Sub-Centres or Edge-Cities 2
An In-depth Analysis of a Fast Changing Region
Patterns of suburban socio-economic transformation in South-western Budapest Agglomeration

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Abstract

In my paper presented at the ENHR Istanbul Conference (SUB-CENTRES OR EDGE CITIES? – socio-spatial and economic transformation of South-western Budapest agglomeration) I analysed the socio-economic developments of one of the fastest changing Budapest agglomeration area from rather a larger scale point of view. The recent and ongoing qualitative and quantitative analyses – namely, interviews with local stakeholders, residents and a survey of 1,200 interviewees in the settlements of the area – enables us to accomplish now a more in-depth scrutiny of the processes and to give a more thorough and detailed description. Micro-tendencies in, and patterns of, movements, the causes thereof, both in case of households and enterprises will be accounted for, as well as the different approaches and actions taken by institutional actors and the rationale behind are being mapped and will presented at the conference. The results will be placed and analysed within the theoretical framework presented in Istanbul, distinguishing global and local trends in the transformation of the edges of cities and the transition from a monocentric to a polycentric urban fabric within a large metropolis area of Eastern Central Europe.

Introduction

In last year’s presentation I summarised the major trends in suburban development in the Budapest agglomeration, distinguishing between effects of global urbanisation and economic trends and imprints of more local factors, such as historical, social and economic components that often divert and transfigure the overall tendencies. The major argument of the examination was that the above mentioned overlapping strands substantially transformed the agglomeration during the last twenty years, converting it from a socially rather low status, semi-rural areas that completely depended upon the capital and were in an underdeveloped state to new foci of economic development, to magnets for entrepreneurial and economic activities, to high prestigious residential areas for upper and middle classes. Conceivably, the changes have been most dramatic in the South western sector of the Budapest agglomeration.

To map in details the scope of the changes and transformation, an in-depth research has been carried out during the first half of 2011 in six settlements of the region, namely Budaörs, Budakeszi,
Törökbálint, Biatorbágy, Páty and Herceghalom. The research composed of a qualitative part with more than forty interviews with local residents and additional ones with local stakeholders. During the quantitative one, a thorough survey of 1.200 is being also performed (the first results of which will be available by the end of June 2011). The picture is further detailed and counterbalanced with several interviews from a different agglomeration town and results of a survey in an outer district of Buda (3rd district, northwestern part of Budapest) that partly examined the mobility patterns of the residents. During the time of writing this paper, information derived from the interviews can be used and the picture will later be completed.

Two major conclusions can be drawn from the preliminary results. The transformation has completely taken place within the inner ring of the scrutinised area (within 10 kilometres from the capital borderlines) and partly but fundamentally affected the outer areas. The above transformation include social and economic aspects as well. Second, the transformation has caused such changes, both in quality and in quantity that the local traditional social and political decision-making mechanisms are no longer able to manage and momentous realignments and adaptations are under way in the local political system.

Features of transformation

Major trends on micro level were accounted for in the paper and presentation for the 2010 EHN R conference in Istanbul, thus now the main characteristics of the change on micro level will be shown and analysed.

Social aspects

The social composition of the settlements were mostly rural in the area before the transition in 1990, except for the then only town, Budaörs. The infrastructural circumstances were also backward that had not attracted significant migration since the late 1960s. During the first two decades after the Second World War, lower status migrants flocked in mostly from rural areas and together they created a comparatively steady social composition. Housing estates were built only in two settlements, in Budaörs and Budakeszi – as a sign of favoured adjudication by the power – with their isolated population bearing close resemblance to those of many housing estates in Buda: poorer in economic but high status in cultural and social terms.

The influx of people in the 1990s and 2000s came from two major social strata. The lower and lower middle class migrants moved to the weekend cottages and garden plots areas that are abundant around the settlements. The lower middle class migrants’ social characteristics resemble the residents of the housing estates – that is to say, they are mostly young couples with children and limited income, employed in some low-paid intellectual work. They goals in choosing the site of residence essentially resembles those of the better-off: green, calm and quiet environment, private garden, ideal for raising up the children, but the social composition of the neighbourhood plays less role in their choice and the low price of the plot and individual way of house building – thus controlling the price and enabling partial construction and later amendments – are of primary importance. The number of the poor, taken in all terms, is low in the area, such is the number of Roma population. Most of them moved to the area before 1990 and now are in the obsolete central areas of the settlements or remote, hardly accessible pockets outside the residential areas. They have chosen vicinities with the lowest prices, that is to say, with the worst givens: farther away from the central areas and any facilities, with poor transport possibilities and infrastructure. Nowadays a slim stream of the latter strata move in and allegedly very effective mechanisms are put at work to get rid of the non-desired migrants. Their inclusion of the two aforesaid groups in the local life is very limited although in some settlement they are represented in the local municipality.
The better-off form the bulk of the migrants. The transformation is so vigorous that in recent public debates settlements in the inner circle have fallen in line with traditional high prestige Buda areas – mostly owing to relocation of some celebrities to the area. This group is heterogeneous although they can be well classified along the dimension of their primary intent: whether they choose such areas seeking a sort of idealised rural – small town lifestyle where private garden is a requisite, or the social composition of the neighbourhood – that is to say, the exclusion of the non-desired elements and the presence of homogeneous groups akin to their own or their ambitions – is the foremost motive. Obviously, the most families can be found somewhere between these two extremes and it also reflects to some extent their aspiration to partake in the local life or they regard their residence as just a gratifying neighbourhood anywhere in Budapest; and the desire for a green locality is generally shared. The major spatial manifestation of this factor can be identified in their selecting the plot: the more towards the traditional areas they move the more role the idealised small town appears to play and thus they more prefer to reconstruct their houses along the romanticised conventional ways. Whereas the people close to the other extreme favour more distant, segregated neighbourhoods where the style of the houses and gardens starkly contrasts with those in the traditional areas.

