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Rural Change at the Urban Fringe: Suburbanisation and Discursive Repositioning in Ballószög's Relationship with Kecskemét (1954–2012)

Abstract

This paper investigates the spatial and discursive transformation of the relationship between Ballószög, a peri-urban village in Hungary, and the nearby regional centre of Kecskemét between 1954 and 2012. The study contributes to broader debates on urban – rural relations, suburbanization, and post-socialist restructuring by analysing how proximity to an urban core shaped local development trajectories and identity formation. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of 129 local and regional newspaper articles, the paper explores how discourses of dependency, integration, and autonomy evolved over time. The empirical findings reveal a three-phase developmental trajectory: a period of administrative separation and functional subordination (1954–1979), a transitional phase marked by spatial reconfiguration and emerging local agency (1980–2000), and a phase of integration characterized by increasing cooperation and regional embeddedness (2001–2012). A complementary vertical model is introduced to capture the structural deepening of the relationship alongside chronological shifts. The analysis shows that Ballószög's trajectory cannot be understood solely through demographic or infrastructural data but requires attention to how local identity and spatial roles were negotiated discursively within the broader urban-peripheral context. The findings have relevance for understanding the dynamics of other post-socialist urban fringes, where similar inter-settlement asymmetries and identity dilemmas persist.

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Introduction

Reconsidering the relationship between urban and rural areas has become a central concern in contemporary research in human geography, urban sociology, and rural policy, particularly in post-socialist contexts. In these regions, the transition to a market economy, the restructuring of state involvement, and the commodification of spatial practices have produced new urban-peripheral dynamics (Brenner 2004; Cloke 2006; Halfacree 1993; Hirt 2012; Stanilov 2007; Sýkora 1999; Tsenkova 2006; Woods 2007).

In contrast to earlier dichotomous approaches, current scholarship emphasises urban-rural continuums and mutual interdependencies. The specific conditions of post-socialist countries offer a distinctive lens for examining these relationships, as the post-1989 transition required a rethinking of settlement hierarchies, the functions of regional centres, and the integration of rural areas (Sýkora 1999; Tsenkova 2006; Hirt 2012).

Within this theoretical framework, suburbanization has emerged as a key area of inquiry in Hungary over the past three decades. Research has explored developments around Budapest (Dövényi & Kováts 1999; Schuman 2015), across the Great Hungarian Plain (Bajmócy 2003; Tímár 1993), and within regional centres (Bajmócy 1999, 2000; Hardy 2002; B-né Pristyák & Kókai 2012; Szebényi 2016; Kristóf 2018). While large-scale processes of urbanization and suburbanization have been examined extensively, less attention has been paid to the ways in which local communities located in the immediate periphery of cities – often targets of suburban expansion – construct their identity, development narratives, and institutional relationships.

This study addresses this gap through an analysis of Ballószög, a Hungarian village whose development has been strongly shaped by its proximity to the regional centre of Kecskemét. The historical trajectory of Ballószög is tightly interwoven with the spatial, economic, and social transformations of the nearby city, which lies only a few kilometres away. This proximity, however, involved more than physical nearness, as it also produced a complex and historically shifting relational structure between the two settlements.

Comparable dynamics have been observed in other post-socialist peri-urban zones, such as the outskirts of Prague or Sofia, where formerly subordinated villages have experienced processes of regional integration alongside the pursuit of partial autonomy (Stanilov 2007; Sýkora & Bouzarovski 2012).

This article examines the spatial relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét not only as a historical process but also through a relational and theoretical lens. It argues that post-socialist peri-urban settlements cannot be adequately described through static centre-periphery models, as their spatial embeddedness is contingent, historically situated, and discursively constructed. By engaging with poststructuralist geographical thought (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994; Paasi 2002), the study introduces a three-phase developmental model – dependency, duality, and integration – that captures temporal and structural shifts in the nature of urban-rural relations. This perspective allows suburbanization to be interpreted not merely as a demographic or economic phenomenon, but as a multidimensional process shaped by institutional practices, everyday interactions, and local narratives of identity and belonging.

The research is grounded in the hypothesis that Ballószög's development was shaped primarily by its geographical and institutional proximity to Kecskemét. The study explores how the village's development trajectory and local identity were constructed through the discursive framing of this relationship, and it reveals the ways in which proximity and dependency were reinterpreted over time. It further hypothesises that this relationship evolved not through a linear process of modernization, but through historically contingent shifts between dependency, duality, and integration, which reflect broader patterns of post-socialist peri-urban change. Beyond its local relevance, this analytical framework contributes to wider theoretical debates on the relational construction of urban-rural space.

Methodology

Media analysis offers a valuable means of tracing how the social interpretation of the relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét has evolved over time – across periods when Ballószög was represented as an autonomous settlement, when it appeared to remain in the shadow of the city, and when phases of close cooperation were emphasised. A key premise of poststruc-

turalist geographical thought is that place is not merely a physical locality, but a socially, historically, and discursively constructed entity (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994; Paasi 2002; Woods 2007). The identity of a place is therefore not fixed, but continually (re)produced through the practices, narratives, and interactions of various social actors and institutions. This perspective is particularly relevant in cases where a small settlement is located in close proximity to a regional urban centre.

In this context, the press functions not only as a source of information, but also as an active medium of meaning-making, and thus as a key arena of spatial representation and identity construction. Especially in post-socialist contexts, media discourses have played an important role in shaping modernization narratives and reframing relationships between urban centres and their rural peripheries (Fairclough 1995; Hirt 2012; Tsenkova 2006; Wodak & Meyer 2001). Local and regional newspapers have not only reported events, but have also articulated normative visions of desirable development trajectories, centre-periphery relations, and modernization schemes for so-called 'scattered rural settlements'.

Over time, these media discourses shifted, introducing new themes and interpretive frameworks. The empirical foundation of the present study consists of the systematic collection and qualitative analysis of press materials reflecting the relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét. The aim was to reconstruct the historical trajectory of inter-settlement relations and the associated patterns of meaning through sources available in local and regional media.

