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The Central-European small town: interpretations, challenges and resilience in Hungary

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Abstract
Small towns are long-term stable elements of the urban network with establishedresidential and service roles. Geographical research has often neglected them, and accordingly, certain conceptual issues require clarification. However, particularly in countries with low urbanisation, small towns, play a significant role in the transformation and modernisation of rural areas. Nevertheless, the increasingly global scale of economic and social processes poses a considerable challenge to their traditional functions, reshaping their development framework. In this evolving context, the flexible adaptive capacity of small towns – defined as resilinece – becomes crucial. Alongside addressing globalisation challenges, this study outlines a cognitive resilience model that could also serve as the basis for a new planning practice.

Keywords
small towns, globalisation, reindustrialisation, resilience, Hungary

Izvleček
Centralnoevropsko mestece: interpretacije, izzivi in odpornost na Madžarskem
Majhna mesta so dolgoročno stabilni elementi urbane mreže z uveljavljenim bivanjskim in storitvenim pomenom. Geografske raziskave so jih pogosto zanemarjale, zato določena konceptualna vprašanja zahtevajo pojasnitev. Zlasti v državah z nizko stopnjo urbanizacije imajo manjša mesta pomembno vlogo pri preobrazbi in modernizaciji podeželskih območij. Vendar pa vse bolj globalni obseg gospodarskih in družbenih procesov predstavlja velik izziv za njihove tradicionalne funkcije ter preoblikuje njihov razvojni okvir. V tem spreminjajočem se kontekstu postaja ključna prožna prilagoditvena sposobnost manjših mest – opredeljena kot odpornost. Poleg obravnave izzivov globalizacije članek predstavi model kognitivne odpornosti, ki bi lahko služil tudi kot osnova za novo prakso prostorskega načrtovanja.

Ključne besede
mala mesta, globalizacija, reindustrializacija, odpornost, Madžarska

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1 Introduction

Why is it important to discuss small towns in 2025? Ostensibly, this is a question that may not seem particularly novel. Small towns are not hubs of global space, they do not represent concentrations of power, nor are they typically characterised by a significant proportion of the spatial conflicts that define contemporary social processes, nor are they affected by extreme social polarisation. However, they are home to a significant proportion of the population, typically between 20-30%, they provide employment and services for those living in rural areas, and they embody a unique model of sustainable urban development.

Moreover, small towns are far from as unchanging as their traditional roles might suggest. The changing scale of territorial processes and the emergence of global impacts have fundamentally transformed the conditions that previously determined the development opportunities for small towns. The national-level markets and redistribution mechanisms that were the primary sources of modernisation have weakened and become hollowed out. Consequently, small towns are compelled to hold their own in an intensifying competition within a transformed, and in many respects, truly global space. In this situation, the concept of resilience, which emphasises the autonomous adaptation of communities to external challenges, can provide an appropriate framework for interpreting the development of small towns.

This study focuses on Hungarian small towns, highlighting their Central European character. It aims to present partially complementary and partially overlapping interpretations of small towns, thereby endeavouring to dispel some of the conceptual uncertainties or, at least, indeterminacies concerning them. Subsequently, it will outline some of the global challenges facing small towns and, reflecting on these, sketch the contours of resilient small town communities.

2 Methodology

2.1 The Small Town as an Interpretative and Research Problem

Research into small towns has been a part of the spectrum of urban geography from the outset, though it has never played a central role. Small towns emerge as specific functional-hinterland problems (Grötzbach, 1963), as key players in the development of rural areas (Vaishar & Zapletalová, 2009), as social communities with unique structural features (Drozg, 2016), or as prototypical representatives of sustainable settlements (Kumer et al., 2023; Mayer & Knox, 2010). However, they primarily appear as problem areas, sites of demographic, economic, and social crises (Bartosiewicz et al., 2019; Besser et al., 2008; Hannemann, 2003; Ljubenović et al., 2025; Lovell et al., 2018).

