

Magdalena Sternicka-Kowalska

Regional Aspects of Social and Economic Restructuring in Eastern Europe

Kulcsár, L., Kulcsár, L. Jr. (eds.), (2010). *Regional Aspects of Social and Economic Restructuring in Eastern Europe: The Hungarian Case*. Budapest: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, pp. 284.

„Regional Statistics”, (2011). *Journal of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office*. Vol. 14 (51), Special Issue 1/2011. Budapest: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, pp. 148.

Space plays a very important role in shaping the nature and dynamics of economic development processes. The economic situation and dynamics of the individual spatial units, however, have a significant impact on the level of the population's standard of living. For this reason, the territorial dimension of social phenomena and processes is one of the more popular subjects of theoretical analysis and empirical studies. This popularity is also associated with the issue of European integration, where the problems of regional development, particularly its spatial variation, are defined as key issues. Equalizing development disparities which exist between the various regions is considered to be the main goal of the activities undertaken in the framework of EU regional policy.

Both books discussed here: *Regional Aspects of Social and Economic Restructuring in Eastern Europe: The Hungarian Case* and „Regional Statistics”, Special Issue 1/2011, focus on the spatial aspects of social, economic and demographic changes in Hungary. These overviews are

provided in the context of European integration and, perhaps above all, they take into account the conditions resulting from the transformation of the post-socialist economy which took place in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The aim of the authors of the first publication – *Regional Aspects of Social and Economic Restructuring in Eastern Europe: The Hungarian Case* – is to present the existing knowledge about the phenomena and socio-economic processes taking place in Hungary in their spatial dimension and their major changes based on statistical data gathered over the past two decades.

The book, on the assumption of its editors – László Kulcsár and László J. Kulcsár, is to have an interdisciplinary character to allow the reader a comprehensive overview of the issues raised. It is, therefore a collection of articles by specialists from different scientific disciplines. Some of them have been created specifically for this publication, while most represent selected studies on regional development published in the last few years in Hungary. The published articles have not as yet been translated into English, so *there was no opportunity for a wider international scientific community to access them* (p.5), which also inspired the authors to change the status quo and was one of the justifications for the creation of this publication.

The publication consists of sixteen chapters, organized into four major parts. They form a coherent, logical and transparent composition. Most of the studies contain tables, charts, maps or diagrams, representing a significant added value.

The main parts of the book have introductions (*All or Nothing: What Has Changed in Eastern Europe? The Unfolding Regional Dynamics in Hungary*), where the authors point out that the transformation process in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is not yet complete and together with the eastern enlargement of the EU it provides considerable interest in this part of the continent at the beginning of the 21st century. They also emphasize that the socio-economic situation of these countries is not homogeneous, as is often seen by Western researchers, and cannot be understood without reference to historical, social and cultural rights. Despite the many similarities between the countries and regions of Eastern Europe, there are also significant differences occurring in this area. Ignoring this fact has consequences in terms of developing the same methods to improve the situation in these countries which do not take into account

the specifics of each of them. Based on the changes of regional differences depicted in the collected articles, the authors conclude that the existing disparities are likely to continue without changing the way of thinking or adapting regional policy to these unique circumstances.

The first part of the book, *Regional Inequalities from an Eastern European Perspective*, consists of three chapters. They concentrate on the differentiations between regions and cities in Eastern Europe in terms of economic, social and demographic indicators. As the authors note, regional variations in the economic structure, level of income, employment, social and physical infrastructure, etc. emerged and grew due to the rising market economies in these countries and especially after the recent enlargements in 2004 and 2007 (p. 9, p. 27). The presented statistical data (from the period before and after 1990) also confirms the thesis of the non-uniformity of spatial changes taking place both in the post-socialist countries and in their particular regions. Another issue (raised mainly in the third chapter) is that of cities and urban networks – their increasingly important role in the global economy and regional development, as well as the nature of developing inequalities among cities in Europe.

An indisputable benefit of the studies in this part is the information about spatial inequalities from an international perspective, which allows a comparative analysis of the spatial units in the EU in several important dimensions and their changes over time. A certain limitation in this field of exploration was the availability of statistical data. While that was not generally a problem at state level, considerable data at regional level (not to mention the lower levels, e.g. local) has only been collected since accession, so not all of it was available to the authors.

