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## **Alligators in the Sewers: Urban Legends about Terrifying Animals and Frightening Places**

### **Abstract**

The aim of the present study is to provide an overall picture of the nature of urban folklore using the “Alligators in the Sewers” urban legend type circulated in both the Hungarian and international press and by word of mouth. While contemporary legends have attracted only sporadic attention in Hungarian research to date, by illustrating the historical development of this legend type the aim of the present case study is to demonstrate how the phenomenon has existed in the Hungarian press for almost 200 years.

The present study attempts to identify the kind of opportunities for interpretation offered by these stories in the field of folkloristics; the extent to which they are relevant beyond their literal meaning; and the ways in which they shed light on modern-day understandings of the world. Giant reptiles that are not indigenous to Europe are terrifying to the average individual, while at the same time they evoke a yearning for the natural world in city dwellers trapped amid concrete walls. Urban sewers and storm drains hold similar terrors: on the one hand, they are there to remove filth and symbolize the more unsavory aspects of urban life, while on the other hand their hidden presence beneath the ground offers ample opportunity for the projection of numerous fantasies. Animals that lurk in the sewers, from where they emerge to attack people, are manifestations, contained within simple, traditional narrative frameworks, of the murkiness of highly structured societies and of the sense of danger that this opacity engenders in us. The emergence and persistence of such stories can be attributed to a number of social practices, such as circuses, sideshows, and the keeping of reptiles as pets, along with the respective press reports and rumors.

**Keywords:** folk culture, urban culture, legends, crocodiles, fear



Stories about reptiles – chiefly crocodiles and alligators – that end up living in sewers and storm drains have been circulated in large numbers in both oral and written form since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> To date, most of the variants of this legend type have emerged in the United States, while in most of these versions the events take place in big American cities.<sup>2</sup> Although at first sight such stories would seem to be typical of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in fact they have a long history.<sup>3</sup> One recently published study has highlighted 2000-year-old parallels as well as related stories dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> When it comes to urban and contemporary legends, one might justifiably question what it is that makes these stories modern, and why they are associated with big cities and the metropolitan lifestyle. The answer lies primarily in the fact that the written press, which plays a decisive role in modern mass societies and which is an integral aspect of the urban lifestyle, is crucial to the circulation of such stories, while they are perpetuated in many other areas of popular culture, from film and television to the Internet.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, for the past five decades the urban legends have been interpreted in the literature as metaphors for the anxieties experienced by the broad and internally stratified middle class of contemporary urban society.<sup>6</sup>

Researchers have recognized the phenomenon known as the urban or contemporary legend for more or less 100 years: it was first identified and investigated in the 1930s by renowned press historians in Germany.<sup>7</sup> The topic became fashionable in academic circles once again after the Second World War, when a large number of North American sociologists, psycholo-

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<sup>1</sup> On the dichotomy between the oral and written dissemination of contemporary legends, see Fischer 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Colemann 1979; Brunvand 1981: 90–98; Brunvand 2011: 174–178; Brunvand 2012: 64–65.

<sup>3</sup> For analyses of ancient and medieval parallels to contemporary legends, see: Ellis 1983; Ellis 2001; Messerli 2006; Bennett 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Asplund Ingemark 2008.

<sup>5</sup> On the role of mass media in the dissemination of legends and folklore in general, see Dégh 1994; Nicolaisen 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Benvenuto 2000 (2004): 77–105. Page numbers refer to the Hungarian edition, which was consulted during the writing of the present study. Fine–Ellis 2010: 1–20. Work on the study was supported by a grant from the “Momentum” program of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, MTA Lendület\_2020-56 (*Locality Embedded in the Web of Global Transitions. Ecological anthropology mediating between local communities and global changes in the Carpathian Basin*). I would like to take this opportunity to thank biologist and ethnographer Dániel Babai for his help in the writing of the present study.

<sup>7</sup> Shojaei Kawan 1995.

gists, and folklorists began working in this field.<sup>8</sup> While it was primarily the folkloristic approach that dominated at the time, in what follows I also draw on aspects of the first two academic fields. The Hungarian versions of one such legend type that are presented in this study represent the fundamental characteristics of the urban legend, while at the same time illustrating the paradoxes of urban life.

In the case of the “Alligators in the Sewers”<sup>9</sup> legend type, the role of the metropolis is particularly important: indeed, in most variants – and especially those collected in America – the events emphatically take place in cities with populations of many millions, typically New York, or more rarely Chicago. The Hungarian-language versions examined in the present paper likewise typically situate the story in these big U.S. cities, and occasionally in Tokyo, Paris, London, or Munich.

In the present study, I attempt to answer two questions. Firstly: Which specific human fears associated with life in the metropolis can the story be interpreted as a metaphor of? Secondly: What factors have contributed to the enduring popularity over the last 200 years of stories about reptiles lurking in the urban sewerage system? Which social practices, primarily in terms of attitudes to wildlife, have contributed to the persistence of the story in the press, and presumably also in oral tradition? And finally, how does the story reflect the typical human relationship with the natural world?

## Sources

Although even the journalists themselves occasionally disprove the stories that appear time and again in the press, such stories continue to crop up.<sup>10</sup> Interest in urban legends and the role of the press in disseminating them has

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<sup>8</sup> Although it remains an important area of research in North America today, interest in the topic is far less pronounced in Europe. However, as can be seen from the bibliography included at the end of the present study, some important publications on the topic have been written, and continue to be written, in German for example.

<sup>9</sup> The stories popular in the United States refer to alligators, although in the Hungarian press both crocodiles and alligators appear, the two typically being used as synonyms. In fact, species belonging to the order Crocodylia can be classified into two families: true crocodiles (Crocodylidae) and alligators (Alligatoridae). Where not otherwise specified, in the present study I use the umbrella name “crocodile,” which appears most often in Hungarian texts, while in unambiguous, American cases, “alligator” is used. The name for this legend type was coined by Jan Harold Brunvand and is universally accepted in the literature, thus it has been used throughout.

<sup>10</sup> Dián 2005.

so far been sporadic on the part of Hungarian folklorists<sup>11</sup>, although even in Hungary the phenomenon can be observed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> To date, only a few contemporary legends circulated by word of mouth in Hungarian have been collected, which precludes a historical analysis of the oral tradition of the phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> I have used online press archives to help fill the gaps in the almost 100-year-old research history. Search words, or rather word pairs, used to investigate Hungarian-language press sources yielded the legend-related data shown in the table in the appendix.<sup>14</sup>

The use of historical press archives also proved useful in terms of tracing the social history of changes in the relationship between city dwellers and reptiles: however, in this case they served not as a source but rather as an illustration, rendering the processes as perceptible as possible.<sup>15</sup>

## The topic and its appearance in Hungary

The individual narratives each highlight different episodes in the lives of crocodiles or alligators that live in the sewers. Typically, the framework of the story involves an individual who returns to the city from an exotic summer vacation and brings back a baby crocodile. However, the individual in question gradually realizes that keeping this kind of reptile as a pet is likely to prove difficult in the long term, so they flush it down the toilet. Having survived the journey home, the reptile then ends up in the sewer where it

<sup>11</sup> Before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the question was only rarely explored in Hungarian folkloristics (e.g. Hoppál–Frank 1980; Voigt 1986: 85). First summary: Nagy 2006. Besides folkloristics, the theme attracts interest among psychologists in more Western countries. In Hungary, interest among psychologists is also sporadic (e.g. Mérő 2005). In addition, journalists deal with this topic in the interests of enabling readers to differentiate between real news and hoaxes or fake news. On this, see Marinov–Dezső–Pál 2006. György Szabó, an essayist writing for *Élet és Irodalom*, a weekly magazine about literature and politics, made many valuable observations about the legend type discussed here, which continue to be pertinent today (Szabó 1973).

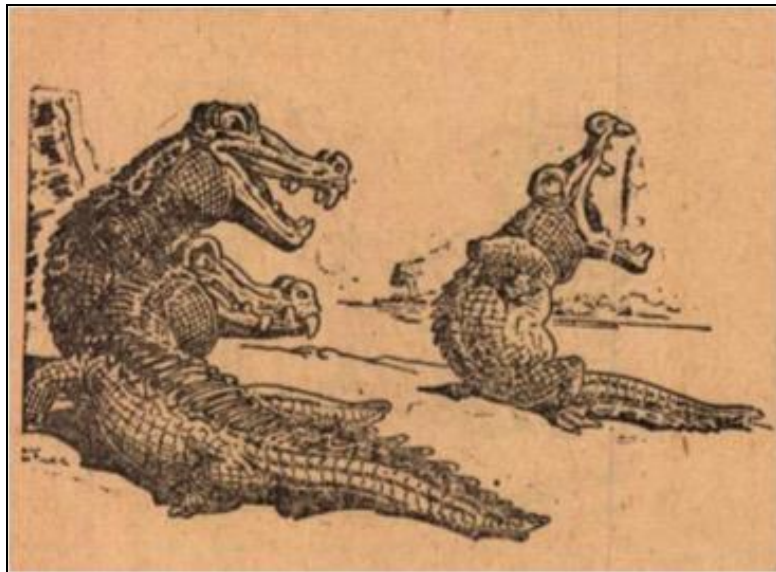
<sup>12</sup> Tracing one legend type, see Mikos 2021.

<sup>13</sup> For a compilation of data before the 2000s, see Nagy 2006.

<sup>14</sup> The finds were generated by four Hungarian word pairs (*krokodil* – *csatorna* [crocodile – sewer], *aligátor* – *csatorna* [alligator – sewer], *krokodil* – *kanális* [crocodile – drain], *aligátor* – *kanális* [alligator – drain]). Further legend-related data can be expected to come to light in the course of further analytical browsing.

<sup>15</sup> The legend type has also turned up regularly in the online press in the last two decades: several Hungarian-language portals are even involved in refuting the truth of these and similar stories. The retrospective nature of the present study and its limited length do not allow for an examination of online data.

grows to adulthood and eventually emerges or attracts attention. In some narratives, people working in the sewers become aware of the alligator, or the alligator attacks them. In other variants, the alligator climbs or bursts its way out of the sewer, and once above ground commences to attack unsuspecting passersby. Many versions of the story include an account of the reptiles' habits. In several cases the reptiles are said to feed on the rats that live in the sewers, or on dead bodies and rubbish floating in the water. In other cases, the narrator points out that an alligator that has grown up in the dark will be white, since it has not been exposed to sufficient light. Stories in which the entire process, both the keeping of the tiny reptile and its subsequent release, can be attributed to a particular hit song or temporary craze form a special subset of the Hungarian-language versions of the story. Likewise, giving the story a happy ending is apparently a local development: rather than attacking anyone, the crocodile is eventually rescued from the sewer and spends the rest of its life peacefully in a zoo.<sup>16</sup>



Pic. Nr. 1. *Basking crocodiles – cartoon.*  
1929. *Újság*. Vol. 5. 111. 30.

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<sup>16</sup> Similarly happy endings can be found in the Hungarian-language variants of the “Snake in the Banana” legend type as well: here too, the adventurous animals end their long journeys in the local zoo. See Mikos 2021: 113.

There are several factors indicating the legend-like nature of the story and the impossibility of substantiating it. Large reptiles such as crocodiles and alligators (Crocodylidae and Alligatoridae) are found primarily in tropical zones, where they live in wetland habitats and swamps. While there is certainly no shortage of water in urban sewerage networks, pollution, lack of light, and the cold continental climate of the big cities in the northern United States create a far from ideal habitat, even when the warmth of the sewage is taken into account. There is very little chance of a reptile surviving for any length of time in such conditions.<sup>17</sup> Although individual episodes within the story might conceivably happen in reality – there are indeed cases of reptiles that have been kept as household pets being set free for example, and, as we shall see below, such reptiles might even remain alive for a time – in its entirety the story that has given rise to the legend could never take place in real life.

The familiarity and popularity of this story type in Hungarian is particularly interesting, since in Hungary, unlike the United States<sup>18</sup>, large reptiles of this kind have never lived in the wild. However, large predators like gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) and brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) which were native in Carpathian Basin and have been persecuted in human-wildlife conflicts are not manifested in urban legends. At the same time, scarcely any Hungarian-language versions of the first urban legend types recorded in America – such as the “Spider in the Hairdo” or the “Department Store Snakes” – have come to light thus far, even though the animals they feature are also indigenous to Hungary.<sup>19</sup>

The “Alligator in the Sewer” legend type has been present in the Hungarian press since the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the first variant predates by around 100 years the first occurrence in the American press, in the February 10, 1935, edition of *The New York Times*.<sup>20</sup> A brief excerpt from the text published in *The New York Times* can be read in Hungarian in a regional newspaper from the early 1990s.<sup>21</sup> However, the earliest Hungarian-

<sup>17</sup> Brunvand 2011: 176–177.

<sup>18</sup> Alligators are an integral aspect of local folklore in the United States, especially in the South, where many alligators are to be found. Cf. Reitter 2005. Representation of crocodile is extremely rare in Hungarian folk culture. A crocodile is visible on the painted wooden ceiling of Hungarian Reformed Church in *Szilágylompért* (Lompirt, Romania) probably as symbol of guilt. Vígh 2019: 193–194.

<sup>19</sup> For more on this legend type: Klintberg 1985; Mullen 1970; Fine–Ellis 149–162.

<sup>20</sup> Coleman 1979: 337–338.

<sup>21</sup> For a description of the so-called Candolucci case, a word-by-word translation of an excerpt from an article in the *New York Times*, see: György Mandics: Parabolha. Krokodil a

language occurrence dates from far earlier: it sets the story in Munich, where people claimed to have seen a crocodile in an open sewer in a public park.<sup>22</sup>

The story has appeared regularly in the Hungarian press since the 1950s: in the 150 years before that, it could be found on relatively few occasions and included few details. For Hungarians, the 1950s meant the adoption of Stalinism. Almost all opportunities for travel disappeared, while poor standards of living encouraged many people to attempt to cross the “green border” into Austria, and from there travel to Western Europe or America. This brief, easily accessible, terrifying story may have proved useful to Hungarian journalists as a way of discouraging emigration and counterbalancing the difficult living conditions by presenting the world’s big cities as extremely dangerous places where monsters emerged from the sewers.

The popularity of the theme following the change of political system may be due to several factors. On the one hand, Hungary’s proliferating television channels regularly broadcast the American horror film “Alligator” in the 1990s, a film that brought to life the legend type discussed here: an alligator, which has been lurking for some time in the sewer, rips open a manhole cover and bursts through the road surface into the street, attacking anything that crosses its path.<sup>23</sup> Films, oral circulation, and the dissemination of the legend in the press could nevertheless be mutually reinforcing. On the other hand, the 1990s saw the liberation of Hungary’s press market in place of the earlier Socialist press that had been controlled by the party state, subject to strict censorship and journalistic self-censorship, and unaffected by market conditions, which meant that sensationalist tabloids, for example, could once again be published.<sup>24</sup> This gave greater scope than ever for fabrications, hoaxes, unfounded rumors, and legend-like stories in a press that now operated according to the rules of supply and demand.

## Interpretations

According to the literature, the function of the many contemporary legend types is to render visible the most hidden human fears and to portray in images and scenes anxieties that the average individual would otherwise be

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csatornában [“Alligory”: Crocodile in the sewer]. 1991 *Dévilág*, Vol. 48. 281. 326. [Appendix]

<sup>22</sup> *Hírnök*, 1837. Vol. 1. 65. [without page numbers]

<sup>23</sup> Smith 1990: 142–143; Koven 2008: 105; Mann 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Gulyás 2000.

unable to express. Members of highly structured societies, for the most part living in bigger cities, are exposed to an extraordinary variety of visual stimuli, from massive billboards through the regular viewing of television shows and films to the memes that circulate on the Internet, which doubtless explains the increased significance of the visualization of narratives.<sup>25</sup> This has favored the elaboration and dissemination of legends – such as the one examined in the present study – that are centered around spectacular and easy to imagine figures and events. The story contains two essential elements: the location and the animal.

For a city dweller, there are few more terrifying places than the sewers that run beneath the streets. Besides being dark and smelly, sewers are home to rats and germs, sources of countless hidden dangers and potential breeding grounds for infections, or even pandemics. They may provide hiding places for fugitives or be used to conceal evidence of crimes. If a city dweller wishes to get rid of anything, it is flushed down the toilet into the sewer. As by-products of human life functions, where all kinds of filth are collected, sewers have been symbols of squalor, crime, and danger since ancient times.<sup>26</sup> The practice of laying pipes to carry off urban wastewater has existed since ancient times: the oldest closed sewerage network dates from 3000 to 4000 BC.<sup>27</sup> The culture of hygiene in cities declined in the Middle Ages, which was doubtless the reason for the plagues that regularly decimated the population of Europe. The connection between urban waste and disease was recognized in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In the face of increasing overcrowding in cities and in the interests of suppressing the continuous outbreaks of cholera, work began on developing a waste collection and urban sewerage network to ensure that contaminated water was kept entirely separate from drinking water.<sup>28</sup>

Although the microorganisms that breed in the sewers, which are invisible to the naked eye, represent a far greater danger to the human population than wild animals in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, they are nevertheless harder to visualize and talk about. Because they are invisible, they never, or very rarely, feature in legends. By contrast, there are countless known variations of the many legend types associated with large carnivores, despite the fact that people living in modern, urban environments scarcely ever come across such

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<sup>25</sup> Gerndt 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Asplund Ingemark 2008: 145.

<sup>27</sup> Juhász 2008: 9–10.

<sup>28</sup> Melosi 2008; Fónagy 2014; Fónagy 2016. On the history of sewers in Hungary in a European context and from a historical perspective, see Juhász 2008.



animals by chance.<sup>29</sup> The appearance in contemporary legends of animals, and especially arthropods, amphibians, reptiles, and rodents that are – in many cases erroneously – believed to be harmful, as well as the appearance of large predators, is connected with the “demagicking” of stories and their distancing from the religious worldview. Among other things, contemporary legends differ from what can be considered traditional legends and tales in that they do not feature mythical beings such as witches, dwarves, giants, and devils.<sup>30</sup> However, the wild animals in these legends are not entirely identical to their real-life counterparts, since they convey ideological and religious concepts imposed on them over millennia, as well as attributes that have taken shape in traditional legends. The wild animals that feature in the urban environments of contemporary legends occasionally have magical attributes, partly inherited from the mythical creatures of traditional legends and partly recognizable from popular culture – for example comics, films, and television series.<sup>31</sup> Thus, for example, the crocodiles that lurk in the sewerage system and occasionally attack humans are presented as mutant creatures<sup>32</sup>: they are remarkably similar to the strange, hybrid beings found in Marvel comic strips and films, which assume qualities bordering on the supernatural.

According to the other approach already touched on above, contemporary legends can be interpreted metaphorically in every instance.<sup>33</sup> For millennia, reptiles – whether snakes and lizards or crocodiles and alligators – have channeled various human anxieties and have been associated with images of evil, treachery, crime, and danger.<sup>34</sup> The academic analysis of these stories is justified by the nature of these texts as “social valves.” The stories contain elemental human anxieties, which, while they may go back millennia, are still relevant today, and which are often embodied in the form of phobias of specific creatures such as spiders, snakes, or other reptiles and amphibians.

The emergence of the story can be explained as the perpetuation of traditions that date back thousands of years. However, many other factors may also play a role in the elaboration and perpetuation of the present-day –

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<sup>29</sup> This is also perhaps why, unsurprisingly, some kind of animal features in the title of many of the first summaries, anthologies, and monographs on the theme: see Brunvand 1984; Brunvand 1988; Brednich 1990; Brednich 1991; Brednich 1993; Brednich 1996.

<sup>30</sup> On the differences between village and urban legends, see Dégh 1975. On the close links between traditional and contemporary legends, see Dégh 1996; Dégh 2001.

<sup>31</sup> On the interrelationships between contemporary legends and popular culture, see Dégh 1994; Brunvand 2004. Popular culture has also integrated a great deal from traditional folklore. An exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>32</sup> Koven 2008: 105.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. e.g., Szabó 1973. Fine–Ellis 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Sax 2001; Vigh ed. 2019.

contemporary or urban – form of this legend type: these include the continuously evolving attitudes to wildlife in Western societies and, more or less similarly but with a slight delay, also in East-Central Europe, as well as changes in the ways in which wild animals, and especially carnivores, are present in the world's big cities. The presence of wild animals, including large reptiles, in European cities in the temperate zone has always been seen as a curiosity, and all occurrences have been reported in turn by the press. In what follows, I illustrate how this has taken place across several broad periods of time, and how the phenomenon has been reflected in the press.

### **Crocodiles in Hungary: Changes in attitudes to wild animals in the 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries**

The relationship between human beings and wild animals has undergone many changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In what follows, I explore key moments in the history of the development of the relationship between animals and human beings, and especially between unusual carnivores and average newspaper readers on the lookout for entertainment, in order to highlight those moments that are materialized in the emergence and perpetuation of contemporary legends. The process ranges from the Enlightenment ideal of the human desire to govern the natural world to the concept of animal protection, with numerous stages in between. At the same time, while intellectual attitudes towards wildlife have undergone significant changes, or indeed a fundamental transformation, in the past 150 to 200 years, it is striking that no substantial change can be observed in the urban legends that represent the morals of ordinary – middle-class – people, and in the corresponding rumors and hoaxes. This would suggest that the basic moral position and mentality of a newspaper-reading individual of average education does not necessarily follow the dominant trends. According to the literature, urban or contemporary legends are the embodiments of average morals and the moderate attitude acceptable to the majority, and they mediate a kind of average opinion.<sup>35</sup>

Public zoos opened in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in most of Europe's big cities (private zoos were already in existence), while opportunities to become acquainted with the animal world existed in many other forms as well. Most of these forms have been consigned to history, although traces of them have been preserved both in reliable published reports and in the form

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<sup>35</sup> Stehr 1998.

of fictitious rumors and hoaxes that resemble them but have no, or little, connection with reality. The latter correspond to the individual motifs or plot elements of the legend. These rumors and hoaxes, however, are the distorted, exaggerated versions or parodies of these motifs and plot elements.

From the middle of the century, there were a growing number of reports of traveling shows exhibiting real animals in big cities, and occasionally in smaller settlements too, generally in the context of staged tableaux. Fights with wild animals had already featured in gladiatorial shows in antiquity and may even have included vanquishing giant reptiles. The animal displays in the repertoires of traveling circuses and menageries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also included exhibitions of reptiles. These shows belong to the medieval tradition of the “theater of fear” and were chiefly intended to strike terror into their audiences: the relationship between animals and humans took on a militant aspect, in which a typically deliberately aroused animal was subdued by its trainer. An animal tamer placing their head in the mouth of a lion or a crocodile embodied the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideal of the subjugation of nature by human beings, demonstrating how they were capable of gaining mastery over animals that were presented as wilder and even more terrifying than in reality.<sup>36</sup>

Unsurprisingly, people at that time were terrified of these exotic carnivores, even though there was almost no chance of encountering such animals in their everyday lives. At the same time, one of the properties of the urban or contemporary legend that is emphasized chiefly by psychologists is that it represents the human desire to spy and human attempts to uncover secrets.<sup>37</sup> Reports – probably hoaxes or fake news – of someone coming across a wild animal that, according to the news article, may have escaped from a circus, are fairly common in the contemporary press.<sup>38</sup> It is not impossible to imagine an animal escaping from a circus or menagerie and roaming around for a time on a riverbank or in a forest. However, the frequency with which this particular rumor, and others like it, cropped up in the contemporary press is not borne out by the numbers of traveling circuses and shows, or by the numbers of wild animals that escaped. It is rather the case that the storyteller would have liked to encounter a dangerous animal, since their relationship with danger was somewhat ambivalent: they both hoped for and dreaded such an encounter, to inject a little excitement into their lives.