Despite the prevalence of small town research in European, particularly Central European, and concurrently in Anglo-Saxon (very significantly Canadian, Australian, South African, and New Zealand alongside British and American) geographical studies, *there is a certain uncertainty regarding how to interpret the small town itself*. Our experience indicates that small town research follows four main directions concerning interpretations and definitions of the small town:

a) *Acceptance of an internationally or nationally established, statistical or semi-official classification*, for example, for development policy purposes. These

usually link the interpretation of a small town to lower and upper population thresholds (e.g., but by no means exclusively, 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants) – see, for example (Besser, 2009; Kwiatek-Sołtys, 2011; Majewska et al., 2022; Stoica et al., 2020; Wirth et al., 2016). A frequently cited work in this context is the *SMESTO project* and its final report (Schneidewind et al., 2006). These approaches very often include the existence of formal urban status or classification (Filipovic et al., 2016; Trócsányi et al., 2024), and even where its significance is not specifically highlighted, small towns are generally selected from settlements classified as towns. This means that a small town is typically not only a matter of size but also a historically developed formal category.

b) *Researchers using their own, unique delimitation and approach* for various reasons, based on population or other easily applicable statistical criteria (Kenyon et al., 2001; Novotný et al., 2016; O'Toole & Burdess, 2004), adapting to the specific aspects of their investigation.
c) *Attempts at a definition not solely based on population size***.** In this, we can most often observe a reflection of the traditional European geographical understanding based on *centrality and central functions* (Jousseaume & Talandier, 2016; Wolff et al., 2021), or research focusing on the presence of an *independent urban identity* (Bartosiewicz et al., 2019), or perhaps *urban social characteristics* (Horeczki, 2013).
d) *Small town research without an explicit definition***.** The majority of writings definitively dealing with small towns take the concept of a small town as given and well-known, a kind of *axiom that requires no detailed explanation*. This approach is generally adopted by research not inspired by geography but touching upon various aspects of small-town existence (e.g., public health, social psychology, education, etc.), as well as in case studies where one or a few specific settlements have been selected, thus delimitation is not an explicit goal (Cudny, 2012; Donaldson, 2009; Lazzeroni, 2020).

Through a non-representative and by no means comprehensive rapid review, we examined the findings of 50 small town studies published between 2000 and 2022[1]. We aimed to observe how authors approached the small town(s) that were the subject of their research, whether they established an explicit definition or delimitation, and what the actual population size was of the settlements included in the studies. *We found that 40% of the publications surveyed provided no substantive definition for small towns* (thus taking the concept as given), while the vast majority of the remainder linked small town status to a population threshold (supplemented by the presence of formal urban status). The smallest town in the examined cases had a population of 90, while the largest was approximately 50,000. If we calculate the average and median separately for the smallest, average, and largest population figures included in each publication, we get 8,700 / 4,400 (average/median) for the smallest, 12,035 (7,300) for the average, and 17,070 (13,400) for the maximum value[2]. This suggests that the most typical small town, according to researchers, is to be sought around the 7,000 population mark. It's also an important observation that while small towns around 1,500-2,000 inhabitants are still numerous in the

[1] The collection was created by online research based on Google Scholar, using keywords "small town" and similar. Search results have been evaluated individually by relevance.
2 Unfortunately, the calculation cannot be performed for the entire sample, as there were several publications in the sample examining a significant number of settlements where the population figures for all settlements individually were not available.

sample, those around 1,000 inhabitants or smaller are very few. At the same time, according to this emphatically very casual review, small town researchers do not feel bound by the previously mentioned population threshold of 5,000.

Even the relatively significant variation in size indicates that, despite many studies taking the concept of a small town as an axiom, *different authors – not to mention different researchers – do not think of the same thing*. At this juncture, it can also be argued that this conceptual heterogeneity has a linguistic layer. The English language (and, among others, Spanish or Portuguese) uses different terms for a large urban area (city) and a smaller one (town). In other languages, there is no such distinction, and settlements considered urban are described by a single noun, with the local equivalent of the word 'city' only used as a modified version with an adjective or diminutive suffix – the most well-known and consistently used example being the German *"Kleinstadt"*, but this also applies to Swedish, Hungarian, Russian, and essentially most Central European Slavic languages. Although this is merely a suggestion requiring further investigations, two approaches can also influence the substantive elements of the concept. If the designation follows Anglo-Saxon logic (the "small town approach"), *there is a qualitative difference between the concepts of 'city' and 'town'; they are fundamentally distinct.* According to *German*, and as we have seen, *Central European logic*, *the difference between 'city' and 'town' (Stadt and Kleinstadt) is only quantitative; the latter is a smaller, less complex version of the former, but in essence, the two concepts are identical*. Thus, it might even be ventured that two parallel perspectives can exist: one that views the small town predominantly and fundamentally as rural, an embodiment of rurality, and another that sees small urban islands within the same rural spaces.