The first step involved identifying newspapers that regularly reported on both settlements over a longer time span:

- Bács-Kiskun Megyei Népújság (1954–1956)
- Petőfi Népe (1956–2012)

The selection criteria included regular publication, local thematic focus, event-driven structure, and digital availability. The second step consisted of compiling a broader set of potentially relevant articles. Articles were selected if Ballószög constituted their primary focus. The source base comprises articles published between 1954 and 2012. The starting date corresponds to Ballószög's administrative autonomy, while the endpoint reflects the last digitally available issue of the local newspaper used. Filtering was conducted through keyword searches ('Ballószög', 'Ballószög község', 'Külső-Ballószög'), complemented by manual reading. The resulting full corpus comprises

449 articles. Given the aims of this study, only those articles referring to the relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét were considered analytically relevant. Accordingly, the third step involved a thematic selection process, identifying texts that explicitly or implicitly reflected on the dynamics between the two settlements. This thematic focus enabled a more targeted inquiry into spatial and historical changes in the centre-periphery relationship. As a result of this filtering process, 129 articles were selected for in-depth analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of local newspaper articles collected for analysis

Period	Total number of articles	Number of relevant articles
1954–1959	69	11
1960–1969	43	14
1970–1979	77	28
1980–1989	46	22
1990–1999	85	18
2000–2013	129	36
Total	449	129

Source: Author's data collection

The fourth step involved preparing the text corpus for qualitative content analysis. The selected press articles were organised in a structured table including the year and source of publication, the article title or section heading, the full text, a thematic summary, and a qualitative classification of the relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét (e.g. subordination, partnership). The organised material was then subjected to content analysis and iterative close reading. Particular attention was paid to shifts in relational narratives, the presence of institutional and discursive references, and changing interpretations of spatial function and role. Through this process, discursive turning points were identified – moments in the tone of the articles, topics, and relational framing that marked the emergence of new developmental phases in the relationship between the two settlements. The delimitation of historical periods was based on both inductive patterns observed in the press materials and relevant historical contexts, such as regime change, administrative reforms, or major infrastructural investments. Based on the iterative reading

and interpretation of press discourses, the article applies a three-phase developmental model – dependency, duality, and integration – to capture the changing relational structure between Ballószög and Kecskemét. These phases do not correspond to rigid historical eras; rather, they reflect discursively constructed patterns that emerged and shifted over time. This analytical framework draws on a poststructuralist understanding of space as relational and processual, enabling a more nuanced interpretation of urban-rural dynamics beyond static centre-periphery dichotomies.

General Spatial and Demographic Profile of Ballószög

In order to situate the spatial embeddedness of Ballószög within a meaningful analytical framework, it is necessary to outline the settlement's general demographic and geographical characteristics. These structural features constitute the preconditions for the centre-periphery relationship that developed with Kecskemét – an evolving dynamic whose historical interpretation represents one of the central aims of this study.

Ballószög is a rural settlement located in Bács-Kiskun County, approximately 10 kilometres from the city of Kecskemét, within its inner peri-urban catchment area (Figure 1). The settlement does not have a direct connection to a national main road; Route 52 merely touches its eastern-northeastern boundary. In addition, railway services were discontinued in 2007. Nevertheless, Ballószög's transport accessibility cannot be regarded as unfavourable: Kecskemét's city centre can be reached by car within 10–15 minutes via secondary road No. 53101.

Historically, Ballószög formed part of Kecskemét's outer homestead zone, where animal husbandry initially predominated, later giving way to viticulture and fruit production as the main forms of economic activity (Lettrich 1968). Like many other homestead-based villages (*tanyaközségek*), Ballószög gained administrative independence during the state-led policy of rural municipalisation implemented between 1949 and 1956 (Bajmócy 2001; Becsei 1993, 1995, 1996, 2004, 2007; Belényi 1998; Csatári 2004; Duró 1995, 2000; Erdei 1976; Orbán 1980). During this process, the outer homestead areas of Kecskemét were reorganised into independent municipalities through administrative measures.

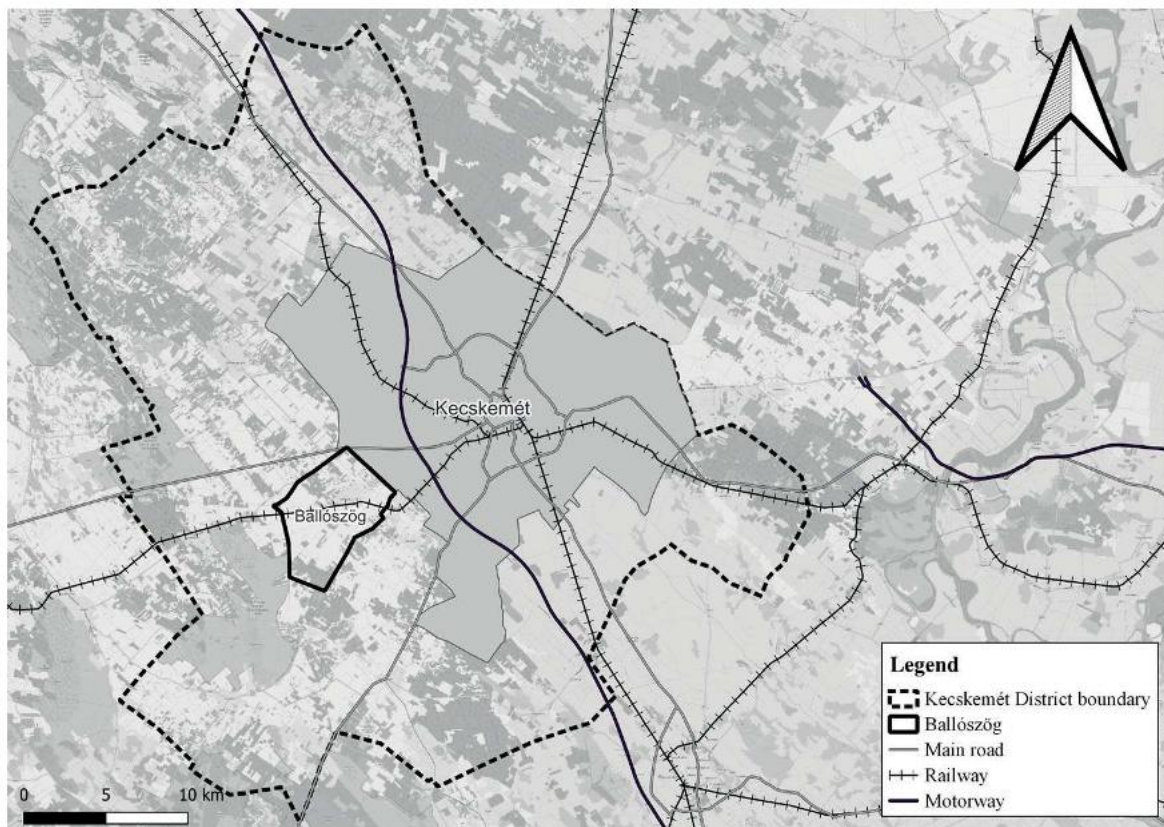


Figure 1: Spatial location of Ballószög

Source: Author's own editing

Between 1960 and 1970, Ballószög experienced a marked population decline of 20.4%, with the number of residents falling from 2,499 to 1,988. Although the population of the inner settlement core increased during this period, this growth occurred at the expense of the scattered homesteads. The primary driver of decline was out-migration, reflected in a negative migration balance of -288. By the 1970s, the pace of population loss slowed (-124 individuals), and during the 1980s the population began to stabilise. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of residents increased modestly from 1,864 to 1,950 (+4.6%). Following the political regime change, the village's population grew rapidly: between 1990 and 2001 it increased by 37%, from 1,950 to 2,672, followed by continued growth until 2011, when the population reached 3,260. The most recent data from 2022 indicate further demographic expansion to 4,311 residents, representing a 32.2% increase since 2011 (Figure 2).

