



OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT – COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY APPROACHES TO IDENTIFYING BENEFICIARY REGIONS

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Abstract

Most European countries apply development policy solutions to help disadvantaged regions catch up and seek effective solutions for territorial cohesion. This endeavour has been strongly supported by the European Commission in both the 2013-2020 and 2021-27 programming periods and is likely to remain so in the period after 2028. This is an understandable and logical endeavour, as being 'left behind' in economic, social or geographical terms not only reinforces internal migration flows within the European Community and its Member States but also increases political discontent.

A number of approaches have emerged in European countries to identify disadvantaged regions and address their problems. The differences stem partly from the different intervention intentions of individual countries and partly from their different spatial, state and public administration structures. Various development policy solutions have been devised to help disadvantaged regions catch up, taking these factors into account. In Hungary, development policy has placed greater emphasis on the catching up of regions and settlements lagging behind in terms of socio-economic development since the 1980s, but the importance of delimitation in development policy practice has increased since the country's accession to the EU, with the establishment of differentiated support resource allocation mechanisms and targeted support programmes. The methodology currently in use for designating beneficiary regions has been in place since 2014. The socio-economic changes that have taken place since then have shifted the focus of both scientific and policy interest in recent years towards more location-specific regulatory mechanisms that measure development differences at a lower level and are more sensitive to functional links between settlements.

To support efforts in the renewal of the Hungarian regional development toolkit, our study seeks to outline alternative options by analysing Italian and British development policy practices, in addition to presenting Hungarian beneficiary regions. The international examples examined, despite their limitations as presented in the study, provide examples of multi-level governance, development policies based on functional units, and methodologies for measuring development below the settlement level. Current legislation in Hungary allows for changes in this direction, but their incorporation into domestic practice is only possible after careful preparation.

Keywords: beneficiary regions, territorial polarisation, regional development, regional planning, support policy

INTRODUCTION

The European Union's cohesion policy aims to reduce territorial disparities and promote harmonious development between Member States and regions. The instruments and

interventions of cohesion policy contribute significantly to the economic growth of the European Union and its member states (Crucitti et al., 2023; Nyikos & Soós, 2020; OECD, 2023).

While acknowledging the efforts made under cohesion policy, it should be noted that only modest progress has been observed in the territorial patterns of development within the Union. As the 9th Cohesion Report points out, the gap between the most and least developed regions has not narrowed significantly in many places (European Commission, 2024), and OECD (2023) research even draws attention to the increase in regional inequalities. All this highlights not only the need for significant and targeted regional development efforts, but also the need for a problem-oriented rethinking of the approach to regional policy.¹

A number of approaches have emerged in European countries to mapping disadvantaged areas more accurately. The differences stem partly from the specific intentions of individual countries and partly from national characteristics that determine the instruments used, including settlement structure and statistical data collection criteria (territorial level, range of indicators, etc.), and partly from the different structures of the administrative and spatial planning systems of the countries concerned, which are a decisive factor in terms of the institutional framework. Various development policy solutions have been devised to help disadvantaged areas catch up, taking these factors into account.

International experience shows that more and more countries are calling for a more accurate mapping and delimitation of territorial disadvantages and functional spatial processes that goes beyond the use of traditional administrative units (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Barca et al., 2012). Salamin (2023) provides a comprehensive review of the literature on the emergence of so-called soft spaces in international spatial planning practice. Salamin and Péti (2023) point out that these soft spaces do not replace the spaces of formal local, regional or national governments, but rather complement them, as experience has shown. These soft spaces and their fuzzy boundaries are often interpreted in terms of spatial governance, but they are not necessarily associated with decentralisation mechanisms, and one of the main criticisms is that they actually bypass legitimate, decentralised local governments (Salamin & Péti, 2019). Hungary has a particularly rich history in the use of soft spaces in design, the development of which is described in detail by Salamin (2024). In international comparison, it can be concluded that changes in attitudes towards soft spaces are quite common in Hungary, which makes it difficult

¹ For specific Hungarian experiences see Rácz and Egyed (2022).

to strategically apply these spaces in support policies, even though international examples show that these areas should be taken into account when defining beneficiary areas.

