

Urbanisation in East Central Europe: Social Processes and Societal Responses in the State Socialist Systems

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Summary. The paper analyses the changes in the production system and their effects during the socialist era. The author states that European spatial forms of urban development were propagated in East Central Europe during the last 40 years as a consequence of (a) general industrialisation, (b) urban planning which aimed at ‘catching up with the West’ and (c) the strength of informal society which continued to express traditional urban values.

1. Introduction

Since 1988, fundamental changes have occurred on the political map of Europe. State socialist systems have disappeared and the eight former European socialist countries have started the process of re-integration into the European socio-economic space.¹

This paper gives a summary of the present state of urban and regional structures in East Central Europe. It is not intended to describe the mechanisms of urban and regional development in the state socialist system; this has already been done.² Instead, this paper will try to provide answers to three questions.

- (1) What are the most important characteristics of changes in the production system and their impact on urban and regional development?
- (2) How has urbanisation in a spatial sense—i.e. formation of an urban network—developed during the last 40 years? Did it follow an independent

model? Does the urban network present a strange configuration in Europe, or have long-term processes of European urbanisation continued somehow even within state socialism?

- (3) How were societal responses formulated and expressed in ‘socialist urbanisation’?

2. Changes in the Production System and in the Socio-political System

Changes in the production system in East Central Europe have been belated and distorted. Generally, fundamental changes in a political system may speed up changes in the production system. East Central European societies have had to absorb these two types of very important changes in a parallel manner. Short-term consequences of these changes are quite startling and perhaps more people will lose than gain. Thus, production changes and social

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changes are much more inter-related than in Western Europe and the feedback effect of societal responses may be stronger.

The Production System

This has had the following special characteristics in East Central Europe.

Technological changes. These were slow and had a number of external and internal constraints. Since the mid 1970s, the technological gap between the socialist countries and the advanced industrial countries has been widening rapidly. Because East Central European countries were more strongly integrated into the global economy than was the Soviet Union, they were more sensitive to technological and organisational changes. Governments developed divergent, highly subsidised projects for technological development.

Socialist countries were unable to promote important technological development because state ownership and central planning provided an environment that was hostile to individual initiative and any deviation from the norm, two important pre-conditions for innovations. Technology, therefore, had to be imported from the West. But because high-tech equipment was on the COCOM list, the imported Western investment goods represented a level of technology which was already obsolete.

Internal social constraints. There were a number of internal social constraints against promoting innovations. Technological innovations were developed in state research laboratories which were separate from the production sector. State industry was not interested in innovations, for the introduction of new technologies made the fulfilment of plan targets risky and more complicated. The artificial prices of manufactured goods on the COMECON market, coupled with the lack of market competition, led to disinterest in product quality. Furthermore, managers of large state en-

terprises formed a politically strong lobby, which was able to block fundamental changes in the production system.

Organisational changes. These have been of a different nature from those in Western Europe. Constant reorganisation within the state industry aimed at greater efficiency. Nevertheless, the main features of state industry have remained untouched. Fordist production dominated; flexible production was almost unknown (and was unnecessary in a non-market situation).

State enterprises were large and had a tendency to grow by administrative measures (mergers ordered by sectoral ministries). Big was beautiful. There were a lot of personal and informal relations within the state industrial management; thus, it was easier for the government to control an industrial sector through a handful of managers of large firms than to deal with hundreds or thousands of firms. Industrial enterprises remained within their national boundaries. Practically speaking, Western multinational firms were not present in East Central Europe, and there was no multinational firm development among COMECON countries. COMECON had no supranational organisations.

Sectoral and structural changes. Sectoral changes resulting from a sharp decline in agricultural employment, and a remarkable growth in the tertiary sectors, were relatively important. Nevertheless, industry is still the main employer in each country. The tertiary sector employs only 35–40 per cent of the workforce in the most advanced countries (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland), and 25–30 per cent in the less developed East Central European countries. Rapid industrialisation has ended everywhere, but the transition from an industrial system to a consumption system has been slow so far for a number of reasons: over-employment in industry, ideological priorities for production, restricted market forces even in the sphere of consumption and a low standard of living.

