

Urban studies and urban research in Budapest – fighting unfavourable conditions

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Urban Agency III

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Hungary since 2010

Very **strong political power** (super majority in Parliament), populist, right-wing political leadership with strong **centralization agenda**

- political power
- territorial governments
- public services
- academia, research, education



Shrinking list of **independent entities**: some remaining **middle level ministry officials**, some of the **larger city governments**, but political oppression kills innovation and the wish for real research results

The (re-)building of the Castle Hill: bringing government functions back



The City Park in Budapest – turning the park into Museum Quarter

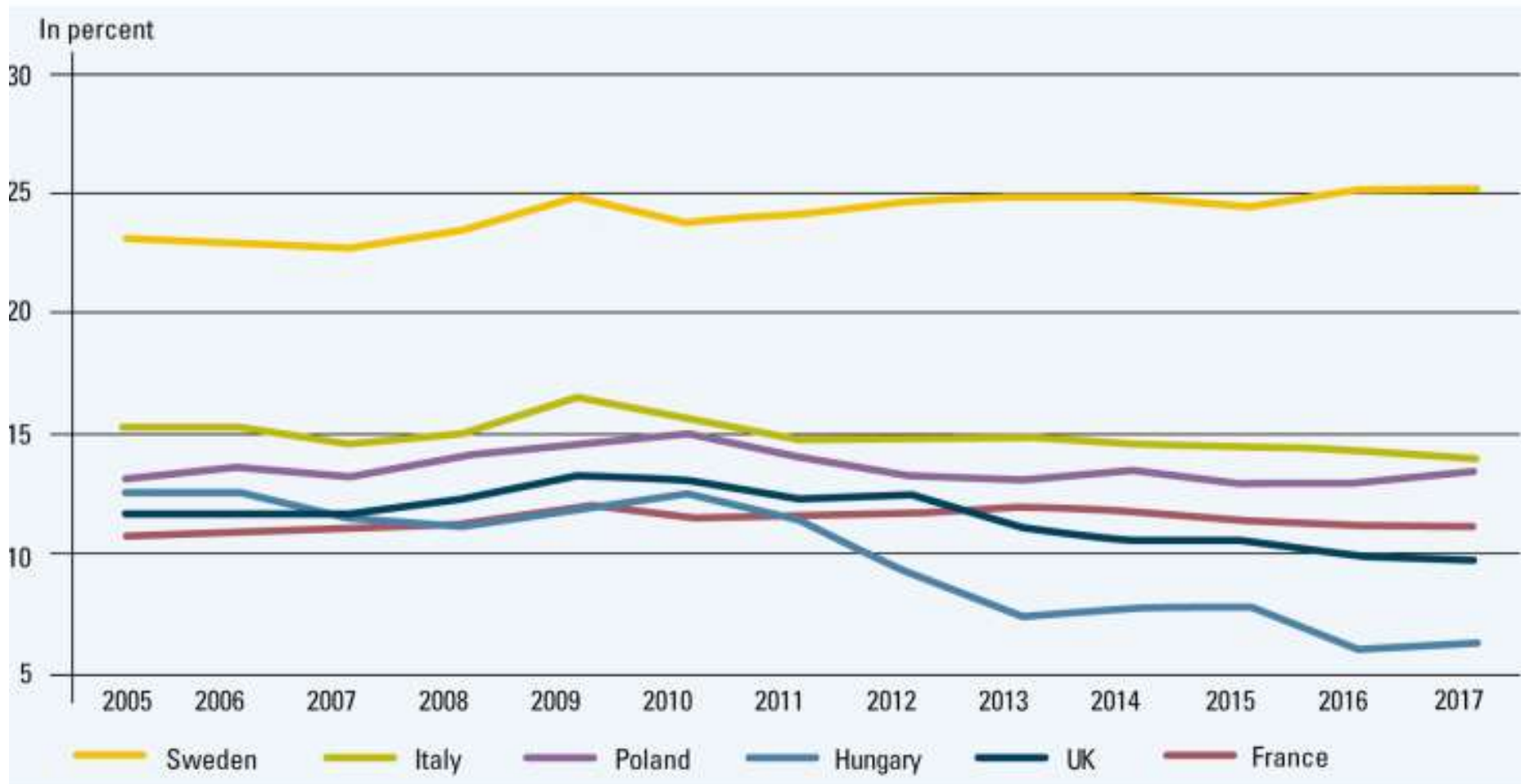


Large prestige projects (spectacularization)





Extreme centralization: dramatically shrinking local government expenditure in GDP



Source: IMF, 2017; BBSR, 2020:

Informal arenas for urban research

Budapest Circle since 2004, meeting monthly around urban issues, mailing list of 300+ people

This is one of the rare **informal arenas**

- attended by a **mixture of researchers, consultants, officers, politicians,**
- offering the opportunity of **free, uncontrolled discussions** (functioning under the Chatham house rules)

227th meeting of the Budapest Circle

Tuesday, 3 September 2024, at 18.00

FUGA Budapest Architecture Centre

1052 Budapest, Petőfi Sándor utca 5.

and ONLINE

The theme:

**The state of affairs in urban studies
and urban research in Budapest**

Moderators:

György Alföldi and Iván Tosics

Contributors:

representatives of universities, research institutions







Budapest Circle debate on the state of affairs in urban studies and urban research

- Prior to the meeting lively **email exchange** in the mailing list
- 3 hours long meeting: **16 online, 22 personal participants** – covering **most actors which are important in teaching and researching urban studies** in Hungary
- My opening presentation about the **Urban Agency network** and its discussions
- Why are **universities in Hungary not in the forefront of urban studies and research**? Why MRI comes out as most quoted urban research institute in Budapest?

General view about urbanism

- urbanism is a **too broad concept to be understood as a science**, it is covering sociology, architecture, civil, traffic and other engineering, social geography, economics and management science, demography, environmental psychology, communication, history