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<sup>36</sup> Tait 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Sergio Benvenuto associated this chiefly with others’ love lives, although it is potentially true of other areas of life. Benvenuto 2000 (2004): 25–46.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., N. A. 1882: 228; N. A. 1938: 19.



Pic. Nr. 2. Advertisement for a show featuring a live crocodile. 1871. *Szegedi Híradó*. Vol. 13. 116.

In the interwar period, crocodiles were mentioned in the Hungarian press rather as the raw material for bags, wallets, and shoes. At the time, fur and leather coats, footwear, and other accessories made from the skins of wild animals were regarded as prestige objects, suggesting prosperity and luxury. Demand for snake and crocodile skins was met chiefly by the Far East, where animals were bred on crocodile or snake farms as sources of special reptile leathers. Wearing snake or crocodile skin dresses still fit into the paradigm of dominating nature.

The wearing of leather and fur began to go out of fashion in the 1980s, influenced by the animal protection laws passed in response to social pressure. Many fashion and cosmetics companies joined the campaign for animal protection, declaring, for example, that their goods were produced without cruelty, without the senseless destruction of animals, and without animal testing.

A Trencsintéren Kolozsvárt  
csak néhány napig látható  
nagy  
kelet-sudáni állatsereglet,  
melyben a legkülönbözőbb ragadozó állatok láthatók.  
Ugymint: oroszlanok Berberidből, Afrika, Nubia, Senegalból;  
tigrisek Braziliából; leopardok és párducok Indiából;  
foltos és csikos hiénák, vagy az ugynevezett sirások; külön-  
böző faj farkasok, sakálók és medvék, struozmada-  
rak és saskeselyük, lámák és guanagok, mufflonok,  
antilopok, szarvasok a Pampás hegysegből, különböző faj  
majmok, papagályok és kajdácsok, krokodil, alligator  
boa constrictor, király, vagy óriáskigyó.  
Naponta két nagy előadás etetéssel  
egybekötve  
Az első előadás délután 4 órakor, a második este 8 órakor.  
Fellépte a híres francia állatszeliidítő  
mademoiselle ROSETTE,  
a kitűnően idomított oroszlan, párduc és farkassával. Továbbá  
fellép a világhírű állatszeliidítő  
Signor RAVIOLI,  
az ő idomított állataival.  
Helyárak: 1-ső hely 40 kr 2-ik hely 20 kr.  
498 1-2 Tisztelettel  
Az igazgatóság.

Pic. Nr. 3. "Menagerie of East-Sudan." Advertisement for a traveling zoo and animal taming show. 1895. Magyar Polgár [Cluj-Kolozsvár]. Vol. 9. 158. [no page numbers]

In the period that followed the Second World War, imports of luxury and even exotic goods were not promoted in Hungary. The 1950s, however, which were known explicitly as a decade of poverty, saw the renaissance of the "Alligators in the Sewers" legend. In the later decades of Socialism, however, there were new developments. The keeping of small reptiles in terrariums became increasingly popular throughout the world. In the way of all trends, this one was also taken to the extreme: the keeping of large wild animals as pets in the West was a way of showing off or an expression of eccentricity. An illegal industry grew up around the hobby, and although from time to time there are reports of the discovery of smuggled animals, this bizarre moneymaking enterprise continues to flourish.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Van Uhm 2016.



Article 1. Bizarre bequest. *Népszava*. 1960. 88. 303. 4.<sup>40</sup>

The presence in the city of large animals, including reptiles, kept as pets suggested the publication of spoof stories – hoaxes and rumors. The fact that they are hoaxes is confirmed by the lack of concrete detail and the tendency towards exaggeration.

The most popular exaggerations and typical press-reported rumors in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century include reports of people walking pet crocodiles on leads, or perhaps taking them to the cinema<sup>41</sup>, or people keeping exotic reptiles at home in a swimming pool or bathtub. These latter stories were published in the Hungarian press during the Socialist era to illustrate the decadence of the West and to demonstrate the excessive opulence and ludicrous manias of the people who lived there.<sup>42</sup> Some articles go even further;

<sup>40</sup> A quite extraordinary individual has recently died in New York. When the police entered his apartment, they discovered a python, an alligator, an aquarium full of poisonous fish, six parrots, two cats, and various other animals. The ravenous python was killed immediately to prevent it from causing injury, while the other animals were taken to the zoo.

<sup>41</sup> N. A. 1959: 4.

<sup>42</sup> N. A. 1944.

reporting how the animal breaks out of captivity and subsequently bathes in a shopping mall fishpond or wallows about in a branch of the city's river.<sup>43</sup>



Article 2. Bitten by a snake...

*Szabad Szó*. 1981. 38. 77. 4.<sup>44</sup>

Occasionally, however, the owners of unusual and sometimes dangerous animals do indeed get tired of them. The releasing of turtles into the wild has led to the major ecological disturbance of domestic water habitats.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, alligator turtles have caused severe damage in the past two decades due to the growing trend for keeping predatory reptiles as pets. Large predatory reptiles

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<sup>43</sup> E.g. N.A. 1995: 18.

<sup>44</sup> Around 80 reptiles, including an alligator, were being kept in the apartment of a young Californian man who dies after being bitten by a cobra almost 1 meter in length. The "livestock" belonging to Knut Anderson, a 27-year-old truck driver, also included a number of poisonous snakes. The young man was fatally bitten by a cobra that he was keeping in his bedroom. The orphaned snakes were taken to the San Diego zoo, where the value of the collection was estimated at around 11,000 dollars.

<sup>45</sup> Panker 2013.

that are native to the temperate zone are able to survive in conditions in Hungary and represent a grave danger to indigenous species.<sup>46</sup>

Both reliable reports and hoaxes about animals that have escaped or that have been released into the wild, as well as news and information concerning the illegal trade in wild animals and the official measures to prevent it, have all helped to perpetuate the “Alligators in the Sewers” legend. On the one hand, these legends, as we have seen above, are metaphors for the fears engendered by the mysterious, underworld powers of the big city, and, among other things, by the germs that breed in the sewers. Furthermore, despite the many regulations and the ever-increasing importance of animal protection, fears of actually being attacked by wild animals are not entirely unfounded, nor have they been allayed by the legal regulations related to animal protection in modern societies.

## Summary

The “Alligators in the Sewers” legend type is a part of urban folklore, while at the same time it is a simple way of evoking the dangers and unpredictability of life in the big city. Like all urban legends, it expresses moral truths, cautions self-restraint and the avoidance of extremes, and takes a stand against excess and exhibitionism. It calls attention to the dangers inherent in keeping wild animals as domestic pets in an urban environment, and to the importance of caring for the creatures entrusted to us. In addition, it focuses on what is still, even today, our rather ambivalent relationship with wildlife and on our anxieties with respect to the natural world, whether or not those anxieties are justified.

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<sup>46</sup> N. A. 1997: 16; Somogyiné Veres 2007: 3.



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## Appendix

### Variants of the “Alligators in the Sewers” legend type in the Hungarian press

Title or first line	Genre	Year	Organ of the press in which it appeared
<i>A müncheni közönség seregestül megy az Isarpartra</i> [Members of the public in Munich flock to the bank of the Isar]	News	1837	<i>Hírnök.</i> Vol. 1. 16. [without page numbers]
<i>Krokodil az utczei csatornában</i> [Crocodile in the gutter]	News	1912	<i>Az Újság.</i> Vol. 10. 131. 13.
<i>Krokodilok a kanálisban</i> [Crocodiles in the sewers]	News in brief	1958	<i>Fejér Megyei Hírlap.</i> Vol. 3. 41. 4.
<i>Krokodilok a kanálisban</i>	News in brief	1958	<i>Kisalföld.</i> Vol. 3. 34. 2.
<i>Krokodilok a kanálisban</i>	News in brief	1958	<i>Népszava.</i> Vol. 80. 36. 4.
<i>Kiment a divatból</i> [Out of fashion]	News in brief	1958	<i>Szabad Föld.</i> Vol. 14. 40. 4.
<i>A kíváncsi krokodil</i> [The curious crocodile]	News in brief	1959	<i>Népszava.</i> Vol. 87. 8. 4.
<i>Titokzatos állat a Rhone partján</i> [Mystery animal on the bank of the Rhone]	News	1969	<i>Hétfői Hírek.</i> Vol. 13. 24.
<i>Krokodilok a londoni csatornáikban</i> [Crocodiles in the London sewers]	News in brief	1976	<i>Előre.</i> Vol. 30. április 15. 4.
<i>Alvilági krokodilok</i> [Underworld crocodiles]	News in brief	1978	<i>Amerikai-Kanadai Magyar Élet.</i> Vol. 20. 10. 11.
György Moldova: <i>Krokodilok</i> [Crocodiles]	Sketch	1979	<i>Új Tükör.</i> Vol. 16. 60. 26.
<i>Egy krokodil lábszáron harapta...</i> [A crocodile bite on the leg]	News in brief	1983	<i>Magyar Nemzet.</i> Vol. 46. 115. 6.
<i>Útonálló krokodil</i> [Crocodile bandit] <sup>47</sup>	News in brief	1983	<i>Vas Népe.</i> Vol. 28. 113. 16.
<i>Útonálló krokodil</i>	News in brief	1983	<i>Zalai Hírlap.</i> Vol. 39. 113. 12.

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<sup>47</sup> The versions in the shaded rows were published on more or less the same date and with roughly the same text, even where the titles differ.

Útonálló krokodil	News in brief	1983	<i>Szabad Szó</i> . Vol. 40. 114. 4.
Útonálló krokodil	News in brief	1983	<i>Előre</i> . Vol. 37. május 24. 6.
<i>A harapós krokodil</i> [Snapping crocodile]	News in brief	1983	<i>Népszava</i> . Vol. 111. 113. 16.
<i>Csodálkozással fedezték fel a párizsi csatornák gondozói...</i> [Amazing discovery by the keepers of the Paris sewers]	News in brief	1984	<i>Magyar Nemzet</i> . Vol. 47. 82. 6.
<i>Krokodil a csatornában</i> [Crocodile in the sewer]	News in brief	1984	<i>Magyar Szó</i> . Vol. 41. 70. 8.
<i>Krokodil a kanálisban</i> [Crocodile in the sewer]	News	1987	<i>Magyarország</i> . Vol. 24. 50. 18.
Tamás Bihari: <i>Aligátor nincs, patkány is alig. A város zsigerei</i> [No alligators and scarcely any rats. The bowels of the city]	Reportage	1991	<i>A Világ</i> . Vol. 2. 30. 15–16.
György Mandics: <i>Parabolha – Krokodil a csatornában</i> [“Alligory”: Crocodile in the sewer]	Essay	1991	<i>Délvilág</i> . Vol. 48. 281. Otthon Magazin melléklet [without page numbers]
<i>Óra helyett</i> [In place of a clock]	Feuilleton	1992	<i>Reggeli Délvilág</i> . Vol. 3. 100. 10.
Csaba Farkas: <i>Három tünet – Tiszta Amerika</i> [Three symptoms – Pure America]	Feuilleton	1994	<i>Reggeli Délvilág</i> . Vol. 5. 112. 7.
<i>Krokodilveszély Párizsban</i> [Crocodile threat in Paris]	News in brief	2000	<i>Magyar Szó</i> . Vol. 58. 34. 16.
<i>Krokodil a kanálisban. Városi legenda?</i> [Crocodile in the sewer. Urban legend?]	News	2003	<i>Délvilág</i> . Vol. 69. 395.
<i>Elfogták a randalírozó krokodilt</i> [Crocodile troublemaker captured]	News	2004	<i>Kárpáti Igaz Szó</i> . Vol. 85. 85–86. 15.
<i>A hongkongi krokodil esete</i> [The case of the Hong Kong crocodile]	News	2004	<i>Magyar Szó</i> . Vol. 61. 135. 14.
<i>Krokodil a kanálisban: városi legenda?</i> [Crocodile in the sewer: Urban legend?]	Article	2013	<i>Délvilág</i> . Vol. 69. 39. 5.
<i>Goebbels és a krokodilok</i>	Anecdote	2017	<i>Vasárnapi Hírek</i> .

*Alligators in the Sewers...*

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[Goebbels and the crocodiles]			Vol. 33. 31. 30.
János Hadzsy: <i>Játék az élővilággal – Bottal ütni a pítont nyomát</i> [Game with wildlife – Hitting the traces of a python with a stick]	Article	2018	<i>Magyar Szó.</i> Vol. 75. 163. 18.

*Helén Pál*

**Remain of a Dialect in an Urban Cultural Medium  
by Means of Folk-tales**

*Role of Some Storytellers of a Hungarian Ethnic Group  
Szeklers of Bukovina in Hungary*

**Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to show the role that storytellers can play in the transmission of traditions, identity and dialect today. The paper focuses on a Hungarian ethnic group: Szeklers of Bukovina settled in Hungary in 1945. The main aim of this paper is to present the function of dialects in tales and tale-telling after the change of traditional peasant way of life and dialects. In Bukovina this ethnic group was isolated from the Hungarian mother-country and the majority of Hungarians, their cultural and language changes did not reach them, therefore the members of this ethnic group could retain their traditional culture and dialect. However, in Hungary they were settled into 38 settlements, thereby their original communities broke up. The dialectal and sociolinguistic data of this paper comes from the storyteller's websites, written and oral personal stories, the text and sound-recording of folk-tales, and also data of formal dialectal researches of this ethnic group is used. This paper presents an analysis of some storytellers who use several dialect elements of this ethnic group, besides the role of dialects in tale-telling is studied too. It is an important aspect of this analyse how some storytellers utilize their dialect in tales and during tale-telling, and why they usually use it. The results of research present that these storytellers can use dialect elements in different ways in their tale-telling. The main conclusion is that use of a dialect can be a part of language education, a dialect is an identity marker, and by the help of it a storyteller can create a pictorial experience during the tale-telling, besides it can be a source of humour too.

**Keywords:** Szeklers of Bukovina, storytellers, revival and professional storytellers, role of dialects in tale-telling, role of tales in traditions





## Introduction

This study examines some storytellers and their tales in connection with the role of dialects in tale-telling at our time, and how it can remain in tales. These storytellers come from a Hungarian ethnic group, Szeklers of *Bukovina* who live in Hungary since 1945. In contrast with the customs of authentic storytellers of previous smaller communities, at our days a storyteller tells a tale in front of other audience, on other scenes and on different occasions. These present-day storytellers are usually fluent in two language varieties of the same language, so these persons speak also the Hungarian standard. Survival of the culture and dialect brought by Szeklers of *Bukovina* into Hungary was hindered by several factors. For example this ethnic group was settled in Hungary in spring of 1945 into *Tolna*, *Baranya* and *Bács-Kiskun* counties, and they got in touch with other ethnic groups there. After the Second World War in Hungary several significant political and social changes happened, and these changes influenced the social positions, way of life, and hereby the language too. After the social changes folklore and dialects got new roles in new and modern circumstances. In Hungary between the 1960s and 1980s the traditional peasant way of life came to an end<sup>1</sup>, and parallel to it change of dialects speeded up, besides dialects were often replaced by the standard or a regional variety of the standard. Overshadow of dialects has appeared in several fields of national characteristics, for example with the disappearance of traditional trades also its vocabulary disappears, and the vocabulary of traditional costumes, food or folk customs (for instance wedding celebrations, patronal festivals, all-night vigils, and other festive occasions) can vanish if these occasions change or disappear. In consequence of the expansion of the standard and the above-mentioned changes of life style, local words and dialects are pushed into the background in everyday use. Although the popularity of folk-tales has remained, the judgement of application of dialects in them can be different. According to some storytellers a few members of the audience do not understand the meaning of local words, moreover they should deduce the meaning from the context, therefore, they can understand the plot only with difficulty<sup>2</sup>. However, application of the storyteller's own dialect can be a part of his/her authentic speaking, and the local words of the tales can enlarge vocabulary of the children<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Romsics 2007: 912.

<sup>2</sup> Kóka 2002: 10.

<sup>3</sup> Dala 2021: 12, 23.

## **Change of traditional peasant way of life in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the role and language of folk-tales**

After 1945 in consequence of the historical and social events of Hungary the traditional peasant way of life was mostly liquidated<sup>4</sup>. Many inhabitants of the country moved to the towns and cities, and the others who remained in the place had no choice but to commute to reach a paying job in a town or city. Therefore some of the dialect speakers left their dialectal surroundings, but through the mass media, school and mobility the standard could influence the language of people who stayed in the place. Several traditions belonged to the traditional peasant way of life. Change of folklore covered for example the change of customs of festivals and celebrations, traditional dress, house, and the traditional folk-tales too. The rural community was the traditional medium of folk-tales, and story-telling was an amusement that made the monotonous work easy for people, mainly in winter when the outdoor works stopped<sup>5</sup>. Occasions of story-telling were the locale of the long works, as spinning room, corn-husking, harvesting, but also the house of all-night vigil, where the authentic storytellers amused the audience, however folk-tales had also a mediator role, and it showed patterns of behaviour, and served as a model for difficult situations too<sup>6</sup>. Nowadays story-telling is not a supplement of workflow but people spend their free time by it. The new scenes of story-telling are stages, schools, nursery schools, performances, competitions, television broadcasts, however, the course of these performances is only limited, and this limitation influences the chosen genre. In a performance the storyteller can rarely tell a long heroic tale or a fairy tale, and on these occasions the short genres with a snap element are more popular<sup>7</sup>. The storytellers and the members of the audience have other way of life than their ancestors, and they have other expectations in connection with a tale. The purpose of story-telling has got new elements, next to the amusement some new aims have come, for example to preserve traditions and identity, to present folk culture, or teaching. This new phenomenon can be noticed from the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and according to the researches with the disappearance of those storytellers who acquired their knowledge in a traditional community, also these new elements will dis-

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<sup>4</sup> Romsics 2007: 912.

<sup>5</sup> Berze Nagy 1992: 256.

<sup>6</sup> Raffai 2013; Kóka 2010; Kovács 2014: 35.

<sup>7</sup> Kóka 2010.

appear<sup>8</sup>. The custom of story-telling narrowed from the 1950s onwards, and while formerly the tales were genre of adults, now, according to general opinion, it is mostly the genre of children<sup>9</sup>. However, there are some tales only for adults in these days too, for example István Sebestyén whose ancestors are Szeklers of *Bukovina*, has many risqué tales, and also other storytellers have some tales for adults in their repertory<sup>10</sup>.

After the change of traditional peasant way of life also the authentic storytellers disappeared, since they had acquired or inherited their knowledge in their authentic community, and during their life they told their tales only in their smaller fellowship. The new type of storytellers collect the tales from several informants, they record these tales, and they expand their repertoire also from books and old journals. The scene of story-telling is that one where the storyteller is invited<sup>11</sup>. One of the storytellers of Szeklers of *Bukovina* Éva Fábíán gives a lecture on story-telling in a cultural centre: Hungarian Heritage House in *Budapest*, and in other courses she tells a tale for primary school and higher-class students. In this institution many school groups attend lectures, and the storytellers have to tell a story with other mentality to an organized student group, or to an audience that consists of distinct classes than to a small group<sup>12</sup>. The professional or revival storytellers do not necessarily hand the authentic tales down to the younger generation than the authentic storytellers. A storyteller of modern times choses a given tale according to the composition of the audience, or even the members of the audience can ask a certain tale, besides the storytellers have to adjust themselves to the expectations of unknown people<sup>13</sup>. According to the noted folklorist Ágnes Kovács folk-tales are survived and make an impression on the audience in this different social environment also in our days, because they have a great aesthetic quality and range of expression. She thinks that a folk-tale is an art of spoken language and a contact between the storyteller and the listener. Also the speech, mimicry, gesture and relationship between the two persons belong to the storyteller's means of expression<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Raffai 2013: 117.

<sup>9</sup> Raffai 2013: 116.

<sup>10</sup> Kóka 2010; Dala 2021: 27–28.

<sup>11</sup> Kóka 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Dala 2021: 20–28.

<sup>13</sup> Dala 2021: 32, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Kovács 1980: 739.

## **Change of dialects**

In Hungary speakers of dialects were usually members of the traditional peasantry (although a dialect speaker could live in other social classes too, and they were not necessarily peasants), and the profession of these people was the traditional peasant farming. Use of dialects is connected first of all with the country in these days too<sup>15</sup>. However, in the 1960s the traditional peasant farming was crumbled, and this change influenced not only the previous peasant way of life but also the dialects. In our days the number of the most important users of dialects the rural dwellers decreases, and at the same time this reduction means the decrease of dialect speakers too. Referring to the living of peasant families, work and family were not dis severed previously, in the centuries of the traditional peasant farming, and from the point of view of transmission of dialects this change of living is important. Since young people today do not continue farming, although it was typical earlier<sup>16</sup>. Dialects are pushed into the background nowadays because of several factors, for example their status is not a favourable one, some significant political, social and economic changes happened, and the number of this speech community decreased. Nowadays the main direction of dialectal change is its approach to the standard. The system, function, and area of use of dialects changes too<sup>17</sup>. Dialects are used rarely or less frequently in that circle of people who have a secondary and higher education degree and hold a higher position, they usually use the standard. Children's socialization in standard spreads due to change of traditions of families and small communities, and change of speech connections between parents and children<sup>18</sup>. Disappearance of dialects is faster in the bigger settlements than in the smaller ones, than in the less stratified and less mobile ones, and in general population decline is the characteristic of small settlements. Use of dialects decreases at first in the public speaking situations, however, the standard variation of the media enters also into the privacy, therefore the standard can affect this speech too. Change of dialects affects mainly the young age group, because the role of families decreases in language teaching, besides the mass media and the electronic entertainment devices affect mostly their language<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Kiss 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Kiss 2017: 212.

<sup>17</sup> Kiss 2001: 248.

<sup>18</sup> Kiss 2001: 248.

<sup>19</sup> Kiss 2001: 247–252.