Consequently, industry and the traditional industrial locational elements (e.g. raw materials, manpower, transport facilities) were the driving forces for regional structuring and for urban development. Only a few large metropolitan areas (notably, Budapest) have shown tertiary and quaternary development.³

High-level production services (banking and foreign trade) were highly concentrated in the capital cities and were controlled by the government.

Structural changes have been characterised by the advancement of modern sectors. High-tech sectors have developed, but slowly, because they had been cut off from the centres of Western innovation. The growth of the modern sectors was *not* accompanied by a strong decline of 'rust-belt' activities. Traditional heavy industries formed a powerful lobby that was able to obtain government subsidies and sizeable state investments for modernising their technologies. The energy sector and heavy industry enjoyed a disproportionately large share of investments even in the 1980s.

Locational changes. These have been important; for they illustrate a strong geographical deconcentration of the industry. Regional policies—as everywhere—aimed at 'levelling' economic development among different regions. Industrial deconcentration has had welfare purposes (full employment in less-developed areas), urban planning purposes (to slow down migration to larger cities), and economic purposes (to find cheap manpower for industrial expansion and to save capital investments). In the least-developed regions of the European socialist countries, industrialisation continued even until the mid 1980s.

Territorial deconcentration did not mean organisational deconcentration. In rigidly planned economies, industrial location was decided by central authorities. In the reform-economies (Hungary and Yugoslavia), large state enterprises

located their subsidiary plants in the countryside.

Industrial deconcentration contributed to the development of a settlement network with a well-developed hierarchy. Small town development depended strongly on industrial location. A relatively well-balanced regional industrial structure developed—which is collapsing now. In most cases, industries located relatively recently in backward areas are not competitive and these regions are sinking again.

Political Changes

The well-known *political changes* that have opened the road to a market economy will speed up the changes in production system. The reorganisation of local governments and their new financing systems have made regional and urban development less dependent on state budget redistribution and have also made 'bottom up' development possible.

Privatisation. This can rearrange economic space. The enormous state economy cannot be privatised overnight. Newly established private firms are mushrooming, but they are usually small. Evidently, little or no capital was accumulated during the state socialist system. Different approaches to privatising state property have developed in individual post-socialist countries. Most probably state enterprises will still produce a great portion, if not the majority, of the GDP for the next five years. The rhythm and forms of privatisation will influence structural changes and changes in the production system. Privatisation is being managed by government agencies, and not too much has been left for market spontaneity so far. Privatisation of state property aims to maximise budget income and diminish the deficit; therefore, privatising agencies are looking for the best bid—a process which takes time. Political viewpoints are also strong—as when authorities try to exclude former state enterprise managers from the

privatisation process. A fear shared by the present governments is that former managers and technocrat politicians might seize certain parts of state property for themselves.

Public services. The tertiary sector as a whole has been shaken by the significant cut in expenditure for *public services*. Public services covered too many areas in state socialism (even retail trade and all types of cultural activities), but their privatisation is difficult in the societies with low purchasing power. Marketisation has lowered the demand for cultural and leisure services, but production services—financial institutions and trade organisations, for example—are rapidly developing.

Other trends. *Social inequalities are growing*, which is a logical consequence of the abandonment of an egalitarian society. In state socialism, egalitarianism existed in an Orwellian sense: some people were more equal than others . . . Actually, socialist society was highly stratified, which was reflected in the continuation of residential segregation in large cities. Extremities were eliminated. The political and economic élite were not rich, but enjoyed a lot of non-monetary advantages and privileges (free car use, vacations, etc.). Because full employment served a welfare function, 'the jobless poor' as a social group was small (although it existed). Now, extreme poverty and extreme wealth are more visible. Although a stable and affluent middle class has not yet arisen, traditional class structures are present. The new inequalities have had a great impact on the real estate and housing markets.