Before examining international examples, we outline the development history of the beneficiary regional system in the European Union and Hungary, highlighting the points of connection. This part of the paper focuses on identifying the types of beneficiary regions and the relevance of their delimitation. In examining the current Hungarian beneficiary classification system, we use secondary data analysis methods and examine the possibilities for further development from a statistical methodology perspective.

The next part of our study, which presents international practical examples, will fundamentally rely on document analysis methods; drawing on a review of legislation, planning and other policy documents, we will evaluate the Hungarian situation, the Italian and English experiences, and formulate recommendations for the possible restructuring of the Hungarian beneficiary regional system, covering both the method of delimitation and the nature of development.

BENEFICIARY REGIONS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The concept of beneficiary region is not new in regional science and policy. In fact, it has been a central element of regional policy since its inception. Between 1957 and 1989, the main objective of the national regional policies operated by individual Member States within their own sphere of competence was to reduce territorial disparities within countries, since, until the first wave of accession, no significant differences existed between the participating countries at the macro level in terms of GDP per capita, while the national averages concealed significant regional differences. The traditional regional policy of the period took a dichotomous approach in terms of development and supported geographically defined (permanently) disadvantaged regions, typically in the form of non-repayable grants (Rechnitzer & Smahó, 2016). During this period, national characteristics rather than Community standards were decisive in Member States' regional policies, despite the coordinating role played by DG Regio. The adoption of the Single European Act (1987) and the introduction of the single internal market made it essential to raise Community regional policy to a new level, which meant that common European standards also came to the fore in terms of development/underdevelopment. In the “Europe of Regions” of that time, beneficiary regions were defined at NUTS2 level. Although support for lagging regions was primarily justified on grounds of equity, clear economic considerations were evident in the background. Accordingly, underdeveloped regions were identified on the

basis of economic indicators (GDP). However, measuring regional development/underdevelopment is a more complex task than this, as it is influenced not only by economic factors but also by environmental and social elements, and varies greatly in space and time, which also poses a major challenge in terms of aligning it with the perceptions of the smaller and larger communities concerned. The measurement of regional development is determined by the period under review (time), the regional level and the geographical location of the area (space), the statistical data available in relation to the above, and the method chosen (key indicator, composite indicator or multivariate statistical method) (Szabó & Szabó, 2023).

Over time, the economic determination of development studies has diminished, as the first Cohesion Report published in 1996 (European Commission, 1996) already referred to economic and social cohesion, and the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) refers to territorial cohesion in an even broader sense. As the concept of sustainability has gained prominence in EU community policies (since AGENDA 2000) and its interpretation has become more complex, so has the demand for more comprehensive territorial analyses, which is also reflected in the methodology used (Human Development Index, Regional Competitiveness Index). And although the Barca report (2009) foregrounding the 2014 renewal of cohesion policy suggests that other indicators besides GDP should be used to assess eligibility for support, the classification of regions as beneficiaries continues to be based on GDP per capita. A notable exception is the Cohesion Fund, which specifically aims to support so-called cohesion countries that have difficulty meeting the Maastricht criteria. In this case, a GNI-based eligibility criterion at national level is used.

At the subnational level, the EU also uses other territorial typologies. The current version is contained in the 2019 amendment to the NUTS Regulation, the methodological background for which is provided by the Eurostat methodological publication (2019). The new territorial typology defines new types of regions at three levels. The GRID grid cell-based categories are completely independent of the NUTS system and are primarily linked to the establishment of urban and rural clusters. Most of the innovations appeared at the regional level, interpreted as NUTS3, where, in addition to the traditional urban-rural, metropolitan and coastal typologies, the categories of mountainous, island and border regions appeared. At the LAU level, in addition to the traditional classification according to the degree of urbanisation, a new category, Functional Urban Area (FUA) and its catchment area was introduced. The Territorial Agenda 2030 (2020) identifies even more types of areas, emphasising that Europe is made up of different types of territories: These include capital and metropolitan regions, small and medium-sized towns, urban fringe areas, rural areas, inner peripheral areas, peripheral areas,