## A dialect as a device for us to identify ourselves with a community, the dialect as an identity marker

The dialect is a means of expression for us to represent our own community, a dialect can be a proper presentation mode of thinking and emotional world of the local population, besides by a dialect we can identify ourselves with our own community, and express our solidarity<sup>20</sup>. A dialect reflects also the life of a given ethnic group, and in folk-tales references and aspects of it can show this kind of life. Éva Fábrián, István Sebestyén, Rozália Kóka (but also Boldizsár Szócs of *Székegykeve*, Serbia) visualize also their ancestors' homeland in their folk-tales<sup>21</sup>. The storytellers are joined to their community by their humour too. For example in one of his tales István Sebestyén uses the honeyed brandy [*pálinka*] as a magical soldering device that was a widespread and popular drink in the circle of Szeklers of *Bukovina*. Besides he uses also dialect words as a source of humour (for example a dialect word for paper bag [*papírsuska*], or a local address: my aunt Clare [*Kaláriném*]), but also other storytellers (Éva Fábrián and Rozália Kóka) use several dialect words as a source of humour. Moreover, one of the storytellers of Lower-Danube, Serbia Boldizsár Szócs used the genre of village-mocking (these can be shorter or longer texts but even one word) during his tale-telling, and this genre makes fun of the inhabitants of the neighbouring settlements<sup>22</sup>. Besides, by the dialect these storytellers can join themselves to the community of Szeklers of *Bukovina* otherwise too, since before story-telling, by way of introduction, also Rozália Kóka, István Sebestyén and Éva Fábrián introduce themselves as a member of this community, their tale-telling stems from this group, besides all three of them use the dialect of Szeklers of *Bukovina* during their performance.

### The ethnic group of Szeklers of Bukovina

The ancestors of Szeklers of *Bukovina* escaped from *Székegyföld* (Eastern Transylvania) to Moldavia after the hecatomb of *Madéfalva* in 1764. Later they were resettled to *Bukovina* between 1776 and 1786, and here five settlements were established (*Istensegíts*, *Fogadjisten*, *Józseffalva*, *Hadikfalva*, *Andrásfalva*). In 1941 these inhabitants were resettled into the Southern Region, *Bácska*,

<sup>20</sup> Kiss 2001: 208.

<sup>21</sup> Dala 2021: 13; Sebestyén 2008: 6; Kóka 2002: 42, 52, 62, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Szócs 2005.

however they had to escape from here in 1944. In 1945 they got the houses of evicted Germans in *Tolna*, *Baranya* and *Bács-Kiskun* counties. Nowadays there are smaller and larger groups of them in Romania, Serbia, Canada, but Szeklers of *Bukovina* live in several countries in the world too. In 1945 about 20 thousands Szeklers of *Bukovina* settled down in Hungary, they moved into 38 settlements. In these settlements also other ethnic groups live, for example some Hungarians of Upper Hungary were settled there, some Germans could stay in the place, besides Hungarians of other regions and Moldavia were settled too<sup>23</sup>. Later some of the Szeklers of *Bukovina* moved to larger towns that offered job opportunities for them: *Bonyhád*, *Szekszárd*, *Pécs*, *Pécsvárad*, *Mohács*, and after 1956 *Érd*<sup>24</sup>, and their moving started into these towns (the corners of the socialist industrialization) shortly after their settlement<sup>25</sup>. However, an urban life and environment is unfavourable if the members of an ethnic group would like to save their dialect, culture or traditions<sup>26</sup>. Besides, use of the dialect and traditions of Szeklers of *Bukovina* was difficult because after their settlement they could not reorganize their original villages, and their relatives could not get into the same settlement, although they had requested it before<sup>27</sup>. In these days some of the 38 settlements face the continuous decline of its population, likewise a lot of Hungarian small settlements<sup>28</sup>. Decline of population and aging of those people who stays in the place contributes to stop of the local school, because these schools cannot work if there are not enough children in them. If the school stops in a settlement, it can result the disappearance of the local community in the end.

### **The contemporary storytellers of Szeklers of Bukovina and possibilities of dialects to remain**

The three storytellers presented in this paper have ancestors of Szeklers of *Bukovina*, but all three of them bore at that time when *Bukovina* was already left by this ethnic group.

Rozália Kóka was born in 1943 in *Bajmók* (Vojvodina), her father was Szekler and her mother was a Hungarian of *Bácska*. The family fled from *Bácska* in October of 1944, and they were settled into a village *Felsőnána*

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<sup>23</sup> Pál 2021: 532.

<sup>24</sup> Pál 2021: 532.

<sup>25</sup> Foki et al. 2000: 9.

<sup>26</sup> Bartha 1999: 144.

<sup>27</sup> A. Sajti 1984.

<sup>28</sup> Pál 2021.

(*Tolna* county) in the spring of 1945. She completed her secondary schooling at *Szekszárd*, then she completed her college course at a teacher-training college at *Kaposvár*. In 1962 her family, moreover some of her relatives and other Szekler villagers moved to *Érd* (a settlement next to the capital *Budapest*). Between 1964 and 1979 she was a primary school teacher in schools of *Tárnok*, *Érd* and *Diósd*. From 1969 onwards she was active as an ethnographic collector, she organized performances from her ethnographic data, and published some books too. In 1971 she established the folk-song group of Szeklers of *Bukovina* in *Érd* [*Érdi Bukovinai Székely Népdalkör*]. From 1973 onwards she started her performer career. She collects the history and folk art of Szeklers of *Bukovina*, she learns it, and presents to the public. She is active as a storyteller, folklorist, journalist and author too. According to her website she told a tale on several scenes, for example in schools, nursery schools, libraries, community art centres, theatres, but in pubs, barracks and churches too. She got the master of folk art prize [*Népművészet Mestere*].<sup>29</sup>

István Sebestyén was born in 1955 in *Szekszárd*, he was the tenth child of her parents who came from *Andrásfalva* of *Bukovina*. He has learned the traditions, jokes and folk-songs of Szeklers of *Bukovina* in his family and in his village *Kakasd* in *Tolna* county (Sebestyén 2008). His parents were founding members of the traditional society of the settlement. At first István Sebestyén presented his knowledge in several competitions and won many first prizes there. Nowadays he tells a tale and sings folk songs on his independent performances, and he is a teacher in camps where folk music and tales are taught. He got the master of folk art prize in 2014.

Éva Fábíán was born in *Szekszárd* in 1959, and she was brought up in *Györe* (*Tolna* county). Her mother was born in *Andrásfalva*, and she was 10 years old when Szeklers of *Bukovina* were settled to *Bácska*. Éva Fábíán's father is also a representative of Szeklers of *Bukovina* but he comes from *Csernakeresztúr*, this village is in Romania. (Szeklers of *Bukovina* moved into some settlements of Romania of today at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.) From 1945 onwards in *Györe* Germans, Szeklers, Hungarians of Upper Hungary and former local Hungarians lived together. Éva Fábíán as a child listened to stories of several cultures in her father's tailoring workshop, and she learned the traditions of Szeklers of *Bukovina* from her relatives. When she was a child she could experience the family cohesion of her ethnic group during weddings, pig slaughters, celebrations, patronal festivals, and in agricultural works as corn and beet hoeing

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<sup>29</sup> Kóka 2010.

and corn gathering. 1977 she completed her secondary schooling at Szekszárd, then she completed her college course at a teacher-training college at *Budapest*, and she became a nursery-school teacher. Later she took a diploma in tradition-knowledge-teacher too. She got the young master of folk art [*Népművészet Ifjú Mestere*] prize in 1979. At first she was a singer and storyteller of the traditional group of Szeklers of *Bukovina* of *Tolna* county, moreover she was a member of folk bands too. Nowadays she is a teacher of singing in a folk-music school, she is a storyteller in the Hungarian Heritage House in *Budapest*, besides she teaches also story-telling and folk-singing here. She collected folk-music in her family and in the whole Hungarian language area.

### **Remaining of dialects through the medium of tale-telling of today**

These chapters below present the role of dialects in folk-tales, they occur in an urban cultural medium, on some story-telling occasions of modern age, they are narrated to a different ethnic group than the story-teller came from, and what is more, these tales are narrated always to new and new people. All three storytellers introduce themselves in front of the audience as a member of the Szeklers of *Bukovina*, they join to this culture with their performances. Description of the ethnic group, and possibly, the mention of historical antecedents can occur during their performances, although in a different way in each case. For example Rozália Kóka starts her performance with a short historical description, and Éva Fábián mentions her ancestors and their homeland *Bukovina* during child shows too, and István Sebestyén's origin is represented in his introductions and also in his tales. In their folk-tales they use dialect elements, besides also folk traditions occurs, for example some habits, clothes or names of devices. According to her own confession Rozália Kóka uses the dialect in a different way when she tells a tale for children or for adults. In front of children's audience she uses only few dialect words or foreign words because these ones can hinder children in understand the plot. However, she assumes that adults can deduce the meaning of these words from the context. For this reason she tells only simple tales for children's audience, and she intends life stories with more dialect elements for adults<sup>30</sup>. In a video Éva Fábián starts a tale entitled The lazy young woman [*A rest leány*] with this introduction: "My old men spoke a very interesting old Szekler dialect. I learned Hungarian in this kind of language, and I loved the old

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<sup>30</sup> Kóka 2002: 10.



men's beautiful melodic speaking, and their strange expressions very much. So I weaves it into my tales."<sup>31</sup> [*Az én öregjeim egy nagyon érdekes régies székegy tájnyelvet beszéltek. Én ezen tanultam magyarul, és úgy szerettem az öregeknek a szép a dallamos beszédét, furcsa kifejezéseiket. Úgyhogy én belé szoktam szőni a meséimbe.*]

### Use of dialects as a part of conscious language education, moreover transmission of linguistic traditions

In Éva Fábíán's tales her dialect serves as a pedagogical purpose too. The Hungarian National curriculum [*Nemzeti alaptanterv*] that is in force, contains also the following aims: schoolchildren should get to know several texts about national traditions and cultural memory, besides they should attain some knowledge about Hungarian dialects too.<sup>32</sup> Éva Fábíán's tale-telling in the Hungarian Heritage House can be connected to this pedagogical goal, where she narrates also biblical stories. She tells some tales of a book [*Parasztbiblia*] where some biblical stories of authentic peasant communities are published. (According to the purpose of the National curriculum schoolchildren should get to know some Christian festivals, for example Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, besides they learn about folk customs too.) In Éva Fábíán's tales also riddles, proverbs, folk-songs or chorales in dialects occur<sup>33</sup>. Thanks to these storytellers, some children who speak only the standard variation of the language can meet the dialects in a folk-tale. In order to make understand the unknown words Éva Fábíán explains the meaning of them for the children, besides she also gesticulate. During the story-telling tale-tellers would like to create a pictorial experience, therefore they use synonyms, adjectival constructions, similes and tropes of the dialect<sup>34</sup>. At the beginning of the tale entitled The lazy young woman [*A rest leány*] Éva Fábíán speaks about the authentic clothing of peasants and the method of preparation, and she contrasts the real, old, woven clothing with the modern ones available in a boutique. During Éva Fábíán's talk the host of children can attain knowledge about a spinning wheel, reel, or loom. She explained why peasant women had to weave, spin and sew, and why it was a shame if they were lazy [she used a funny word for it: *büdösdőg* – smelly carcass]<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> ...oda kújjel Andrásfalán <https://fabianevamesel.hagyomanyokhaza.hu/>

<sup>32</sup> *Magyar Közlöny* 2020. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Dala 2021: 47.

<sup>34</sup> Dala 2021: 38–44.

<sup>35</sup> Németh 2021: 73.

István Sebestyén also speaks about some traditional costumes in his tale entitled 'The deficient young woman [*A csorba leán*]', for example he mentions a special kind of shirt, skirt, bodice and a sky-blue ribbon<sup>36</sup>.

## Humour and dialect

In order to maintain the attention of their audience storytellers often apply also humour, and they use it in performances for children too<sup>37</sup>. In the tales narrated by the storytellers of Szeklers of *Bukovina* some elements of the characteristic dialect, for example dialect words can serve as a source of humour. Although creation a pictorial experience is part of tale-telling, but according to the Transylvanian linguist János Péntek's research picturesque and metaphors occur more frequently in the Szekler dialects than in other ones. In his opinion in given dialects its speakers have a preference for the logical, descriptive, defining technical terms, but in other dialects speakers give preference to the expressive, pictorial, emotional metaphors<sup>38</sup>. In the following example Éva Fábián creates a pictorial experience when she exhibits the poor man's move: his ball of knee trembled when he was afraid of a dragon in the tale entitled 'The seven-headed dragon and the poor man [*rizgett a térgyekalácsa*]<sup>39</sup>.

In Éva Fábián's tales also the amazement and dislocation from the story serve as a source of humour, for example she unexpectedly refers to the present time<sup>40</sup>, and also a simile can be effective: so large tears of her fell as my fist (the storyteller uses a dialect word for fist: *akkora könnyei hullottak, mint a kujakom* [The lazy young woman]). She uses a humorous closing formula in her tales: Do they not believe it? Climb up the I-belive-little-tree, and if they fall down, get on the little tail of I-belive-dog [*S ha akkor sem hiszi? Másszon fel a hiszem facskacskaeskára, s ha lepottyan, üljön fel a hiszemkutyá farkincájára!*]<sup>41</sup>

Also István Sebestyén and Rozália Kóka use humour in their folk-tales. We can find humour in the music of the text, when rhyming of some words presents the swinging of a skirt. The given words can represent when a young woman's way of walking is attractive, and the other one is nasty<sup>42</sup>. They use

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<sup>36</sup> Sebestyén 2008: 10–11.

<sup>37</sup> Dala 2021: 36.

<sup>38</sup> Péntek 1978: 183.

<sup>39</sup> Németh 2021: 72.

<sup>40</sup> Dala 2021: 42.

<sup>41</sup> ...oda kújjel Andrásfalán <https://fabianevesel.hagyományokhaza.hu/>

<sup>42</sup> Sebestyén 2008: 11.

also echo words as a source of humour, for example in the tale entitled The three young women when one of these women's laugh is foolish<sup>43</sup>.

Use of strange dialect words that are unknown in the standard variation of the language can serve as a source of humour. In the tale entitled The three young women [*A három leján*] the short-tongued woman is oakum-tongued [*szösznyelvű*], the short-sighted one is hen-eyed [*tyúkszemű*]<sup>44</sup>, there are some humorous words for the sounds generated by a bag or a dragon (Fábián Éva: The seven-headed dragon and the poor man [*A hétfejű sárkány és a szegény ember*]). In István Sebestyén's tale entitled Golden nest, golden bird [*Aranyfészék, aranymadár*] he applies metaphors for the male and female genitalia, the humour of the tale and the gist of the joke at the end of the tale are connected with these metaphors<sup>45</sup>. In the tale entitled The defective young woman [*A csorba leán*] because of the continuous barking the watch dog wheezed in its half side [*Eddig jól élt a kutya, mert csorba volt a leán, de most annyit kellett ugasson, hogy már a fél oldalára sípolt*]<sup>46</sup>. In the tale entitled The gossip woman [*A pletykás asszon*] we can find the following sentence: Our neighbour, that [*pitán* – a kind of meal] man Ambrose, laid an egg at night [*A szomszédunk, az a pitán ember Ambarus az éjen megtojott*]<sup>47</sup>. (*Pitán* is made of corn flour, and it is flowing and soft before baking<sup>48</sup>).

The following similes are used as a source of humour in the tales: My aunts have really big breasts and a bottom but I was as flat as a board [*malélapító* – a kind of pastry-board] [*A néném jó csicsesek, farosok vótak, de én olyan lapos vótam, mint egy malélapító*]<sup>49</sup>. Ambrose was so handsome young man that young women pissed in a standing position after him<sup>50</sup>. There was a big bright hole in the darkness. The witches went out and came in through this hole as people in a wedding-house [*setétségbe vót egy nagy fényes lik. Azon úgy jártak ki s bé a boszorkák, mind egy lakadalmas háznál*]<sup>51</sup>. The young woman runned home so fast that the wind almost tore across her breast [*Úgy futott háza a leán, hogy a szél a mellit szinte kikezdte*]<sup>52</sup>. István Sebestyén's following simile is a modern one: The crows crouched at the top of the walnut tree like

<sup>43</sup> Kóka 2002: 93.

<sup>44</sup> Kóka 2002.

<sup>45</sup> Sebestyén 2008: 5.

<sup>46</sup> Sebestyén 2008: 10.

<sup>47</sup> Kóka 2002: 125.

<sup>48</sup> Kóka 2002: 152.

<sup>49</sup> Kóka 2002: 22.

<sup>50</sup> Kóka 2002: 52.

<sup>51</sup> Kóka 2002: 62.

<sup>52</sup> Sebestyén 2008: 11.

some disaster intellectuals [*A varjak a divófa tetején gubbasztottak mint valami csapás értelmiségiek*]<sup>53</sup>.

Personification and humour: In István Sebestyén's tale entitled The defective young woman [*A csorba leány*] the genitals flew up on a branch of the willow and they posed. Then because of pipe smoke the genitals' eyes filled with tears<sup>54</sup>. In this tale the dog's thought is a source of humour: he/she thought the following words when he/she had to bark at the lot of boy-friends in the courtyard: Kill you the spasm [*Hogy a görcs öljön meg tüktököt*]<sup>55</sup>.

One of the motifs of the tale is a modern one, therefore humorous too, because the fairy-tale hero carries the genitals in a paper bag [*papírsuska*] for his daughter<sup>56</sup>.

In the tales some humorous elements are connected with the traditions of Szeklers of *Bukovina*. One of the features of folk-tales are the wonderful devices, for example several magic herbs or decoctions of witches can cure injuries or it can raise a person from the dead<sup>57</sup>. In one of István Sebestyén's tales the genitals are soldered with honeyed homemade brandy [*bazsai mézes pálinka*]. This brandy is a reference to the traditions of Szeklers of *Bukovina* at the same time because it is (was) a popular drink of this ethnic group<sup>58</sup>. In Éva Fábrián's tale entitled The lazy young woman [*A rest leány*] the humour is connected with this woman's laziness.

## Summary

In Hungary traditional peasant way of life changed in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and also the role and language of folk-tales changed too. The purpose of story-telling has got new elements, next to the amusement some new aims have come, for example to preserve traditions and identity, to present folk culture, or teaching. This new phenomenon can be noticed from the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and according to the researches with the disappearance of those storytellers who attained their knowledge in a traditional community, some of these elements will disappear too<sup>59</sup>. In Hungary in our days the number of rural dwellers decreases (they are the most

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<sup>53</sup> Sebestyén 2008: 8.

<sup>54</sup> Sebestyén 2008: 9.

<sup>55</sup> Sebestyén 2008: 10.

<sup>56</sup> Sebestyén 2008: 9.

<sup>57</sup> Berze Nagy 1992: 291; Kovács 1980: 573–574.

<sup>58</sup> Gáspár Simon 1986: 18.

<sup>59</sup> Raffai 2013: 117.

important users of dialects), and at the same time this reduction means the decrease of dialect speakers too. Szeklers of *Bukovina* live in Hungary since 1945, and in the rising generation their traditions, culture and dialect are pushed into the background. Nowadays professional or revival storytellers can present their ancestors' tales and dialect too. Storytellers of Szeklers of *Bukovina* use their dialect for example as a part of conscious language education, moreover during transmission of linguistic traditions. Dialects can remain through the medium of storytellers of today. Storytellers apply often humour in order to maintain the attention of their audience, but in the tales some humorous elements are connected with the traditions of Szeklers of *Bukovina*. Dialect words can serve as a source of humour too, but they contribute to the pictorial experience of the tales. Creation a pictorial experience is part of tale-telling and for this reason storytellers can use synonyms, adjectival constructions, similes and tropes of the dialect.

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## The Venues of Recreation in a Former Socialist Town

### Abstract

In Hungary 10–14 towns were classified as socialist towns. In 1953 the construction of the would-be *Leninváros* (present day *Tiszaújváros*) was started. The town planners laid stress on building facilities for the relaxation and recreation of people and parks, playgrounds, beaches and holiday homes were available for everyone. However, the public places designated as recreational facilities for the inhabitants of the town, which was intended to be an idealistic one, did not satisfy their needs. They preferred to spend their free time in their ‘household plots’ in town. Small gardens and garages complemented a lot of apartments in panel blocks, thus increasing the available living space in a special manner. These “private properties” mostly had the function whose mass demand was unexpected for the planners of the city. The author describes how they helped residents, who often had a village background, making the socialist type of town more liveable.

**Keywords:** socialist town, public spaces, recreational facilities, small gardens, garages

After the Second World War, new cities were established worldwide, which were looked upon as the symbols of a new world.<sup>1</sup> Utopian rhetoric and conception were common characteristics of these projects. Its Eastern-European variant was the socialist town, an experimental site of the new society where harmony and happiness were to prevail, according to this conception.<sup>2</sup> In these towns, theories of modern architecture and urban design were complied with in a greater degree: not only industrial factories but also the towns connected to them were built according to unified plans.

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<sup>1</sup> The study was supported by the Eötvös Loránd Research Network, project title: Social and cultural resilience in the Carpathian Basin.

<sup>2</sup> Wakeman 2014: 105. For more see: Lebow 2016; Szirmai 2016; Horváth 2017.





In Hungary 10–14 towns were classified as socialist towns in various geographical, sociological and historical studies.<sup>3</sup> In connection with the forced industrialization in the 1950s, the construction of these towns was begun already in the initial stage of socialism. After the first wave of town building when *Sztálinváros* (today *Dunaújváros*) and *Kazincbarcika* were also built among others, in 1953, as part of the so-called green field investment, the construction of the would-be *Leninváros* (present day *Tiszaújváros*) was started. Prior to the construction of the town, two factories, the Tiszapalkonya Thermal Power Plant and the Tisza Chemical Combined Plant (TVK) were planned and built.<sup>4</sup> The new towns – besides *Budapest* and the big cities in the country – were in the focus of migration, which was driven by the forced collectivization and requisitioning, and many workers with peasant roots and first generation white collar workers settled down there.<sup>5</sup> The population of *Leninváros* was dynamically increasing, although to a lesser extent than in the plans.<sup>6</sup>

The first plan of the town, initially designed for ten thousand inhabitants was drawn up in 1955, but tailored to the development of chemical industry, the planned number of inhabitants was adjusted to forty thousand in 1962. According to the new plan drawn up in 1964 – complying with the principles of socialist urban design<sup>7</sup> – the territorial organization was based on neigh-

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<sup>3</sup> Germuska 2004: 47–52; Germuska 2008.

<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the practice of those days, it was not the town that attracted the industry, but the industrial facilities (and the workers in them) constituted the basis of a new town.

<sup>5</sup> During the Socialist era, the majority of the people were employed by local factories, mainly working in the industrial sector and in the construction industry, whereas the proportion of those living from agriculture did not make up 5% of the population by 1970. (1970. évi népszámlálás 1972: 19.) The change of the political system brought about changes in the structure of employment too: the proportion of intellectual workers and those working in the service sector rose, while the number of those employed in the industrial sector fell. The old industrial companies were replaced by an American company manufacturing electronic products as the main employer.