Although 'rejoin Europe' has been a general slogan for all political movements, some of *the spatial processes display quite different tendencies from those in Western Europe*. While in the EC 'integration' is the catchword (i.e. the strengthening of supranational economic and political ties), 'disintegration' is becoming the key word in East Central Europe. When COMECON

was dissolved, trade among the former COMECON countries dropped dramatically. Disintegration is intensified by the growth of regionalism, separatist ideas, and ethnic conflicts in many countries. Perhaps the 'Hexagonale' (the loose co-operation of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia) holds promise for the future. At present, not only supranational but even national integration has been weakened. Psychologically, it is quite understandable. State socialism in these countries was characterised by excessive centralisation, by the oppression of existing ethnic problems and by Soviet dominance (except for Yugoslavia). Hence, the excessive expression of national identities, the suspicion towards *any* type of central government, and the establishment of local governments in the smallest communities should not be surprising.⁴ Disintegration processes could make political and economic transitions more difficult.

There is not yet a *comprehensive urban and regional policy* for the new East Central Europe. Societal responses are fragmented, often exhibiting a sectoral character. Former policies—based on central budget redistribution and resource allocations made by the governments—have been abandoned, but the current rapidly changing situation is not favourable for a well-founded policy formulation.

Beside public policies we should pay attention to *informal societal responses*. Informal societal responses do not represent simply a specific aspect of the reaction (or adaptation) of the society to economic changes, but often represent tendencies differing from public policies, as well as efforts to weaken public policies. Such informal societal responses are a traditional part of the political culture in East Central Europe that has developed during the centuries of foreign rule. Public policies expressed the interests of the ruling empire; informal societal responses expressed regional and national self-defence.⁵ This routine operated well during

Communist rule, 'but it has not disappeared with the recent democratisation. Certain urbanisation processes—as will be discussed later—cannot be explained solely by analysing public policies.

3. Specific Urbanisation in East Central Europe⁶

My hypothesis is that *socialist urbanisation—more precisely, the post-World War II urbanisation in East Central Europe—is not a new model of modern urbanisation*. It replicates the stages of the global process. These countries have reached different stages of urbanisation and have developed special features as they reproduced each stage because of belated modernisation and the state socialist system.

In order to prove this hypothesis, we have developed a comparative analysis of urban networks in the East Central European countries *plus* Austria and Bavaria. The series of maps based on census data for 1910, 1920, 1930, 1938–40, 1950, 1960, 1970 and 1980, include all cities of over 50 000 inhabitants. All the population data are relevant to the present cities and present boundaries. We can summarise our findings as follows.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the *core area of urbanisation* in East Central Europe consisted of Bohemia, Saxonia and Thuringia (i.e. the southern part of the German Democratic Republic), and Silesia (now in Poland, then in Germany). It has been a historical centre for urbanisation since the Middle Ages. This urbanisation was characterised by a dense network of medium-sized and small cities. (Prague was also a medium-sized city at that time.)

Large cities (over 1m inhabitants)—Berlin, Budapest, Vienna and Warsaw—were outside this area. These large cities had poorly developed urban networks in their region. Austria, Hungary and Bavaria had similarities in their urban networks: the capital cities were 'lonely stars' within the national settlement network, lacking secondary urban centres.

In South-eastern Europe, Bucharest was the only sizeable urban centre, and only Romania had a 'skeleton' of an urban network. In the Balkans, there was not a single medium-sized city; even capital cities, such as Belgrade or Sofia, did not reach this level.

This overall picture did not change much between World War I and World War II (see Figure 1).

In the post-World War II period important changes took place.

In Austria, Bavaria and the GDR the number of cities over 50 000 inhabitants rose by 50 per cent between 1950 and 1980. The Austrian urban network remained relatively poorly developed because of the still over-sized capital city and the physical environment. Urbanisation was characterised by the expansion of small cities.

In all the other countries the number of cities of over 50 000 tripled. Bulgaria, where this number grew six times, was an exception. The urban network of South-eastern Europe became similar to the Central European network.

The case of Czechoslovakia is unique, for Slovakia witnessed a much faster growth than the Czech regions. In Bohemia, urban growth was similar to those of the GDR and Austria.