After this, it is perhaps not so surprising that when we try to find the substantive characteristics of the concept of a small town in relevant studies, we find, on the one hand, very few explicit attempts to provide a definition, and on the other hand, these characteristics are more or less clearly distinguishable according to a *urban network approach and a social approach.*

Viewed from the perspective of the *urban network* – and this is the traditional approach of European geography – the small town is not difficult to define by formal characteristics. These definitions essentially go back to Walter Christaller's central place theory (Christaller, 1933) and *highlight a specific level of services*. A small town should possess, among other things, a secondary school, a facility providing hospital care, a shopping centre, and a sufficient number of jobs (Jousseaume & Talandier, 2016), or, in more general terms, be capable of satisfying daily needs (Wolff et al., 2021). This approach – that is, that a small town can be defined by a certain level of services and jobs available locally and serving the surrounding countryside – is also applied in Hungary's National Atlas (Kovács et al., 2021). Definitions originating from the settlement network perspective often emphasise the independent character of small towns and their autonomous roles, not merely borrowed from large cities (Bartosiewicz et al., 2019; Konecka-Szydłowska, 2016).

Another possible starting point for defining small towns is *a community-centred approach*. Primarily, American sociologists have engaged relatively extensively with small-town societies, dedicating classic works to the subject, such as "*Small towns in mass society"* (Vidich & Bensman, 1968) or *"Bowling Alone"* (Putnam, 2001). Their approach is rather normative and carries a positive value content regarding the essence of small-town life, with criticisms mainly revolving around the loss of

traditional small-town values and the dissolution of traditional structures (Hannemann, 2004; Merrett, 2001). If the previous approach emphasised central roles as its key, here the role of *social capital* must be highlighted (Hannemann, 2002; Konecka-Szydłowska & Kaczmarek, 2010; Liu & Besser, 2003). The scale of the small town space allows for the personal connection and strong embeddedness of all significant actors. This is partly made possible by the size itself: Antonín Vaishar emphasises the importance that residents cover small town distances on foot, at most by bicycle, rather than by car or public transport, thus creating occasion and opportunity for personal interaction (Vaishar et al., 2016).

At this point, it is worth recalling Joachim Burdack's observation, which discusses *the existence of a dual small-town image*, with parallel running small-town romantic and small-town sceptical attitudes (Burdack, 2013). Most of the small-town interpretations above can fundamentally be categorised into the first group, however frequent the criticism, which is mostly realised in the continuous out-migration of young people (Alston, 2004; Makkai et al., 2017), which is both a consequence and an accelerator of the erosion of small-town communities. Small-town values, that certain conservative attitude, which in part is a reflection of the characteristics of traditional societies (Lueders, 2018), can easily be inverted: in small towns, every everyday function is available, but typically there is only one of everything – one secondary school, one cultural scene, one sports team, one major employer – and often one single person for every role: doctor, director, mayor. This is a society in which everyone has their precise place, and which is rather difficult to change.

Nevertheless, despite all perceived or real limitations of the small town, perhaps precisely because of its conservatism, it is primarily and increasingly an attractive place to live, one that not only emits but also receives population. So much so that many approaches see their future in this: the expansion of the small town brand, which offers an attractive (Fertner et al., 2015; Kwiatek-Sołtys & Mainet, 2014) and sustainable (Knox & Mayer, 2009) alternative in a globalised world.

3 Results

3.1 The Small Town and Global Challenges

3.1.1 The Source of Global Challenges

The small town – or more precisely: the prototypical small town – is, on the one hand, the traditional centre of rural areas, historically offering services and employment to its residents. On the other hand, it is the bearer of a unique society and community, which is perhaps, on the whole, more rural according to Anglo-Saxon, and transitional, arguably semi-urban, according to Continental European interpretations. However closed we may consider these small town societies to be, these communities have not, and could not have, avoided the challenges stemming from globalisation.