Their financial status seems a roughly independent variable that is reflected in the actual layout of their home. Those who can afford move to detached and larger houses whereas families with more limited financial means move to smaller houses or condominiums. The private garden is clearly a conspicuous sign but its sheer existence seems enough and neither its size nor its quality seems to play a major role: in the most prestigious areas the detached houses give the impression of lopping over the plot and the gardens of lacking usefulness. For many less affordable, the prestige of the area and being segregated override the want of having an own garden and move to small flats in large condominiums resembling the ones they moved from but on the edge of higher status segregates, often facing large open fields and pastures.

Outflow from these settlements were said to be minimal till the mid-2000s. Recently, three major trends can be traced. Especially in the economic recession, some families had to realise that living in the suburbs put too large a burden on their budget and on their time in terms of constantly running two cars and commuting in the regular traffic congestions due to the insufficiency in connection to the core areas, therefore they try to constantly move back to more inner greenish areas of the city – although the collapse of the housing market hardly allows them nowadays to sell their homes and to actually take the move. Furthermore, the offspring of traditional local residents can no longer afford to buy building plots or houses in the settlements thus they have to move out, usually to some nearby, outer, thus cheaper village. Selling the houses of the locals also often allows them to buy a couple of homes for the parents and the children in the aforementioned areas thus this process also contributes to the out-flux of the original population. Finally, a score of recent migrants have realised that they can buy homes and plots of better quality and larger size for the same price some kilometres farther out and the additional commuting time adds little up to the overall so for them the move is economically worth making.

Inflow of people to formerly scarcely or inhabited areas clearly involves growth in the population. Replacement of the native population with newcomers in the traditional areas amplifies it less visibly but in comparably in an even so strong way. Substituting a one-person household with a young family of four or five evidently densifies the area but replacing the former detached house with a condominium of two or four flats on the same plot with the same families moving in increases by factors the growth and the denseness of the given area also in a less perceptible way – thus evoking less attention and resistance on behalf of the locals.

**Economic aspects**

Transformation of the economic base and function of the area are most perceptible in settlements close to the triangle formed by M1-M7-M0 motorways (as possible “Golden Triangle”) which serves as a
gateway to the capital and has excellent accessibility by roads and railways to the prospering northwestern parts of Hungary, and farther to Austria, Germany and Italy. Budaörs, Törökbálint and recently Biatorbágy belong to this group. Partly building on these assets and partly following the migration of their managers, numerous companies settled or moved their headquarters to these inner areas. These companies or dedicated branches operate in logistics, telecommunication, informatics, innovation and likewise. Commercial activities followed also the migration of the well-to-do, creating a huge shopping corridor along the M1-M7 motorways, but smaller enterprises also serve the needs of the locals. These activities offer huge income for the concerned municipalities in form of local taxes thus putting them among the richest ones in Hungary. Settlements also close to the core but in less favourable accessibility, namely Budaörs, Páty and Herceghalom, are predominantly residential and lack notable economic activity – the locals, regardless of their social status, commute to the city. The significance of leisure activities and tourism, primarily based on one-day visitors and specific activities is growing, by virtue of their auspicious natural conditions and proximity to prosperous population. Although Telki, a settlement bordering Páty and Budakeszi, is not included in the study, it is worth mentioning that as arguably the most prestigious village in Hungary, economic activities serving the local rich, e.g. private hospital and alike.

The labour market and other services, that once used to offer some insignificant opportunities to the locals thus commuting was almost total, nowadays provide possibilities to the locals. Flourishing economy or rich population goes hand in hand with abundant financial resources thus nursery schools, kindergartens, primary, and in some cases, secondary schools of good quality work for the locals and often attract pupils from neighbouring areas. As to the employment, Budaörs, Törökbálint and Biatorbágy offer more workplaces than their active population, thus in the recent decades, commuting to these settlement has emerged; the structure of the supply side of the workforce, however, does not satisfy the demand. Most of the original inhabitants are low- or unskilled and they can hardly find work nearby in spite of the possibilities offered by commercial and logistical activities – as they are not labour-intensive in their activities. On the other hand, the skilled and the qualified commute to the city for higher salaries thus there is an unmet demand on behalf of the new industries looking for such workforce.