The spatial pattern of urban growth was influenced by the overall population growth, migration patterns and the size of the countries. Polish and Romanian urban growth partially resulted from a high natural increase in the urban population. High population growth in the southern Yugoslav republics was cushioned by temporary and permanent migration (Yugoslavia was the only socialist country which permitted free travel abroad for its citizens).

Medium-sized cities multiplied in the larger, more populous countries, mostly in Poland. In federal states, regional centres had more importance, more functions and, consequently, faster growth than territorial administrative centres in other states. Small countries with large capital cities

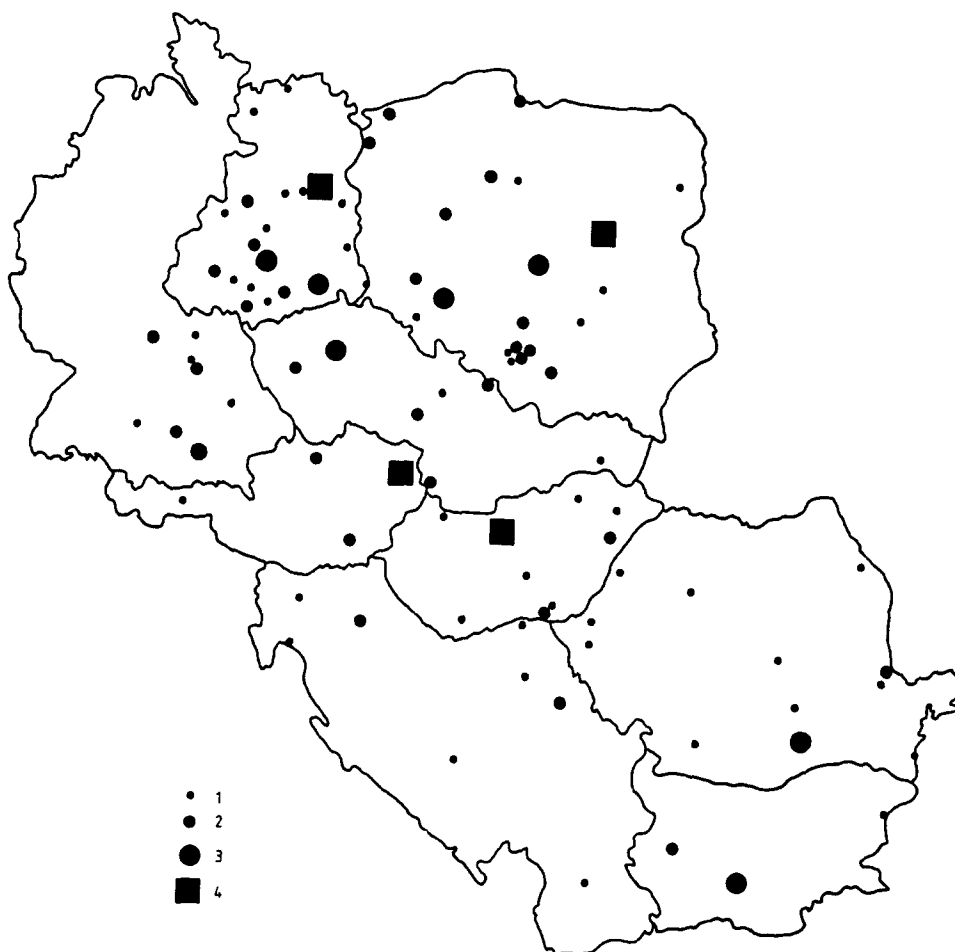


Figure 1. The urban network in Central Europe in 1930: 1, 50 000–99 999 inhabitants; 2, 100 000–499 999 inhabitants; 3, 500 000–1m inhabitants; 4, over 1m inhabitants.

(Austria, Hungary) were unable to develop a substantial number of medium-sized secondary urban centres. Generally speaking, the number of cities expanded most rapidly in the category of 50 000–100 000 inhabitants.