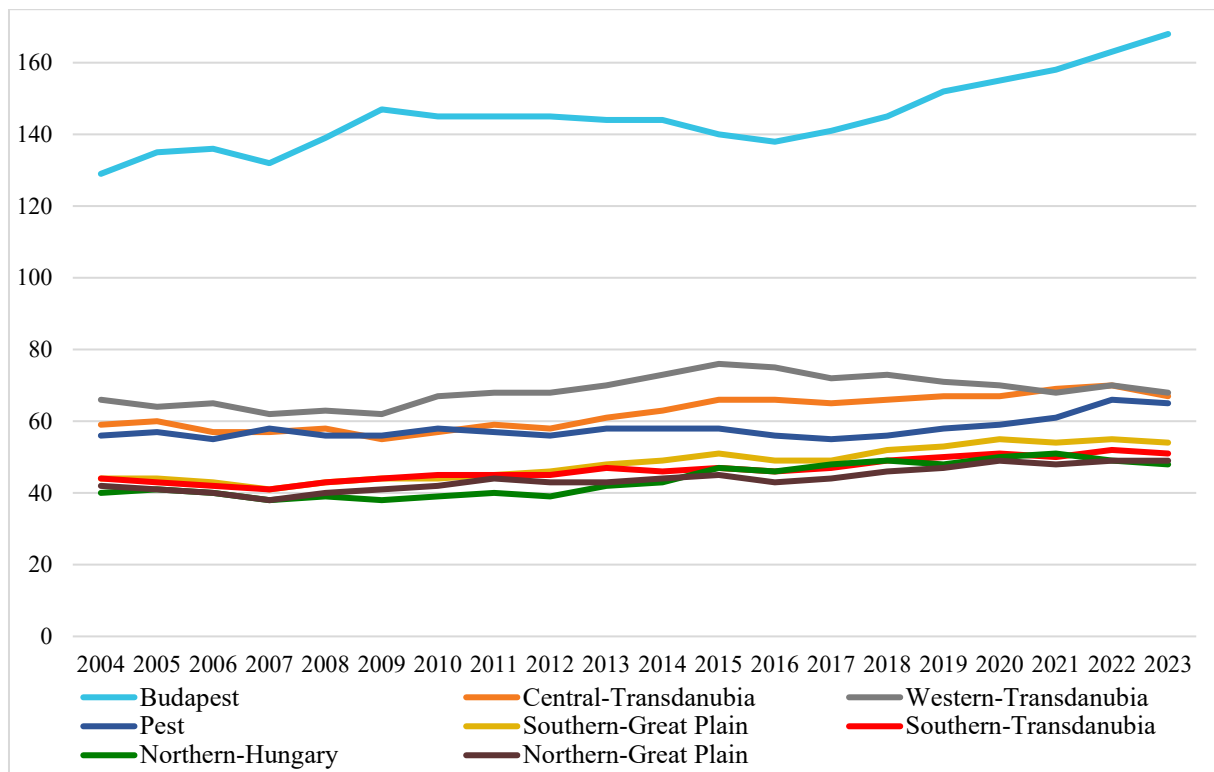
northernmost areas, sparsely populated areas, islands, coastal areas, mountain areas, outermost regions, cross-border regions, macro-regions, areas facing demographic decline, and areas affected by economic and industrial transition. These areas have very different development potential and face different challenges, the precise identification of which can contribute to increasing the effectiveness of cohesion policy. Institutionalised instruments that differ from traditional ones have been available since 1989 to deal with the specific territorial units of the EU. Initially, this was the purpose of the Community Initiative Programmes (CIP) (e.g. rural areas – LEADER, cities – URBAN, border regions – INTERREG), which ceased to exist in their original form in 2007, but most of them have been continued in some form. Since 2014, new instruments have been introduced in the new type of cohesion policy, which are specifically designed to support the complex development of areas not linked to the traditional NUTS3 level, such as Integrated Territorial Investment and Community-led Local Development.