<sup>6</sup> In 1960 the population of the town was little over 3,000 and 11 years later it was well over 11,000. It peaked in 1990 with a population of 18,685, but since then, its population has been decreasing continuously, in 2021 the town had only 14,649 inhabitants. 1990. évi népszámlálás 1992: 6.

<sup>7</sup> The principles of socialist urban design laid down in the 1950s can be summarized in the following way: creating zones; a homogeneous composition of the town; the prominent, almost sacred location of the industrial factory; constructing city districts in the same quality and building a monumental main square; organizing apartments into blocks, neighbourhood/vicinity units. Germuska 2004: 209.

bourhood units.<sup>8</sup> In the four units, with ten thousand inhabitants each, contained various commercial and cultural facilities as well as public educational and pedagogic institutions. The town centre with the community buildings was built in the area bordering on the four neighbourhood units. In the town predominantly multi-level buildings were constructed as in this manner more opportunities were created to establish green areas. According to the plans, the distribution of buildings with 4–5–6 and 9–10–11 storeys followed a regular pattern, whereas 8–16 level buildings were to be distributed a chequered pattern.<sup>9</sup> The participants of the discussion of the plan from the town were proud to announce: “the ideal picture of the socialist type of towns is presented to us”<sup>10</sup>.

The town, which constituted a unified composition on the drawing board – with its modern, multi-level buildings, unique space distribution, loose structure, numerous green parks and community facilities – seemed to be really ideal provided that the residents wished to lead their life in compliance with the socialist lifestyle, prioritizing collectivity and active social life, striving to achieve social equality.

In the following, focusing on the facilities of the town serving recreational purposes, I intend to give an account of what type of public places characterized the socialist town, what functions were assigned to them in the plans, how it was overridden in practice by the delaying process of town construction and the use of space characteristic of the people moving in from villages. It is a general conclusion drawn in studies on immigrants coming from villages that the first generation retain and re-creates countryside mentality and lifestyle, instead of adopting city culture. As an example of this, I describe the role of small gardens and garages. To present contemporaneous public discourse and power perspective I make use of the local press of the socialist era (*Borsodi Vegyész, Leninvárosi Krónika*) and in a lesser degree, the documents of local administration, while I intend to grasp individual dimensions through the interviews I made.

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<sup>8</sup> The system of neighbourhood units, which originated in America, became common when the new European and Soviet towns were designed and they were also applied in town plans in Hungary too from the 1950s onward. Imre Perényi in his groundbreaking book on socialist urban design, defined it as a functional-social unit – in terms of size it is between a block of flats and a town quarter with 2000-5000 residents – whose most important public institution is the primary school. Perényi 1952: 49–54. The size of the neighbourhood units in *Leninváros* was different from the size defined here.

<sup>9</sup> N. A. 1967: 6. The town was not constructed completely in this manner, for instance the 16-storeyed buildings were not constructed and until the end of the 1980s only two neighbourhood units were built.

<sup>10</sup> N. A. 1964: 3.

## Cultural houses, parks, playgrounds, leisure centres

In the functional division of the socialist town the venues of recreation played an important role, besides residential buildings and workplaces. Leisure activities were considered to be a part of culture, elevating people's level of knowledge and strengthened their physical conditions. The institutional system necessary for this was regarded as an important task of the state.<sup>11</sup>

Cultural palaces or cultural houses comprising several functions were prominent elements of socialist towns. According to the rhetoric of the newspaper articles, the important problem of the first decade in *Leninváros* was the continuous delay in the construction of the cultural house, which not only deprived people of a long-awaited opportunity of entertainment, but the construction area and the buildings attached to it in the middle of the town spoiled the cityscape. The problems with the construction of the cultural house derived from the schedule of the city's construction. Due to the increase of the population, which was adjusted to the industrial development, the construction of residential homes took precedence over community buildings. The problem arising from this situation was highlighted by Lajos Füle, an architect and the chief city planner of the town, back in 1964. In his opinion, those new housing estates that were built in historical cities, around them, may lack the construction of a town centre, as the historical centre may serve this purpose instead of them.

“But such a new town as Tiszaszederkény,<sup>12</sup> whose construction has been going on for ten years out in the prairie, cannot do without a town centre for long because people want to get organised, to entertain and to gravitate somewhere busy and exciting where they can relax, recreate and socialize in various ways and according to high standards.”<sup>13</sup>

In the articles published in the 60s from the construction of the cultural house was expected to boost entertainment and culture as in *Leninváros* it had separate rooms for showing movies, theatrical plays, a rehearsal room, a dance room, a library, an exhibition room and separate rooms for clubs, but it lost its popularity by the 80s, especially with younger generations. The shortage of catering facilities, especially in the 60s, is a recurring topic in the

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<sup>11</sup> Shaw D. 1979: 122.

<sup>12</sup> The nearby village of *Tiszaszederkény* was incorporated in the new town by the name 'old town' and the housing estate of the town was built in its outskirts.

<sup>13</sup> Füle 1968: 20.

local press of the time and in the reminiscences of the interviewees: apart from a few pubs, restaurants and confectionaries, there was no other place for this kind of entertainment.

Based on Ebenezer Howard's concept of garden cities,<sup>14</sup> the planners envisioned the Soviet town as the city of gardens and parks. Integrating nature in the structure of the town was an important element of the plans and to achieve this, a whole network of green areas was created in the residential area, but they also tried to place the institutions of the industrial zone in a green environment.<sup>15</sup> In the case of *Leninváros*, due to the air pollution caused by chemical industry, green areas were to be assigned an even greater importance for the purpose of health protection and such a town was planned embedded in forests where the dimensions of the town ensured that nearby parks were a five-six-minute walk from anyone's home.<sup>16</sup>

According to the plans, the network of green areas was to ensure the health regeneration of the population and to enhance the aesthetic experience provided by the town and to contribute to social communication. Depending on the demands street, squares and parks could provide "quiet retirement and relaxing recreation on the one hand, and the cultured venues of social gatherings and community meetings on the other hand"<sup>17</sup>. As apartments were tight and uncomfortable, they were expected to gain a greater significance in social life. Parks (e. g. culture park,<sup>18</sup> youth park, KRESZ park [Highway Code Park],<sup>19</sup> playgrounds<sup>20</sup>) constituted a part of not only the social but also the educational infrastructure. By way of the sport and cultural events organised here, they provided a framework for spending one's free

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<sup>14</sup> It was Ebenezer Howard who first described his ideas on the agreement of the values of town and country life in his 1898 book (*To-Morrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*). For more details on the concept of garden cities, and the effects it had on American and European urban design, see: Parsons-Schuyler (eds.) 2002; Meggyesi 1985: 34–50.

<sup>15</sup> Engel 2006: 175.

<sup>16</sup> Füle 1968: 17–18.

<sup>17</sup> N. A. 1983: 4.

<sup>18</sup> According to the original Soviet conception, these were places where visitors were informed about the latest technological and scientific achievements, culture, they could pursue sports, relax and where monuments and reliefs strengthening the ideology of the system were placed. See: Engel 2006: 175; Shaw C. 2011; Shaw D. 1979: 125.

<sup>19</sup> On the miniature network of roads fitted with pedestrian crossings and road signs, children could learn the rules of city traffic. N. A. 1979a: 5.

<sup>20</sup> In time, playgrounds were built next to nearly all blocks of flats (in 1972 there were forty-two), which also functioned as the central green area of a particular zone. The playgrounds between the blocks could only be approached on footpaths and car traffic was limited to vehicles parking in front of the houses. These squares could serve as recreational places apart from the noise of children. N. A. 1979c: 1. Cf. Engel 2006: 177–178.

time in useful way “from an ideological point of view”. In consequence of the increased importance of conservation and nature, which could be observed from the second half of the 1970s on, the educational park of conservation was opened in the neighbourhood of the youth park in 1984, where an open air educational room, trails and signs were intended to help students to know more and to love nature.<sup>21</sup> Certain companies also established leisure parks because they considered it of utmost importance “to take care that workers could spend their free time in a useful and pleasant way”<sup>22</sup>.

The network of town parks made the leadership of the town proud, however, they were less satisfied with the way certain residents used them. Reports appeared in the local press regularly on the damages improperly behaved people caused, e. g. in 1964: “some misbehaved individuals have already caused damages to the tune of thousands of forints by treading on the lawn in parks and ravaging the flowers planted outside during the night”<sup>23</sup>. A 1974 announcement of the council urged people not to step on the lawn in parks and not to pick flowers. The local decision makers could be induced by the fact that in that year, a movement was started by the Leninváros Council and the Patriotic People’s Front (*Hazafias Népfront*) by the name of “Clean, Leninváros in bloom (*Tiszta, virágos Leninváros*)”<sup>24</sup>, whose aim was to receive the title of “Clean, town in bloom”. The movement achieved its greatest success in 1976, when the challenge cup of the movement called “Clean, town in bloom” was awarded to *Leninváros*, among the towns of *Borsod* County, after being won by *Kazincbarcika* for several consecutive years.

By participating in the movement, the towns not only won an award, but they acquired a catchy slogan that boosted the image of the town. A drawback that has often been mentioned in connection with socialist towns is the lack of unique features. As the industrial manufacturing methods of panel buildings incurred lower costs and shorter time of assembly, these characteristics made them indispensable for socialist urban design. An architecture developed, characteristic of all the socialist countries with uniform structural elements and buildings. Owing to the improvement of panel technology,

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<sup>21</sup> N. A. 1984c: 4.

<sup>22</sup> The first beach was opened next to the Tiszapalkonya Thermal Power Plant, back in 1965, then, in the early 1980s the TVK started to build a large-scale leisure park (which included a beach and an ice rink too), which helped make the town a tourist destination. N. A. 1986: 4. The third big company, the Tisza Oil Refinery, opened its leisure park in 1987, which included three tennis courts, a handball court and a brigade park. N. A. 1987: 1.

<sup>23</sup> N. A. 1964: 2.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 18 June 1976. MNL BAZML. XXIII. 572. 13. d.

higher buildings could be built, which led to a structural transformation of socialist towns.<sup>25</sup> However, panel buildings, which reached their top in the 70s, did not live up to the expectations as it resulted in monotony.<sup>26</sup>

All the socialist towns had to cope with the issue of a monotonous cityscape, which was the result of their housing estate-like character and the uniformity of panel buildings, while the measures they took to enliven the cityscape were quite similar. *Leninváros*, like *Kazincbarcika*, tried to excel with its parks full of flowers and the numerous statues placed throughout the town and although reports were regularly published on the achievements, the latter town was always a step ahead concerning the acquisition of slogans. The construction of detached houses from the mid-1980s and facilities that had been neglected for either economic or ideological reasons (churches, new forms of the commercial and service providing sector such as the comecon open-air market,<sup>27</sup> separate pavilions for boutiques) at the time of the change of the political regime, meant a real breakthrough.<sup>28</sup>

### **“Household plots” in town**

Activities done because of some forcing material incentive have been distinguished from those done voluntarily on one’s own initiative in the research of free time, which have been carried out since the 1960s. The goal of the latter ones may have been relaxation, entertainment and personal development. There were some activities where the two big groups overlapped,

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<sup>25</sup> Engel 2006: 155.

<sup>26</sup> The urban problems caused by standardisation were disputed by architects too. One such attempt made to eliminate monotony – the huge panel building of the nuclear power plant in *Paks* decorated with tulip motifs – triggered a dispute all over the society. The criticism of the buildings expressed by Máté Major, an architect, was answered by the poet, László Nagy (which triggered an argument), in which, besides welcoming the attempts to make something new, he missed human, aesthetic and modern architecture. Nagy 1975. Gábor Preisich, an architect, explained the desolate character of housing estates by the preference of quantity over quality, by the behaviour of construction companies opposing any attempt to achieve variety and by the strict rules of factory panel technology. Preisich 1975. For more, see: Molnár 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Czakó–Sík 1999.

<sup>28</sup> According to the 1964 plan, no houses with gardens were to be built in *Leninváros*, due to the expenses incurred by the construction of amenities, their “natural place” was thought to be in villages around the town and in the area of the “old town”. The construction of residential houses with garden gained momentum when in 1982 state financed house constructions were stopped and the council started to divide land plots to satisfy the demand.

although by doing these activities, some income may have been earned, interest and passion also played a role in cultivating them. DIY and gardening were classified into this category. The latter one was one of the most popular among the pastime activities of the time. Gardening was mentioned in newspaper articles as “a real social movement” in which people from all walks of life participated. Its popularity was explained by the peasant background of those with green fingers, the upswing of the gardening movement,<sup>29</sup> the healthy nature of gardening and the increasing economic and material importance of the fruits and vegetables produced for home consumption or for sale, and by the attraction of moving in fresh air after the environment of the factory-coop or we can add that of the housing estate.<sup>30</sup>

In *Leninváros*, right at the time when the town was established, vegetable patches and kitchen gardens appeared in empty, (temporarily) undeveloped plots. For example, in front of the eight-level buildings or in the site of the would-be youth park, some parcels were appropriated by the residents most of whom moved in from villages. Tibor, a mechanist and his wife, a sewer came to town from a village in the neighbouring township. They were immediately given an apartment by their employer, which they exchanged for a bigger one in the first half of the 60s. The residential house was located across from the youth park and like the other residents in the building, they also established a little garden in an area that was left undeveloped back then, where they liked to take their little children too.

*“The council allowed it, we didn’t have to pay for it, we cultivated it and it wasn’t overgrown by weed. Someone started it and we, the others, were digging next to him. [...] Later some trees were planted and the trees were taken special care of and when the tree grew, nothing could thrive under it, then they came away from under it, and the whole thing was over. Until then, they had dug and raked it, and they had hoed it. When I needed anything, I just ran out and brought some vegetables and we cooked.”<sup>31</sup>*

However, this type of agricultural activities were mentioned in a negative context in the contemporaneous press, especially because in their opinion,

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<sup>29</sup> Gardening clubs and associations aimed to enhance the professional knowledge of their members, to buy specialized books and periodicals, to organise lectures, practical shows specialized in growing crops, exhibitions, competitions and the common purchase of grains, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and other tools.

<sup>30</sup> Fukász 1983: 134–135. The popularity of gardening and the use of small gardens can be observed in other socialist countries too, which can be explained by reasons similar to the aforementioned ones. Németh 2019: 215–264.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Tibor and his wife, Éva. Sajtószöveg, 12 February 2016. The names of the interviewees have been altered to protect their personal rights.

besides growing vegetables and fruits, animal were raised on a growing scale.<sup>32</sup> A 1965 article mentions that pig sticking became a “folk custom” in town and in connection with this, smoking sheds appeared at various points in town, on balconies and in playgrounds.

“How did these contraptions, resembling village toilets get to various points of our town...? Will stabbing, singeing and smoking be accompanied by raising pigs? And in the sign of striving for complete anarchy, will some pigsties be built here and there...?”<sup>33</sup>

Although in consequence of the gradual development of the area of the town, smoking sheds disappeared and small gardens retreated to the fringe of the town, the journalist’s fear was not without any basis. Back in 1969, at the session of the party committee of the town and the factory, the director of TVK disapproved of the fact that some people kept animals in the safety forest between the town and the factory (“ranging from keeping pigs to nutrias”), as they unleashed an invasion of pests on the town and the factory.<sup>34</sup> Later, illegal animal husbandry not complying with the hygienic regulations was discussed at the session of the town council,<sup>35</sup> and finally, the case received greater media coverage in 1977:

“Well, at first it was only one or two citizens, who did not respect the law at all, who encircled a little garden for themselves (under the electric line!), later their example was followed by more and more people. Today more than a hundred families are working in their free time on their »household plots« of 50-60 quadrats, which they enclosed arbitrarily. Everyone grows the vegetables they need and there are some who planted fruit trees under the electric line. I don’t envy anybody’s little pepper or tomatoes they worked for, but...! There came meat programme. More and more of the owners of little gardens built pigsties (a fascinating sight), and more and more people started to keep pigs. Today more than a hundred pigs and piglets are running around the little gardens. But what kind of little gardens are they? Most people cut the timber for the fence in the protective forest strip.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In connection with *Sztálinváros*, the adaption of village migrants to city lifestyle and the opposition of “town” and “village” norms (e. g. condemning keeping animals in the city and damaging parks) are described: Horváth 2017: 81–112.

<sup>33</sup> N. A. 1965: 4.

<sup>34</sup> N. A. 1969: 3.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of the Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 16 August 1974. MNL BAZML XXIII. 571. 10. d.; Minutes of the sessions of Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 16 April 1976. MNL BAZML XXIII. 572. 12. d.

<sup>36</sup> N. A. 1977a: 5.



As a last argument, the journalist mentioned the in-confused amazement, foreign and Hungarian visitors showed at this phenomenon on their arrival at the factory. Two months later it was reported in the press that small gardens were discontinued in the forest strip.<sup>37</sup>

The council tried to regulate the arbitrary establishment of small kitchen gardens several times. Already in 1974, a gardening cooperative was planned to be established in the site of the forest strip and on the land of the local cooperative covering 19 “*bolds*” (Hungarian acre) lying waste along the railway tracks, unsuitable for cultivating in large-scale cooperatives, but these plans were not realized.<sup>38</sup> The demand for the possibility of small-scale farming was satisfied in a regulated manner only in 1978, when small gardens of 100 quadrats were established in the northern part of the town and divided them among 351 tenants.<sup>39</sup> Due to the growing demand, new parcels were designated in other parts of the town.<sup>40</sup> Later it was recommended to those wishing to do gardening – due to the limited availability of lands – that they should obtain properties in the closed gardens of the neighbouring villages.<sup>41</sup>

Below, highlighting the experiences gained by some interviewees, I will demonstrate the reasons why they started to cultivate small gardens in the town, what functions the gardens had, what hierarchy was between the various gardening possibilities (small gardens in town, closed gardens in neighbouring villages, weekend plots), and how their significance changed during the lifetime of the interviewees as they became more advanced in age.

Zoltán, who was born in 1929, grew up in the agglomeration of the capital and after a turbulent life the authorities assigned him *Borsod* county as his residence.<sup>42</sup> In his narrative, Zoltán emphasized it several times that he was

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<sup>37</sup> N. A. 1977b: 2.

<sup>38</sup> Minutes of the Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 16 August 1974. MNL BAZML XXIII. 571. 10. d.; Minutes of the Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 28 March 1975. MNL BAZML XXIII. 571. 11. d.

<sup>39</sup> N. A. 1978: 5.

<sup>40</sup> N. A. 1984a: 4; N. A. 1984b: 4.

<sup>41</sup> N. A. 1979b: 6. Closed gardens covered those lands in the outskirts of settlements, which were found to be unfit for cultivation in big cooperatives and therefore they were left private property. Private individuals could only obtain lands here, in a maximum size of 3,000 m<sup>2</sup>. It was part of the more or less private second economy, which worked upon market principles, but from a legal point of view, it differed from household plots. Bali 2005: 156–158; Andorka 2006: 477–479.

<sup>42</sup> He worked as a painter at the construction of Soviet and Hungarian “new towns” (*Angarsk, Sztálinváros, Leninváros*). He compared the significance of *Leninváros* with the experiences he gained elsewhere several times in his reminiscences: he described the inhabitants of the town under construction as “sundry” folks whose majority were workers, temporarily staying there. In accordance with this, in his description of the not enclosed

good at gardening as he had lived all his life in a house with a garden and they kept animals when he was a child. He mentioned as a natural thing that in the house with a garden he rented in the 'old town' he started to keep rabbits and he did not give it up even after he moved to town. At the abandoned premises of a company he was allowed to set up some rabbit cages in which he kept 47 rabbits for three years. He started to cultivate his first kitchen garden near his home when his daughter was born in 1964 and even after he moved out he continued this in the new site for a while. He said he gave up gardening because his vegetables were often stolen and the animals often did some damage to it. "Half of it was stolen. The prime of it was always stolen. By the time I got there, part of it had been stolen. It was stolen. Half the people who went there did not even have a garden. They were lousy people."<sup>43</sup>

Tamás was born in a village in the township in 1948, and after finishing his studies, he settled down in the town in 1975, where he performed geodesic measurements in his jobs. His wife also came from the surrounding area, as he put it: "they also moved here from a farm". With his wife together, they cultivated five or six land plots designated as gardens – so called "occupied parcels" – growing vegetables and fruit on them. He stated that these land plots were not profitable and their cultivation required a lot of effort as they had to break the ground – he transported the rotary cultivator in his small Polski from one place to another. He had a vineyard in his native village too, but he doesn't cultivate it anymore as the 50–60 fruit trees on the big plot he bought at the time of the change of regime on the edge of the town give him enough work. He talked about agriculture as a hobby,<sup>44</sup> as both he and his wife loved the land, but lately he also regarded his orchard as a source of income.

Balázs, a teacher, who came from the northern part of *Borsod* county, moved to the town with his wife in 1979 and they immediately started to cultivate a small plot of land: "...you could gain land here by going out to the outskirts, digging a piece of land or tilling it for yourself and that was it, you occupied the land." Later these lands were meted out by the council, and a

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kitchen gardens cultivated on the edge of the residential area, stealth and damages caused by wild animals were the lead motifs.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Zoltán. Made by Ágota Lília Ispán and Csaba Kovács. Tiszaújváros, 30 April 2012–17 November 2012: 326–333. (manuscript)

<sup>44</sup> It can be seen that he considered it as a hobby when he described the difference between his harvesting practices and those of his father: "It had its own magic, the harvest. When you organised a harvest and it was not like in my father's vineyard at home that all the grapes had to be picked up, but I said that they should be harvested and I didn't care what was left there. If the grapes fall, you will bury them under a little sand so that we won't see them and that's it. They don't have to be picked up." Interview with Tamás. Tiszaújváros, 31 January 2010.

small sum was paid for them. He emphasized it in his narrative that he first started to cultivate a small garden next to the garden of his relatives who came from his native village to *Leninváros* like him.<sup>45</sup> Due to the construction of houses with gardens from the end of the eighties on, the lands available for kitchen gardening were gradually shrinking and in keeping with the pace of development, Balázs and his family had to exchange their small gardens for other plots several times, but this time the old acquaintances and relatives and the cooperation with them were not there any more. The interviewee mentioned that the main motivation of kitchen gardening was that they could break out of the environment of panel homes when they could fry bacon or have the billycan boiling together with the family.

The construction plots, closed vineyards bought in one of the neighbouring villages or the plots bought on the hillside studded with cottages in *Nyékládbáza*, which is also situated nearby offered predictability as opposed to small kitchen gardens. Many parted with their weekend plots when their children grew up or when their parents grew old and cultivating their parents' village yards became their task.