The expansion of the urban network exhibited a NW–SE movement during that time-span. Urbanisation did not change its spatial pattern in the 1950s. Post-war reconstruction and the first wave of ‘socialist’ industrialisation reinforced the position of the already existing urban centres. In Hungary and Poland urban take-off started in the 1960s, in Slovakia and in the

Balkans in the 1970s. In the GDR and Bohemia the network of larger centres did not change much.

The population in the larger part of East Central Europe remained overwhelmingly rural until as late as 1950: over 80 per cent in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, 70 per cent in Romania and Poland, 60 per cent in Hungary. The urban network that developed in this basically rural space during the state socialist period was a replication of the urban network of the more developed Central European space. There is still an urbanisation gap between the Central European and the South-eastern European

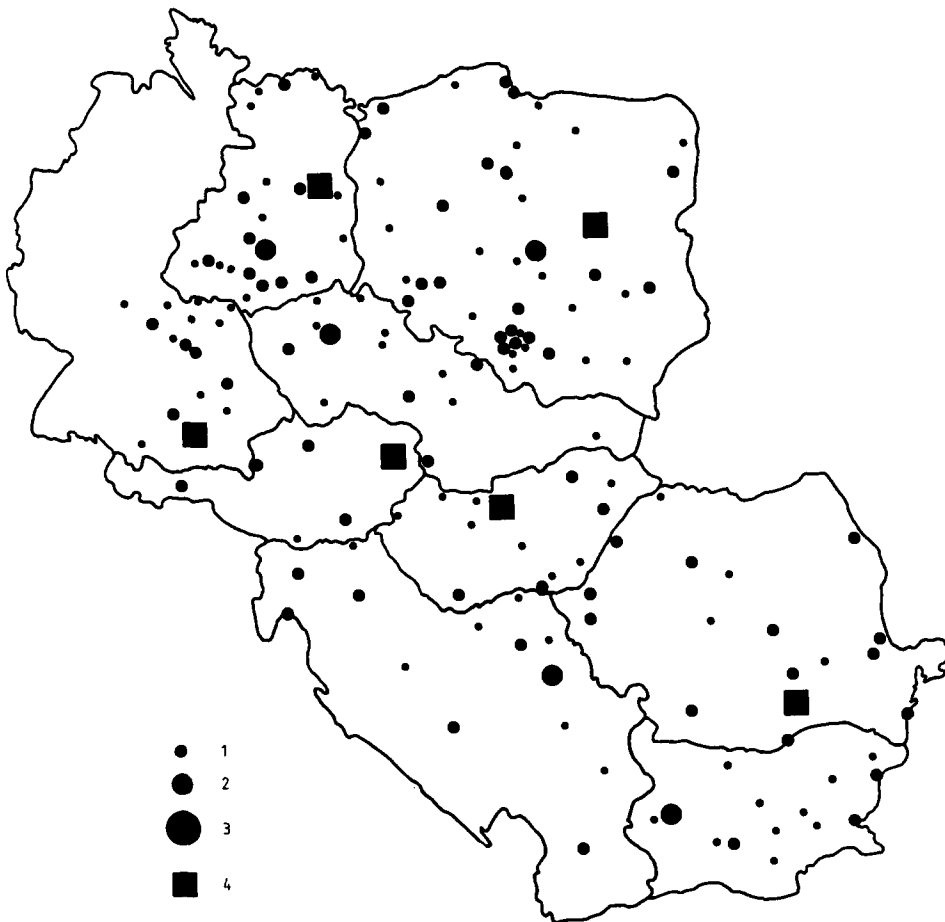


Figure 2. The urban network in Central Europe in 1960: 1, 50 000–99 999 inhabitants; 2, 100 000–499 999 inhabitants; 3, 500 000–1m inhabitants; 4, over 1m inhabitants.

parts of the region, but this gap has been shaped mostly by historical development and *not* by differences in the social system. Forty years ago South-eastern Europe was as rural as a currently developing country, but urban take-off then was not the same as the present pattern (excessively polarised) of Third World urbanisation. There are a number of publications on the spatial pattern of settlement development in East Central Europe (e.g. on suburbanisation, conurbanisation, rural depopulation).⁷ None of them has defined a single feature which is *unique* to socialist countries. I firmly state that European forms of modern urbanisation were propagated in East Cen-

tral Europe during the state socialist system (Figures 2 and 3).