Whereas booming economy is clearly seen as beneficial for the settlements, the opinion on the effects of migration gradually changed in time. The arrival of young people with children were seen with approval and was actively supported in the settlements; feelings by now turned opposite on most of the cases. Hardships with integration, cost of necessary development in infrastructure, problems with investors and political issues has led to a practical halt in larger scale residential developments – although it has to be said that the economic crisis has drastically lessened the demand for that, too. The weekend cottages and garden plots areas are of a significant risk to the settlements due to the aforesaid circumstances. In some areas, such as Budaörs and Budakeszi, such neighbourhoods are already built up and have turned into residential areas. In other ones, the process is in an earlier phase and only a limited number of people live in such areas but they are able potentially to house inasmuch people as the present population. These territories have so much hindrances that a significant development would require huge investment by the municipalities – widening the streets, public lighting, public transport, sewage, etc., – that they cannot afford. With the notable exception of Budaörs, where such hardships were not mentioned, the mayors claim that the present rate of migration puts such a very heavy load on the municipalities that have to reopen social facilities, especially kindergartens and schools to meet the demand arising from the children of the newcomers that they can hardly compete.

According to the calculations of the municipality of Törökbálint where such reckonings were of late performed, the migration of a thousand people requires in the municipal budget a one-time expenditure in infrastructure of 370-420 million Forints (approximately €1.4-1.6 million) and sustaining the produced infrastructure needs annually further 80-120 million Forints (approximately €300-440 thousand).
Reorganization of the local power structures

The social and economic – and partly the general political – changes have affected intensely the traditional local societal and power structures. The original political machine was replaced in the last couple of years with somewhat new ways of policy making and new people in decision-making. This rearrangement has occurred in almost all settlements and in almost all aspects of the local hierarchy; only in case of one or two municipalities has this process been partial but still preponderant, due to special local circumstances. It would be a coarse and hence false oversimplification of the matters to argue that the newcomers have taken over the power; rather, the distinction can be drawn between correlating different attitudes of policy making and managerial approaches.

The backbone of the local society used to consist mainly of well integrated local groups the large part of whom were descendants of the pre-war population, often of German origin. The migrants in the early communist period were in a way integrated in the society but lacked the ability of really influence. The running of the affairs, the management were in the hands of the opinion-leaders of the aforesaid groups and some professionals by their position had their say in decision-making. The state remained unchanged in the first decade after 1990. The overwhelming majority of the local society did not intend to be involved in the decision-making, moreover the intension had not even surfaced till the turn of century. In fact, neither the locals, nor the leaders could even imagine what participation or other means of involvement could have been good for. The decisions were made in an elitist and/or technocratic way, and often during one-to-one agreements between the leaders and the locally strong persons.

The circumstances change as new generations and new groups arrived in the local scene. The composition of the local public changed and people outside the traditional circles with new and explicit interests and with intention to intervene in the public debates and public affairs emerged. Besides the altering social composition, the new economic situation and the sheer growth of populace render the old techniques obsolete and therefore new managerial skills need be introduced in running the settlements. Contradictory local incidents, mostly related to some residential or business developments, assisted the process, especially where direct interests of a certain group of locals were at stake. The appearance of affluent people, or groups capable of effectively using new means of lobbying and other methods in enforcement of their interest has been of an evident incredulity and unexpected novelty to the ‘traditional’ local élite. The division line lies between the ‘winners’ and the ‘losers’ of the last twenty years, and between the segregated and integrated groups. Two examples may shed more light on the processes. The municipality of Páty allotted an area, far off the built-up areas of the village but immediately on the borders to Telki, a wealthy community, for development of a gated community with a golf course. The layout of the proposed development gradually changed to denser and in the final stage the golf course was no more than a tiny element of an élite housing estate. A strong group of the locals together with the municipality of Telki vehemently opposed the venture and during the local elections in 2010 the former opposition was elected to power, including the local council and the mayor and the development is now being turned into a leisure centre without much residence. To their fortune, the investor is keen on agreeing on the new terms. Second, the municipality of Törökbálint regulated during a rather hidden procedure the layout of the fourth step in the Tükörhegy as multi-storey residential buildings with a potential of housing three-four thousand people whereas the previous three steps in the developments provide accommodation for three thousand people in detached or semi-detached houses. This area being one of the most prestigious in the capital with many highly influential people, the lobbying against the proposal started soon after the investor began its activities. The opposers promptly succeeded in involving some high authorities, including a parliamentary committee and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations and national newspapers on their side during the spring of 2011. As a consequence, the municipality was forced to withdraw the building permit and now faces a claim for damages from the investor in the sum of 4 billion Forints (€14.8 million) that is comparable to the annual budget of the town.
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