It is also worth noting that, apart from regional policy, the Common Agricultural Policy, which is the second largest user of the EU budget, also applies special territorial delimitations that differ from those of regional policy. This is justified by the needs of rural development, which have been defined as the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy since 2000. There are several methodologies for delimiting rural areas, some of which are of theoretical importance, while others are indispensable from a statistical point of view. However, in support policy, only the LEADER delimitation is accepted, which is based on Local Action Groups interpreted at LAU level, which are not compatible with NUTS. The methodology for delimitation in this case is very simplified, based solely on population and population density data, does not include economic or social indicators, and has remained essentially unchanged since the launch of the LEADER programme in 1991, despite its transfer from regional policy to the CAP in 2007, which fundamentally changed its financing and objectives. It is precisely the latter that has led to increasingly sharp criticism of LEADER, as the objectives set out envisage increasingly complex rural development interventions, for which only limited resources are available. Naturally, the question arises as to what extent a fundamentally sectoral policy can be expected to apply a territorial approach to its sub-policies and to use its sectoral resources to fix social problems. The development of rural areas is a typical area where joint intervention by several community policies may be justified.

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, TERRITORIAL POLARISATION AND ITS MANAGEMENT IN HUNGARY

The positive impact of EU cohesion policy on economic development (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2023; TA2030, 2020) is undeniable at both the Community and individual Member State levels. Hungary's economic development relative to the EU average increased from 63% at the time of accession in 2004 to 77% in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025a). Over the same period, domestic GDP growth significantly exceeded the EU average (1.4%), averaging 2.1% per year (Eurostat, 2025b). However, as highlighted in the 9th Cohesion Report, territorial disparities have not disappeared, with more than a quarter of the European Union's population still living in regions with less than 75% of the average per capita economic development of the EU (European Commission, 2024). The global and European trend of intra-country territorial polarisation of development (Ezcurra, 2019; Heidenreich & Wunder, 2008) is particularly pronounced in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, where the driving force of national economies is concentrated in capital cities (European Commission, 2024). In line with this, a time series analysis of gross domestic product at NUTS 2 (regional) level also points to the fact that not all regions benefit equally from the results of economic development, and this trend has not changed significantly in nearly two decades (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 GDP per capita (PPS) in Hungary's regions in percentage of the EU-27 average

