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LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN SMALL SETTLEMENTS OF SOUTH-TRANSDANUBIAN REGION IN HUNGARY

After the political changes in 1990 rural Hungary has been exposed to the negative effects of economic transformation, thus to social disorganization. This paper is focusing on the problems, strategies and chances of Hungarian small settlements. Statements are based on 25 interviews with mayors in the villages of an underprivileged small-region of the South-Transdanubia.

RURAL SOCIETY UNDER TRANSFORMATION

Hungarian village society cannot be characterised as a close and coherent community anymore. Peasant work, rustic lifestyle, local traditions and values (the most important points of public life) are not existing effects nowadays.

Although there were heavy oppositions and conflicts between the different strata of agricultural society before World War II, the connections among village people were stronger and there was a well-functioning social network in small settlements. Dissolution of local communities has already begun at the end of the 19th century because of the inflexible social structure and the pauperization in consequence of the lack of soil among the peasantry. One of the main bases of social disorganization was the economic transformation executed by the communist regime after the takeover in 1948. The government took the important means of production into public ownership, forced the establishing of agricultural co-operatives from the peasant properties, and extinguished the ranges and conditions of traditional rustic work and lifestyle. Several young people left villages looking for work and a higher quality of life in the rash-developed communist industrial centres: continuity of generations and human connections have broken (Hankiss 1983). Although some of the workers moved back to the villages for getting higher incomes from household farming after “second economy” became stronger for the early 80s (Juhász 2006), the rate of the agricultural population decreased from 53% (1950) to 15% (1990) during the communist period (Andorka 1997).

TRENDS OF MIGRATION – SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN VILLAGES

After the political changes the transformation of economical-territorial system has begun. Most of the industrial areas became crisis zones, only the capital and the north-western part of the country could prosper and attain a significant economic growth (Beluszky 1999). We can realize different destinations of migration from rural areas to cities and from bigger towns to villages. The young and qualified population is moving to the economical centres for workplaces and for a higher level of services. Some of the villagers undertake a hard physical work abroad so villages are functioning now as a temporary place of their living. Small settlements could not exist as a complex of home and workplace anymore. Less than 10% of the active rural population in Hungary works in their own village (Juhász 2005).

On the contrary migration of the underclass (people living in poverty, without any chances on the labour market) heads to the distant villages for a lower cost of living. There is a huge difference between the villages and cities concerning the real estate costs and overhead expenses. Mayors of towns try to charge the expenses of changes to the rural area: they support the migration of underprivileged strata to the small settlements (Ladányi 2004). We can find a high rate of roma population in these disadvantaged villages.

The invasion of poor, unqualified, roma people elicit a further rural exodus of original population. The smallest elements of the territorial system become ethnic ghettos. After this trend of migration village society is neither a community nor a civil society anymore – it is a split society with heavy conflicts. After the continuous process of changing people do not have enough time to become acquainted with the culture, customs, problems and goals of each other. Also the expansion of individual values supports the disintegration of this broken society. Approximately 32% of the Hungarian villages can be characterized by crisis, segregation or social conflicts (Kovács 2003).

After 1990 the country lost 22% of workplaces – in villages this rate is 33% (Kovács 2005). There is a high rate of unemployment and a significantly inactive population in small settlements far from economical centres. Most people obtain their incomes from seasonal and casual work, from pension, disability pension, child benefit, social benefits and sometimes from crime (smuggling, stealing). Crime for living is one of the most important grounds of giving up the traditional vegetable gardening in villages. In addition to crime, there are various forms of deviant behaviour (alcoholism, gambling addiction etc.). According to a research on a great sample, a significant part of the adult population had some kind of mental problem in the rural society in the late 1990s (Kopp – Skrabski 2000).

Strong dependence on the social system of state and upon the local government results in paternalism, lack of initiative, passivity and disappointment (Bognár and Csizmady 2005). We can see the second generation growing up after 1990 without any patterns of job and labour. On the other hand, these same people are members of the consumer society – they have got the same expectations as the wealthier strata of the society.

There is a low level of services in the rural area. The local governments have the compulsion of cost-cutting, so they close their institutions on the ground of financial problems. This practice strengthens the process of rural exodus. Without schools and social institutions the local intellectuals have disappeared, so the traditional leader strata are missing from the villages. Negative processes strengthen each other and the economic, social, demographical, sanitary and infrastructural gap is continuously growing between the central regions and the underdeveloped rural area. In Hungary one of the most underprivileged rural territories is *Ormánság*, the scene of our interviews.