Now, the question arises: *how could this be possible?* Does such a phenomenon imply that there was no difference between capitalist and socialist urbanisation? Socialist governments had the power to intervene in the urbanisation process, and these governments had quite specific ideas about urbanisation ('the urbanisation should be *planned* and *egalitarian*').

Similarities between East Central and West European urbanisation are of fundamental significance. These similarities express the general rules of modern urbanisation and continuity of European urbani-

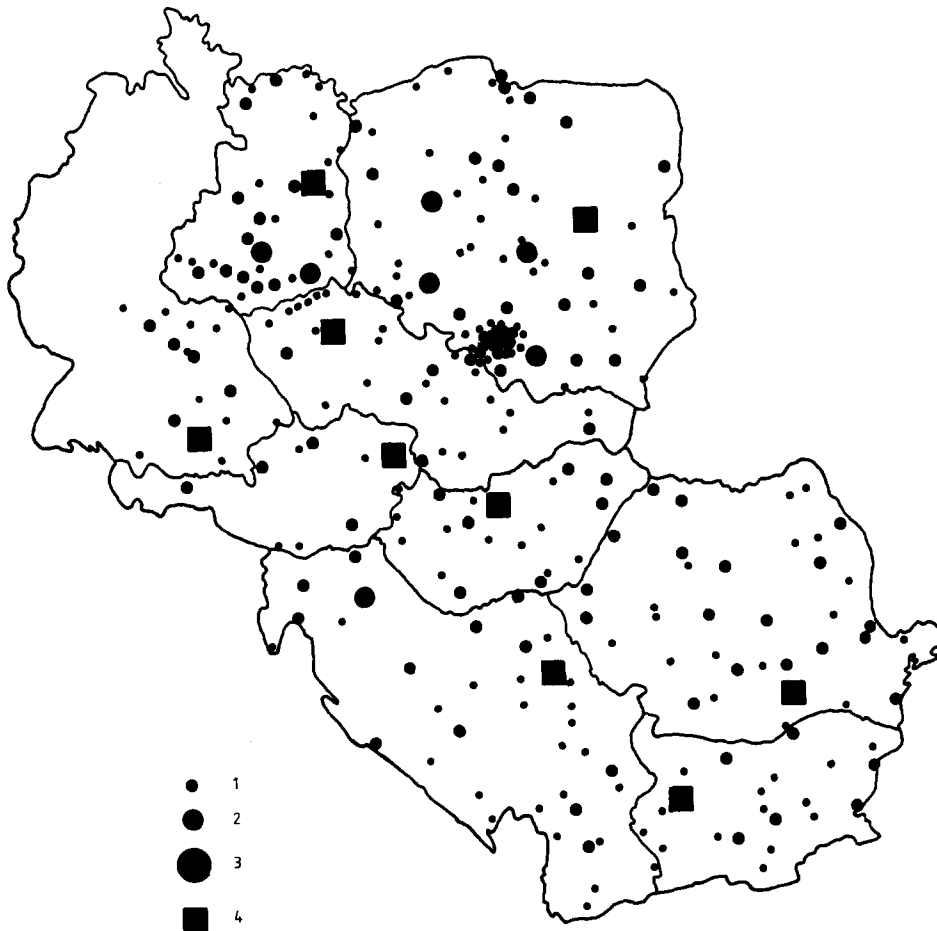


Figure 3. The urban network in Central Europe in 1980: 1, 50 000–99 999 inhabitants; 2, 100 000–499 999 inhabitants; 3, 500 000–1m inhabitants; 4, over 1m inhabitants.

sation. The similarities stem from the fact that the post-war industrialisation in East Central Europe created a modern industrial system with all the inevitable spatial consequences: rural–urban migration, urban concentration of population, spatial separation of workplace and residence, development of functional zones within cities, suburbanisation, etc.

East Central European urbanisation has important *specific features* as well. These features are partly due to belated urbanisation, partly to the state socialist system.