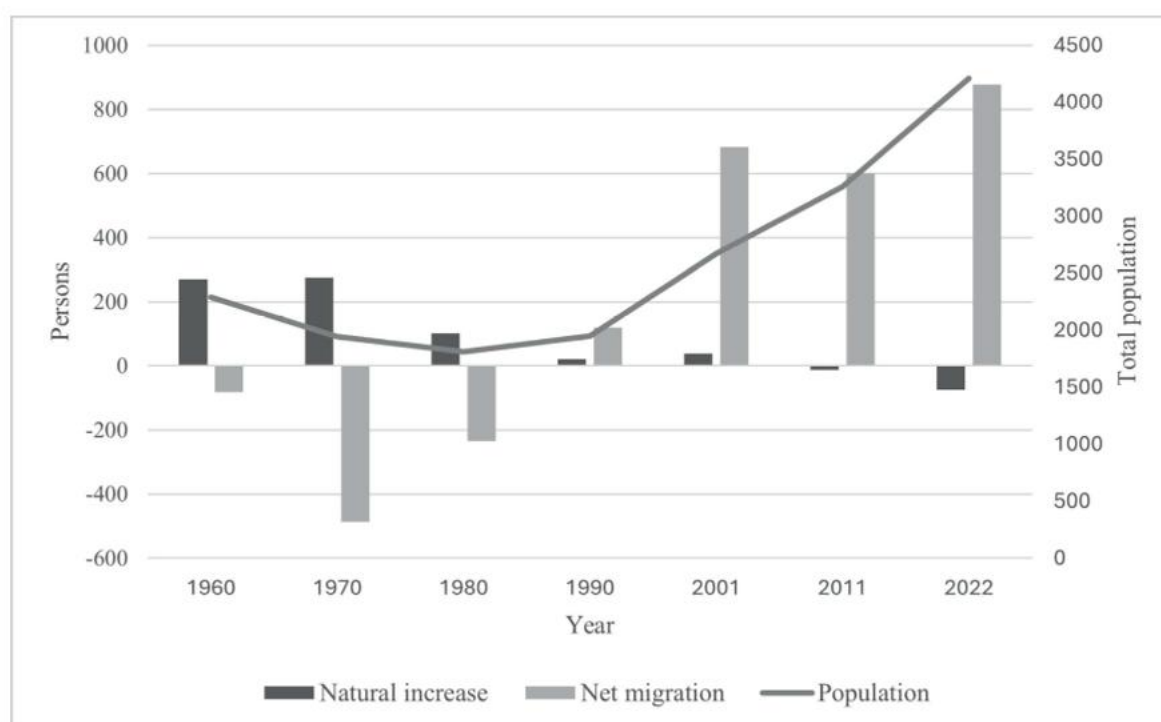


Figure 2: Components of population change and total population growth in Ballószög (1960–2022)

Source: Author's own editing based on census data

These demographic trends were accompanied by significant changes in the housing stock. Between 1960 and 1970, the number of dwellings declined from 717 to 672, followed by a gradual increase to 675 dwellings in 1980 and 733 by 1990. The most substantial expansion occurred after 1990, with the housing stock reaching 1,423 dwellings by 2022. Notably, 313 of these homes – approximately 22% of the total stock – were constructed after 2010. New development has been concentrated primarily on the periphery of the central built-up area and in the northern and eastern garden plot zones (zárt-kertes övezetek), indicating both internal spatial restructuring and emerging processes of urbanisation (Figure 3).

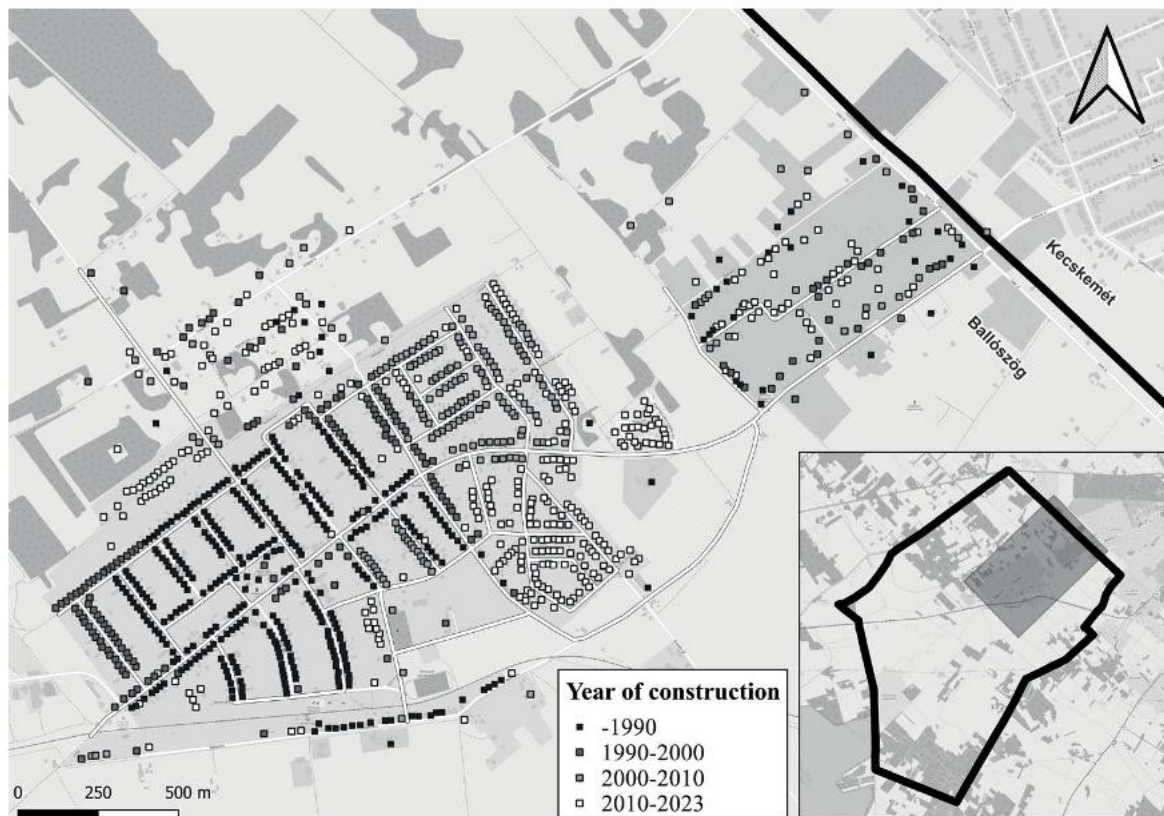


Figure 3: Spatial distribution of residential buildings by year of construction in Ballószög

Source: Author's own editing

On the basis of demographic and housing development trends, Ballószög can be characterised as a transforming settlement that is increasingly integrated into urban fringe dynamics. This transformation involves not only quantitative growth but also qualitative changes in land-use patterns and local identity. The rising population of the garden plot areas (*zártkertes övezetek*) and the expansion of the inner built-up area suggest that the village is becoming more deeply embedded within the urban catchment area of Kecskemét, while simultaneously reorganising its internal spatial structure. However, these processes cannot be fully understood through statistical analysis alone. It is therefore essential to examine how these transformations have been represented in public discourse – specifically, the narratives and interpretations that have accompanied the evolving relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét.