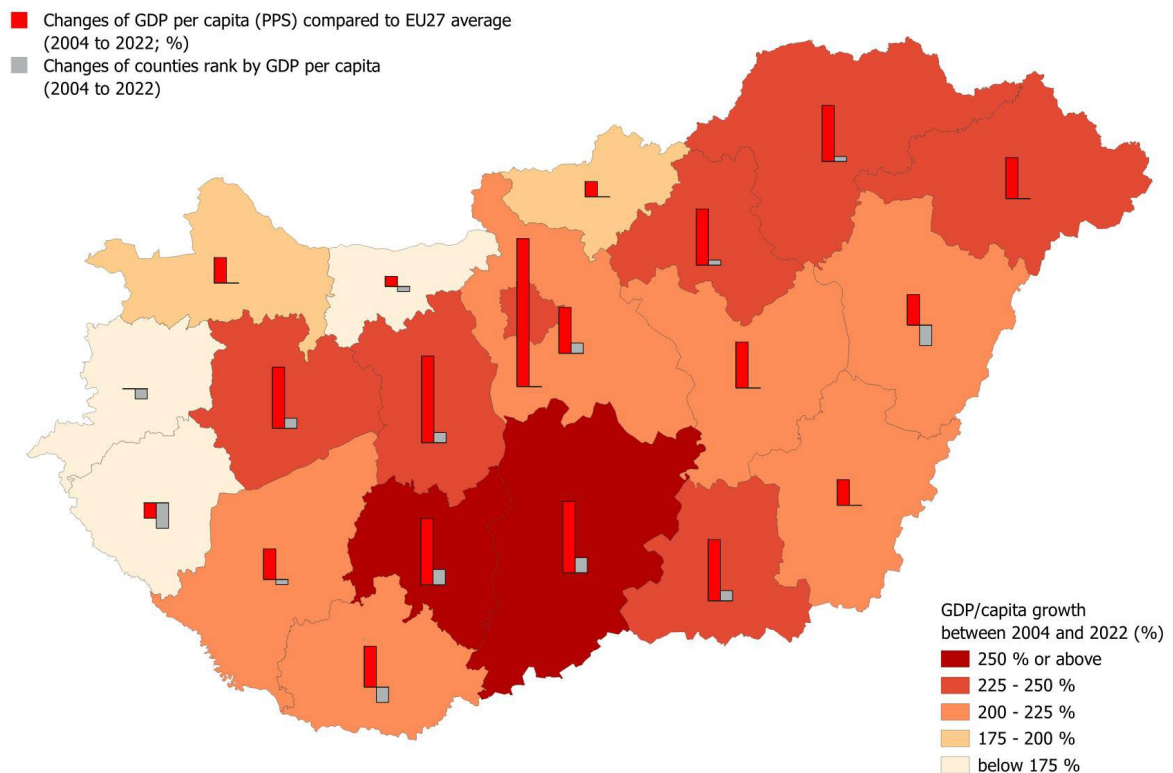


Source: edited by the authors based on Eurostat, 2025c.

This deeper level of regional analysis reveals that the long-standing polarisation of the Hungarian economy and the concentration of economic and social resources within the country have caused the development gap between the capital and the regions to widen in recent years (Medve-Bálint, 2024).

An analysis of economic growth since 2004 at the county (NUTS3) level further nuances the picture (Fig. 2). While Budapest's economy grew from 129% of the EU average in 2004 to 158% in 2022, the economy of Nógrád county, which borders the central agglomeration, grew from 32% to only 35% over the same period.

Figure 2 GDP per capita (PPS) in Hungary's counties from 2004 to 2022



Source: Edited by the authors using data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office.

Examining development differences at a lower statistical level (NUTS 3 on the map above) provides a more nuanced picture of the internal development differences within a country or region. On the one hand, this draws attention to the limitations of the regional (NUTS 2) resource allocation mechanism of cohesion policy (due to the territorial differences characteristic of most regions) and, on the other hand, raises the need for more detailed analyses at even lower territorial levels.

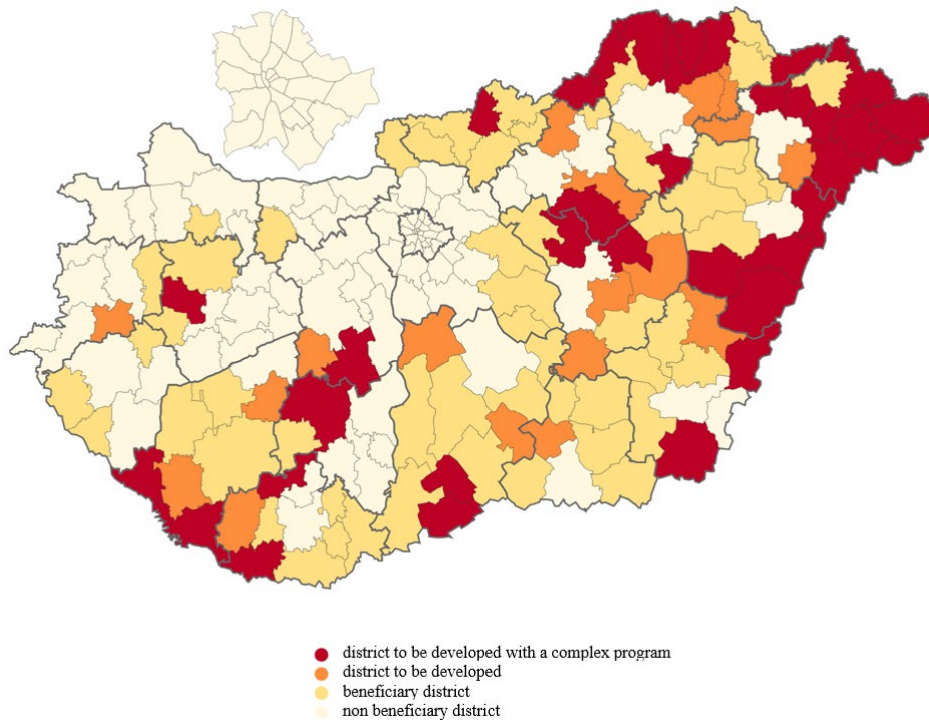
In Hungary, development policy has placed greater emphasis on the catching up of regions and settlements lagging behind in terms of socio-economic development since the 1980s. Initially, the focus was on settlements, but it was not until 1996 that regional-based delimitation came to the fore, which has since been supplemented by disadvantaged settlements. During the transition to a new political system and preparations for EU accession, the direction and framework of development policy changed significantly, which also affected the interpretation of beneficiary regions.