Modern urbanisation started late within the region (by the end of the 19th century

and in some cases rather recently in the 20th), but its advancement was rather fast, although imperfect, and remains so in many respects. The eras of industrial take-off and rapid urban growth have already ended; yet, the rural sector still remains large and important. Except for the traditional industrial zones of the 'urban core', the rural population is between 35 and 50 per cent in the region, which means that the rural effects of urbanisation are of great economic and political importance.

State socialism has had two important effects on the urbanisation process. *First*, it prolonged the rural–urban dichotomy,

mainly related to living conditions. The infrastructure, which chiefly served production purposes, has been neglected for a long time. Infrastructural development also depended on central budget redistribution, but it had a disadvantageous position in the competition for government subsidies. (Inefficient state industry always had priority.) *Second*, state socialism changed the content and functioning of urban society. Instead of middle-class development, proletarianisation became widespread. Instead of autonomous, individual decisions made by citizens, centrally designated and strictly controlled rules dominated urban life, including leisure, culture and political activity.

4. Societal Responses to Urban Changes

During the last 40 years, East Central European countries have fully developed their industrialisation and have started the transition to a consumption (or tertiary, or post-industrial) society. Two important transitions have occurred within the lifespan of a single generation (from a rural to an industrial society, and from an industrial to a consumption society). These transitions were intensified by two fundamental political changes.

Societal responses to these changes were twofold. *First*, new institutions, ideologies, and urban and regional policies were formulated. *Second*, society developed a certain shadow mechanism of urbanisation, by which it intended to conserve historical continuation and to defend itself against undesirable changes.

Public Responses

Urban and regional policies passed through several phases in the socialist era. No explicit urban policy existed in the early 1950s; sectoral planning was dominant. Principles of socialist urbanisation were applied only sporadically in certain sectors (e.g. government housing) or in certain settlements as each country established a

few new, 'socialist' cities as experiments of socialist urban planning.

The 1950s and early 1960s witnessed the introduction of the first comprehensive regional and urban strategies. The key was industrial decentralisation to provincial cities to help level out employment opportunities among regions and to diminish inter-regional migration.

By the 1970s, cities were no longer regarded simply as sites for industrial production; the importance of their central place functions began to be stressed. The equalisation of living conditions in different regions and types of settlements has become the basis for new regional and urban policies.

Until the mid 1970s, regional goal-setting policies regarding regional levelling were similar in the Western welfare states and the East Central European countries. Although they shared the similarity of providing government subsidies for infrastructural development, they differed on such key elements as direct economic intervention, state industrial location, the exclusion of market forces, and the very limited role accorded to local authorities in regional development. Later on, Western and socialist regional policies took even more divergent paths. Bottom-up indigenous development and the diminishment of the governmental role, which are characteristics of Western regional policies, remained alien to the centralised state socialist system. Socialist countries tried to continue central redistribution policies. With the worsening of the economic situation, central sources became more and more scarce; thus, earlier regional policies have collapsed, without being replaced by more modern approaches. Local and private initiatives were not accepted as a basis for regional development.

Planning was a decisive part of public policies. Planning covered resource allocation for urban development, industrial location, etc. At the beginning of the socialist period, urban planning had a few ideological goals, such as assuring equal

opportunities for housing, equalising the standard of living of different social groups, creating the working-class basis for provincial cities, etc. Ideological purposes were subsequently replaced by technocratic goals with a few exceptions. Evidently, in such a complicated system as a city, processes could not be planned and guided in a normative way. An entirely new process cannot be started arbitrarily. Planners several times adjusted the goals of planning to correspond to the 'normal', spontaneous urbanisation processes.

Planning targets were not entirely at variance with Western European urbanisation. East Central Europe as a whole has lagged behind Western Europe for centuries and has tried again and again to close the gap. For this reason, countries in the region have imitated or tried to follow Western patterns of political institutions, economic organisations and urbanisation. Communist governments tried again to catch up with the West through rapid economic growth and accelerated urbanisation. In political declarations, they praised the Soviet example, but planners were looking for Western patterns in physical planning, management and in developing technical civilisation in cities.