Cultivating small gardens is still practiced today, several interviewees have been cultivating a land plot since the 1970s or 1980s, in some cases this is the last piece of a “package of plots” (e. g. weekend plot, closed garden) they have retained. The temporary status of small gardens has remained. While earlier the plots that were cultivated as small gardens disappeared due to the expansion of housing estates and the construction of the suburban quarter with houses with gardens, since the 2000s the tenants were forced to move on and to start cultivating newly designated “virgin” soil in consequence of the appearance of new stores (Tesco, Spar, Lidl). The transitory feeling is strengthened by the current regulation providing that officially trees cannot be planted, wells cannot be drilled and sheds must not be built in small gardens and the local self government may immediately take away the land plot that has been rented for years. Some of the interviewees describe small gardening as a generational custom: they started it as young people (“that was the mood that everyone tinkered with such little watchamacallit”), but they have grown old together with the garden neighbours and today gardening on the edge of town is considered to be a pastime mainly of retired people living in panel homes.

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Balázs. Tiszaújváros, 19 January 2010. A literary sociographic description pointed out this phenomenon in *Leninváros* already in 1965: “Kitchen gardens are cultivated by those who moved from the village into town. And that bunch who came from the same village got household plots in Szederkény next to one another!” Balázs 1965: 2.

## **The garage in a new function**

With the rising number of private passenger cars, the limited number of parking places in streets and the lack of garages providing permanent storage space posed an ever-growing problem.<sup>46</sup> In the countries of the Eastern Bloc the latter one was solved in a similar way in terms of architecture, ownership and location (using suburban or marginal areas). Garage blocks became elements of the landscape characteristic of socialist towns.<sup>47</sup>

The professional automobile magazine called *Autó-Motor* suggested already back in 1957 that – following foreign examples – for the night passenger cars should be kept in the rows of garages built between blocks of flats or in garages constructed on the ground level or the basement of residential buildings.<sup>48</sup> The Ministry of Construction prescribed in 1960 that places should be designated for parking or constructing garages in the urban designs of towns. Connected to this, *Autó-Motor* raised the topic again and reported on a block of garages built next to a housing estate in *Budapest* as a pioneering initiative, setting it as an example. Here, car owners built their own garages in groups of four, on state-owned land, according to plans provided for them by the town council, which were owned by those who built them afterwards. In the press, it was suggested at that time that it was more cost effective if constructions were carried out by construction collectives or garage building cooperatives should be established following the example of apartment building cooperatives, furthermore, they suggested that type designs and regulations on construction and ownership should be worked out.<sup>49</sup> At last a comprehensive regulation – the so-called garage decree – was created in 1970.<sup>50</sup>

In accordance with the nationwide regulation, the gradual increase of the use of passenger cars was included in the calculations in the urban design of *Leninváros* in 1964:

“At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there will be no cityscape without passenger cars, and town route without the threat of accidents, so the separation of pe-

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<sup>46</sup> In Hungary, in 1950 there were 13,054 passenger cars, in 1960 31,268, in 1970 238,563 and in 1980 1,013,412. The annual increase of the passenger car fleet was 10-15,000 on average until the mid-1960s and from the mid-1970s it reached 80,000 per year. Valuch 2021: 109.

<sup>47</sup> Tuvikene 2010; Tuvikene 2014; Siegelbaum 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Torjai 1957: 24–25.

<sup>49</sup> Reményi-Gyenes 1961: 24–25; N. A. 1961.

<sup>50</sup> N. A. 1970: 420–422.

destrian and vehicle traffic is an important task to be solved by modern urban design. In consequence of the increased traffic demands, new functional and cityscape elements appear: multi-level garages, car carpets of roads, squares, real »parking stations«. Masses of moving cars cause problems to the cityscape whereas standing cars pose a problem to the townscape and the town structure.”<sup>51</sup>

When designing parking capacities, for full capacity, the plan calculated with the following data: for 1000 residents there were 280 cars, out of them 150 in big garages, 40 in small garages, and 90 in parking lots. The engineer suggested that big garages requiring large areas should be built in the forest on the edge of the town and on the far side of the roads bordering the residential units. In *Leninváros*, the small number of parking places and garages became an increasing problem by the 1970s, therefore car parks were added to the new residential buildings in 1973,<sup>52</sup> besides, in several steps huge garage blocks were built in several places in the city, mostly by garage cooperatives. Nevertheless, some suggested that blocks of garages should be built not only in suburban areas – as in this case, cars could have been parked quite far, even a kilometre away –, but free places fit for this purpose should be made use of in the city centre too.

According to the memoirs, those could build garages who already had cars or who could produce a request for a car to the authorities of the city council. The garage builders were often organized along the lines of the network of connections at their workplace. The garages were built by the co-owners in community work according to the interviewees<sup>53</sup> (later ready-made concrete garages also appeared), and then the single units were assigned by drawing lots. Kati, a shop assistant and her husband moved to the city from *Miskolc* in 1976, with their family, as they thought they would have better chances here to acquire an apartment. From the beginning they had a garage in a garage block and since then, they have bought garages for each of their sons there. The garages were handed over with finished structure and they were completed according to the owners’ needs and material possibilities: some people simply laid concrete on the floor, many built in a T-shaped inspection pit or created a cellar or attic in them.

A garage had several functions: they were used for storing and repairing cars and provided venues for social activities. This multifunctional usage of garages was typical in other socialist countries too, and the characteristics of

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<sup>51</sup> Füle 1968: 15.

<sup>52</sup> The increasing motorization required related service units, so a car service was built in the town and the filling station was also expanded.

<sup>53</sup> Voluntary community work based on the principle of mutuality.

socialist car culture played a role in it. Socialist car culture was characterized by paradoxes and complications accompanying mass motorizations, according to the research done by Luminita Gajat.<sup>54</sup> Besides western influences, some of its features derived from the socialist economic system such as the insufficient supply of cars and spare parts, the long waiting lists, the high consumer prices, the special commercial and distribution patterns that resulted from the lack of market, the poor production quality, the system of privileges and the individual car repairs and the social activities resulting from them.<sup>55</sup> It was researched by Kurt Möser, who argues that due to the shortages of manufacturing and the related service infrastructure, the repair and maintenance of socialist cars required a bigger technical activity and knowledge and an emotional attitude and practical care for the car different from the west, so the method of car use did not only involve driving. Maintenance and repair activities took place in garages.

In the following interview excerpt I would like to show what was the role of a garage in the owners' life and how they were used in everyday life. As the majority of the interviewees remained owners after the change of the political regime, we can see how certain functions were transformed. In their narrative the time planes are sometimes jumbled – some examples given by them to demonstrate the methods of uses are taken from the socialist era, others from our days, which indicate that some functions spanned various historical periods.

Imre, an electrical technician, who liked riding his motorbike in his youth from the '60s on and later he had several cars, spent much of his time in the garage as the second hand cars he bought required regular maintenance. His way of speaking – as has been pointed out by Möser in his research – expresses a unique emotional attitude and care in connection with cars:

“These had to be massaged, as there was always something to be done. [...] Everyone tried to ensure that it would not break down when they drove somewhere, you know, and they tried to inspect and maintain them and as they had had motorbikes they caressed the car, cleaned it and found out that this or that part is faulty or had broken down and they required repair.” In the beginning, he went to the garage to get acquainted with the car: “I looked into it here and there, I repaired this on it, I trimmed it, I repaired that on it. On the other hand, you had to pass the time somehow. Where shall I go when I get home from the factory at two, what the hell shall I do in the summer until 8? Or in the afternoon? Then I went out to the garage.”

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<sup>54</sup> For more see: Urry–Larsen 2004: 25–26.

<sup>55</sup> Gatajel 2011: 155–156.

He also mentioned storing as another important function of the garage and social activities when garage neighbours helped one another with repair and they often tasted the wine they received from hometown.

*“Well, going to the garage was a social activity [he is laughing], to entertain and to talk. Garage life was a different lifestyle, so perhaps we didn’t do anything, but the three or four of us were there and we had such a wonderful time all afternoon. There were fewer possibilities back then and it was like this.”<sup>56</sup>*

The garage, as described by Gábor, who was born in a neighbouring village in 1950 and after graduating from the university he lived with his family in *Leninváros* for several years, did not only serve the purpose of storing the car:

*“the two rooms [of the apartment] did not provide any opportunity for a man. There the expression »I’m going to the garage!« had a special meaning for those living in town. It still has. It meant that the husband left his family and started a new life in the garage around the car. Which meant everything including washing the car, but the car was not so dirty that it should be washed every day, but if you felt bored, you could go down to the garage or away to the garage.”<sup>57</sup>*

Kati also talked about the garage as the venue of activities mostly done by men and social occasions for several generations:

*“my husband occupied himself a lot out there, tinkering with his fishing things, and got busy, trimmed himself, he has a small collection of artefacts, er...a collection of cigarette lighters, he was organizing it, [...] there are lots of items which I couldn’t imagine in the apartment but there it served the purpose well as it is displayed in a round along the walls and he can store the car in the same way. He was tinkering and he is still tinkering in the summer [...]. The other two garages, which belong to the two sons, are terrific, there is almost always some gathering even in winter, yesterday they met old colleagues, they went there, had a little talk and then they went to play bowling. In the summer there are no such boy parties, but we usually organise family gatherings. The garage neighbour opposite us, [...] he arranged things so that they can cook in a cauldron inside, it is constructed in a way [...]. We usually cook good meals in cauldrons, fish soup, goulash with beans and we usually celebrated there some remarkable days like name days or the birthdays of those who were born in the summer [...].”<sup>58</sup>*

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Imre. Tiszaújváros, 15 February 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Gábor. Tiszapalkonya, 12 August 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Kati. Tiszaújváros, 20 January 2010.

Female garage owners (singles, divorcée, widows) used the garage almost exclusively for storing their cars and they did not participate in garage life: “they loved tinkering, working or having a drink together outside and to come together so men were socializing there, so to say, but it was not the dream of women”<sup>59</sup>. Nevertheless, it was a divorced woman who mentioned a new way of using her garage because she and her friends had a musical rehearsal in there.

Tamás, who we have already quoted in connection with the cultivation of small household gardens, had his fourth garage at the time when the interview was made. He explicitly summarized the characteristics, mentioned in other interviews too. Although he mainly talked about present day garage use practices, they can be traced back to the 1970s and the 1980s. In his narrative, the garage had multiple functions.<sup>60</sup>

In his own garage there is an attic, a storage room for cars, an inspection pit, and a cellar with an entrance opening at the back of the garage. The proper use of the pits he connected to socialism, “as socialist cars had to be repaired on a regular basis, they had to go under them and so on”. He connected the disappearance of car repairs to the fact that socialist cars vanished, which involved a change in the function of inspection pits: since then they have been used as storage places. In the cellar section he stored wine, spirits and fruit gathered in the garden while in the attic plastic barrels, apple mincer and tools were stored. Garages built under panel blocks were not considered by him suitable for this purpose due to their higher temperature, neither did they provide opportunity for cooking and they could not make noise in them either. Due to the other function of the garage, he preferred parking his car in front of his house. According to Tamás, most garage owners have a garden somewhere and the crops or the wine are stored in the garage, they are taken from there to be sold or home. Therefore, he said that garages have dual functions: “storing cars and crops”. Apart from storing cars, he mentioned that in many garages “various jobs are done privately” (welding, metal work, woodwork) in some of them there is a turning lathe too.

He told at length about the community life in the garage. In her opinion, family gatherings were held in the garage only lately and it had the advantage of not “making a mess” at home and it provides a more convenient venue than the narrow apartments. He mentioned that cooking fish soup or frying fish or smorgasbord (cold buffet) were characteristic of these occasions.

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Magdolna. Tiszaújváros, 4 February 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Tamás. Tiszaújváros, 31 January 2010.



*“And garages completed rental apartments and most people go down to the garage to socialize and talks to people. For many people, for me too, that I had a vineyard, it was created..., my garage is created in a way that I have a cellar where all tools necessary for processing grapes can be found. Everything from a press, a mincer to barrels. [...] And then, when there’s a gathering, or something, you offer it to the others and they offer something for you. Or if I had some spirit distilled, it wasn’t for my private consumption. All right, I probably consumed it too, but such barter trade... when they came up, tilled my garden, I gave them three litres of spirit or if they did me some favour, then...”<sup>61</sup>*

He connected the golden days of garage life to the time of the change of the regime, but in time, when garage owners often changed, lost its significance. As the pub was the place where jobs or job assignments could be received, the garage row provided an excellent opportunity to exchange information. Thus, it occurred several times that they informed one another about where to obtain a spare part and from whom.

*“So if someone has a problem, well... people there deal with everything. From drilling wells with everything. With electric things, repairing cars, small welding jobs, repairs, painting and one man goes up to the other asking what can be expected [...] and so they help one another.”<sup>62</sup>*

These communities include garage neighbours on the one hand and workplace companies or friends on the other hand, which communicate with one another sometimes. For example, one of the garage owners joins the card game organized in front of the garage with interviewee’s friends. A retired elder brother of Tamás’s makes awnings and doors for garages. He said that retired people like him stayed there regularly and they “form such bands of regulars” like his brother. He mentioned “fishing friendship” as another important link connecting men. Besides the experiences connected to fishing, which is called the most popular sport in town, he mentioned politics as a topic they liked talking about.

Finally, the garage is also an investment for him serving as a property that could be cashed if need be, for example if his daughter gets married. Referring to others, he also said that by renting out several garages, one can earn a considerable amount of monthly income. At one time, he himself owned several garages.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Tamás. Tiszaújváros, 31 January 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Tamás. Tiszaújváros, 31 January 2010.

## Conclusion

As has been said, in *Leninváros*, the planners laid stress on building facilities for the relaxation and recreation of people and parks, playgrounds, beaches and holiday homes were available for everyone. However, the public places designated as recreational facilities for the inhabitants of the town, which was intended to be an idealistic one, did not satisfy their needs. They preferred to spend their free time in their 'household plots' in town. Small gardens and garages complemented a lot of apartments in panel blocks, thus increasing the available living space in a special manner. As they were nearby – mostly within a five-minute bicycle ride from the apartment – their importance was different from that of weekend houses, plots or the vineyards owned in neighbouring villages. In the case of the latter ones, the interviewees highlighted that due to their difficult accessibility, they became more of a burden for them. As opposed to this, the small gardens and garages on the edge of town were visited every day, especially in the summer. While the small gardens were also frequented by the housewives, garages were mainly visited by men. At the same time, small gardens and garages had a community forming/creating effect. For instance, garage rows of the cooperative were plastered by means of community work. In many cases they worked at the same place and it also contributed to the fact that the owners knew one another relatively well. Common programmes organised by garage neighbours (drinking wine, cooking in cauldron) were activities for which the public places of the town did not provide any facilities. These "private properties" mostly had the function whose mass demand was unexpected for the planners of the city. Besides embodying the desire for private property, they helped residents, who often had a village background, making the socialist type of town more liveable.

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Róbert Gyökér

**“We Came to a Village...”**  
*Value Systems in a Changing World*

**Abstract**

Although we experience an increasing level of cultural foreign experience in our time intensified by the pressure of migration and the development of information technologies, the conventional view of value systems still prevails in modern nations. Change in culture is a never-ending process, though. The persuasive power of stability and uniformity seems to decline in postmodernity transforming the role of nation states, as well. Peripheries and “partial truth” come into view. Value systems are also affected by these changes. Value systems are no longer cast from a single mold, but rather derive from a dynamically changing framework that is shaped by the dialogistic connection of the elements of the sociocultural realm, the central role of the subject’s interpretation and the positioned meaning of values. This paper attempts to describe the changes brought about by postmodernity through the everyday life of four families settled down in Hosszúhetény. After having embraced traditional values at a certain point in their life as a result of a conscious decision, families are compelled to reevaluate their former worldview. This process results in the revision of their identity, as well. In the end, they are trying to establish themselves through various representational practices in a village that has already been modernized. While trying to analyze the components of their value system, I define so-called *correlations* in the hope of realizing a more relevant understanding of the postmodern age.

**Keywords:** value systems, identity, correlations, postmodernity, metanarratives



We imagine values as solid frameworks that keep our everyday life within limits. They guide us on the pursuit of our goals and behaviors we deem right. The word “value system” gives special emphasis to this view. Change in culture is a never-ending process, though. The persuasive power of stability and uniformity seems to decline in postmodernity. Peripheries and „partial truth” come into view. “Postmodernity rehabilitates the marginal, integrates the exotic, and channels many values into the social mainstream which has no relevance for the historical and cultural traditions of the given area”<sup>1</sup>. As a result, perception of values and value systems is also modified. They are no longer cast from a single mold, but regarded as a dynamically changing framework shaped by the diversity of the sociocultural milieu.

In my paper I will examine the integrating power of values through the everyday life of four families settled down in *Hosszúbetény* whose main purpose is to realize a self-sufficient lifestyle based on traditional values. While trying to analyze the component parts of their value system, I define so-called *correlations* in the hope of providing a deeper understanding of the post-modern age. Knowledge drawn from the outer world as a result of interpretation is a universal human trait. However, this experience shows a high degree of diversity due to the socio-cultural embeddedness of the individual. What constant is the relationship between the external environment and the human cognition. This systemic relationship is manifested as a collection of *correlations*. Correlations are therefore the hermeneutic relationship between the individual and the external variables of the sociocultural milieu. Values, on the other hand, are a combination of correlations, their process of pattern-formation during which the resulting constellations become saturated with normative content.

In my view, changes in value systems follow a four-step process and evolve in close relationship with identity politics. At some point in their lives, people are exposed to new values. This turn can be a result of a conscious decision, a commitment to new ideas, or even a sudden change in living conditions. After having identified with new values, the individual is encouraged to reevaluate his or her former worldview, which leads to the transformation of their value system, as well. Changes in value systems do not leave personal identity untouched either, leading to its revision and sometimes a formation of a completely new identity. In the end, the individual seeks to establish his or her new identity through various representational practices.

I regard traditional values as attributes of peasant societies before the advent of modernity. The most important feature of traditional societies is

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<sup>1</sup> Gyökér 2020: 122.

the central role of community based on mutual support and shared activities. In this context, villages are viewed as locality-based units bound to a particular geographic location.<sup>2</sup> Since proximity and reciprocity play an important role in the life of traditional communities, self-expression and personal initiatives are kept between boundaries, and only a limited form of individualism can be realized.<sup>3</sup>

As a first step, I try to identify the main changes brought about by postmodernity regarding knowledge production along with the tension between subjectivity and objectivity, the role of metanarratives and texts in power distribution and the crisis of representation adding a fourth aspect which I find especially decisive: the birth of small, local communities. As a next step, I discuss some value theories that influenced me the most. In the end, in order to support my ideas, I present some empirical data drawn from my fieldwork that was conducted in Hosszúhetény.

## **Introduction**

### *Postmodernity and its basic tenets*

One of the most important recognitions of postmodernity is that the world is not organized around a general framework of explanatory principles, but is home to a diversity of interpretations – often mutually exclusive interpretations, in which beliefs, conjectures and expectations play at least as important a role as the attributes observed during empirical investigation of a given phenomenon. In postmodernity, the hegemony and the unifying power of metanarratives are broken. Diversity, heterogeneity are the key words of the era, which is characterized by the peaceful coexistence of pop art and photo-realism; John Cage’s music philosophy and punk music; TV series and B-category films. As Jameson notes: “the postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole ‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch”, and those postmodernisms admire a world of imagination filled with science fiction, fantasy novel and horror.<sup>4</sup>

Postmodernity is a kind of counterculture that draws its power from the crisis and criticism of modernity. Though the mindset of modernity is pervaded by an unbroken optimism and faith in progress, since World War II

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<sup>2</sup> Nádasi 1987: 68.

<sup>3</sup> Erdei 1934: 93.

<sup>4</sup> Jameson 1991: 1.



the shadow side of the era has come ever more starkly to the surface. Due to growing internal contradictions, modernity's notion of progress is slowly turning against itself, giving rise to postmodernity. The crisis is based on the misconception that the balanced operation of the system should be pursued along general principles, which ignore the specific features of the sub-processes. Since minor processes show a markedly higher degree of diversity, conflict between the center and the peripheries arises. All these coercive forces transform the nature of cognitive processes as well, shifting its focus from general explanations into a diversity of individual interpretations.

#### *Discourse and metanarratives*

Although transition from modernity to postmodernity is very diverse, the essence of the change is confined to a single characteristic as Jean-François Lyotard points out: postmodernity is based on the recognition that "scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse"<sup>5</sup>. Postmodernity questions the status of discourse and calls for re-reading. The central role of texts in power formation is recognized. Foucault approaches the oppressive forms of power through the concept of discourse, discerning that discourse is a limited collection of assertions, which gain leadership in a given historical period and in a particular linguistic area, suppressing alternative strategies of interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Postmodern authors emphasize the constructed nature of scientific descriptions, drawing attention to the historical and institutional determinants of text production. Prevailing texts are not incidental, scattered products of a historical period, but are testimonies of power formation, which formulate statements about reality. Repressive forms of power are clearly illustrated by the phenomenon of orientalism. According to Said, orientalism is not only a means of knowledge production, but also a means of oppression applied by the West against the Middle Eastern societies concerned. The pictures and allegations propagated in this way are nothing but mere representations of a reality deprived of its locality, and committed predominantly towards the West, not the East.<sup>7</sup>

Texts emerging as a result of scientific research come under scrutiny, too. According to Clifford, anthropological writing has always been a determining factor during research. That it has only recently become the focus of atten-

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<sup>5</sup> Lyotard 1984: 3.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault 1972: 117.

<sup>7</sup> Said 1994.

tion "reflects the persistence of an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience"<sup>8</sup>. This kind of perspective, in many cases, attributed only a formal character to research reports, reducing their role to the status of well-kept "field notes". In postmodernity, meaning is thus *positioned*. The same life situation observed from different epistemological perspectives often lead to different interpretations. And at the same time, even staying within the framework of a particular sociocultural perspective, we may come to different conclusions. Therefore, interpretation plays the primary role in the process of knowledge production.

*Subjectivity vs. objectivity*

Subjective experience overrides faith in the existence of objective reality. While metaphysical realism emphasizes the existence of reality independent of human experience, postmodernity is distrustful of the postulates of objectivity and the applicability of scientific methodology. The driving power of the postmodern turn is a deep skepticism about whether the researcher is able to integrate the results of his or her observation into an explanation of the phenomena examined, and thus be able to produce credible socioscientific knowledge. According to Reed, this is questionable. Ethnographic fieldwork involves an epistemic paradox. Since the researcher is a social being who brings his or her own knowledge and preliminary experiences – as a kind of inheritance – into the sociocultural situation, the evaluation process becomes subordinated to the researcher's subjectivity, which raises doubts about the credibility of the account.<sup>9</sup>

Rosaldo emphasizes the power of emotions while analyzing the cultural phenomenon of "rage, born of grief"<sup>10</sup>. After realizing the organic unity of grief, rage, and behind *Ilongot* headhunting, Rosaldo is forced to reconsider the classic principles of anthropological research. In order to understand the specific cultural phenomenon, he introduces the concept of *positioned subject*. In analyzing the phenomenon of mourning, he criticizes earlier anthropological methods that only dealt with the description of the given rite rather than analyzing the feeling of mourning. He believes that the functional description of rites as a set of actions deprives the event from its historical depth and the momentary tensions of human drama. Ethnographers who

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<sup>8</sup> Clifford 1986: 2.