To understand the relationship between small towns and globalisation, the geographical discourse on *scale* offers the most suitable starting point. From the outset, one of the most exciting questions concerning scales has been the juxtaposition and interconnectedness of global and local dimensions (Berki, 2017; Smith, 1992; Taylor, 1982). *Scale jumps* and the interpenetration of different scales (Swyngedouw, 1997) are undoubtedly of fundamental importance for the

development of small towns. We are certainly inclined to view small towns primarily from the perspective of locality, and this perspective is historically well-founded. At the same time, in our previous research, we have endeavoured to show how, in Central Europe, characterised by delayed modernisation, *small town development was and still is strongly dependent on central redistribution*; indeed, small town urbanisation was top-down in nature (Trócsányi et al., 2018, 2024). If we contrast this with theses regarding the weakening role of the nation-state scale and *deterritorialisation processes* (Swyngedouw, 1989), it becomes clear that the challenge is not merely globalisation, but the vacuum left by the *retreat of the state* (Strange, 1996) as it dissolves into globalisation.

In Central Europe, the small town was made more urban than its surroundings fundamentally not by its citizens, but by its state-founded and financed institutions: schools, hospitals, courts, post office, railway station, and barracks. It was also the state that created the relatively broad foundations for small-town industrialisation in countries developing within the framework of planned economies. Therefore, when the cascading waves of globalisation and post-socialist transformation simultaneously brought *deindustrialisation, demilitarisation, and de-administration* (Hannemann, 2004), small towns, not surprisingly, consistently appeared on the losing side in spaces defined and reconstructed by new dimensions of uneven development (Nagy, 2015; Timár, 2007). Paradoxically, even phenomena that we are fundamentally justified in considering factors of social progress can lead to the relative decline of small towns. An example of this is the expansion of higher education, which has directed an increasing proportion of the population towards higher education instead of the secondary education still available in small towns, thereby becoming a significant factor in the out-migration of young people (Makkai et al., 2017). Perhaps even more importantly, the general digitisation of society, with an increasing proportion of private consumption and public affairs moving into online spaces, has allowed small towns to be bypassed, primarily in commerce and services, but secondarily in the traditional venues and actors of cultural and community life. This process is currently far from complete; in fact, in some respects, it leads to a sharp polarisation of the rural population, as the most competent groups within the local society – and thus obviously indispensable for the reproduction of small town development factors – will be able to bypass this level and connect directly to larger-scale (national, global) networks. In contrast, in the increasingly multilateral rural spaces, marginalised and isolated groups are emerging for whom even small town spaces will become almost inaccessible, and this *perforation of rural spaces* (Máté et al., 2024) further diminishes the already depleted resources of the traditional hinterland of small town development.

3.1.2 Dominant Forms of Global Challenges in Hungarian Small Towns

Economic Restructuring and Reindustrialisation

The transformation of 1989/1990 halted the relatively dynamic industrialisation experienced by Hungarian small towns in the 1970s and 80s, becoming the starting point for an intensive deindustrialisation process. This process was somewhat delayed and less dramatic than in the case of some of the classic "socialist" heavy industrial strongholds, but it also affected entire industries (e.g., textiles, leather and footwear, sugar). As a result, in small towns, where the share of industrial and construction

employment was still almost 40%[3] in 1990, this figure decreased to 36% by 2001, a very moderate decline compared to the trajectories of Budapest or larger cities. Between 2003 and 2022, the gap between large and small towns further widened, as the number of industrial and construction employees decreased by 53% in the former and 43% in the latter. Consequently, a stable 33% of Hungary's industrial earners live in small towns.

Behind this apparent stability lies a significant restratification. Industrial earners are now concentrated in rural areas. 73% of industrial earners live in small towns and villages, while only about 23% are found in Budapest and larger cities (for all employed, this ratio is 40:60).

The process was far from uniform. The first wave of investment after the regime change affected small towns relatively little, and by the end of the first decade of the 2000s, it seemed to be losing momentum simultaneously with the global and European crises (Egedy, 2012; Neumann & Tóth, 2009), leading to a significant employment crisis (Altwicker-Hámori & Köllő, 2013). Reindustrialisation subsequently became the dominant narrative and explicit strategy in Hungarian economic policy (Dabasi-Halász et al., 2021; Kovacs & Domonkos, 2024; Póla & Egyed, 2019), despite some of its contradictions being known from the outset. These contradictions became increasingly evident later, as the emphasis shifted – not without some greenwashing – towards the production of electric vehicles and their necessary batteries (Czirfusz, 2023; Ricz & Éltető, 2025). At the same time, it is undeniable that reindustrialisation proved to be a successful strategy insofar as it almost eliminated the previously suffocating unemployment in small towns by the end of the 2010s.