Informal Responses

Informal responses have had a much more important effect on urbanisation than earlier supposed. The main tools of government urbanisation, such as public housing and centralised development of infrastructure, have evidently been focused on urban centres rather than on rural settlements, whose development was more independent. It should be recalled what a high proportion of the population in the region is still rural.

Government urbanisation created mainly the built environment for urbanisation. That built environment is filled with social social functions performed by people who make individual decisions in selecting a new settlement, accepting a new job,

searching for a new apartment, and choosing education for their children. The goals set by individuals are quite simple: adequate housing; accessibility to work, services and other family members; social status, i.e. to live in a good place within the residential area of the city. Average citizens set their goals in basically the same way whether they live in East Central or Western Europe. After all, these choices express a certain perception of the urban space, which is a part of our common European culture. In the event that government and individual urbanisation goals conflict, in state socialism government has the power to constrain the articulation of individual interests but none to change individual goals and ambitions.

Everywhere there exists an individual, informal basis for public societal responses, which have a feedback effect on public policy. But the case of East Central Europe was special. Individuals built up hidden mechanisms for defending their interests and for promoting urban social processes opposing official policies. *Private urbanisation* refused the values dictated by 'socialist' urbanisation and tried to continue traditional burghers' values. Citizens did not accept egalitarianism; they intended to demonstrate the improvement of their social status by changing residence. In the cities, where the housing market was—in most cases—abolished, the change of apartments expressed the different prestige values regarding the location of the apartments in a complicated way. This mechanism kept social segregation alive. Where private (detached) family housing was possible—in the suburbs, or in the countryside—the size and the layout of the houses were quite different from the apartments built by governments in large housing estates. The traditional farmers' housing was rejected, too; people intended to follow modernisation but in a way which corresponds to their urban traditions. In most socialist countries, a limited housing market was re-established after the mid 1960s.

Private urbanisation was based largely on the second (black) economy. Services, goods and information related to housing circulated in this private network. The black economy in East Central Europe had a social significance that did not exist in the second economy of the West. The East Central European secondary economy was the locus of market relations, of consumer free choice, of autonomous economic decisions—it was a real *parallel society*. This second society continued certain European urban traditions, and even had a modifying effect on official urban policies. The influence of the second society was evidently limited in the most authoritarian regimes (in the GDR and Romania). Urban traditions were stronger in the Central European part of the region than in the Balkans (in Bulgaria and in the southern republics of Yugoslavia) where egalitarian peasant societies functioned before World War II.

Notes

1. The eight countries are as follows: Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia. Their combined population is 130m. The GDR was absorbed by the Federal Republic of Germany; as for the rest of the region, the historical division between Central and South-eastern Europe has surfaced once again. The Central European countries (Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland) form a distinct group, not just because these countries are more advanced in building democracy and a market economy than the Balkan countries, but because of the different cultural, religious and institutional traditions of these two groups of countries. This dividing line cuts Yugoslavia into two parts, which partly explains the present internal tensions and separatist tendencies of this country.
2. See Enyedi (1987a) and Szelenyi (1983).
3. The highest figure for industrial employment in Budapest was in 1964 (700 000 employees). The industrial workforce had dropped by 60 per cent by 1985 and almost half of that number were employed by enterprise headquarters in white-collar jobs.
4. The merger of communities, which has been general all over Europe, was undertaken in our countries as a further centralisation effort by Communist governments. In those countries where free elections of local governments have been already organised, all these mergers have been cancelled and the 1950 public administration network has been re-established. This fragmented network will not be able to perform present-day public services, a weakness which will certainly promote a new type of integration.
5. In the mid 19th century, none of the present states existed as independent entities. Romania consisted of two separate principalities, dependent upon the Turkish Empire; Albania, Bulgaria and a part of Yugoslavia belonged to the Ottoman Turkish Empire; Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the northern part of Yugoslavia belonged to the Habsburg Empire; Poland was divided among Prussia, Russia and the Habsburg Empire.
6. For more detailed explanations see Enyedi (1987b, 1990).
7. See Enyedi (1978) and Musil (1980).

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