Discourse, Dependence, and Transformation: Temporal Phases in the Ballószög-Kecskemét Relationship (1954–2012)

The relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét has undergone significant spatial, institutional, and economic transformations from the mid-20th century to the early 21st century. This chapter examines these shifts through the lens of local and regional press discourse, which not only reflects but also actively shapes the evolving dynamics between the two settlements. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of newspaper articles published between 1954 and 2012, the chapter identifies three distinct historical phases – dependency, duality, and integration – each characterised by specific configurations of spatial embeddedness, institutional arrangements, and discursive framings.

Rather than treating the local press as a passive mirror of reality, this analysis approaches media discourse as a constitutive element in the representation and reproduction of centre-periphery relations. The selected newspaper excerpts illustrate how Ballószög's position within the Kecskemét metropolitan region was narrated and legitimised across different decades, providing insight into how rural-urban interdependencies were normalised, contested, or reconfigured over time. Through this perspective, the chapter reconstructs a temporal sequence of interrelated yet analytically distinguishable phases, each marked by shifts in the language of governance, development, and territorial identity.

Dependency Phase (1954–1979)

The period between 1954 and 1979 represents a foundational phase in the evolving relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét, characterised by a dual process of formal separation and continued functional subordination. During this period, Ballószög attained administrative autonomy, yet remained structurally embedded within the socio-economic and institutional systems of the nearby regional centre.

The Period of Administrative Autonomy and Local Institution-Building (1954–1960)

The process of administrative independence began in 1954, when Ballószög became an autonomous municipality. The local press reported the event as follows:

‘More than 3,000 residents of Ballószög are currently electing their council members as an independent municipality. The new council apparatus will advance the life of the village.’ (Hírek, Bács-Kiskun megyei Népújság, 1954, 9(245): 4)

This milestone marked the beginning of a local institution-building process and signalled a formal detachment from Kecskemét. Some economic and administrative connections were reconfigured during this period, including the dissolution of the joint urban tariff system. Local infrastructure investments also began:

‘The village council of Ballószög purchased a hammer mill from the local development fund, which will be put into operation in two weeks. This is a great joy for the working peasants of the village, as they will no longer need to cart their grain to Helvécia or Kecskemét for milling.’ (Hírek, Petőfi Népe 1957, 2(206): 2)

Originally, the separation from Kecskemét was accompanied by strong local enthusiasm and expectations of self-determination. In practice, however, the newly gained autonomy soon revealed the structural limits of independence, as everyday life, employment, and services remained closely tied to the city. Despite these developments, the detachment from Kecskemét remained incomplete. Functional connections – including transportation, services, education, and cultural programming – persisted and, in some cases, intensified. One of the clearest examples of this process was the expansion of the commuting network:

‘At the request of workers from Ballószög and Matkó, the Kecskemét City Bus Company will launch a trial service from July 22 (Sunday), operating on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Fridays along Halasi Road to Felsőmatkó (Tobacco Drying Facility).’ (Örömhír a felsőmatkóiaknak, Petőfi Népe, 1957, 2(221): 1)

The ideological and cultural embeddedness of Ballószög was further reinforced through centrally coordinated educational programmes:

‘As in every year, cultural life becomes livelier in autumn and winter. This is also true around Kecskemét, where a whole network of public education institutions coordinates activities to meet the cultural needs of the working individuals across the vast homestead areas. Educational initiatives are also starting. [...] Most recently, for example, an agricultural professional lecture was held in Ballószög.’ (Élénk kulturális élet a Kecskemét környéki tanyavilágban, Bács-Kiskun megyei Népújság, 1955, 10(246): 3)

By the end of the 1950s, it had become increasingly clear that administrative autonomy had not translated into structural independence. The following decades witnessed the consolidation of functional and institutional ties that kept Ballószög within the gravitational field of Kecskemét.

The Period of Consolidated Functional Dependence (1961–1979)

The period from 1961 to 1979 saw the consolidation of these ties in the form of institutional and functional dependence. While Ballószög operated as a formally independent municipality, the majority of its population continued to rely on Kecskemét for employment, education, and services. The local press frequently referred to this relationship using terms such as ‘functional dependence’ or a ‘core-periphery relationship’. One particularly stable pillar of this dependence was commuter labour:

‘Out of the 20 to 23 eighth-grade students graduating each year, only five or six remain in Ballószög. The pull of Kecskemét must still be reckoned with.’ (A múlt és a jövő mezsgyéjén, Ballószögi változások, Petőfi Népe, 1965, 20(208): 3)

Infrastructural shortcomings – especially in education, healthcare, and retail – also reinforced Ballószög’s dependence on Kecskemét. Demand for institutional services in the city remained high:

‘These villages have not only been historically closely tied to the city, but today’s supply, distribution, and other functions also constitute a mutual attraction in the

lives of Kecskemét and the surrounding smaller settlements... There was unanimous agreement, for instance, on the urgent need to establish a weekday dormitory in Kecskemét to accommodate upper primary school students.' (Fejlődnek a Kecskemét környéki kisközségek. *Petőfi Népe*, 1971, 26(55): 1)

A 1972 report further noted that Ballószög continued to exhibit the characteristic service deficiencies of dispersed rural settlements:

'The actual character of the aforementioned villages is only beginning to take shape, as they are largely dispersed settlements, and thus their commercial supply issues resemble those generally found in homestead regions.' (A peremrészek ellátásáért, *Petőfi Népe*, 1972, 27(50): 1)

Finally, a mid-1970s article emphasised the lack of healthcare infrastructure as a continuing source of dependence:

'This peripheral settlement does not have a medical clinic; consequently, residents travel to the city centre for healthcare services.' (Sajtóposta – Kecskeméti észrevételek, javaslatok Volán-ügyben, *Petőfi Népe*, 1979, 32(148): 4)

In summary, the years between 1954 and 1979 represent a phase of dependency constructed both discursively and functionally. Although Ballószög gained political-administrative autonomy, this shift did not result in a symmetrical relationship with Kecskemét. Instead, the village's socio-spatial embeddedness persisted and even intensified, particularly in the domains of labour, education, services, and ideological control. Here, the concept of 'dependency' extends beyond economic ties to encompass spatial practices, institutional hierarchies, and discursive framings that positioned Ballószög as a subordinate locality within Kecskemét's metropolitan region. These deeply entrenched patterns of dependency provided the structural and discursive foundations upon which the duality of the 1980s would later emerge.