Although there are examples to the contrary, small towns primarily benefit not from tier-1 investments, but rather from the related second and third-tier companies establishing their sites there. Research by Ernő Molnár revealed that path dependency, past industrial traditions, and the quality of human resources play a complex but very important role in the success of reindustrialisation (Molnár et al., 2020, 2022). Success in this sense can be considered the creation of a diversified structure with multiple pillars, relatively high added value, and visible participation of locally rooted SMEs.

Overall, with all its achievements, reindustrialisation and, more broadly, economic restructuring cannot be considered a closed or successfully resolved challenge. One symptom of this is the exhaustion of the reindustrialisation model itself, and more broadly, the Hungarian economic development model: as of spring 2025, when these lines are being written, only two of the last 10 quarters have seen annual GDP growth exceed 1%. The resources for industrialisation also appear to be depleted, with continuous doubts arising regarding the availability of energy, water, and labour – the conflicts related to the latter, where official and very vocal anti-migrant political communication clashes with the increasingly frequent presence of guest workers in everyday life, visibly causing social tension and potentially conflicts in small towns as

[3] Although there are many hints in the first part of the paper about what is in the authors' mind regarding the definition of the small towns, under the conditions of the Hungarian urban network, we always calculate a stock of 315 units, containing every settlements with town rank and a population less than 30,000 people. The population of these towns is about 2.88 million, it accounts 43% of the urban. and 30% of the total population of Hungary.

well (Jankó et al., 2024). We have also touched upon the other problem: successful reindustrialisation results in a divergence of economic structures between small and large towns, which may also manifest in lagging incomes.

Small Towns and the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was precisely the kind of event that many had theoretically anticipated, and which was ultimately facilitated by the advanced nature of globalisation. The symbolic spaces of the pandemic were urban, primarily metropolitan areas. First, of course, was the hermetically sealed Wuhan, with an army of human resources mobilised by the Chinese authorities. Then came the images of Western cities under lockdown, with their empty, eerie streets; Indian metropolises, with masses of people waiting for hospital beds or trying to find oxygen cylinders; and later, images of various European cities with people protesting against restrictions, clashing with security forces (Pirisi et al., 2022). Smaller towns rarely found themselves in the spotlight, thus maintaining the dichotomy in public perception that identified large cities with danger and small towns with safety.

However, subsequent research did not necessarily confirm this perception. Differences stemming from higher population density and concentration tended to level out in the later stages of the pandemic, partly due to existing differences in age composition (Kulu & Dorey, 2021; Sigler et al., 2021; Uzzoli, 2022). Nevertheless, the challenges faced by small towns were complex. On the one hand, due to the lower complexity of the local economy, the consequences of exposure in a single sector were more acutely felt. In Hungary, spa towns represent a typical type of small town, for which lockdowns essentially crippled the foundations of their local economies.

Despite this, the direct economic impacts at the small town level were minor, even in 2020, which saw a 4.3% decrease in real GDP nationwide. Of the more than 54,000 small town enterprises employing at least five people, only 29 declared bankruptcy in 2020. Their revenue in Forints essentially stagnated, and their export revenue increased by 5% (partly due to exchange rate fluctuations). Unemployment rose only temporarily and to a lesser extent than in large and medium-sized cities. Overall, the data indicate that cities successfully integrated into the global economy adapted more successfully and quickly to this challenge as well.

The pandemic also attacked the foundations of small towns' identity through other means. As noted earlier, informal networks and social capital based on personal encounters and relationships are essential elements of small-town life, and COVID-19 partly eliminated, or at least dramatically reduced, these opportunities for interaction. Furthermore, Hungarian regulations attempted to manage the crisis of the central budget with quite specific measures, significantly reducing the economic manoeuvring space of local governments through several interventions (Kovács, 2020; Pálné Kovács, 2023). Measures such as the withdrawal of vehicle tax, the halving of local business tax, a ban on tax increases, and, not least, free public parking placed serious financial burdens on local communities.

Overall, the end of COVID-19 was followed by a very rapid "bounce back" – an almost seamless reintegration into the system of previous daily life (Pirisi et al., 2022). In this sense, small-town resilience stood the test of the pandemic, yet the crisis was a stronger signal than ever that small towns are just as exposed to dangers spreading

through global networks as much larger and more embedded places. It's just that they have far fewer resources to deal with these problems.

