | Small town with mixed function | -8.6 | -9.7 | 11.1 | 770.0 | 4.7 |
| Lengyel- tóti | Small town with mixed function | -11.9 | -5.3 | 669.2 | 32.0 | 4.6 |
| Bük | Spa town, tourist centre | 7.0 | 10.1 | 636.4 | 0.0 | 4.5 |
| Tisza- újváros | Small town with an industrial function | -4.1 | -12.4 | 4.7 | 620.2 | 4.4 |

Source: own compilation from census data

Conclusion

Recent census data indicate a substantial increase in the number of foreign-born residents in Hungary. Particularly in the northern regions, where the proportion of immigrants had previously been low, a spectacular increase was seen. In the Ukrainian border regions this change is partly attributable to the arrival of war-related migrants in 2022. Across most districts, immigrants from Romania – predominantly from Transylvania – constitute the largest share of the foreign population. Individuals born in Slovakia, Ukraine and Serbia primarily settled down in towns and villages located near their countries of origin. Migration patterns are additionally shaped by the availability and quality of employment opportunities, the extent of suburban areas, access to services and the appeal of peaceful rural living for older residents. Similar conclusions regarding lifestyle migration were drawn by Váradi et al (2025).

The initial phase of this research, aimed to provide an overview of the countries of origin of foreign residents seeking to settle in Hungary, as well as their proportional distribution. The majority of this foreign population continues to reside in the capital and regional centres. However, over the last 20 years, small towns have experienced a revival, with migration patterns beginning to reverse (in response to such factors as security concerns, pandemics, digitalisation, etc.). Rural centres are once again emerging as important nodes of mobility, and are considered to be among the most stable municipalities in Hungary, both in terms of population and their position within the settlement network.

The next phase of this research will examine whether small towns can simultaneously function as a "container" and a "magnet" following Mumford's (1961) conceptualisation. Specifically, we will investigate whether these towns can retain their existing populations while attracting residents from surrounding areas. In this framework, the inhabitants, activities and cultures preserved within the town as a container and repeatedly drawn in as a magnet, may facilitate ongoing renewal, thereby contributing to the maintenance of the local cultural heritage. Additional questions of interest include the extent to which small-town communities are supportive and tolerant toward newcomers or returnees, and the types of innovations that individuals with international migration experience – such as returning migrants and immigrants – can introduce to the area. To address these issues, the next research phase will involve qualitative investigation, which will complement the quantitative findings presented in this study.

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