<sup>9</sup> Reed 2010: 22–23.

<sup>10</sup> Rosaldo 1993: 1.

exclude strong emotions therefore distort their accounts and “remove potentially key variables from their explanations”<sup>11</sup>.

### *Crisis of representation*

Awareness of the discursive character has many implications; in particular, a sense of theoretical uncertainty, a doubt about the origin of knowledge. Rorty traces back the history of crisis to philosophy’s central concern of becoming the foundation of knowledge. According to the overall attitude consolidated by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, knowledge is nothing other than the authentic representation of reality existing independently from the cognitive processes of the mind. Understanding the nature of knowledge is, therefore, the clarification of mental processes through which consciousness creates its representations of external reality. A contradiction inherent in the initial situation is apparent to Rorty: philosophy’s quest to become a “tribunal of pure reason” is problematic since it was established during a specific historical period (the 17<sup>th</sup> century), and within a geographically specific region (Europe)<sup>12</sup>. Postmodernity questions belief in the clarity of representation which led to the naive idea that the world is fully perceptible and perfectly describable. It holds the view that even the simplest cultural encounter is situational in nature and due to the subjective aspects of the cognitive process, ethnographic truth remains only partial.<sup>13</sup>

It is recognized, that reality transmitted by representation, is not a credible source of cognition, but rather a network of meanings created in an arbitrary fashion. In the postmodern era, the “natural bond between the signifier and the signified” is loosening.<sup>14</sup> New contents penetrate the scope of interpretation. As a result, the image of the signified becomes enriched, transforming conventional meanings as well. *Epoch blending*, the simultaneous presence of incompatible historic periods of time only amplifies the crisis. In the maze of constant allusions and arbitrary references often lacking normative basis, meaning becomes uncertain.

For Tyler, the crisis of science is in fact the crisis of representation, resulting from the disabilities of language as a tool for describing the world. While glorifying its triumph over knowledge, science has tried to place discourse under its control. However, since the verification process science

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<sup>11</sup> Rosaldo 1993: 12.

<sup>12</sup> Rorty 1979: 4.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford 1986: 7.

<sup>14</sup> Saussure 1959: 68.

has established is within its own discourse, its ambitions have led to controversy, which makes it impossible for science to justify its claims.

The crisis of representation probably reaches its ultimate form in Baudrillard's *simulacra* and *simulation* theory. According to Baudrillard, reality by now became completely transformed. The phenomena were finally torn away from their archetypes and in the interpretation simulation took over. Simulation is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal". Reality is no longer based on the process of representation, but rather on generated patterns, command models. "The age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials – worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs". As a result, separating the simulation from actual ideals becomes impossible.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Local communities*

To counterbalance the negative forces of globalization, the power of the local scene is recognized. One of the most important developments of post-modernity is the growing demand for the recreation of local communities. Only a self-organized community can provide an adequate space for self-expression and personality development, counterbalancing the unifying effects of the market economy. Individuals in identity crisis or seeking refuge from social control turn again towards the community, looking for a way out. Within a community they find home, will be able to re-establish their identity, and paradoxically preserve their independence.

Though nostalgia for local communities seems to be a peculiarly postmodern phenomenon, its foundations can be traced back to the commitment to the countryside destroyed by modernity. According to Araghi, the collapse of rural communities can be divided into two periods. From 1945 to 1973, it is characterized by the emergence of the world market and the establishment of the institutional system of the new global political-economic order, while from 1973 to the present day it is marked by the collapse and the reorganization of the institutional system. During the first phase, development policies launched by the United Nations focused mainly on industrialization and internal growth as opposed to export-oriented agricultural production. The aim of the programs was to create family farms, thus preventing the spread of communism. However, in those countries where access to credit was limited, only a few family farms emerged and gained

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<sup>15</sup> Baudrillard 1988: 166–167.

leadership. Reforms thus led to the formation of a large number of unviable smallholdings that became vulnerable to market forces. The years after 1973, on the other hand, have been marked by a relative decline in US hegemony. The root cause of this process was the collapse of the Bretton Woods System. As a result, the state took on a transnational character, giving free path to the spread of international capital independent from national regulations through the operation of supranational institutions. This process continues even today.<sup>16</sup>

The postmodern debate surrounding development theory is a dilemma of choice between global market and human communities: the question is whether we support infinite growth of industrial production, or rather, we focus on communities so that they may find their spiritual-environmental unity, and develop a sustainable way of life once again. This latter objective seems to be more justifiable. Since the beneficiaries of globalization are only one-fifth of the world's population, globalization can be considered more as a project designated by political considerations, rather than a necessary process of credible representation of the individual's interests.<sup>17</sup>

## Values and value systems

### *A historical overview*

Considering value system theories in general, we can observe different approaches to the topic. Many authors emphasize the integrative aspect of values. In these theories values are regarded as guiding principles, deep-rooted assumptions or postulates, which ensure the unity and harmonious functioning of culture. This type of integrative character is accentuated by Hoebel who was among the first to carry out systematic research on the topic. Hoebel was actually investigating the nature of law among primitive tribes like Cheyenne, Kiowa or Comanche. After having taken into consideration the conception *imperative of selection*<sup>18</sup> laid down by Ruth Benedict he found that

“once a culture gets under way [...] there are always some criteria of choice that govern or influence selection. These criteria are the broadly generalized propo-

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<sup>16</sup> Araghi 1995: 355.

<sup>17</sup> McMichael 2004: XXXVIII–IX.

<sup>18</sup> Benedict 1961: 171.

sitions held by the members of a society as to the nature of things and as to what is qualitatively desirable and undesirable. We prefer to call these basic propositions 'postulates'. Philosophers and sociologists commonly call them 'values'.<sup>19</sup>

Hoebel's views on values were echoed by many anthropologists like Francis Hsu who studied the system of Chinese clans. Hsu emphasizes the integrative power of values. In his theory, values show the focal points of the culture's integration. They are a limited set of behaviors that have gained exclusive validity over other behaviors within a particular culture. Postulates are generally accepted by all members of society and considered to be the natural order of things. Hsu, however, points out the fact that fundamental values are not always consistent with each other. Consistency is the indicator of cultural integrity.<sup>20</sup>

For Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, the normative aspect of culture is determined by certain value orientations. In their view, value orientations are "complex but definitely patterned (rank-ordered) principles, resulting from the transactional interplay of three analytically distinguishable elements of the evaluative process", defined as cognitive, emotional and guiding aspects. Although principles change from culture to culture, variability only appears in the pattern of the elements (principles), which are themselves cultural universals. The authors in their theory identify five orientations, and three degrees within each orientation whose combination defines the general "profile" of a given culture. In the theory of value orientations, transitions completely disappear, though. Patterns representing cultures seem to create a particular type of human being (good or evil, being subject to nature, living in harmony with it or dominating its forces), whose scope of validity applies to all members of society. Culture is constantly changing, though, and our values are continually being re-evaluated. In the postmodern era we find polyphonic life paths containing values that are often incompatible with the past or the socio-cultural traditions of a given region. Someone can be an IT person, make a movie, and even cultivate an organic garden at the same time: his value system will be made up of preferences set by the horizon of his life cycle. Following the theory of Kluckhohn, a self-sufficient individual questioning the achievements of modernity, may appear in negative light, even if he lives in postmodernity.

Another group of authors concentrates on the transition between modernity and postmodernity and tries to understand the persistence of tra-

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<sup>19</sup> Hoebel 1954: 13.

<sup>20</sup> Hsu 1969: 61.

ditional values and the characteristics of the (post)modern personality. This conception was originally outlined by Roland Inglehart who tried to visualize cultures in a co-ordinate system by examining the relationship between *survival* versus *self-expression* and *traditional* versus *secular-rational* values. In Inglehart's interpretation difference between modernity and postmodernity is, however, an evolutionary one: the traditional value system appears as a lower level of social development, the world of social backwardness and exploitation.<sup>21</sup>

Inkeles and Smith examine the causes of the emergence of the modern man and reach the conclusion that "men become modern through the particular life experience they undergo", specifically through work experience gained in factories and industrial plants. The authors regard the individual as the basic unit of modernity. They are convinced that personality traits are not necessarily formed in childhood only: changes in values may take place in adulthood as well. The individual, after having come into contact with an institution, incorporates its characteristics into his or her own personality. Culture is therefore in continuous motion, its component parts are constantly being changed and updated.<sup>22</sup>

Bilsky and Schwartz examine the relationship between values and personality traits. In their theory, values are described as "cognitive representations of the important human goals or motivations" coordinating people's behavior. Motivation plays an important part in this model highlighting the difference between the various types of values. According to the authors, values and personality traits constitute an integrated structure and can hardly be distinguished from each other. Despite all the similarities, though, values are conceived as a distinctive type of disposition: "as guiding principles in the individual's life, values are conscious goals evaluated in terms of importance"<sup>23</sup>.

## Values and value systems in the postmodern age

"Reading" of culture is transformed in postmodernity. Interpretations carried by traditional cultural definitions are hardly capable of describing sociocultural changes in their entirety. For Geertz, culture is still a

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<sup>21</sup> Inglehart 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Inkeles-Smith 1974.

<sup>23</sup> Bilsky-Schwartz 1994.

“historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life”<sup>24</sup>.

In Geertz’s definition cultural transmission plays a decisive role. Almost everything is overshadowed by the past, and it seems that innovation, temporality resulting from the diversity of communication, or randomness of sociocultural life situations, do not play any role in forging knowledge or shaping a personal life philosophy. However, in an age like postmodernity, the source of content (traditions) and the flow of knowledge (information) can hardly be controlled. Because of weakened family ties, symbols of the past may mean nothing to the next generation. *Pastiche*, the empty form of a referential system hiding behind the mask of historicity, is one of the creative techniques of the era, as Jameson recognizes.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, meaning production is situational, and interpretation thickens in the moment of the encounter.

Among the cultural terms defined within the sociological tradition, Inglehart’s definition provides a subtle meaning of culture. According to him, culture is created in the cross-section of two extreme dimensions: the constraints of external reality, and the inner world of the subject. On the one hand, culture is the “system of attitudes, values and knowledge that is widely shared within a society and is transmitted from generation to generation”. On the other hand, it is “the subjective aspect of a society’s institutions: the beliefs, values, knowledge and skills that have been internalized by the people of a given society”<sup>26</sup>.

When examining value system theories, we find that definitions are basically essentialist. Interpretations assume a general meaning whose relevance extends to society as a whole. Reality has degrees in postmodernity, though. Knowledge production is more procedural and always adapted to the expectations and conditions of the given sociocultural situation. In my view, culture is a dialogic relationship between inherited forms and acquired knowledge, which gains meaning through the interpretative act of the individual based on his or her value system. The meaning created in this way is a “momentary” meaning, since the individual’s value system also changes dynamically.

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<sup>24</sup> Geertz 1973: 89.

<sup>25</sup> Jameson 1991: 16–18.

<sup>26</sup> Inglehart 1997: 15.



Just as the definition of culture, concepts of values become also transformed in postmodernity. In my view, values are the conclusion of an organic *correlation* between the individual and an external variable of the socio-cultural milieu based on practical considerations, as it becomes manifested at a certain point of the individual's life path. "There is a never-ending dialogue between the individual and his or her own sociocultural environment. A correlation is in fact this *dialogicity* in its reflective entirety."<sup>27</sup> Individuals define their values on the basis of their own life, then compile their value system out of those that gain special significance in the given life situation. Values are therefore the individual condensation of preferences related to the sociocultural environment: either value variations emerging from the reconsideration of already existing values, or newly created ones reflecting the needs of the given sociocultural milieu.

An additional feature of values is their interpretative nature reflecting one's own personal relation to his or her sociocultural environment, and the resulting dynamism, that is, their positioned meaning: a lifelong unrelenting re-evaluation of the content of values one professes. Because individual life situations show a high degree of diversity depending whether a situation is related to the workplace, family, or other group membership, a different "reading" of the same value is possible in different sociocultural environments. This fractured system is also described by Arjun Appadurai who coined the term *disjuncture*<sup>28</sup> when addressing changes of our time can be observed in its full dimension in the life of families living in *Hosszúbetény*.

## Case study

*Hosszúbetény* is a small village situated in the southern part of Hungary. It was traditionally an agricultural settlement whose inhabitants were engaged in cultivation and viticulture. Nowadays, however, these activities have gone into decline. Villagers commonly commute to work outside the village, in larger towns like *Pécs* or *Komló*. Among traditional activities, viticulture and the associated winery have survived. In addition to the peasant population of the village, miners should also be mentioned who settled in *Hosszúbetény* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of coal mining. After the transition, a boom in rural tourism occurred. This boom perhaps helped attract attention to the village, leading many new residents to move there. This newly emerging core

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<sup>27</sup> Gyökér 2020: 128

<sup>28</sup> Appadurai 1996: 33.

is a narrow group of intellectuals whose value system is markedly different to that of the village-dwellers’ worldview. Their guiding principles are organized around ecological considerations based on self-sufficiency, organic farming and community life. Instead of emphasizing growth and self-expression, rather sustainability and self-restraint are recognized. Local solutions are emerging as an alternative to the globalist perspective of the service sector. In place of the usage of information technologies immersion in joint activities becomes appreciated putting an emphases on *face-to-face* communication.

Since families seek answers to practical questions, my research relied on semi-structured interviews recorded with community members in order to explore the interconnectedness of personal motivations and local needs. During the selection process of my interviewees, I have applied a non-probability sampling technique, the snowball method. Since families form a closed group, a community whose members are trying to establish a traditional way of life based on self-sufficiency, this approach has proved to be particularly useful because after having met my first contact point I have easily reached out to other families as well.

The fieldwork was completed during the summer of 2011. Interviews were carried out in the village, and its peripheries, with the exception of one family, which lived in the forest. During my research, members of four families were questioned out of those 7 to 8 families who also took an active part in community development and the organization of different projects beside cultivating their own farm. Interviews were documented with a video camera, the recordings of which later served as a basis for an independent documentary film.<sup>29</sup> Recordings were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed using the method of thematic analysis.<sup>30</sup> Accounts were then coded to identify recurring themes and topics of the personal interviews. Based on the themes obtained during my analysis, correlations were refined and further developed applying the inductive reasoning during which I was continuously striving to diminish the distance between the empirical material of the texts and my theoretical framework.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to questions about values and values systems, life histories were also analyzed. According to Thomas and Znaniecki, social facts exist only through the subjective filter of the individual. During various historical periods, and even in different geographical locations, different narratives come to the forefront emphasizing different aspects of social reality. There-

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<sup>29</sup> Gyökér 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Braun–Clarke 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Kovács 2007: 234–242.

fore, social life must be interpreted as the result of an uninterrupted interaction between the individual and his or her sociocultural milieu.<sup>32</sup>

Beside semi-structured interviews, participant observation also formed an essential part of my fieldwork. One of the indisputable advantages of the participatory method is that it dissolves the “scientific self” of the researcher, who thus appears more authentic to community members, as Katz points out. Even if the location of the research is influenced by the presence of the researcher, members of the community explore their daily lives not from the perspective of a social science but from their own.<sup>33</sup> During my research, I visited community events and recorded different kinds of interactions between community members. These were occasions like harvesting, garden works, mutual visits between families and food sharing events.

### **Everyday life as interplay between correlations and values**

Relationship between individuals and variables of external reality is determined by mutual reciprocity. Constants of sociocultural reality influence individuals in their decision making who – in return – make social reality an object of their interpretation. Correlations are the conclusion of this interpretive act. Values, on the other hand, are a conclusion of certain correlations and their development into unique patterns, a process that is determined by the hermeneutical aspirations of the individual. Since values always acquire their meaning through a specific life situation, the existence of a universally valid value system is a paradox. This would assume that different lifeworlds could be matched with each other disregarding their spatial and temporal embeddedness. Concentrating on the aspects of a self-sufficient lifestyle based on traditional values, I have distinguished the following correlations as decisive elements of the families’ value system:

#### *1. Correlation between humankind and nature*

Instead of evading nature and artificially manipulating it, the notion of guardianship becomes accentuated in postmodernity. According to this approach, living communities are considered to be equal to humankind. The idea is also emphasized by Thiele (1995), who argued for such a personal

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<sup>32</sup> Znaniecki–Thomas 1958: 1–8.

<sup>33</sup> Katz 2015.

relationship towards nature, free of desire for possession and domination. As is so strikingly illustrated by one of my interviewees:

*“I try to approach nature in a way that I only make some adjustments. I do not want to transform it at any price. All I want is to adjust it in a way that suits everyone: nature, animals, beetles, and plants as well.” (ZsG)*

Guardianship also builds community and strengthens social cohesion. As a result, a feeling of connectedness is being created among community members. They emphasize common goals and cooperation. In their effort to create such a milieu, families are trying to counterbalance the negative effects of modern life, which often lead to “the predominance of individual strategies of survival over the principles of intragroup and intergroup identity and cohesion”, as Uzzell *et al.* describe it.<sup>34</sup>

## *2. Attitude towards spirituality*

Although in the postmodern era everything is pervaded by a sense of instantaneousness and immediacy, there is still an unbroken desire in people for permanence and continuity. “The greater the ephemerality, the more pressing the need to discover or manufacture some kind of eternal truth that might lie therein”, as Harvey points out.<sup>35</sup> Increases in spiritual susceptibility in postmodernity underline this basic human need, which is also reflected in peoples’ value system living in *Hosszúbetény*. One of its central categories is religiousness that encompasses many forms of religious convictions including Christianity, Pantheism or Buddhism. A personal commitment towards transcendence is accentuated here without which a balanced relationship between man and landscape is inconceivable. As is revealed by my interviewees:

*“For me, land is not only the land, but everything, the earth itself. The whole earth in its unity. And I like to personify this as life itself, and to become one with Mother Earth, with her maternal quality.” (KNJ)*

*“I think you can surely discover God in nature. It is also possible in the city but we have probably been more open to this kind of experience within the framework of nature since our childhood than to the other.” (JL)*

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<sup>34</sup> Uzzell et al. 2002: 27.

<sup>35</sup> Harvey 1990: 292.

### 3. The role of tradition

Families living in *Hosszúhetény* are trying to revitalize a way of life that was once typical of the traditional peasant society. This process is heavily loaded with conflicts, though. The tension between the capitalized village and the farmers' specific way of life together with the negative experience of loss of knowledge as a result of modernization are being further deepened by the search for a compromise with consumer society. As is also explained by my interviewees:

*"The peasant lifestyle was embedded into a community, into a system. This system has completely disappeared by now. So, in practice the classic peasant lifestyle and our way of life are as different as chalk and cheese." (KNZs)*

*"Even on a theoretical level, we are not able to operate the system, this once coherent, unified worldview that they were able to operate once because they knew the details. And because we don't know all the details, we're just struggling to rebuild this unified vision again." (JL)*

Tradition takes on a distinct feature in postmodernity. It is not simple *traditionalism* or *nostalgia* lacking self-reflection but a special course of action having transformative power, which helps create a dynamic future through the resurrection of a forgotten past.<sup>36</sup> Through conscious adaptation of traditional values, families try to meet the challenges of our time while employing elements of modernity that prove to be beneficial for them. They strongly believe that our civilization is running into a global catastrophe unless we return to the ancient knowledge of our ancestors. In this context, the past is a pledge for the future, a possible way out of the apparent chaos of the present. Returning to a rudimentary form of production is therefore regarded as a commitment to the future:

*"I think that's the real value: to live from the work of my own hand and have a direct feedback on my own work. I can see more and more people who would like to follow the same path. And on the other hand, conditions of our present time point to the same direction. If consumer society collapses, humanity will be forced to return to the past and cultivate the earth with its own hands." (ZsG)*

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<sup>36</sup> Clifford 2000: 100.

#### 4. Correlation between individual and community

Community is regarded by many authors as a central unit of the traditional peasant society. It is a kind of social, economic and legal unity determined by cooperation, reciprocity and joint activities, which are bound by the geographic location of the village.<sup>37</sup> Faith in the power of community plays also a central role in the value system of families living in *Hosszúbetény*. Family members are strongly convinced that personal goals can only be realized within the framework of a well-functioning community. In order to achieve this purpose, ideals of community building and cooperation come to the forefront. As described by one of my interviewees:

*“We have also tried out how our community can work together in agriculture. Therefore, we sowed spelt, an ancient strain of wheat. All the families took part in this project financially and then, as a result of our common work, we also bought a mill that is now moving from family to family, and everyone is grinding his own grain with it. Our experience was very positive. People in our community were brought together by this common activity.” (KNJ)*

The traditional concept of community is complemented by the idea of mutual relationship between man and landscape whose foundations were laid down by Leopold’s land ethics.<sup>38</sup> My interviewee’s worldview is based on the unbreakable link between man and nature. In their accounts, prominence is given to attitudes like personal commitment and deepening of ethical behavior towards natural communities. The spirit of community is manifested through their respect for the natural environment. As is set out by one of the interviewees:

*“The traditional peasant culture was aware of the simple fact that different phenomena of life are interrelated with each other. That various forms of life manifestations, life of the Earth, plants and animals, natural events, how people act and think, different aspects of material life, peoples’ houses and plots are all interrelated things in life. And to recognize and live this unity is the wisdom that was actually present in traditional cultures, but became in our time forgotten as were many other ancient values.” (KNZs)*

However, the possibility of the creation of a community is continually overshadowed by the feeling of alienation inherent in consumer society. In the age of modernity, as my interviewees point out, individual actions are

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<sup>37</sup> Szabó 1969.

<sup>38</sup> Leopold 1949.

mainly determined by the pursuit of self-expression and individualism, which makes it more difficult to maintain commitment and devotion:

*“Basically, there is a Christian community in the village consisting of extended families that we are building for some time now. And there is another community consisting of farmers and intellectuals whose members overlap with that of the Christian community. The best would be of course to form a real village community because people became really separated from each other. And this is very bad.” (JL)*

*“We had to realize that joint activities also raise difficulties. We produced potato together that entailed a lot of hard work, like planting, hoeing etc... And during this work, differences arising from different life styles came also into light. Not everybody could afford to take part in these activities. So finally, it didn't work.” (KNJ)*

## Values embraced by the families living in Hosszúhetény

As a result of correlations' pattern formation, the following values have gained prominence in the life of the families:

### 1. Self-sufficiency

Self-sufficiency is regarded by many authors as a basic tenet of traditional peasant societies. In their view, traditional communities were once closed localities whose relationship with other settlements were limited. These conditions then served as a basis for self-sufficiency, according to Erdei.<sup>39</sup> Although the idea of self-sufficiency has been revitalized by the families, members of their community also admit that its pure form cannot be achieved. As is revealed by my interviewees:

*“The original idea, I think, was that we didn't need civilization because it would lead us to a dead end. And we let it all go. We go into exile. But years have taught me that this is impossible. We cannot create everything for ourselves.” (ZsG)*

*“What we can fully cover in our way of farming is vegetables: carrots, potatoes. And meat: rabbit, pork, poultry. But if we take a look at the current fruit consumption for example we have to realize that it's a bit abnormal. When one eats grapes during wintertime or apples whose storage life is much shorter. So, self-sufficiency can only be realized if we limit our needs as well.” (NB)*

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<sup>39</sup> Erdei 1934: 91.