The themes of the four chapters in the second part (*Spatial Disparities in Hungary*) are focused around the regional disparities in Hungary. The authors of chapter 4 describe the economic development of the country's various territorial units measured by GDP and using a complex regional development indicator which was created by them on the basis of 36 factors of social, economic, infrastructural and cultural capacity. As a result, they carry out a comparative analysis of the level of development in the regions, counties and micro-regions. They also examine the nature of the relationship between the development of domestic micro-regions and the capital attraction ability, which is a significant potential for increasing the competitiveness of these areas.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 refer to rusticity and the situation of agriculture, describing the uneven dynamics of rural development in Hungary. The as yet unsolved problems (mainly the employment crisis in agriculture and unemployment in the Hungarian rural areas) which are currently the main barriers in the context of the development and cohesion of the country, are shown in great detail and in contrast to the revaluation of nature and some new functions of rural areas, such as clean air, environment, a favourable place to live in and rest, etc. These negative phenomena are affecting mainly peripheral border areas, isolated from the larger cities, where disadvantages accumulate – there is an underdeveloped entrepreneurial infrastructure, the demographic and education structure is unfavourable, the agricultural sector dominant. The authors call these areas “*forgotten places*” (p. 78) while expressing their conviction that the people living there cannot help themselves. Changing the situation requires the development of different forms of support, taking into account the type of resources and many other conditions occurring in the local units.

For the success of national regional development it is essential to be able to assess complex spatial processes as precisely as possible (p. 148). However, it is difficult to express the level of development or regional disparities using only one, universal indicator. Therefore, the next part (*Methods for Analyzing Spatial Inequalities*) is entirely dedicated to important methodological issues associated with finding appropriate ways of measuring certain phenomena and processes in their spatial aspect. There are descriptions of more or less complex mathematical and statistical methods which allow for the measurement of such phenomena as: inequalities between settlement units and their dynamics (the method of gravity centres characterized in chapter 8), the competitiveness of cities (chapter 9), competitiveness and its typology in particular types of spatial units, mainly at local level (chapter 10), spatial patterns of phenomena (clustered, random, scattered) and changes, measured by the nearest-neighbour model presented in chapter 11.

The last section (*Social and Demographic Changes in the Carpathian Basin*) describes the social and demographic changes in Hungary and their spatial manifestations, which are closely correlated. Living conditions in various regions of the country have an impact on people’s decisions and patterns of behaviour, but on the other hand these behaviours have a parallel effect on the situation in a given space. The authors of the five chapters

in this part of the publication ascribe an important role, among others, to human resources in economic development and creating economic disparities between regions (chapter 13 and 14). In addition, the reader can find the demographic characteristic of Hungarians living abroad, on land formerly belonging to Hungary (chapter 12), the current situation in the settlements affected by depopulation during socialism (chapter 15) and the specific pattern of the regional distribution of suicides (chapter 16).

Due to the very similar problems discussed, the second publication can be considered as a perfect complement to the first one. It is a special issue of the scientific periodical of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office – „Regional Statistics”. The authors of the articles presented in the journal are scientists and researchers in various fields, especially geographical, social and economic, as well as officials and planners involved in regional development in Hungary.

This is a collection of eleven articles (with the exception of a brief introduction) undertaking the regional themes whose aim, as in the case of the book characterized above, is to present the regional condition of Hungary, mainly spatial differences and changes among them, as well as sharing the results of research in this area with the wide scientific community in Europe. The assumption of the editor-in-chief, Péter Szaló is that the exchange of research experiences can contribute to working together on cohesion policy integrating representatives of various specialties, to which he invites you by recommending this issue of “Regional Statistics”. Due to the extensive use of statistical data and nature of the discussed issues, the articles also contain a number of maps, charts, diagrams and tables illustrating the problems raised.

The first article (Lajos Marosi – *A visit to the academic György Enyedi in the citadel of science*) is an interesting interview with Professor György Enyedi, the renowned economist and geographer, in which he talks about his career, beginning during the socialist system, his interest in geography, the validity of statistical data and certain private matters. In the interview he stresses the importance to him of both economics and geography in the study and in explaining regional differences. He also devotes particular attention to identifying as well as developing so-called “regional studies” or “regional science”, which according to him is a form of interdisciplinary knowledge and not a scientific discipline in the traditional sense, such as mathematics. Regional processes cannot only be explained by social,

cultural, geographical or economic causes, but they have to be considered as a whole.

In the next article (József Nemes Nagy, Gergely Tagai – *Regional inequalities and the determination of spatial structure*) relations are discussed between the Hungarian spatial structure and the nature of spatial inequalities in connection with some interesting methodological elements. The aim of the characteristics of these relationships is to help establish new guidelines for regional policy, which according to the authors is flawed in some important aspects. In addition, they highlight the need to strengthen the role of international comparative studies in the analysis of regional processes.