Small Towns and Migration

Migration is one of those phenomena that, in the context of globalisation, appear in small town spaces on entirely different scales and dimensions than before. Traditionally, small town migration was bidirectional: from the rural hinterland towards small towns, which served as an important modernisation channel for the rural population, and from small towns towards large cities. The two processes were roughly balanced for small towns, typically resulting in a positive balance, which allowed these settlements to slowly grow. The dimension of migration was predominantly regional, considering both directions (Trócsányi et al., 2018).

Although the 2008 crisis intensified labour migration from Hungary towards Europe (Kapitány & Rohr, 2014), it was in 2015 that migration as a topic became a significant element in the national discourse, and indeed, became a distinctly successful political product (Glied & Pap, 2016; Pap & Reményi, 2017). However, in this discourse, migration quickly became linked with large urban spaces, and Hungarian small towns were presented as being left out, as islands of safety. Hungary was inherently more of a transit country than a destination for migration, so Hungarian small towns did not have to deal with the reception and integration of refugees or immigrants from other cultures after 2015. This is never an easy process anywhere (Jonitz et al., 2024), because although migration could, in principle, be a suitable tool for slowing down ageing and counteracting out-migration, the rather closed small town societies and often the weaknesses of the local labour market also hinder this process.

Nonetheless, international migration has, albeit stealthily, reached the small town level by the 2020s, even in Hungary, which officially pursues an anti-migration policy. By this time, the "Hungarian model" based on extensive industrial development and employment expansion had reached its limits, leading to a specific labour shortage; in several cases, even the realisation of large investments would not have been possible without labour imports. This led to a dual narrative and the emergence of a distinction between "bad" and "good" migrants (Reményi et al., 2022). "Good" migrants arrive specifically for industrial and construction jobs; their stay is strictly time-limited, and they strive to remain invisible, to be as inconspicuous as possible – often these are groups living in small town spaces but isolated from small town societies, and they are very often surrounded by a hostile attitude from the local community (Bernát, 2020; Jankó et al., 2024).

However, small towns are currently participating in global and European labour migration not primarily as recipients, but as emitters. According to 2022 census data, 2.8% of all small town employees worked abroad; in border settlements, this proportion can exceed 20-25%, but in inland areas, for some small towns struggling with persistent crises or having German ethnic traditions, a value of 5-8% is also typical.

Permanent out-migration was particularly characteristic of small towns in the period between the 2001 and 2011 censuses. More precisely, during this period, small towns belonging to agglomerations recorded very strong migration gains, while prototypical small towns belonging to rural areas experienced an average annual migration loss of 1.7‰. It is important to emphasise that this out-migration was specifically age-

specific and largely affected young people in their twenties, with both educational and employment goals appearing among the motivations (Makkai et al., 2017). After 2011, out-migration slowed down and even statistically reversed. Among the real factors behind this, we must certainly mention the significantly improving employment situation from the mid-2010s onwards; however, another factor in the improvement results purely from the peculiarities of statistics. As the European labour market, which fully opened up during that decade, became more attractive, domestic out-migration was replaced by international migration, and Hungarian statistics are unable to reliably measure this, as out-migration does not involve "checking out" with Hungarian authorities or giving up one's Hungarian address.

Regarding the migration balance of small towns, several recent studies have highlighted a type of population movement in which often older, already retired segments move towards small towns (Fertner et al., 2015; Jaszczak et al., 2021; Steinführer & Grossmann, 2021). In the Hungarian context, there are few signs of this. The only significant exception was 2020, in which small towns with recreational functions, primarily on the shores of Lake Balaton, unexpectedly (and without further continuation) recorded a significant migration surplus. This phenomenon can be considered both a genuine migration response triggered by the pandemic and, again, we can suspect a statistical effect here, as many may have only then officially registered their "second home" properties, which they might have used previously anyway. For small towns – excluding, of course, those in agglomerations – to become mass destinations for a peculiar kind of rural or even small-town gentrification is still something to wait for. Thus, the migration balance is rather negative: eroding human resources on one side, and unwelcome guest workers, whom local society does not even attempt to integrate, on the other.

3.1.3 Resilience of Small Towns

Globalisation has fundamentally transformed the spaces and scales where small towns must find development opportunities and ensure the well-being of their inhabitants. The collapse of the state level, which previously provided the backdrop for development, after the regime change, the newly arising uncertainties in redistribution systems, and the global challenges presented above, have all contributed to the emergence of a development model that emphasises the *responsiveness of organisations and communities* to fend off uncontrollable and essentially uninfluenceable negative external impacts.