## 2. *Self-restraint*

Realization of a balanced relationship between man and nature plays a prominent role in the lives of the families I studied. Restoration of a previously broken relationship is an ethical duty, which focuses on ecological self-restraint, rather than growth based on economic self-interest. In order to realize their goal, families are trying not to interfere with natural processes. They also avoid using chemicals and agricultural machinery. Whenever surpluses are being produced they are not for economic self-interest or maximizing profit, but for conducting a kind of barter trade. Increasing biodiversity and favoring indigenous plants are also strategies that work towards sustainability, thereby reducing vulnerability to commodities produced by multinational companies. As is revealed in the accounts:

*"We are trying to produce as much as we could under the environmental conditions of our land in order to exchange these things later. So, if there is something we can produce more than we need, we exchange it." (ZsG)*

*"We collect local grafts and replant those species that have worked. And the same with vegetables. So, we test as many cultivation methods as possible and apply the best ones." (KNJ)*

## 3. *Organic farming*

An important milestone on the road to reconciliation with nature is the commitment to organic farming. This strategy is regarded as a conscious revolt against the practices of intensive agriculture, mechanization and the use of chemicals. Instead of artificially manipulating nature, organic farming relies on the self-sustaining power of living communities, thereby reinforcing the notion of guardianship. The idea is also emphasized by Thiele who was arguing for such a personal relationship towards nature free of desire for possession and domination.<sup>40</sup> Realization of organic farming is not that simple, though. The village has by now become modernized and absorbed by the surrounding consumer society. Cultivation is determined by methods of chemicalization, mechanization and monoculture. Apart from the newcomers, no one in the village follows a traditional way of life any more. Changes in sociocultural conditions as a result of globalization often place families at crossroads. As we see in the following account:

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<sup>40</sup> Thiele 1995.



*“It’s not like I don’t use chemicals or fertilizers – as one of my interviewees said. Because of the type of farming we are doing, a particular garden with a relatively small number of plants and fruit trees, this type of farming doesn’t allow us to just simply ignore the usage of chemicals. Not to mention that my neighbor sprayed his garden with pesticides last year covering my garden too. So, I have been living in a dream world for years, believing that what I ate was fully organic. But in fact it wasn’t.” (JL)*

#### 4. *Anti-globalization*

Placing values in a broader context, strategies used by families meet in the field of anti-globalization. Revolts against consumer society are based on the belief that the growth paradigm – as the engine of technical civilization – is starting to fade away. Since continuous growth is unsustainable, conflict between centralized economic policies and heterogeneous sub-processes is inevitable. Therefore, the achievements of technical civilization, the compulsion towards growth encoded in consumer society, reality as filtered by the media, these are all seen as forces to be conquered by the families. Possible answers to this question given by them are contradictory, though:

*“I do not think that consumer society is about making everyone feel good, having everything they need. Rather, it is a story of the manipulated collective. People are led astray about what they really need. The concept of well-being is actually an illusion.” (ZsG)*

#### 5. *Local strategies*

A logical consequence of anti-globalization is breaking away from the urban lifestyle. Local strategies become appreciated instead and, as a result, attention turns to the village. The possibility of establishing a village as an independent, self-contained unit is increasingly defined. One of the key features of local communities is their ability to respond more quickly and flexibly to changes and to develop more effective action plans based on local knowledge – compared to those solutions developed by a central power. The main purpose is to return to the human scale and to use one’s own local resources. This approach, of course, also entails the circumvention of central power and control characterizing classic distribution systems. The principle of independence, which refers to the self-sustaining capacity of a system in general, plays a decisive role in this scenario. Each system is capable of reproducing itself from its own resources, as Max-Neef states in his writing.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Max-Neef 1991.

Therefore, what can be produced locally must be produced locally, thereby reducing economic dependence. As is emphasized by my interviewees:

*“I think the idea of acting locally is already a commonplace. It aimed at strengthening local communities and building relationships. As far as I remember, climate change was the starting point. [...] And then obviously the solution is not to import food from Italy using huge trucks, but to produce them locally.” (ZsG)*

*“As we individually strive to achieve self-sufficiency in our life, the village could be a self-sufficient unit as well. In fact, from a country's point of view, these so-called small local communities, which are larger than the family, might be able to operate an economy based on self-sufficiency.” (KNZs)*

## **Changes of identity by newly emerging values**

The individual is exposed to an incessant flow of external impressions. The influencing power of social reality and sociocultural environment that surrounds us is inevitable. *Thrownness*, being immersed, being delivered into this world gives rise to a kind of vulnerability as we enter societal reality.<sup>42</sup> During interactions with their sociocultural environment, individuals continuously develop their identity that takes on different characteristics at different stages of life.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, identity is the conclusion of different values, which are formed at the intersection of various correlations. Thus, identity is neither closed, nor final, but instead is a constantly evolving phenomenon.<sup>44</sup> The individual is not only a passive bystander of the impacts of external reality but also a conscious creator of his or her own world. In the postmodern era, tendencies to versatility are more rapidly gaining ground due to the growing pace of globalization and information technologies. Not only new ideas, ideologies, but even a news report, a television broadcast, or a reading experience on the World Wide Web can have a transformative power, not to mention the power of virtual communities formed in the cyberspace. As a consequence, the individual is constantly forced to re-read his or her own worldview and the underlying value system in the light of new experiences. During the evaluation process, identity is also transformed and new dimensions are added to it, modifying each individual's conceptions about the sociocultural realm.

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<sup>42</sup> Heidegger 1967: 135.

<sup>43</sup> Erikson 1991: 437–439.

<sup>44</sup> Hall 1990: 222.

Embracing a traditional way of life has a significant transformative effect not only on values and value systems but also on identity. Due to changes in lifestyle, values undergo a sort of selection. This process results in the revision of identity. As a consequence, alternative identities come to birth. In the end, these newly-constructed identities are trying to establish themselves through various representational practices. A defining aspect of identity politics is the discursive nature of various representational practices (that is, the self-articulation of a newly-born identity through various modes of action). Identification is, in fact, a never-ending process that unfolds from a wide range of possibilities. During its practical realization it delineates the symbolic boundaries of identity. The birth of a new identity is a kind of differentiation that can only be understood through the individual's relationship with the *other*.<sup>45</sup>

In the life of the families I have studied, representational practices may take various forms depending on concrete life situations. Among them we can mention the organization of a dance house, the revival of the local market, organic farming and barter trade. Identity politics represented by my interviewees illustrates all the difficulties brought about by the social changes of postmodernity, though. While modernity consolidated individual and categorical identities and reinforced self-sameness, social changes made at the same time render the recognition of identities problematic. "Recognition is at the heart of the matter", though, as Craig Calhoun recognized. "No matter when and where one looks, subjectivity is perhaps best understood as a project, as something always under construction, never perfect"<sup>46</sup>. This also explains the failure of the attempts that my interviewees underwent. In their view, the previous situation has reversed. Those intellectuals who come to the village often represent traditional values to a greater extent than the indigenous people of the village themselves. As one interviewee points out:

*"We came to a village in Hungary, settled down in a community that we thought would work roughly the way we dreamed of how villages could live in Hungary. And it actually turned out to be no longer the case. The idea we were thinking about did not really match reality."*  
(KNZs)

All these circumstances call attention to the volatility and incompleteness of postmodern identities and show us "how complex is the relationship

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<sup>45</sup> Hall 1996: 1–5.

<sup>46</sup> Calhoun 1994: 20.

among projects of identity, social demands and personal possibilities”<sup>47</sup>. As is strongly articulated in the following accounts:

*“Co-operation is not so typical between the indigenous people of the village and the newcomers. Both groups of people try to hold their lines and communicate only among each other.”*  
(KNJ)

*“It has become clear to me over time that it is not working for me to live this way of life as we imagine it now in the traditional sense. To toil from morning till night in order to satisfy our basic needs and to give up all kinds of entertainment at the same time because of lack of time or money.”* (KNJ)

Representational practices carried out by the families are also overshadowed by uncertainty, which is illustrated through the fate of the local market. The main motivation for creating a local market – which only survived one year – was to enhance local production and trade within the village. Although there was no marked opposition to it, it slowly died away after a while. Indifference seemed to play a decisive factor in its decline:

*“The local market was an initiative that, unfortunately, collapsed more quickly than expected. Unfortunately, the market itself as a platform is not really viable in the country. Virtually everyone goes to supermarkets where he or she can get everything faster and cheaper, having more choices. The local market failed because it couldn’t fulfil these requirements. It was poorly organized, held in the wrong place, and no one gave their solid support to promote it.”*  
(JL)

## Conclusion

In my paper, I seek to explore the value system of a small, rural community as revealed through the structural relationship between its members and their environment. My starting point was the assumption that value systems in the postmodern age are no longer cast from a single mold, but are much more of a dynamically changing framework. This framework is characterized by the dialogue between the various constituent elements of a given sociocultural situation, the distinctive role of the individuals’ interpretation, and the dynamism of values resulting from their positioned meaning. I am convinced that culture is meaning that arises as a result of individual interpretations, which is created in the overlap between tradition, knowledge and

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<sup>47</sup> Calhoun 1994: 14.

values. In examining values, therefore, I did not set out from the list of abstract ideas of freedom, happiness, or equality as laid down by Rokeach.<sup>48</sup> Instead, I defined so-called *correlations* in which individual relationships are revealed with regard to particular sociocultural situations through personal, practical considerations. During my research, it became apparent that neither the correlations – nor the values deduced from them – can be regarded as pure forms of absolute concepts. In a single value, the influencing power of numerous correlations can be identified, and at the same time, one distinct correlation can be present in the component parts of many other values as well. The dialogue between them is always determined by the sociocultural medium in which they surface.

The value system of the families living in *Hosszúbetény* is based on the revitalization and reinvention of traditional values. In a contradictory way, this interpretive act takes place in the sociocultural environment of a village that has already been modernized. As a result, postmodern identities are formed through various representational practices (organic farming, dance house, barter trade, the revival of the local market) in order to be recognized in a space dominated by modernity. Although values professed by the newcomers form a coherent system, their identity is deeply fragmented by conflicts with the traditional population of the village. Their room for manoeuvre is limited, just as are their interpersonal relationships with the village-dwellers. Similarly, their network extends mainly to the members of their own community. Although there were some occasions during which their practices encountered each other, these opportunities became very soon exhausted and were not able to dissolve the boundaries between the two groups. In a contradictory way, neither did the incoming families seek to learn the traditions of the village. However, in many cases, they themselves tried to show exemplary behavior towards the majority of the village. A similar *fragmentation* can also be found when examining identities within their own group. Although values associated with the traditional way of life play a crucial role in their identity formation, individual interpretations show a markedly high degree of diversity on a personal level.

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<sup>48</sup> Rokeach 1973.

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*Mirlan Alymbaev*

**New Settlements in Bishkek**  
*Law, Urban Space, Culture  
and Socio-Economic Development*

**Abstract**

In Kyrgyzstan, internal migrants in search of a better life left high mountains, clean air, and their native village. There are tens of thousands of such people around the capital city of Bishkek. Physically, they are in the capital in the status of city dwellers, but living conditions, the level of access to public services are at the level of remote regions. And this is how these internal migrants live for tens of years, a new generation of children is growing up who were born in these slums where lack of infrastructure such as schools, drinking water, medical facility, electricity, and transport.

This study is aimed to explore the living conditions of residents in the new settlements and their rights for decent housing. The study was prepared in order to attract the attention of the state authorities to solve the urgent problems of the residents.

**Keywords:** Internal migrants, new settlements, NGO, local government, legalization

**Introduction**

*The relevance of the problem*

Over 200,000 new settlements reportedly exist in the world today. These are *Favelas* in Brazil, *Barriadas* in Peru, *Vijijis* in Kenya, *Katchi Abadis* in Pakistan, *Gecekondus* in Turkey, and so on. These new settlements, often labeled as informal areas, are nothing less than a vivid illustration of the process commonly referred as the “urbanization of poverty”.



Over the past decade, there has been a significant influx of population into Bishkek city and Chui region. The movement of a large number of citizens from the regions to the capital in search of jobs and better living conditions requires active actions of state authorities both in the field of socio-economic development of regions, and in solving problems arising from internal migration.

One of the results of the influx of population to Bishkek and Chui region was an increase in the number of the new settlements. In a capital city of Bishkek, there are 48 new settlements with a population of 223,258<sup>1</sup> people according to data relevant at the beginning of 2016, which is 27, 9 % of the total resident population of the city. Infrastructure development in new settlements and living conditions cannot be described as sufficient, prosperous and meeting the requirements of minimum standards in terms of economic, social and cultural goods.

One of the important problems in the new settlements is a lack of electricity, hot water supply, heating, drinking water, sewerage, access to public transport, ensuring fire safety, as well as issues of access to educational, health care, and cultural institutions. Also most of the houses built in the new settlements are located in unsafe areas for living and on illegally seized plots.

There are existing contrasts in the socio-economic development among city districts that may cause social tension and conflicts, and affect the overall security of the city. Simultaneously, there is a progress in problem solving of the new settlements over the years is insignificant, and many issues, related to basic infrastructure remain relevant. It is necessary to solve these problems through fulfilling the right for adequate housing in accordance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the General Comments of the relevant UN Committee.<sup>2</sup>

This study was conducted to assist municipal authorities to identify priority areas and solving the accumulated problems over the years, and improving the living conditions of residents in the new settlements. The primary data collected through the fieldwork interview with the residents of new settlements. In addition, secondary data obtained from public agencies.

The author expresses gratitude to the residents of new settlements who took part in the study and provided the necessary information for this study, as well as to representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), PF

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Health of the KR 2016: 3015.

<sup>2</sup> General Comment of the UN Committee – legal interpretation of the norms enshrined in the relevant international human rights treaty.  
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/general-comments>

“Center for the Protection of Children”, PF “Arysh”, Association of NGOs for the Promotion of the Rights and Interests of Children, PF “League of Rights Defenders child”, for advice in the research process.

## **Review of published materials**

It is believed that the problems related to the rights of residents of new settlements have been repeatedly published by media, NGOs and scientific institutions. Simultaneously, many issues were covered over a long period of time. For example, the existing materials were examined before the start of the study in order to avoid significant duplication of information that already presented to public. In general, the existing materials are composed of media publications that reveals the problems in the new settlements, plans and programs developed by NGOs concerning to self-help groups among residents of the new settlements.

In addition, the number of media and online publications of news agencies were reviewed and analyzed. The most of reviewed materials are devoted to problems such as electrification, access to drinking water, to educational and health care institutions. Moreover, 65% of these materials were devoted to the problems of new settlements, including Rukhiy-Muras, Ak-Ordo 2, Ak-Ordo 3, Muras-Ordo, Zhumgal-Ata, Kok-Zhar, Ak-Zhar, Tynchtyk, Uchkun-2, Kara-Zhygach, Archa-Beshik, and Dordoi. Some of the materials about 20% contained information about the measures taken to solve the problems of new settlements, and only 10% were fully devoted to measures and plans to improve the situation.

According to NGO “Arysh”, the strategic plans for the development of new settlements (Ak-Bosogo, Ak-Zhar and Adilet), developed under the support of an international organizations. This plan provides general information about the situation in new settlements, identify priority tasks that require immediate solutions, and offer a list of specific measures necessary to improve the situation.

Furthermore, the problems of new settlements identified by the NGO “Arysh” include lack of access to health care services, education, limited access to drinking water, lack of sewerage, electricity, unsatisfactory road conditions, lack of regulation of land rights, inability to participate in elections, difficulties in obtaining identification documents. One of the good practices of NGO “Arysh” is the promotion of self-help groups among residents, which allow them to unite efforts in solving their problems. In total, the self-help groups promoted in nineteen new settlements in Bishkek.

The NGOs and scientific institutions published a number of research materials. These publications address the following issues such as lack of documents for residents living in new settlements and its reason.<sup>3</sup>

In 2015, the NGO “Center for the Protection of Children” and the Coalition NGO for the protection of the rights of internal migrants conducted a study in cooperation with “Arysh”, Legal Clinic “Adilet”, Association for the Promotion of the Rights and Interests of Children in the Kyrgyzstan “within the Partnership Platform Central Asia on the Move” in eleven new settlements of Bishkek including Kelechek, Ak-Bata, Kalys-Ordo, Uchkun-2, Dordoi1, Dordoi2, Ak-Ordo, Zhenish, Ak-Bosogo, Altyn-Kazyk, Ak-Zhar. According to the results of the study, in new settlements, 1,577 people were identified living without documents (passports, birth certificates), of which 38% of people aged 16 and over did not have a valid passport (406 people). About 92% of children under the age of 16 did not have a birth certificate (436 children), never received these documents, or the documents were lost, stolen, their passports expired. The study notes that these citizens remain invisible to the public administration system and experience significant difficulties in accessing basic services of education and health care organizations. The main reasons for the lack of documents included the high cost of collecting a package of documents and lack of time for this, insufficient information on the procedures for obtaining documents and their complexity.

In 2014, the NGO “Child Protection Center” conducted study on the availability of quality medical service for the residents of new settlements such as Ak-Bata, Kelechek, Muras-Ordo, Altyn-Kazyk, Dordoi-1, Dordoi-2 and in the Osh market. It was revealed that the most common problems of internal migrants are the lack of registration at the place of residence, at a medical institution, personal documents, frequent change of residence, low income, and ignorance of their rights.<sup>4</sup>

There is the need to simplify the registration system, which is still important to access to medical services, to employment, and to election processes. He also points the relationship between the conflict capacity within society with the unfavorable condition of residents.<sup>5</sup>

In the paper presented by public foundation “Nashe Pravo” in 2015,<sup>6</sup> noted a significant inflow of internal migrants to Bishkek and Chui region, problems of infrastructure development of 47 new settlements in Bishkek,

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<sup>3</sup> Raev 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Kalmuratov 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Rakhimov 2016: 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ormonov 2015.

lack of sufficient access to minimum health and education services, as well as problems of sanitary and living conditions of internal migrants including the undocumented migrants and registration of internal migrants living in new settlements, and the impact of the existing registration system on the access of internal migrants to basic education, health care and legal protection.

### **Interview with Stakeholders and Residents of the New Settlements**

The social worker from the NGO “Child Protection Center” said that the living conditions in “Altyn-Kazyk” squatter settlement are very low. For example, there is no water and the land is not suitable for housing construction, school or a hospital. Many residents do not have documents and do not have the right to vote or use social services. People survive as best they can. Mostly they work at the landfill and sort the garbage. “Child Protection Center” helps them as much as it can. NGO created initiative group that identifies children, families who find themselves in a difficult life situation. In addition, it helps residents to restore documents and receive benefits.<sup>7</sup>

One of the resident of the “Altyn-Kazyk” settlement Altynai Booronbaeva, and her husband came to Altyn-Kazyk five years ago. They borrowed a loan from bank and built a house. They haven’t been able to find a permanent job over the years. “We somehow gets by, she says. The children collect metal near the landfill. My husband has a seasonal job. In the summer he works at a construction site, and in the winter he collects metal with his children”, she added. She also said that all money they earn goes to repay the loan, clothing and food. Regarding to basic infrastructure, water supply in “Altyn-Kazyk” is also bad. So, she has to take water from the “Kalys-Ordo”, which is neighboring squatter settlement.<sup>8</sup>

The head of the public department of construction of the Bishkek municipal administration notes that there are 49 new settlements around Bishkek city nowadays, and the new region has appeared in the country over the last 25 years, in which representatives of all seven regions live. Many housing were built on agricultural lands. Some of them were squatted. Because there was a housing problem and government decided to allocate land to people for housing construction. Some squatter settlements were

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with the Social Worker of the “Child Protection Center” in July 13, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with the resident of the Altyn-Kazyk Squatter Settlement in July 02, 2021.

never given an official status, as they are located in nature protection zones, under power lines, and on sanitary landfills.<sup>9</sup>

I had an opportunity to meet and talk with Mirzat Ajiev, who is an Executive Director of the Legal Entities “Erap”. He argues that lack of drinking water in new settlements is a sore point. The level of development among new settlements differs, as there are legal and illegal ones. He suggests that government should primarily develop the infrastructure legal new settlements. However, the situation with “Altyn-Kazyk”, is very complicated, he added. Because there was a land grab. He believes that the authorities should not follow the squatters and build roads and water pipes for them at the expense of others. The people themselves are to blame for settling near a garbage dump. He states that only way in this situation is that the residents should solve the problem with water supply themselves through using their own funds, drilling wells and conduct water. They should also start writing grant projects. There are many non-governmental organizations that can help residents solve their water problem.<sup>10</sup> In new settlements, 28 secondary schools, 6 kindergartens, 22 sanitary-obstetrician centers have been built. Over 25 years, more than 4.5 billion soms (55,200,000 USD) have been allocated for the development of the infrastructure of new settlements. In recent years, significant funds have been allocated for the development of new settlements. The most common problems are roads, water supply and sewerage. In the summer, there is a suffocating smell in some new settlements due to the lack of sewerage. There are especially many problems in illegal new settlements. Unfortunately, there is little can department do to help them.

Unlike Altyn-Kazyk, Muras-Ordo is legal new settlement. Since 2006, the government was issuing plots for housing construction, especially for the public employees. However, despite its official status, the problem is a same as in the informal new settlements. For example, people complain about the lack of a kindergarten, a school, and physical infrastructure such as water supply.

I have interviewed one family living in the settlement. The family came to Muras-Ordo new settlement twelve years ago. For the first few years there was not even electricity in their house, and just recently bought the television. “*We have two children, says Isaev.*”<sup>11</sup> He works for the private company as a mechanics.

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<sup>9</sup> Omurkanov 2017: 10.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Mirzat Ajiev, Executive Director of “Erap” in July 15, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with the resident of Muras-Ordo Squatter Settlement in July 04, 2021.

*“There is no kindergarten nearby and no one is expecting it. So, I have to take care of the children myself, he says. There are no playgrounds here either, so the kids play wherever they have to. We live like in an ail, far from civilization, and have to go for water to the main street. When it rains, the roads get washed out that people cannot walk by feet and stuck in the mud.”<sup>12</sup>*

The Muras-Ordo medical center was built at the expense of the charitable organization in 2012. However, since then the medical center cannot provide with many type of medical service due lack of medical staff. There are only five people working for the medical center. However, there are many people in need of quality medical care. Nowadays, only one doctor and three nurses provide medical services almost all the population of the squatter settlement, which is approximately 5000 people.<sup>13</sup> There are many elderly people and children who often need medical help. There are many patients with infectious diseases notes the Physician of the Infectious Diseases Hospital<sup>14</sup>. He noted that clean drinking water is essential for good health. The lack drinking water leads to an increased incidence of acute intestinal infections and viral hepatitis and other transmitted diseases, and source of diseases is water. In addition, she added that sometimes patients are admitted in very serious condition, which is a primarily due to self-treatment. In the first two or three days there is a lot of fluid loss. If it is not replenished, the body feels it and lot of negative changes occur. Especially in the brain. There is swelling, seizures, and respiratory failure. The kidneys’ excretory function is also affected. The kidneys fail. There are dangerous complications.