Duality Phase (1980–2000)

The period between 1980 and 2000 marks a turning point in the evolving balance between dependency and autonomy. During these two decades,

Ballószög was shaped simultaneously by the enduring gravitational pull of Kecskemét and by emerging local aspirations for independence. The 1980s witnessed the consolidation of suburban integration and commuting-based dependence, while the 1990s introduced political decentralization and new experiments in self-governance. This coexistence of structural subordination and symbolic assertion constitutes the core of the ‘duality phase’, reflecting broader regional patterns of post-socialist transformation in Hungary.

The strengthening of the ‘suburban’ role and the prelude to suburbanization (1980–1989)

During the 1980s, Ballószög increasingly assumed the role of Kecskemét’s ‘garden suburb’, as demographic growth, housing development, and urban overflow redefined the village’s spatial function. Although administrative and infrastructural dependencies persisted, this period introduced a new layer of integration rooted in residential relocation and commuter practices.

Press materials from the 1980s reveal growing concern about the spatial expansion of Kecskemét into its surrounding settlements. Ballószög was no longer perceived solely through the lens of functional or institutional dependence, but increasingly as a peri-urban residential zone. Urban development strategies framed the village primarily as a labour and housing reserve, subordinating its growth trajectories to the needs of urban expansion.

This dynamic was particularly visible in housing trends, as land prices and real estate availability prompted many city dwellers to settle in Ballószög. A 1980 article offered a striking comparison between urban and rural land costs. This decade also marked a subtle discursive shift: whereas earlier reports emphasised rural modernization and urban-rural cooperation, by the late 1980s the tone had become more ambivalent – acknowledging the advantages of proximity to Kecskemét while simultaneously expressing growing concerns about dependency and marginalization:

‘There will be an even greater need for housing applicants to build their own homes using private resources. This is more easily achievable in smaller settlements than in cities. Why? Let us consider a comparative example that provides the answer: in Ballószög or Hetényegyháza, one can buy a suitable plot for family house construction for 20,000–24,000 forints. In Kecskemét – for example, along Mátyás Király Boulevard – the cost of a plot per dwelling

unit amounts to 214,000 forints. This example may seem extreme, but even half of that amount would still be considered high.' (Drágák a telkek – Leendő lakók gondjai a kecskeméti Műkertvárosban. *Petőfi Népe*, 1980, 35(174): 3)

Despite these residential changes, Ballószög remained economically dependent on Kecskemét. Employment opportunities within the village were scarce, making commuting a widespread necessity. The growing intensity of this dependency was reflected in transportation statistics:

'The public transport system of the county seat is inseparable from the transportation of its peripheral areas. More than twenty settlements belong to Kecskemét's sphere of attraction – not in the administrative sense created by regional restructuring, but in terms of actual functional ties. This means that workers and individuals attending to their affairs travel daily to and from Kecskemét from these towns and villages. To illustrate the extent of this phenomenon, it is worth citing some examples of how the number of public bus services increased between 1970 and 1983. In the Ballószög-Kecskemét relation, the number of bus routes rose from 26 to 46; in the Helvécia-Kecskemét relation from 14 to 46; between Hetényegyháza and Kecskemét from 26 to 52; and in the Fülöpháza-Kecskemét relation from 4 to 9.' (*Kecskemét és környékének tömegközlekedése. Petőfi Népe*, 1984, 39(92): 4)

Institutional self-sufficiency likewise remained elusive. Ballószög relied heavily on Kecskemét's urban infrastructure for basic services. Contemporary articles frequently described this relationship using a 'patron-dependent' model:

'As the report pointed out, the county seat has some role in providing services for approximately 230,000–250,000 individuals in one way or another. A significant responsibility lies in taking care of the population of the four suburban villages – Ballószög, Helvécia, Hetényegyháza, and Városhőd.' (*A megyeszékhely gyarapodása nem csak a város lakóinak szívügye. Petőfi Népe*, 1980, 35(31): 1)

By the end of the 1980s, the limitations of the suburban model had become increasingly apparent. Although Ballószög benefited from demographic inflows and infrastructural integration, it remained dependent on Kecskemét's labour market and institutions. The collapse of socialism and the regime change of 1989–1990 fundamentally redefined these inherited struc-

tures. The following decade thus opened a new chapter in which political decentralization and market transition reshaped both the meanings and mechanisms of local autonomy.

The Period of Post-Socialist Restructuring and Local Agency (1990–2000)

Following the regime change, the 1990s introduced a new layer of complexity. The tone of public discourse shifted as the optimism of socialist modernization gave way to narratives of crisis, uncertainty, and local self-reliance. Earlier patterns of economic and institutional subordination persisted, but they were now refracted through the lens of market instability and newly acquired local political autonomy. While Ballószög continued to depend on Kecskemét for employment, new survival strategies began to emerge, often rooted in informal practices. A 1990 article vividly captured the dual pressures of economic hardship and dependency:

‘We used to live well,’ says Mrs. Péter Fodor, a shift supervisor at the Kecskemét Canning Factory, pensively. ‘Anyone who denies that is not telling the truth. My husband works here at the factory as a locksmith; we have three children. We managed to build a house in Ballószög, more or less furnish it, and four and a half years ago we even bought a car. [...] But after the price increases, my husband and I sat down and went over all our expenses. [...] Earlier, Mrs. Fodor mentioned that the two of them earned good money: they fatten pigs at home, keep chickens, and grow vegetables and potatoes in the garden. [...] Even our situation feels hopeless—but what about those whose monthly income doesn’t even reach half of ours? [...] I don’t believe in anyone or anything anymore. They spend hundreds of millions on poplar planting, referendums, and foreign aid, while workers, ordinary individuals, are left with nothing to eat.’ (Kilátástalanság, reménytelenség Egy munkáscsalád költségvetése. *Petőfi Népe*, 1990, 45(20): 5)

At the same time, the decentralization of governance opened new avenues for local agency. Ballószög began to pursue not only material development but also symbolic independence through the creation of institutions and public spaces. One article highlighted these aspirations:

‘Although the population of the settlement has stagnated, kindergarten enrolment stands at 135 percent, and there is still no dentist. Nevertheless, the 2,200 residents of this village near Kecskemét have much to be pleased about: a preliminary decision has been made to establish a community centre, with construction expected to begin in 1992. The planned 12 million forint facility would accommodate all cultural activities of the community. The plot for the Roman Catholic church has been secured, fundraising is ongoing, and construction may start by spring. The number of shops is also notable: a stationery shop, grocery store, café, restaurant, general store, second-hand clothing shop, and soft drink store serve customers daily in Ballószög.’ (Örömhírek Ballószögről. *Petőfi Népe*, 1991, 46(249): 5)

Local debates also highlighted the dilemmas of this transition, as illustrated by a conflict over infrastructure investment:

‘Recent social and economic changes have made it necessary to revise the village development plan,’ began Deputy Mayor László Harsányi in his introduction to the first agenda item. He stated that the community’s only chance for further development lay in creating conditions – such as the establishment of industrial zones and jobs – that could attract entrepreneurs. [...] According to the local government and its supporters, the planned community centre would resolve long-standing cultural and communal issues in the village. However, another group regarded it as an excessive and unnecessary expense, arguing that it would merely become another pub, since a private entrepreneur had been granted the opportunity to open a catering facility there. (Viharos falugyűlés Ballószögön. *Petőfi Népe* 1993, 48(303): 5)

Such debates reveal that local development was not merely an economic issue but also a symbolic struggle over the future identity of the community – whether Ballószög should remain an independent rural locality or evolve into a suburban extension of the city. These tensions reflected the village’s ongoing search for identity within a transforming regional landscape.

Although the centre-periphery pattern persisted, new frameworks of co-operation also began to emerge. Ballószög actively sought to reposition itself within the regional space. One example of this effort was the establishment of the Central Sand Ridge Association (KÖHOSZ) with neighbouring villages:

‘As Lászlóné Máté, the mayor of Ballószög, stated, the leaders of the five municipalities [...] hope that the grant applications submitted through the association will be evaluated more favourably than individual initiatives by each village.’ (Társulnak a kistelepülések. *Petőfi Népe*, 1996, 51(180): 3)

In sum, the duality phase (1980–2000) was characterised by a layered interplay of continued dependency and emerging agency. While Ballószög remained embedded within Kecskemét’s urban sphere – economically, infrastructurally, and spatially – it also began to experiment with forms of local initiative, symbolic differentiation, and regional collaboration. The village simultaneously functioned as a residential periphery, a dependent commuter hub, and a site of decentralising aspirations. These parallel dynamics constituted the defining features of the duality phase.

The Integration Phase (2001–2012): Period of Integration and Regional Embeddedness

Between 2001 and 2012, a new phase unfolded in the relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét, marked by intensifying suburbanisation, deepening functional cooperation, and the growing influence of regional development frameworks. In contrast to earlier periods dominated by structural asymmetry, this era witnessed the emergence of a more reciprocal model of interaction, in which the language of ‘dependence’ gave way to that of ‘integration’, ‘partnership’, and ‘autonomy’. These shifts signalled Ballószög’s redefinition not as a peripheral settlement, but increasingly as an active, self-organising node within the Kecskemét agglomeration.

Ballószög emerged as a primary destination for urban outmigration, with suburbanisation unfolding within a planned and policy-driven framework. Contemporary press coverage emphasised that Ballószög and Helvécia alone accounted for more new housing construction than the other eight surrounding villages combined – a trend attributed to the area’s tranquillity, affordability, and transport accessibility:

‘Ballószög and Helvécia are the two most popular and most dynamically developing settlements, as these two alone account for as many new constructions as the other eight villages combined. This trend may be explained by the fact

that Ballószög and Helvécia are easily accessible by public transportation. Those moving out of the city long for the tranquillity of the countryside, yet their work still ties them to Kecskemét.’ (Sok lakás épül Kecskeméten – A város környékén Ballószög és Helvécia a legnépszerűbb. *Petőfi Népe*, 2003, 58(25): 7)

Rather than passively absorbing urban spillover, Ballószög actively shaped this growth through targeted land-use and development strategies. As one article noted, more than 300 new residents had settled in the village as a result of municipal initiatives that designated and sold over 100 building plots:

‘In recent days, the population of the village has surpassed 3,000. Thanks to the municipality’s settlement development strategy, approximately one hundred building plots have been designated and sold in the village over the past three years. As a result, more than three hundred people have moved to this settlement near Kecskemét.’ (A Duna-Tisza köze A-tól Z-ig – Ballószög. *Petőfi Népe*, 2005 60(270): 3)

The 2008 announcement of the Mercedes-Benz factory in Kecskemét further catalysed these trends. Ballószög responded proactively by initiating negotiations for a residential park intended to accommodate incoming factory workers. This industrial investment not only intensified regional housing and labour flows but also symbolically marked Ballószög’s transition from passive dependency to proactive integration:

‘It is anticipated that 400–500 employees of the Mercedes factory will settle in the area with their families. For this reason, the Ballószög local government is in negotiations with the company regarding the development of a residential park zone.’ (Gyarapodik a falu óvodája -Lakóparkos övezet építéséről tárgyalnak a Mercedessel. *Petőfi Népe*, 2008, 63(221): 4)

Press narratives during this period increasingly replaced the language of shortage and dependency with that of partnership, competitiveness, and local initiative. This linguistic shift reflected a broader redefinition of Ballószög’s position – from a passive periphery to a self-confident suburban actor.

The village’s evolving relationship with Kecskemét was also manifested in joint infrastructure and development projects. Initiatives such as regional sewerage construction were organised through partnerships among neigh-

bouring municipalities and supported by the EU funding. These projects symbolised a transition from dependency-based service provision to coordinated regional planning:

‘Kecskemét and three neighbouring settlements have received 5.8 billion forints in non-refundable support from the European Union for the implementation of a sewage infrastructure program. [...] Szécsi Gábor, Mayor of Kecskemét, informed the press yesterday, stating that Kecskemét, Kerekegyháza, Ballószög, and Helvécia jointly applied for funding under the ISPA program, which supports environmental and transport infrastructure development in the EU.’ (Tízmilliárdos beruházás indul. ISPA-pénzből épül a csatornahálózat. *Petőfi Népe*, 2003 63(253): 5)

While Ballószög remained embedded within the urban sphere, the municipality simultaneously pursued a development model centred on strengthening local capacities. The establishment of tourism and wellness infrastructure – most notably the Aranykor Thermal Bath and Retirement Home – reflected a deliberate strategy to diversify the village’s functions and enhance its appeal beyond a commuter role:

‘Tourism in Ballószög may experience significant growth due to the newly built Aranykor Wellness Thermal Bath located on the outskirts of the village. This investment, worth several hundred million forints, was completed in December 2004 next to the Aranykor Home for the Elderly. The facility is not only available to the residents of the home but is also open to the general public.’ (Jelentősen nőhet Ballószög turisztikai vonzereje -Termálfürdő a község szélén. *Petőfi Népe*, 2005, 60(7): 11)

Local leaders explicitly articulated this multi-pillar development vision. Mayor Imre Katona emphasised a management-oriented approach to governance, grounded in multiple development pillars including infrastructure expansion, demographic renewal, and institutional growth:

‘In 2002, when I became mayor, the first thing I did was to apply the managerial approach that had proven highly effective in my previous entrepreneurial work to the everyday functioning of Ballószög. I believe it is important that a settle-

ment's development should be based on multiple pillars. [...] The first was urban development: we designated plots for both residential and industrial purposes. This led to the influx of young families and a sharp increase in the number of children.' (Hitelük nincs, sikerük igen – új lakóparkot alakítanak ki a községben. Petőfi Népe, 2008, 63(225): 14)

In line with this vision, investments increasingly targeted education, childcare, and cultural services in order to support long-term population retention and reinforce community cohesion. The preservation of local identity became a central element of the development strategy, as traditional festivals and cultural events were mobilised to reinterpret and sustain a distinct village character:

'Ballószög sees itself as a town, but it does not wish to forget its rural traditions – especially not the celebration of grapes and wine. Yet tradition is such that, if not carefully preserved, it wears away and is buried by oblivion.' (Akik megérintették a falu lelkét – 'Sok ilyen fesztivált szeretnék, mert öröm volt látni a legutóbbit.' Petőfi Népe, 2009, 64(239): 15)

While identity-building strengthened the village's symbolic autonomy, institutional collaboration articulated its regional dimension by linking local cohesion to collective capacity-building across the Sand Ridge settlements. In this context, Ballószög also sought to reposition itself institutionally through regional alliances. Its participation in the formation of the Central Sand Ridge Association (KÖHOSZ) exemplified a bottom-up strategy of regional embeddedness, whereby municipalities acted collectively to enhance bargaining power and development opportunities.

In sum, the period between 2001 and 2012 represented a pivotal stage in Ballószög's transformation – from a structurally dependent periphery to a semi-autonomous, regionally embedded actor. Although asymmetries in power and resources persisted, the village increasingly defined its role through agency, partnership-building, and identity formation. Rather than signalling the simple erosion of dependency, this era was characterised by its strategic rearticulation through the integration of local capacities, regional coordination, and identity-based place-making.

Summary

The analysis of press articles published between 1954 and 2012 shows that the relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét is not a static structure but a dynamic construct shaped by changing historical contexts. Since attaining formal administrative independence in the 1950s, this relationship has undergone a gradual transformation – from functional subordination, through the uncertain realignments of the post-socialist period, towards a more integrative and partnership-oriented regional configuration by the early 21st century. Each historical phase is characterised by shifts in both the nature and content of the relationship: early administrative and service-related dependencies were progressively complemented by economic, social, and developmental dimensions. The analysis confirms that Ballószög's development has been significantly influenced by resources derived from its proximity to Kecskemét, while the village has continually sought to renegotiate its identity and autonomy within an asymmetrical yet evolving interdependence (Table 2).

Table 2: Relational periods between Ballószög and Kecskemét based on press discourse analysis

Period	Nature of relationship	Type of connection	Short comment
1954–1960	Partial independence, administrative separation, increasing functional subordination	Administrative, cultural and educational	Formal independence with remaining and emerging dependencies
1961–1979	Functional dependence, subordination in public services and education	Economic, educational, healthcare and transport-related	Stabilising, but functionally one-sided relationship
1980–1989	Asymmetric, city-centred relationship with expanding residential function	Suburbanisation, housing, labour market, 'garden city'	Urban outmigration area, yet in a subordinated role
1990–2000	Multi-layered, transitional relations: market exposure, identity-seeking, new political space	Social, political, administrative, survival economy	New opportunities, but continued dependencies and uncertainties
2001–2012	Cooperative, structured regional embeddedness, integration into urban spatial structure	Regional development, infrastructure, agglomeration-related	Partnership seeking mutual benefits in the peri-urban zone

Source: Author's own analysis

Ultimately, the case of Ballószög demonstrates that post-socialist peri-urban development cannot be adequately explained through static models of dependency. Instead, it must be understood through historically contingent and discursively constructed relationships in which local agency and identity play constitutive roles.

Conclusion: A Developmental Model of the Ballószög-Kecskemét Relationship Based on Press Analysis

The relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét can be analysed not only as a temporally segmented historical process, but also through a theoretical lens that highlights deeper transformations in inter-settlement relations. Based on the historical content analysis, a three-phase developmental trajectory can be identified that models qualitative shifts in the nature of this relationship: a progression from subordinated dependency, through a phase of transitional duality, to an integrated partnership (Figure 4).

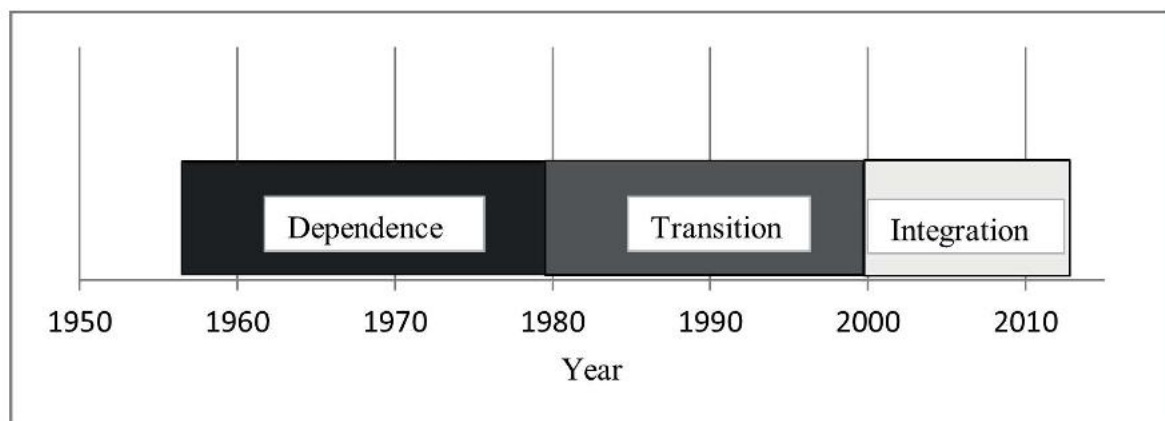


Figure 4: Developmental model of the Ballószög-Kecskemét relationship

Source: Author's own analysis

In the dependency phase (1954–1979), Ballószög's relationship with Kecskemét was characterised by strong administrative and functional subordination. Although formal local autonomy had been achieved, institutional, public service, and economic relations remained asymmetrically dependent. The urban centre functioned not only as an administrative hub but also as the

primary provider of public services, labour market opportunities, and ideological guidance.