The first differentiated, multi-level beneficiary system was introduced by Government Decree 80/1996. (VI. 7.), which defined four thematic target areas: in addition to regions with significant unemployment, socio-economically disadvantaged regions, regions undergoing industrial restructuring and regions eligible for agricultural rural development were also identified as target areas. Until 2007, there were no significant changes in the territorial benefit system of development policy, with only the target area of regions with significant unemployment being changed to regions with long-term unemployment.

The classification of target areas based on a complex indicator system similar to the regional benefit system used today was first applied by Government Decree 311/2007. (XI. 17.), which defined four beneficiary target areas based on a complex indicator comprising 32 indicators: disadvantaged areas, most disadvantaged areas, most disadvantaged areas requiring complex programmes, and temporarily beneficiary micro-regions. During this period, the support policy instrument system already widely applied this classification by dedicating targeted support funds, ensuring higher aid intensities and awarding additional points during the evaluation of applications, both under EU and domestic support schemes.

The regional-based beneficiary structure currently in force, as defined by Government Decree No. 290/2014 (XI. 26.), defines four target areas: beneficiary districts, districts to be developed, districts to be developed with complex programmes, and temporarily beneficiary districts (Fig. 3). The system assesses the development of Hungarian districts using a composite indicator based on a total of 24 social, economic, environmental and infrastructure indicators. The indicator and the set of indicators examined assess the development of the 174 domestic (non-capital) districts using a much more complex set of criteria instead of an assessment based solely on economic performance. The government decree establishes a list of 109 districts that do not meet the national average level of development by setting up three beneficiary categories. The municipalities in the districts classified in this category were able to obtain additional resources through positive discrimination in the allocation of funds for both the 2014-2020 and 2021-27 programming periods.

Figure 3 Beneficiary districts in Hungary, 2025



Source: https://www.ksh.hu/teruletiatasz_egyeb_teruletilehatarolasok

ASSESSMENT OF THE HUNGARIAN REGIONAL AID SYSTEM

The Hungarian practice described above and its evolution clearly show that development policy interventions and beneficiary systems in Hungary have been continuously adapted to changes in socio-economic processes, but have largely been implemented along administrative and statistical boundaries. Although the current composite indicator system provides a complex picture of territorial disparities, its review would be justified from several points of view. In the following, we will basically list the factors that were already discussed in the presentation of EU practice: time factor, territorial level, methodology and instruments used.

In Hungary, the current regulations governing beneficiary areas were adopted in 2014 and supplemented at municipal level in 2015. Previously, Hungarian regulations were linked to the renewal of the National Development and Regional Development Concept programme periods, but since this was not completed for the 2021-2027 budget period, the review of the regulations on beneficiary regions was also postponed. Although the application of beneficiary classification across several programming cycles is not unprecedented (see, for example, Poland's current classification, which was established in 2018 (Szabó & Szabó, 2023), this time frame is likely to provide a meaningful opportunity to track changes over time in a relatively

flexible manner only in the case of multi-level governance, which is currently not feasible in Hungary with its unitary system. On the other hand, from a methodological point of view, it is not advisable to leave it unchanged for more than 10 years. Péntes (2015) has already reported in detail on the temporal changes in the statistical procedure used to delimit beneficiary areas. In Hungary today, the set of indicators used to define beneficiary regions includes several elements linked to census data, but given the shortage of updated data since then, it still contains the 2011 indicators despite the availability of the 2022 data. For the other indicators, we used the 2013 values. Other issues have also emerged concerning the methodology. As pointed out in our previous study (Mezei, 2024), in addition to updating the data for individual indicators, it is also advisable to modify the set of indicators, due to the presence of indicators that are outdated, no longer measure development, or do not differentiate between regions (e.g. urban/rural index); as well as those that are affected by changes in legislation regarding their collection or background (e.g. local tax revenues of municipalities). In addition, there are indicators related to access to public services that should be included in the indicator set (e.g. population with local access to basic education and health infrastructure).