Based on conducted interview it is obvious that the number of problems in the squatter settlements around Bishkek is increasing year by year. In this situation, it is difficult to blame the local municipality for not dealing with infrastructure issues in squatter settlements because many villages in Kyrgyzstan still cannot boast of the availability of the drinking water despite support from donor organization such as World Bank and Asia Development Bank.

However, the authorities should not turn a blind eye to the existing problem because the social tensions are on the rise among the population. And a problem is that authorities have planted a time bomb around capital city, willingly or unwillingly. And whether it will explore in a near future, no one can say this. The revolutionary events in 2010 and recent in 2020

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with the resident of Muras-Ordo Squatter Settlement in July 04, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Maldybaeva 2017: 19–20.

<sup>14</sup> Aliev 2017: 21.



confirm this fact, when most of the protesters were from squatter settlements. According to Abdyrazakov (2006), the squatter settlements around capital city of Bishkek are a “Shahid Belt” that may explode at any time. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate it into the city infrastructure as soon as possible, and a radical improvement in the standard of living is required.

The published materials of media and NGO allow us to see the main points of public concern relating to the rights of internal migrants and the situation in the new settlements in Bishkek. This study filled a number of gaps in the characterization of the situation of new settlements, in understanding the reasons of existing problems and their consequences. It should be noted that the information presented in the media and in publications of NGOs was valuable for posing research questions and identifying the key components of this study and its methodology. Nevertheless, the published materials cover only certain aspects of existing problems. Therefore, the study was conducted through the interview with the stakeholders of the public service, NGO, social activist and residents of the new settlements to view the holistic picture of what is happening in the new settlements.

## **Research methodology**

The study is designed in accordance with the qualitative method. Examination of the research method involves collecting first-hand information from the interviewees. Describing qualitative method, Saunders et al. (2000) argue that social research rarely may fall under one particular study paradigm. The study relies on primary and secondary data sources, and interviews had the purpose of finding primary information about the situation in the new settlements.

- Conducting a survey with the residents of new settlements and representatives of Municipal Territorial Administrations (MTA);
- Data obtained during the consultations with residents of new settlements and with the specialists of NGOs working in the field of social and economic rights protection;
  - Participant observation data, conducted during fieldtrips to the new settlements;
  - Court decisions issues on demolition and eviction from houses built on illegally seized plots.

The collection and analysis of secondary data was also conducted: already published research papers of NGOs, departmental reports and analytical materials, and responses from public authorities and officials.

The assessment of existing problems and achievements of the state in solving the problems of new settlements was conducted using a system of indicators. This system involves assessing the situation at several levels, including the structural level (analysis of established legal norms, national programs, strategies and institutions that are important for solving existing problems); progressive indicators (analysis of measures taken by public authorities, their sequence and effectiveness); performance indicators (an actual situation demonstrating the results of efforts of public authorities in solving problems).

The research was conducted in two stages. The first stage included a preliminary analysis of the norms of national legislation, a number of visits to the new settlements in Bishkek (Altyn-Kazyk, Kara-Zhygach, Rukhiy Muras, Uchkun-2, Ala-Too, Ak-Ordo, Ak-Ordo 2, Ak-Ordo 3, Enesay, Bakai-Ata, Ak-Bata, Dordoi, Muras-Ordo, Kalys-Ordo, Ak-Bosogo) and unstructured conversations with representatives of MTU and district officials for preliminary diagnosis of the situation. The second stage of the study was focused on collecting quantitative data and was implemented by conducting interviews with residents of new settlements and representatives of NGOs using a structured questionnaire. Also, information was collected on the results of requests to government agencies regarding measures taken to solve the problems of new settlements. In general, 75 people took part in the study, including residents of new settlements, quarterly ones, representatives of MTA and representatives of NGOs that work with the new settlements. 48 residents of 5 new settlements (Ala-Too, Ak-Ordo, Bakai Ata, Altyn Ordo, Muras-Ordo) from the research participants became respondents during a structured interview.

Achieving the full tasks implementation is a challenging task. The analysis of the implementation of the tasks for decent housing in this study includes an assessment of such aspects as its accessibility, compliance with guarantees of equality and support for vulnerable groups, the adequacy of housing conditions and the availability of social services in new settlements in Bishkek.

## Right for Housing in New Settlements: Implementation issues

### *Reason of Formation of New Settlements*

According to State Migration Service under the Government and the National Statistical Committee, the trend towards the direction of internal migration flows to Bishkek and the Chui region continues, where the population inflow is about 5 thousand people annually (according to data from 2010 to 2014)<sup>15</sup>. The reasons for migration, prompting citizens to change their place of residence, are mainly related to the wider opportunities for employment in the capital. The rest of the regions are steadily losing population.

The data from this study also show that the main reason for moving to Bishkek is greater job opportunities and quality education. In addition, as one of the reasons for the move, residents of new settlements indicated a change in marital status, which mainly affected women.

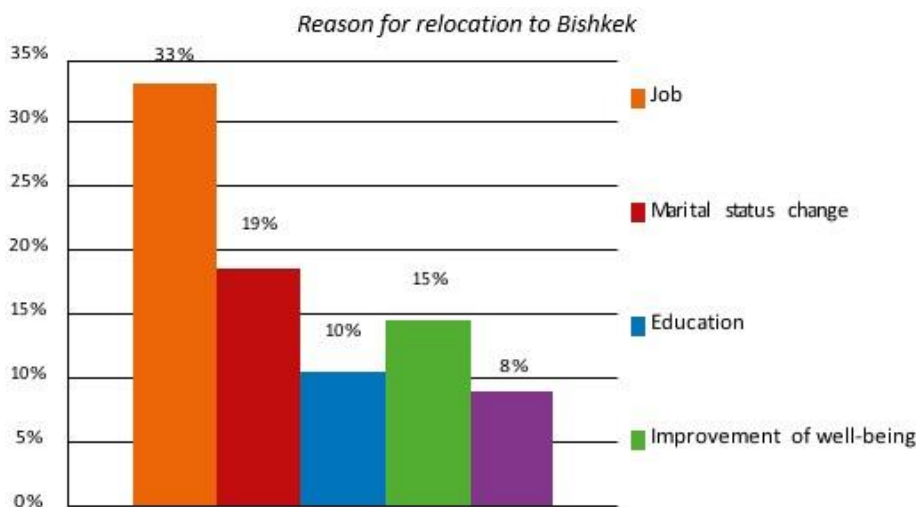


Fig. 1. *Reason for relocation to Bishkek*. Based on the author's interviews with the residents of Ak-Ordo squatter settlements.

Moving to Bishkek, internal migrants face problems related to implementation the right for decent housing. The overall context for the development of housing stock is not favorable. According to National

<sup>15</sup> Samaev 2015: 7.

Statistical Committee, housing supply has decreased over the past 5 years. So, in 2010, there was 15.7 m<sup>2</sup> of living space per inhabitant, and in 2015 – 13m<sup>2</sup>. In 2018, 17,900 families were registered for housing, and only 0.2% of this number improved their living conditions.

The economic affordability of housing is decreasing due to the rise in prices for construction materials and work: the actual cost of one square meter of the total area of individual residential buildings under construction has increased by 33% over the past five years. The share of the private sector prevails in the structure of the housing stock (99.4%), where 79.4% is individual housing construction. The largest share of commissioned individual housing falls on the city of Bishkek, Osh and Chui regions.<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted that the increase in the private housing stock in Bishkek over the past decade is to a large extent associated with the development of new settlements. Due to the influx of internal migrants, insufficient development of the housing stock of the city of Bishkek, the lack of variations in the forms of housing arrangement and the economic inaccessibility for the population, residents intending to move to the city are forced to solve housing issues on their own. Attempts to acquire land at a low price and reduce costs lead to the fact that they become victims of fraud.

In 2015, the state is introduced a new types of housing supply for the population through the adoption of the national program “Affordable Housing 2015–2020”, which provided “Affordable Mortgage” and “Social housing”. The mortgage campaign is focused primarily on providing housing for public sector employees, employees of health care systems, education and the social sector, while the direction for providing social housing provides for the introduction of a subsidy system for the poor and socially vulnerable categories of citizens in the purchase of housing<sup>17</sup>.

The implementation of this program was completed in December 2020. Since 2015, according to the State Mortgage Company (SMC)<sup>18</sup>, the 5089 families have received preferential mortgage loans in the country through partner banks for a total of more than 6 billion soms.<sup>19</sup> As a result, about 300 thousand square meters of real estate were purchased in the form of apartments and private houses.

Although the current results of the program show some expansion of opportunities in the acquisition of housing for public employees with

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<sup>16</sup> National Statistical Committee 2018: 273.

<sup>17</sup> State Agency for Architecture, Construction and Housing and Communal Services under the Government KR 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Momoev 2019: 8471.

<sup>19</sup> National currency of KR.

permanent jobs, such issues as the reasons of illegal construction, homelessness and residence security remained outside the scope of this program.

Moreover, internal migrants, many of whom do not have a permanent job or are employed without a contract, will not have ample opportunity to benefit from the results of this program. Among the surveyed residents of new settlements, most of the respondents noted that members of their families of working age are employed in the private sector (services, trade, production).



Pic. Nr. 1. *Bakai-Ata New Settlement*. Harlamov 2020.

<i>Scope of employment of family members in new settlements</i>		
Transportation	7	15%
Government agencies	10	21%
Local governments	5	10%
Social services	5	10%
NGO	2	4%
Private sector (services)	15	31%
Private sector (trade)	19	40%
Private sector (manufacture)	12	25%
Others	3	6%

Most of the respondents did not consider work in the public sector as an opportunity and prospects for their employment, preferring the private sector, where 97.9%, according to the National Statistical Committee, is informal employment.<sup>20</sup>

Over the past five years, the rate on government mortgage loans has decreased six times. The latest reduction – from 7–9 to 6–8%, depending on the amount of the initial payment – was announced at the State Electoral Commission in early February 2021. In addition, the list of those who could apply for a loan expanded. At first, these were only public sector workers, then later citizens working in private sector in Bishkek and Osh were joined this program. To tell the truth, the rate for the latter is 14% per annum. But if they want to buy housing outside of the two largest cities, they will be given a mortgage loan at 10%.

Recently, government has announced the official start of the new state loan program “My House”. “My House” is a continuation of the well-known state program for public sector employees “Affordable Housing”. 30 billion soms will be allocated for its implementation. Lowering the rate to 4% per annum within the “My House” will be implemented in stages. In addition, in the near future the company will begin to revise the terms of cooperation with partner banks, which will allow excluding the margin of intermediaries from the interest rate.<sup>21</sup>

In general, the SMC within the framework of “My House” plans to offer potential participants a wider list of services. For example, from 2021, Kyrgyz citizens who already own real estate can also receive a preferential mortgage loan. Such an opportunity is provided to them by the Housing and Savings Credit Company (HSCC) “Ak-Bosogo”, which is a subsidiary of the SMC.

Employment opportunity	Likely		Unlikely		Impossibly		I don't know	
Government agencies	4	8%	16	33%	23	48%	5	10%
Local governments	5	10%	17	35%	20	42%	6	13%
Private sector (services)	27	56%	13	27%	6	13%	2	4%
Private sector (trade)	42	88%	4	8%	0	0%	2	4%
Private sector (manufacture)	42	88%	4	8%	0	0%	2	4%
Social services	8	17%	17	35%	9	19%	14	29%
Developing own business	18	38%	25	52%	5	10%	0	0%

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<sup>20</sup> National Statistical Committee 2016: 86.

<sup>21</sup> Tologonova 2019.

At the same time, according to the survey, the level of income per family member per month for 81% of the respondents was less than the subsistence level determined by the National Statistical Committee for December 2020.<sup>22</sup> As the result, most of the citizens in a vulnerable position were not able to participate in the “Affordable Housing 2015–2020” program.

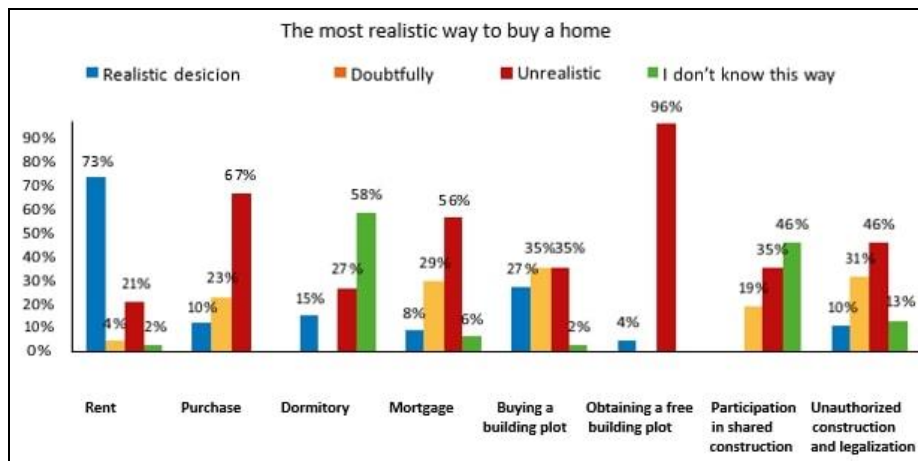


Fig. 2. *The most realistic way to buy a home.* Based on the author’s survey of the residents of new settlements.

To solve the problem of housing affordability, in addition to measures focused on the possibility of acquiring home ownership, it is necessary to develop other forms of housing arrangement. At present, when asked what methods of housing arrangement are the most successful/realistic for them, residents of new settlements provided the following answers.

According to survey, the respondents see the most affordable housing solution for families in renting, purchasing a plot for building and living in a hostel, while the least realistic and successful ways, from the respondents' point of view, were participation in shared construction, mortgage, and obtaining free plot of land for housing. At the same time, 10% of respondents (5 people out of 48 respondents) noted that self-seizure with subsequent legalization can also be a successful/realistic solution to housing problems. The answers demonstrate the limited possibilities of the respondents to use the state mortgage campaign to purchase housing, the need to pay more attention to the development of such forms of housing

<sup>22</sup> Ilgizov 2021.

arrangement as housing rental and construction of dormitories and the prevention of illegal constructions.

At present, the Housing Code does not sufficiently regulate the relationship between the owner of a dwelling and the person to whom the right to a fixed-term use of the premises is transferred, including the lease of a dwelling. So, the Housing Code only defines the right of the owner of a housing to transfer it for fixed-term and indefinite use on the basis of a civil contract and establishes requirements for the number of persons living in the premises (Articles 26 and 45). At the same time, the Civil Code in regulating the relationship between the owner and the tenant of a dwelling gives a reference to the Housing Code (Art. 609).

The development of various forms and possibilities of housing arrangement will contribute to ensuring the right to housing and security of residence for various groups of the population and is likely to lead to a decrease in illegal housing construction.

### **Legalization of illegally squatted land plots and housing**

As of December 1, 2020, there are 47 new settlements in Bishkek with the number of land plots 45,769, and the registered population in the amount of 253,816.<sup>23</sup> Of these, 20 residential areas were built before 2000, from 2000 to 2005 – 9 residential areas, and from 2005 to 2010 – 18 residential areas.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, according to the Health Department of the Bishkek municipal administration, the enrolled population is 241,746 people in 2020,<sup>25</sup> and according to the Ministry of Healthcare – 310,154 people in 2020. This discrepancy can be partially explained by the fact that internal migrants, stateless persons, foreign citizens, as well as refugees with no permanent residence in the presence of appropriate documents can be assigned to the Group of Family Doctors (GFD).

In new settlements, not all land plots and housings are legalized. According to municipality, 6,382 housings are unauthorized, and only 3,589 housings can be legalized. The remaining 2 793 houses cannot be legalized due to being in security zones, communication zones, and red lines.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mayor's Office of Bishkek 2021a.

<sup>24</sup> Mayor's Office of Bishkek 2021c.

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Health of the KR 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Mayor's Office of Bishkek 2021e.



As of 2019, municipal authorities understand the need to solve the existing problem of illegal construction and the vulnerability of citizens living in them. Thus, Parliament was considering the draft laws “On the legalization of land plots with unauthorized housing, built before August 3, 2012” and its legalization, in order to solve the problem of illegal settlements.<sup>27</sup>

The solution proposed by the bills is to provide limited tenure and use rights in relation to real estate: citizens will not have the right to dispose of real estate and make any transactions. If the bill is adopted, the problem of 3,589 families living in illegal settlements will be solved, at least temporarily. They will be provided with some guaranteed accommodation in these buildings and improved access to social services. However, these bills do not offer any solution for families living in houses in areas hazardous to life and health or zones intended for the construction of social, cultural and domestic facilities.

The lack of decision on 2,793 housings remains socially unsettled and calls into question the future of many families. As noted in the supporting documents for these bills, the majority of citizens living in illegal constructions are poor from socially vulnerable segments of the population who have invested all their money savings in housing construction.

On the other hand, the citizens living in polluted and life-threatening areas, as well as in areas that are important for the development and construction of social facilities, cannot remain outside the scope of attention of state agencies. Therefore, an adequate solution, contributing to the improvement of the legal status of citizens, should be found as soon as possible with appropriate consultations with residents of new settlements.

Municipal agency should inform the residents about the unauthorized housing construction, especially in areas hazardous to health and life. However, their inaction generates many troubles. For example, residents who took part in survey, said that no prescriptions were issued.

According to the MTA, in the case of housing construction in hazardous zones or in the areas intended for the construction of social facilities, the state agencies are far from always informed. However, MTA made attempts to inform the government agencies about the construction of housing in the high-voltage lines zone of the new settlement Kara-Zhygach, but they did not reply. Another example relates to Ak-Orgo, where housing was built in the

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<sup>27</sup> Mayor’s Office of Bishkek 2021b.

area intended for the construction of a playground, but no reaction followed from local government.<sup>28</sup>

A survey showed that many citizens do not have sufficient information about the dangerous areas in which their houses are located, and during construction they do not understand what health risks are existed by the choice of a building site. So, out of 48 randomly interviewed residents of new settlements, 18.8% of respondents live in adjacent to cattle cemeteries areas, 25% - to a cemetery, 37.5% to a landfill, and 18.8% to high-voltage lines.

At the same time, of those living near the landfill, 61%, near the cemetery, 66%, near the cattle burial ground, 44%, and near high-voltage lines, 66% of the respondents consider their area of residence to be safe.

*“When we were buying a plot of land, the price was important to us, and we bought a plot at a cheaper price. We never thought that we were buying a plot to build a house in a hazardous area. Now we don’t know what to do”.*<sup>29</sup>

The above bills on the legalization of housing and land offer only a one-time and fragmentary solution to the problem of illegal constructions. Insufficient development of the housing stock and the lack of land available for the construction of housing in Bishkek and the high level of internal migration to the capital and the surrounding region create a situation where the likelihood of construction of new housing outside the established procedure remains very high. In such conditions, the mere mention of the prohibition of the seizure of land plots and the unauthorized construction of housing in the Housing and Land Codes is extremely insufficient to regulate the established practice and prevent unauthorized construction of housing.

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<sup>28</sup> Data obtained during observation and interview with MTA in the targeted new settlements.

<sup>29</sup> The owner of an illegal house built in the area of high voltage lines. From a speech during an interview with a resident of a new settlements, July 18, 2021.



Pic. Nr. 2. *Muras-Ordo New Settlement*. Voldykov 2020a.



Pic. Nr. 3. *Ak-Ordo New Settlement*. Voldykov 2020a.

## **Rights for Decent Housing**

Decent housing means meeting a number of conditions that are necessary to ensure the basic needs of residents. Thus, the interviewed 48 residents from 5 new settlements answered the following question about which of the housing problems they are most worried about.

What housing problems are you most worried about?	Extremely worried (there are significant issues)	Moderately worried	Barely cares	Don't care at all (no problem)	Does not matter
Illumination of the area	81,3%	6,3 %	0,0%	8,3%	4,2%
Access to healthcare	66,7%	14,6%	4,2%	12, %	2,1%
Access to education	66,7%	20,8%	8,3%	4,2%	0,0%
Fire safety	58,3%	4,2%	16,%	8,3%	12,5%
Environmental and sanitary safety	52,1%	4,2%	4,2%	22,%	16,7%
Transport	50,0%	22,9%	14,6%	12,5%	0,0%
Gas supply	45,8%	2,1%	2,1%	6,3%	43,8%
Heating	43,8%	0,0%	12,5%	43,8%	0,0%
Power supply	35,4%	35,4%	0,4%	8,8%	0,0%
Access to cultural events	25,0%	4,2%	6,3%	2,1%	62,5%
Security	20,8%	25,0%	25,0%	16,7%	12,5%
Benefits and pensions	12,5%	6,3%	8,3%	16,7%	56,3%
Irrigation water	10,4%	4,2%	2,1%	12,5%	70,8%
Drinking water	8,3%	27,1%	35,4%	29,2%	0,0%

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Communication	6,3%	6,3%	2,1%	16,7%	68,8%
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Until now, there is no strategic vision for the development of new settlements from local governments. By the resolution of the Bishkek city council “On approval of the” Program of socio-economic development of the Bishkek city for 2020-2025 “City of open opportunities” the following directions of the development were approved:

- Comprehensive security of citizens and facilities in Bishkek city.
- Harmonious spatial organization of the urban environment.
- Development of economic opportunities and prospects aimed at attracting investments and developing entrepreneurship.

One of the important directions of the municipal social policy is the solution of social issues of residents of new settlements and, in particular, maintaining their own demographic records, and ensuring their access to social services.

According to the above-mentioned resolution of the Bishkek city council, the interaction of residents with the city administration and its subdivisions remains weak, residents are excluded from the management process and influence on decision-making.

At the same time, for the success and feasibility of development plans, it is important at the local level to involve residents in discussions at development stage and take into account their needs, as well as public involvement in monitoring the implementation of plans.

## Conclusion

The data presented in the study demonstrate that residents of new settlements, constituting at least 22–27.9% of the total population of Bishkek, live in unfavorable and unsafe conditions and do not have the opportunity to fully realize their rights to adequate housing, to education, to healthcare, access to cultural institutions. Many of the residents of new settlements are internal migrants and experience discrimination in terms of access to minimum social services.

The measures taken by state bodies to solve the problems of new settlements so far remain insufficient. The existing problems are solved fragmentarily and in this process the opinion of the population of new settlements is not taken into account when determining the most pressing

problems and priorities for the activities of state agencies. This leads to an increase in social tension, protests and rallies of residents of new settlements. Insufficient information to the public about the plans for the development of new settlements, the lack of consultation with the population, excludes the possibility of constructive participation of the population of new settlements in solving local problems.

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