VILLAGES IN THE ORMÁNSÁG REGION

Ormánság is one of the historical small-regions of Hungary in *South-Baranya* County. This area consists of 47 settlements and almost 18 000 inhabitants, so the average number of the inhabitants per settlement is 383. In the most densely populated town, (*Sellye* – the only city in this region) live 2 900 people.¹ The stock of settlements is frittered, and the transport network is underdeveloped. Although *Ormánság* is rich in folk-traditions and in treasures of nature (well-watered with forests and wild animals in the flood area of the river Drava), this region is one of the most underprivileged areas of Hungary.

In this crisis-region the main problems come from the disadvantageous status on the labour market: unemployment, long-term passivity, pauperization and segregation. People pursued traditional agricultural activity in the *Ormánság*. After the forming of agricultural co-operatives in the communist era, redundant local employees worked as commuters in mines of hill Mecsek and in the industrial factories in Pécs. After the political and economic changes in the 90s mines and industrial plants were closed and people had less chance for work. They tried to manage farming in their village but most of the forced entrepreneurs became bankrupt because of the strong competition created by the multinational and trans-national companies.² People had to sell their estates and the concentration

¹ Source: www.ksh.hu.

² In the *Ormánság* region people cultivated water-melon as a traditional and famous plant of the area. The new supermarkets in the 90s kept the prices of fruits and vegetables permanent under the cost of productions level and

of landed property has begun. Independent self-employed farmers became passive dependants of the social system and left the skills of doing individual initiatives to improve their lives. The rate of unemployment in most villages of *Ormánság* is more than 50-60%.

Although the settlements of this historical area seem to be characterized by uniformed viewpoints, here we can find villages with different social structure on the basis of the heterogenic trends of migration (Kovács 2005):

- ordinary villages (without any strong dominant migration trend)
- aging villages (youth moved towards economical centres)
- ethnic ghettos (a high rate of deprived roma population)
- destinations of migration (from other settlements) on social base
- villages with split society (traditional agricultural population against new migrants from the underprivileged strata).

THE RESEARCH

We have selected³ 25 small villages (average population: 320) from the territory of traditional *Ormánság*. The common characteristics of these settlements are the specific attributes of Hungarian villages far from economical centres:

- disadvantageous status of inhabitants at the labour market
- high rate of inactive population
- lack of appropriate infrastructure
- low level of social services
- most of the inhabitants are undereducated and underprivileged
- low level of social integration and cohesion.

We wanted to clarify the typical problems and conflicts and also the operable and effective patterns in local societies, and also to get acquainted with the plans and strategies of local governments. We have made half structured interviews. Our interviewees were the local opinion leaders: mayors, vice mayors, leaders of the local minority self-government, teachers, representatives of churches and local entrepreneurs. We would like to present how the mayors, the possessors of local power react on the challenges in small settlements.

most of the farmers got a huge unpaid debt and gave up the agricultural enterprise.

³ The interviews were made by the help of students from the University of Pécs, Department of Sociology in 2009-2010.

STATE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

We have recognized that the work and achievement of local government depend on the state and composition of local society. Although the researched villages stand on diverse positions in the settlement structure and there are different problems and prospects present in their lives, we could find similar phenomenon and symptoms, too.

One of the common parameters is the lack of localism. Most people do not have attachment to their village and they would move off, if it was possible. Since they cannot sell their houses for a reasonable price, they are not able to allow themselves to buy a flat in other settlements with more developed infrastructure and better services. Only few inhabitants with local workplaces and strong connections to relatives appreciate village as an ideal place for living.

Most of the mayors declared that people used to have stronger solidarity and collaboration. Today envy, mistrust and malignity weaken the concentration of forces and undermine the basis of community. These are the hotbeds of conflicts between individuals and families, too. Also thefts and crime for living generate antipathy and oppositions in the village society. Passivity and the real feeling of defencelessness are combined with pessimism and lack of undertaking common tasks. The low level of motivation is connected to the paternalism and the missing activation role of social services (Ragadics 2010).