During the transitional phase (1980–2000) – particularly in the late socialist period and the years surrounding the regime change – Ballószög's position became increasingly ambiguous and contradictory. Early signs of suburbanization emerged, residential functions were strengthened, and the village became a destination for urban out-migration. At the same time, political decentralization after 1989 created new forms of local agency; however, these were accompanied by economic vulnerability, informal survival strategies, and an ongoing search for identity. As a result, a duality developed: Ballószög functioned simultaneously as a marginalised zone and as a site of alternative spatial practices.

In the integration phase (2001–2012), the village was functionally incorporated into Kecskemét's spatial structure and gradually became an active participant in regional cooperation. The relationship was no longer defined solely by hierarchical or imposed dependencies but increasingly took the form of partnerships in project development, infrastructure planning, and institutional collaboration. New spatial logics – such as suburbanization, agglomeration, and regional coordination – enabled Ballószög to emerge as a cooperative actor within the city-centred spatial structure.

This three-phase model not only summarises the historical trajectory of the relationship but also serves as a theoretical abstraction that directly supports the paper's central hypothesis: that the development of peri-urban settlements in post-socialist contexts unfolds through relational transformations rather than linear modernization. The model demonstrates that the Ballószög-Kecskemét relationship did not evolve through a single event but through gradual, layered transformations from dependency toward integration. While the boundaries between phases are not rigid, they mark key turning points and qualitative shifts that continuously redefined local and regional power relations. Beyond historical periodization, an additional analytical dimension becomes visible – the evolving quality of the relationship itself, which deepened over time (Figure 5). The model thus highlights that the transformation of this connection involved not only temporal change but also structural evolution, moving from subordinate dependency toward partnership-based cooperation.

The combined use of historical and relational theoretical frameworks thus reinforces the study's broader contribution to post-socialist urban geography. It demonstrates that local agency, discursive identity construction, and institutional negotiation play constitutive roles in reshaping spatial hierarchies. In particular, the Ballószög-Kecskemét case confirms that spatial embeddedness should be understood as historically contingent and discursively reproduced, echoing the perspectives of Lefebvre (1991), Massey (1994), Paasi (2002), and Woods (2007).

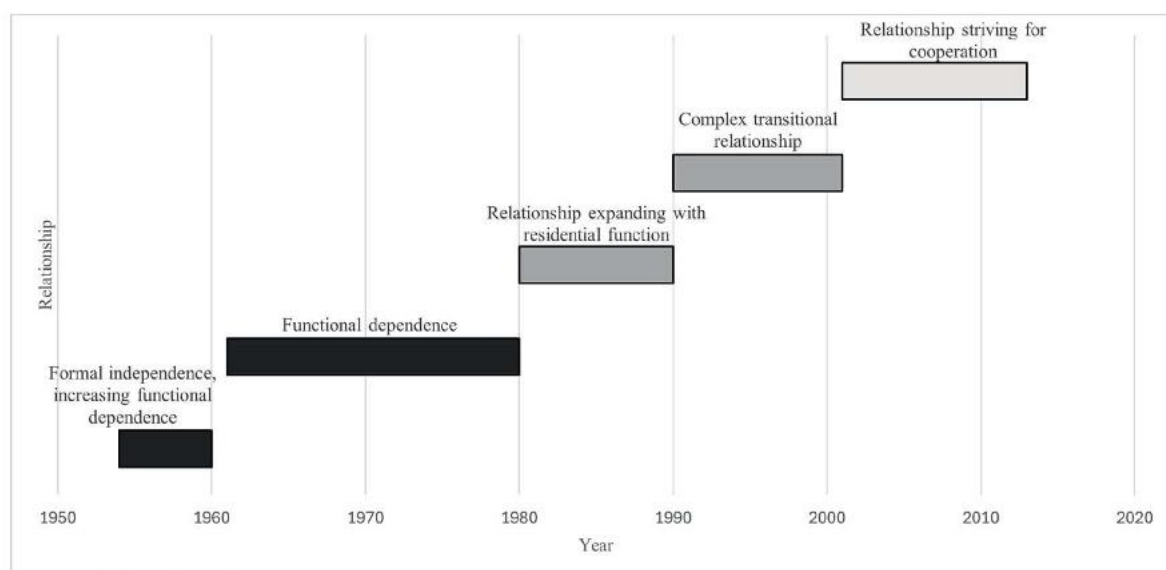


Figure 5: Qualitative changes in the relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét

Source: Author's own analysis

Overall, this study demonstrates that the relationship between Ballószög and Kecskemét was neither constant nor unambiguously defined. Instead, it underwent multiple transformations over the decades, alternating between phases of closer integration and more distanced interaction. The discourses emerging from historical press materials reflect this fluctuating dynamic, while also indicating that Ballószög's local identity has consistently been shaped within this relational framework. Proximity, dependence, the pursuit of autonomy, and various forms of connectivity collectively influenced the village's developmental trajectory. Empirically, the findings confirm the initial hypothesis that Ballószög's development was primarily driven by its geo-

graphical and institutional proximity to Kecskemét. However, this proximity did not constitute a fixed dependency; rather, it functioned as a relational condition that enabled shifting configurations of subordination, negotiation, and cooperation.

Through the lens of historical press analysis, this research provides insights not only into the past of a single locality but also into the broader variability of spatial relationships. While grounded in the case of Ballószög, this approach may also be applicable to urban-rural or core-periphery relations in other post-socialist contexts, where similar processes have unfolded – often with varying intensity, but along comparable structural lines.

Theoretically, the study contributes to ongoing debates in post-socialist geography and rural sociology by refining relational and poststructuralist approaches to spatial change. It demonstrates that the development of peri-urban settlements in post-socialist contexts cannot be adequately explained through static centre-periphery models or formal administrative classifications alone. The case of Ballószög highlights that spatial embeddedness is relational, historically contingent, and discursively constructed, thereby confirming key insights from poststructuralist geographical theory.

Moreover, the proposed three-phase model – dependency, duality, and integration – offers a conceptual framework for interpreting the layered and often contradictory nature of suburbanisation in post-socialist settings, where formal autonomy may coexist with deep and persistent functional ties.

Finally, developments since 2012 further reinforce the study's conclusions. Both population numbers and the housing stock in Ballószög have continued to grow steadily, while new infrastructural and service developments have strengthened its position as a dynamically embedded peri-urban settlement within the Kecskemét region. These trends suggest that the partnership-based and regionally coordinated development model identified in this study remains viable and resilient over the long term, underscoring the enduring explanatory value of relational perspectives in understanding post-socialist regional change.

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