- urbanism has a **too extensive interface with politics** which limits the nature of the questions it can ask
- as urbanism is not nested in any one discipline and is too political, **it is not embraced or fought for by any of the universities**

Attempts to create university basis for urbanism in Budapest

There were quite a few attempts, but all short lived

- 2003: two universities launch a **five-year course in urbanism**. With the **Bologna system**, however, the five-year course was discontinued. The education government of the time thought that **urban education at the Bsc. level was not needed**, the Msc. education would solve this problem.
- But in the Msc. Course **the topic was soon limited to the question of planning eligibility** and how to become a chief architect (chief urbanist) became a key issue. The course died out in a few years

- **ELTE** (Eötvös Loránd University) Centre for Regional and Urban Studies
- **BME** (Technical University) in 2007: the Centre for Spatial and Social Research
- **BCE** (University of Economics): Department of Economic Geography and Urban Development, in tandem with environmental economists

Somehow universities cannot grasp that **urban studies will never be mass education**, but it is needed

BCE is pushing for **English language teaching**, but this is typically the area where it makes limited sense, as training professionals for a highly localised market is needed

Urban at sociological faculties

In the field of **sociology**, lecturers would start urban-related courses, but

- the internal teaching staff is not enough, there are no new posts, and **it is hard to find external lecturers due to the extremely low fees which can be paid**
- the **faculty often does not support new degree/specialisation start-ups due to lack of funds**
- among **sociology students**, there is **less and less interest in urban courses**, they are more interested in market research, HR or youth or media sociology

Under such circumstance it is a wonder that there are **still a few workshops, informal attempts existing...**

The only one ongoing attempt

- BME (Technical University) is running since early 2000s the **Urbanist Advanced Professional Training as a post-graduate adult teaching** (for quite a high fee)
- The success of this course suggests that **even at master's level, students are not really mature enough for the complex contexts** urban studies requires.
- Urban studies education is best placed in **post-graduate adult education**, best to start **after a few years of practical experience of the attendees.**