One of the most serious problems is the instability of rural families. Youth (especially women) move off from small settlements for higher education and appropriate workplaces and leave the elderly and unqualified family members. Villages in *Ormánság* are characterised by pauperization, on the other hand the *culture of poverty* (Lewis 1975) results in a great doubtfulness and insecurity, and there are lots of temporary cohabitation and the divorce-rate is quite high.

STRATEGIES, ROLES AND PATTERNS IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Different problems and challenges and the diverse personality of mayors bring on special strategies and methods set in by the possessors of local power in the small settlements of *Ormánság* region.

Mayors playing the role of the rational economists are trying to solve the financial problems of the local government by the way of savings. They abolish the uneconomical institutes (school, kindergarten etc.) and decrease the working hours and the wages of the staff in the government. These arrangements strengthen the financial status of villages for short distances but at the same time the quality of life may be undermined.

Paternalist leaders are engaged in extending social services. They expend most of the budget for social benefits, for social programs and communal work. This type of leadership is very wide-spread on the basis of the traditions of communist centralization and the lack of subsidiarity. Serious social problems support the model of a provider governing but it is carrying the danger of reduction of democratic values and it is deepening the passivity in the local society as well.

Another important role played by mayors is the “Justice of the Peace”. Split societies without strong communities contain several conflicts excited by poverty and social problems. Migration also brings people and families with different and antagonistic culture next to each other. That is why the presence of a respected person is necessary in the villages far from economical centres.

Development-oriented mayors are interested in infrastructural expansion. As we enquired about the successes in the governmental labour, they mentioned the new renovations and buildings in the village. Developing the local infrastructure is a particular fact for showing the activity of the leader for the voters. Unfortunately, some of the newly developed and reconstructed institutes should be closed later on the ground of thrift and financial problems.

Project-oriented leaders recognized the importance of lobbying and try to manage in the field of application system. They are looking for contacts and references for gaining governmental and EU-tenders. The local governments of small settlements are often run into debt, so it is rather oppressive to get the sufficient retention demanded by the applications system.

There are just a few innovative leaders in the villages in the *Ormánság* region. The lack of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) narrows and limits the ambition of innovation. There are some plans for the future⁴ but some of them are too unrealistic and impracticable.

The figure of cooperative leader is missing from the small underprivileged settlements. Most of the mayors act as lonely heroes without any help and support from others. There are mayors with the symptoms of burnout syndromes as well. We can interpret this phenomenon with the lack of local intellectuals and with the serious problems of village societies. Sometimes the role of a local hero could give some power for everyday struggling to survive.

The strategies and roles mentioned above are often combining in the asked interviewees and they are determined by the local challenges and opportunities as well. Most of the tentative could not be an effective way for problem-solving

4 One of the mayors wants to breed sheep using them as lawnmower and social benefit. Another leader would like to produce food on the estate of the local government by common labourers. The food could be utilized as social benefit for poor families.

because of the lack of external assistance and the disorganization and passivity of local community.

SUMMARY

Small settlements in Hungary far from economical centres are hotbeds of exclusion, social problems and deviant behaviour. Local governments running into debt are not able to solve the problems of the underprivileged population.

Socialization of youth is determined by the *culture of poverty* (pauperism, no labour patterns, and lack of motivation and instability of families). While children are strongly affected by consumer society, local youth-politics are accidental, random and unsystematic. Institutes and common spaces are missing and youth without future perspectives is endangered by cultural and ethnic segregation.

The development of villages characterised by the symptoms of crisis depends on the power of local societies. On the grounds of these are very important to increase the autonomy of rural communities for supporting the common recognizing, discussing and solving of local problems (Vercseg 2004). Man is a social being – communities help to develop healthier personalities. They give social security in case of need, defencelessness and poverty. Social integration is also the base of stronger democracy, solidarity and subsidiarity.

Furthermore, individual interest can have more effective representation by an organized community (association). Initiation of civil society into the process of decision making by the local government leads to a slow and laborious way of leadership. Still this is the only guarantee for functioning of real feedback mechanisms and democratic governance in small settlements (Lukovich 2004).

Researchers and social experts are important members of the multilevel collaboration for deprived people living in underdeveloped small settlements. They can support the working NGOs and communities by the way of presenting successful patterns and examples from other settlements and stimulate the self-organization in villages by special methods of the community development.

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