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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

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Since its inception, *CITY.HU – Urban Studies Review* has pursued two central missions. First, to present the major economic, spatial, and social issues shaping different types of urban areas; and second, to analyze both the historical background of these determining mechanisms and the most recent transformations affecting spatial development, since Hungary's EU accession and its integration into the globalized world. While the journal primarily focuses on Hungarian urban development processes, it also aims to foster cooperation between researchers and urban policy-makers by providing a forum for dialogue and knowledge exchange.

This current issue is *the first English-language edition of CITY.HU*. Beyond the journal's founding goals, one of the key objectives of this issue is to introduce the most significant Hungarian urban development processes to the international scientific community. To realize this ambition, the editors have prepared a *special issue* that presents both to the wider international readership and to Hungarian urban policy circles the economic, social, and spatial issues of Hungarian cities and towns within a European and global context. The majority of ongoing urban transitions in Hungary's urban network is deeply embedded in global processes, a fact this issue seeks to highlight. Furthermore, the concept of *CITY.HU* intentionally goes beyond describing cities as isolation units. Instead, it adopts a metropolitan perspective examining the complex relationships between core cities and their surrounding suburban or peri-urban areas.

Budapest as the global nexus of the Hungarian urban network

The first focal point of this issue is *Budapest*, which, as Hungary's only true metropolis, has always played a decisive role – not only within the national settlement network but also in urban research more broadly. When exploring Hungary's *global embeddedness*, the capital city is an unavoidable subject. This is due not only to its *gateway function* but also to its size and diversity, which make it the only location where many national phenomena can be observed in their entirety. Consequently, any investigation into the challenges facing Hungary's settlement network, must begin here.

The study by *Gyula Szabó and Réka Tóth* explores Budapest's integration into the global economy, addressing topics, such as the city's ranking in international comparisons, the role of foreign direct investment and multinational corporations, financial and business services, startups, and potential directions of future economic development. Through this, the authors aim to contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the Hungarian capital's role in the global urban hierarchy.

A similar approach is taken by *Viktória Szirmai* in her study, *"The Issues of the 'New Urban Crisis' and Their Special Manifestations in the Hungarian Settlement Networks"*. Here, Budapest serves as a detailed case study and at the same time as an intellectual gateway to the special issue as a whole. The author surveys the global challenges that urban networks face today, placing *inequalities* at the centre – an essential dimension of the *New Urban Crisis*.

Budapest and its wider urban region are themselves products of inequality. They form part of the global North, concentrating a substantial share of Hungary's human and material resources as well as production capacities. Yet, the capital is also a landscape of internal inequalities: its prospering and declining districts, its affluent suburbs, and socially deprived housing estates together constitute the contemporary reality of Budapest.

The study by *Júlia Schuchmann* further elaborates on this by comparing Budapest and its metropolitan area with the rural urban regions of over 100,000 inhabitants. By using demographic (migration, population change), social (income, educational attainment) and economic (capital investments, taxation) indicators the author identifies patterns of convergence and divergence among Hungary's major urban areas, highlighting the persistent and structural inequalities within the urban system.

Urban resilience and the pandemic

Some challenges have long-term implications, shaping development trajectories over decades. In such cases, adaptation resembles a marathon rather than a sprint. However, in the spring of 2020, a new factor emerged in the world's metropolises, that posed an immediate and unprecedented threat. The relationship between cities and epidemics, evidently, is as old as urbanisation itself – crowded environments have long acted as breeding grounds for disease. Yet, it was widely believed that Western cities had overcome this historical vulnerability through advances in public health. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how mistaken that belief was.

The *symbolic images of the pandemic* were all urban: empty streets during lockdowns, emergency hospitals built overnight, exhausted health workers, and moments of community solidarity, resilience and hope.

Annamária Uzzoli and her co-author chronicle Budapest's experience as the domestic epicentre of the pandemic. The city, by virtue of its gateway function faced not only epidemiological challenges but also complex health policy and urban governance issues.

Even today, it remains difficult to determine unequivocally how successfully Budapest managed this challenge. Despite an ageing population and the sometimes contradictory measures of central epidemic management measures, the capital's vulnerability was not substantially greater than the Hungarian average or that of comparable metropolises in Central Europe.

Small towns and macro-processes

The second half of this special issue turns to the scale of *small-towns*, whose challenges, while distinct, are rooted in the same global processes that affect larger cities. Although their resources and scope for action are limited, their exposure to global and environmental transformations is growing.

Among these, the most critical factor today is the *climate crisis*. Its recognition and acceptance – both in planning and, in society at large – have developed gradually over recent decades. Consequently, climate change and adaptation have now become an integral part of mainstream planning practice.

The study by Péter Csorba examines small-town planning through an analysis of strategic documents from 34 Hungarian towns with populations between 10,000 and 25,000, alongside an empirical survey conducted in the small East-Hungarian small town of *Tiszaöldvár*. They underscore not only *spatial disparities* but also the fact that residents' ability to sustain their living standards varies significantly depending on the town's level of development. Importantly, only the most climate-conscious communities can actively engage local residents in the planning process.

Another study by *Gábor Pirisi, Ernő Molnár, and Balázs Berkecz* focuses on *urban shrinkage* as a sustainability issue – specifically the *demographic sustainability* of settlements – which is closely tied to their economic weight and performance. Shrinkage is a primarily European, and particularly Central and Eastern European phenomenon, strongly associated with the small-town condition. While large cities can also experience population decline, the archetype of the shrinking small-town searching for its 21st century role has become widespread across the Western world, and it is especially prevalent in Eastern Europe.

Shrinking is not inherently problematic, but its consequences can be. The study focuses on the *education sector*, exploring how demographic trends manifest in the network of secondary schools in small towns. Two findings are particularly noteworthy: first, that the decline in student numbers often outpaces the overall population decline of the settlement; and second, that in certain smaller towns, this trend increasingly *threatens the very existence of secondary schools* – institutions that have long been emblematic of small-town identity and autonomy.

Urban diversity and social change

Historically, cities have always been home to heterogeneous social structures, where people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds coexisted. The larger the settlement, the more pronounced this diversity tended to be. In Hungary, however, the 20th century brought about a powerful – and in many respects tragic – process of homogenisation. As a result, the re-emergence of *urban diversity* has become a novel experience in the early 21st century.

Since public discourse often focuses not only on the positive, but also on the perceived negative consequences of this transformation, academic research has a crucial role in providing an objective perspective. The paper by *Réka Horeczki and Gábor Lados*, examines the number, proportion, and spatial distribution of *foreign citizens* in Hungarian towns. This indicator – an excellent measure of global integration – reveals highly significant differences across settlements, correlating strongly with the degree to which local economies are embedded in global networks.