The academic career of resilience began with the 1973 study by Canadian ecologist Crawford Stanley Holling (Holling, 1973). In its original sense, it meant the recovery of a (complex) ecological system in an equilibrium state after a strong external impact or shock. It is not the aim of this study to review the evolution and widespread adoption of the concept in the social sciences, including human geography. Much more important is where resilience has arrived in this process, now as a distinct narrative, interpretive framework, and in many cases, a planning paradigm. Contemporary approaches in human geographical research have moved beyond interpretations focused on absorptive capacity or elastic rebound, *most frequently placing the emphasis on adaptive resilience* (Martin & Sunley, 2015), where the impacts on the system bring about its transformation and adaptation (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013).

The concept of resilience has been connected to small towns for years (Strzelecka, 2018). The resilience of small towns periodically comes to the forefront in connection with current social or economic crises (Lazzeroni, 2020) or in relation to climate change and the resulting natural disasters (Nazari et al., 2025; Porfiriev, 2009). At the same time, there are also a relatively significant number of approaches that interpret small town resilience as a counterpoint to the general decline and shrinkage characteristic of settlements, as resistance to it, primarily in demographic terms (Couch, 2016; Konecka-Szydłowska, 2018; Ljubenović et al., 2020; McManus et al., 2012).

If we accept the complex and adaptive interpretation of resilience, then we must also accept *that it is unlikely that a measurement procedure can be devised that would be able to quantify the differences in resilience among individual small towns.* Measurability is important for planning and indispensable for risk management, and quantitative resilience models also primarily (though not exclusively) seek to quantify the phenomenon from this starting point (Nagy & Szép, 2023; Renschler et al., 2010; Somers, 2009; Winderl, 2014).

The authors of this study instead follow the path of employing *case study-based approache*s, avoiding the statistical comparison of individual locations, if only because a significant measurement challenge regarding resilience is that the summation of individual social factors and descriptive statistics can be misleading, *as a strength in one factor is not necessarily able to compensate for a weakness in another*. Moreover, resilience requires the presence of attributes and competencies from the community that, at least in part, cannot be maximised simultaneously; their effects can cancel each other out.

Considering these two aspects, the authors endeavoured to create a *cognitive model* that might be suitable for examining the resilience of small towns (Pirisi, 2019). This model examines fundamental values of community resilience, such as *diversity, cohesion, and autonomy*, across three spheres *(economic, political, and community)*. Diversity has been a key element of ecologically-based studies from the outset (Holling, 1986), but it also plays a significant role in purely social or even economic approaches (Adger, 2000; Brown & Greenbaum, 2017). Cohesion or interconnectedness plays at least as prominent a role in studies, either directly (Adger, 2005; Townshend et al., 2016) or embedded in the concept of social capital (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Petzold, 2016; Szabó, 2015). The dimension of autonomy plays a central role in the concept of community "resourcefulness" (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013). Along with these factors, the characteristics typical of a resilient small town community can be determined (Table 1).

		Factors of resilience		
		Diversity	Cohesion	Autonomy
Some aspects of the local production of space	Social structures and relations based on reciprocity	Diversity in different segments of the population (age, social groups, ethnic/ religious structure, subcultures, etc.)	Strong connectedness to the local community (identity), high level of trust and social capital, integration and social inclusion	Self-organisation, significant civic activity, and the important role of NGOs
	Economic activity and market-based relations	High variety in size and sectors of economic role players.	Locally rooted enterprises and corporate social responsibility	Local control and availability of economic resources, local markets, and supply chains
	Political activity and power-based relations	Representation of different values, involvement of diverse groups in governance	Cooperation between political wings and actors, unity in basic strategic goals	The possibility of local decision-making and strategic planning

Table 1: Attributes of the resilient settlement in the political, economic, and social spheres.
Source: Pirisi, 2019.

This model describes the conditions for *adaptive resilience*. In our interpretation, *resilience is therefore a social construct* created by a spatially organised community, interconnected by institutionalised and informal relationships. It is a sum of skills and knowledge carried by these relationships, enabling continuous adaptation to changing social, economic, political, and ecological conditions perceived as external to the community, maintaining the community's functionality, and possessing the ability to expand its own skills and knowledge and renew its structure, thereby reducing the community's vulnerability (Pirisi, 2019).