Municipality funded research

- Budapest leaders were only interested in the **zoning plan**, and when they needed research (rarely), they outsourced that to private professional contacts
- There was only a short period in the 2000s when the City of Budapest **established and financed gave Studio Metropolitana to carry out research and surveys**
- The situation deteriorated a lot in the last 15 years: research institutes and experts **with good connections to the government and its institutions dominate** public contracts and tenders, while **opposition-led municipalities are stuck: 'we have no money, so we don't outsource'**
- Budapest's has an **in-house research institute**, they should be able to **find out facts** (how many Chinese live in Bp, how many cars come into Bp) **but should not make research in concepts**, such as gentrification...

,Basic research' and data?

At the **universities** the research side is simple, there is **no money, no one gives you any data or anything...** Thus universities produce **11th article out of 10 previous ones** as they can't get any data...

Most organisations are **secretive**:

- **municipalities** conceal the results of representative urban surveys they have carried out,
- the **tourism agency** does not publish the results of the mandatory online data services that should, in principle, be made available to the public,
- the **government** does not publish the results of the many surveys it carries out.

The EU as a last resort

- For those experts and institutions who are **not close to the present political power**, the **EU is the only remaining source for research funding**
- For universities the **opt-out from Horizon Europe (and Erasmus) and the policy-driven university foundation boards of trustees** make the situation very bad
- Research results from EU or other grants **might have limited domestic relevance** and is not considered by domestic decision-makers

The view of a politician

- "Today, **posters need short texts**. Of course, this comes at a price. ... simplistic messages are not Fidesz's problem, but the problem of modern politics. ... **the internet and mass democracy** seem to have brought this about.
- Never before have so many people been involved in politics, because never before have so many people had access to news and information (...) Social media platforms have made things worse, and **politicians have learned that they can only reach their voters with short messages**.
- Under such circumstances **honest and professional discourse is the most risky thing for politicians**. Therefore, these debates can at best be conducted in the background.
- Both the government and the opposition are **spending money on research and workshops in politics, but only in closed circles**. In the open media, meanwhile, there is a circus."

Politics and research

- The **ruling party spends a lot of money to train right-wing elites**. Mathias Corvinus Collegium also has an urbanistic branch, led by foreign-educated, dynamic, right-wing figures...
- In the 'normal' research world **everyone is waiting for projects and commissions**, which then, however, narrow down the research topic. Instead of that **academicians should take the initiative, launch work from bottom-up**
- Given today's crises, an activist approach would allow new results to be achieved on the basis of **informal cooperation in professional networks**, willing to work forward on sustainability issues, **without funding**...

Budapest Circle: following debates

- **ACADEMIC CLUSTER** / they work according to their own rules (publication, citation) reacting to themselves, looking at the Hungarian situation from the "outside", working and evaluating it as a case study.
- **CONSULTING, EU PROJECT CLUSTER** / They work with EU planning systems, support policies, trying to mediate planning-programming towards EU principles, but in the shackles of national policy.
- **PLANNERS' CLUSTER** / planning organisations deal with their clients, serving national-territorial-city needs, trying to synchronise them with their own professional principles and rules.
- **PUBLIC SECTOR CLUSTER** / cities, municipalities, urban planning authorities, managing authorities are trapped in national policies, left to their own devices, trying to represent local values among actors with very different values.

Conclusion: urban research under political headwinds

- **unfavourable domestic political and financial conditions** for established urban research
- development of **informal and more practice oriented forms of urban research** in different forms
- development of **informal arenas, complex web of links between research oriented entities** (municipal departments, NGO-s, private think tanks) which keep contacts even under the hardest times

The Hungarian case is **extreme** but similar tendencies could/can be observed in some other countries under **autocratic political leadership**

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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