

A small monograph of big cities – The logic behind the regional foundations of growth*

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Bálint Filep:

A nagyvárosok az európai és a magyar területi politikában

(Big cities in European and Hungarian regional policy)

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After the authors graduation in finance at the Faculty of Business Administration and Management of Széchenyi István University, his interest gradually shifted, through comparative economic policy disciplines, to international relations and eventually to regional policy. Bálint Filep gradually shifted his interest. The key topics of his PhD thesis connected to higher education development policy and its labour market implications. Beyond the topics of welfare states, social economy, regional economics and their labour market correlations are also organic parts of his professional expertise. In addition to his professional activity, during his university studies, he assumed several public functions: as an opinion leader and interest conciliator, among other positions, he was President of the Students' Union at Széchenyi István University, as secretary he worked for the Nonprofit Association for the University of Győr, and he was also member of the Rector's Council at Széchenyi István University. Utilizing his previously gained experiences in university procedures and academic community as a research fellow; at present he is associate professor at the Department of Regional Studies and Public Policy and has served as Chancellor of Széchenyi István University since November 2014.

The monograph entitled *Big cities in European and Hungarian regional policy* was published in 2014 within the framework of the Doctoral School for Regional and Economic Sciences, established in 2004.

In the two decades preceding the mid-2000s, the *concept of settlement networks* and the network and settlement hierarchy oriented approach to regional processes had been largely neglected in the Hungarian scientific community. The interrelated *role of cities*, however, *has increasingly gained significance* both in terms of

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population concentration and economic performance. To put this in perspective, while 30 per cent of the world's population was urban in 1950 and this ratio rose to 54 per cent by 2014, by 2050, 66 per cent of the world's population is projected to be urban (UN 2015¹). In OECD countries, GDP per capita is, on average, 64 per cent higher in urban areas than in rural areas (UN 2013²). These *concentration, densification and realignment processes are also presented in Hungary* (albeit to a lesser degree), and their management inevitably requires shifts and a higher degree of harmonisation both in development policy and the resource coordination and execution thereof. Focusing on the level of major cities functioning as individual network centres that react actively to the processes mentioned above, in this monograph, Bálint Filep presents the background of Hungarian urbanisation processes with the synthesis of the most recognised Hungarian regionalists' research outputs and highlights the most important Hungarian and international policy dimensions that determine urban policy.

The *process-oriented reasoning and editing* of the work provide a clear framework of for the *development paths* of the Hungarian medium sized and large cities and introduces the main urban development directions that have still impact on regional development. Among these issues, the author sheds light on such interconnections as the way in which the *underestimation of the communication and transport sectors in the socialist era* gave rise to regional and thematic and territorial dissonances in the allocation of production capacities and “accentuated higher centres”, which largely determined the – still persisting – imbalances of Hungarian industrial development and regional processes.

Modelling the evolution of Hungarian towns and cities, the author dedicates a separate chapter to the *development of two cities, Győr and Nyíregyháza*. In this section of the book, using complex, multidimensional competitiveness indicators, the author provides evidence that, despite the East-West imbalances of the country, altogether the adequate size (of over 100,000 inhabitants), the social recognition of education and knowledge, embedded in cultural and religious traditions, furthermore the regional concentration of manufacturing sector developments can cause leading position in the settlement network, even if the given territory can not benefit from the government's central development priorities. The growth pattern of the two cities, however, also highlights significant differences: broadly interpreted cooperation with rural and partner city regions constitutes a pivotal point in the sustainability of long-term growth. In this regard, Nyíregyháza still faces considerable challenges, addressing the striking development disparities between

¹ UN – DESA (2015): World Urbanization Prospects – the 2014 Revision, Final Report

² UN – HABITAT (2013): State of the World's Cities 2012/2013

the city and its neighboring areas, as well as to the implementation of a dynamically functioning urban triplets of Nyíregyháza–Debrecen–Oradea region.

Looking *ahead*, along with the foreign urban policy visions, the author sets out directions for the future development of the Hungarian settlement network highlighting the development potentials of the cross-border urban regions, and the urban network's impact on the diffusion and promotion of innovation.

The book also provides a summary of the *potential methodological*, tools and classification methods required for the exploration of the horizontal and vertical (hierarchical) processes transpiring in the *urban network*. In this context, as one of the most frequently used method, the author gives prominence to the factor and cluster analyses that form the basis of many multivariate analyses; in addition, he introduces the Global Competitiveness Index (developed by A.T. Kearney in 2008) and some average dimensions of the complex competitiveness rankings, exemplifying the methods and scopes behind these complex, multivariate statistical indexes.

The monograph of Bálint Filep on big cities equally supports the implementation of an *evidence-based policy* – both in terms of the urban developments historical horizon and regional integration in the international space – and the high-level decision planning work of regional and local government bodies; moreover, it identifies the key points of *towns' capacity to act* and deliver their projects, highlighting, the institutional capacities and social capital of the regions concerned. *The book knowledge base also contributes to the efficient absorption of EU funds under the 2014–2020 programming period*, giving special attention to the implementation of the territorially integrated urban development strategies in cities with county rights and in their surroundings, and to the spatially-sensitive utilisation of innovation resources.

From a policy and scientific perspective the book provides a comprehensive overview of the ongoing processes of the Hungarian medium and large-sized towns for the university students, and for the civil servants and other officeholders in the institutional system of the Hungarian development policy as well. Given that we are only at the beginning of the 2014-2020 EU programming period latter stakeholders' professional competence has special importance in the efficient delivery of the development policy. Based on these issues the adaptation of the book's valuable information may also provide a guarantee for successful implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the National Development and Territorial Development Concept published by the government in January 2014 and achieving the objectives defined in the Partnership Agreement with the European Commission.