However, the concept of resilience is not merely an academic question, *as it has become a fundamental element of EU planning in the last decade* (Baravikova et al., 2021; Joseph & Juncos, 2024), despite obvious uncertainties regarding its interpretation, especially its measurability. In Hungary, the era of resilience-based planning arrived in 2021 with the preparation of Sustainable Urban Development Strategies, a document that, in addition to large and medium-sized cities, was also prepared by some small towns. In these strategies, resilience appears as a tool for achieving long-term sustainability (Pirisi, 2023). The resilience of cities is interpreted as the sum of their *absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities*, meaning that resistance to crises and adaptation to changing circumstances are considered the

essence of resilience (and not, for example, rapid rebound or recovery). A resilient city, according to the manual serving as the basis for planning, is to be developed along the dimensions of a *prosperous city, a greening city, a digital city, a retaining city, and a servicing city* (MKB Consulting, 2021). With this, regional policy has elevated resilience to the level of a general narrative, essentially creating a metaphor for development. The conclusion, therefore, is that the guarantee for the development of small towns lies in their ability to develop the resilience inherent in their communities.

4 Conclusion

Historically, the small town was a very stable formation within the settlement network. It was, in fact, a living anachronism, maintaining its fundamental functions for centuries in an almost unchanged form by providing markets and services to the population of the surrounding rural areas. Even the modernisation that began in the 19th century and unfolded in the 20th century only changed this insofar as small towns became integrated into the institutional, infrastructural, and economic networks organised within nation-state frameworks. Consequently, small towns were spaces of stability, slow growth, and, on the whole, predictability.

This role has been transformed by the process of globalisation, fundamentally challenging the historically established roles of small towns. The external conditions determining development have disrupted previously functioning networks. They have caused a reorganisation in economic life, where the otherwise limited success of reindustrialisation is now taking place along the lines of integration into global networks. The conditions for the previous reproduction of local social structures have been changed by the increasing role of migration, primarily through out-migration.

Previously, the stability of small towns was primarily given by their low exposure to external shocks. This situation has changed; to counterbalance increasing exposure, a growing degree of resilience is, or would be, necessary. When we talk about the resilience of small towns, the strengths and weaknesses of these communities can be clearly outlined. If cohesion or interconnectedness is considered a determining factor, then its conditions are present within the framework of small-town society. Diversity, however, stands on more uncertain ground in all dimensions. The societies of ageing small towns, constantly losing young, skilled layers through migration, are homogenised in a negative sense; with the emptying out of certain age groups, the value of pluralism of these societies also decreases. The diversity of economic life is paradoxically most at risk in those places where the success of reindustrialisation is indicated by the appearance of a few particularly large players relative to the size of the local labour market, capable of drawing labour away from local small and medium-sized enterprises. Finally, the dimension of autonomy would also mean exercising control over the resources necessary for adaptation, in which regard, there are not simply shortcomings, but the tendency of change is also rather unfavourable in this respect. Some Hungarian small towns are trying to strengthen their resilience precisely by increasing their embeddedness at the expense of their autonomy, and – twisting the original concept – are awaiting guarantees for future development from the central government. This strategy may provide a short-term competitive advantage for certain communities, but in the long run, it is unlikely to lead to the creation of resilient and sustainable settlements.

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Povzetek

Prispevek obravnava pomen srednjeevropskih manjših mest v 21. stoletju. Čeprav ta mesta niso svetovna središča moči, v njih živi pomemben delež prebivalstva in zagotavljajo ključne storitve okoliškim podeželskim območjem. Avtorji poudarjajo, da je razprava o manjših mestih pravočasna, saj sta globalizacija in upad mehanizmov državne porazdelitve sredstev temeljno spremenila njihove razvojne pogoje. Članek preučuje različne konceptualne okvire ter izpostavlja različne pristope avtorjev, med katerimi so statistični, vidik centralnih funkcij in aksiomatski pogled. Članek ugotavlja, da lahko lingivstične razlike odražajo različne poglede. S poudarkom na učinkih globalizacije na madžarska majhna mesta v srednjeevropskem kontekstu članek predlaga koncept odpornosti kot analitični okvir. Obravnava več globalnih izzivov, s katerimi se trenutno sooča regija, kot so zmanjševanje vloge države, gospodarska prestrukturiranja in reindustrializacija, vplivi pandemije ter migracijska vprašanja. Pristop prilagodljive odpornosti poudarja pomen krepitve sposobnosti skupnosti za samostojno prilagajanje, kar je ključno za prihodnost manjših mest danes.