Access to jobs, education and various kinds of services, closely correlated with the place of residence are among the major factors affecting the quality of life and subsequently the competitiveness of given spatial settlements. The issue of accessibility is the subject of interest in three articles included in the work. Each of them refers to the analysis of the problem of availability, manifesting itself in another aspect of life. In one of them, the availability of given settlements to the rail network is presented (Tamás Dusek – *The effect of the reduction of the Hungarian railway network in 2009 on accessibility*). The next provides information on spatial diversity in access to health services (Gábor Pirisi, András Trócsányi – *Spatial aspects of the ambulance service in Hungary*). The last one describes the transport situation in the Great Plain region, taking into account, first, the structure, quality of the road system and availability, but also pointing out some conditions of rail, air and waterway transport in the region (Géza Novák, Tamás Varsányi – *The transport situation in the Great Plain*).

Links between demographic processes, manifesting themselves especially in urban areas and the spatial structure of the EU regions is another topic discussed in the journal (Éva Gerőházi, József Hegedüs, Hanna Szemző, Kyra Tomay, Iván Tosics, László Gere – *The impact of European demographic trends on regional and urban development*). Apart from a review of the significant changes in demographic processes which are a challenge for contemporary regional policy, possible strategies to adapt to or mitigate the effects of these phenomena are also indicated.

A similar issue, although in a much narrower range, is addressed by László Kulcsár, László J. Kulcsár, Csilla Obádovics (*Who lives in forgotten places? Age structure and socio-economic development in Hungary*). Based on

studies carried out in Hungary, the authors show that the obvious and often emphasized relationship between the age structure and socio-economic development of the regions is not in fact so simple – a young age structure is not always equal to economic development, and is more complex.

There is also an article on the issue of neighborhood in the journal (Zsófia Fábíán – *The role of neighbourhood in the regional distribution of Europe*). The author stresses its importance in regional analyses and tries to answer the question – to what extent neighbouring regions in Europe are similar to each other in terms of economic development (p. 122).

The other studies also focus on the various socio-economic processes that imprint their mark on space. One of them describes the regional differences of the labour market by concentrating on employment among those with Romanian citizenship (Nándor Németh, András Csité, Ákos, Jakobi – *Employees with Romanian citizenship in Hungary*). In another, researchers look for the impact of the development of settlements that offer health oriented tourism in Hungary on the local community and economy (Gábor Michalkó, Tamara Rátz, Géza Tóth, Áron Kincses, Béla Benkő – *Research on the quality of life in the spa towns of Hungary*). The last article describes the spatial structure of the industry in Hungary, analyzing it in the context of the recent economic crisis, which, according to the authors, did not significantly affect the changes within it (Györgyi Barta, Hajnalka Lőcsei, *The effect of the recent economic crisis on the spatial structure of Hungarian industry*).

Both publications take into consideration the spatial aspects of the economic, social and demographic processes. Although some of the ideas contained in the studies may seem rather obvious and not very innovative (e.g. *the inverse relation between educational and unemployment rate*, p. 224), presenting them together in these publications allows us to become aware of the variety and versatility of the areas of life in which the various processes manifest themselves in space. Many of the analyses collected here illustrate the spatial diversity of the level of development in Hungary in various dimensions and indicate the multiplicity of conditions and factors associated with them. The number and nature of the themes cause awareness of the complexity of the issues, thus justifying the need for a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to the analyzed issues by the authors.

A notable advantage of these books is a discerning, detailed analysis of a wide range of issues based on spatial statistics informing both about the potential of each region and the challenges facing them. Many issues are described in connection with an appropriate, often innovative methodology.

Most of the articles refer to the situation of different areas and regions in Hungary, but some of them relate to the international context, which is an undoubted advantage of these studies, as it gives the possibility of a comparative analysis of spatial units in a wider than national scale.

Another major benefit should be considered as a kind of “turn to locality”. Previous surveys of economic development were dominated by studies conducted at national or regional level. Meanwhile, the authors emphasize the need to also pay attention to the settlement units of the lower levels, which play an increasingly important role in a comprehensive and integrated development process. Hence, the aspect of locality and statistics for micro-regions appears in a number of articles in the reviewed publications.

The political transformation and eastern enlargement are processes that have a significant impact on the shape of the transition in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, they encourage us to assess the ongoing transformation, tend to seek answers about the determinants of the dynamics of regional development and the factors that determine the spatial variation of different levels of territorial units. These significant issues are presented in the above-mentioned publications, which, in my opinion, will prove attractive to those interested in regional studies in the broad sense.