The analysis of changes in the relative development of districts, in accordance with the recommendation of the Ministry of Public Administration and Regional Development, can be carried out by a comparison of the 2013 and 2022 data, and by classifying the districts into three thematic groups instead of the previous four, using 23 indicators and normalised group indicators to calculate an average complex indicator (Table 1). As a result, the number of beneficiary districts would decrease from the current 109 to 99.

Since 1996, the territorial level used to define beneficiary areas in Hungary has been the so-called lower middle level, to which settlements are only linked on a supplementary basis. Between 1996 and 2013, the delimitation was based on LAU1, although small regions without historical traditions followed a unique path of development in the country. Since 2014, the basic units have been beneficiary districts, meaning that the territorial framework for delimitation and resource allocation has shifted from regional development to public administration. However, this approach has several limitations.

On the one hand, the boundaries of administrative units do not always reflect the actual spatial organisation of socio-economic functions, such as labour market networks, commuting zones or agglomeration processes (Mayer & László, 2024). On the other hand, measuring development and designating target areas using composite indicators is often a static system that is rarely updated, and is not necessarily able to respond flexibly to economic and social changes or the dynamics of territorial differences.

Table 1. Components of the composite indicator recommended for district classification

I. Social and social situation	1	Mortality rate (number of deaths per thousand inhabitants) (average for the last five years), ‰ (2017-2021)
	2	Domestic migration difference per thousand inhabitants (average of the last five years), persons (2017-2021)
	3	Number of places in nurseries and day-care facilities per 10,000 permanent residents aged 0–2, number (2021)
	4	Proportion of the permanent population aged 0–24 receiving regular child protection benefits, % (2021)
	5	Number of persons receiving employment replacement benefits or municipal benefits per thousand permanent residents aged 15 and over, persons (2021)
	6	Life expectancy at birth by male district, average for 2019-2021
	7	Life expectancy at birth for women by district, average for 2019-2021
II. Economic and employment situation	8	Income forming the personal income tax base per permanent resident, thousand HUF (2021)
	9	Number of passenger cars operated by natural persons, weighted by age, per thousand inhabitants (2021)
	10	Proportion of people aged 18–X with at least a secondary school leaving certificate
	11	Proportion of registered job seekers in the working-age population (annual average), % (2021)
	12	Proportion of long-term unemployed (registered for at least 6 months) in the working-age population, % (2021)
	13	Proportion of registered job seekers with at most primary education, % (2021)
	14	Number of active enterprises per thousand inhabitants, number (2020)
	15	Number of retail stores per thousand inhabitants (2021)
	16	Aggregate tax capacity per capita (2022)
	17	Proportion of dwellings connected to public sewage collection network, % (2021)
III. Infrastructure and housing situation	18	Average price of second-hand dwellings, million HUF (2021)
	19	Proportion of dwellings built in the last five years in the total housing stock at the end of the period, % (2017-2021)
	20	Proportion of dwellings without amenities, substandard dwellings and other dwellings in occupied dwellings, %, (2016)
	21	Proportion of paved roads in total municipal roads, % (2021)
	22	Proportion of the district population living within 15 minutes of a motorway junction, % (2019)
	2	Percentage of the district population with local access to basic education and healthcare infrastructure, % (2021)

Source: Ministry of Public Administration and Regional Development, State Secretariat for Regional Development, Support Policy Department.

When examining the issue of beneficiary regions from the perspective of instruments, it is worth treating direct and indirect instruments separately. With regard to direct instruments, the question of how targeted these resources are, i.e. how specific the objectives for which they can be used are and/or how specific the methodology used for delimitation is, cannot be avoided.

In terms of terminology, Act CII of 2023 is rather vague, referring to “areas defined on the basis of statistical characteristics, taking into account the applicable regional development objectives, where development programmes and projects planned for implementation in the administrative area are eligible for priority support through financial and economic incentives”. In the absence of specific intervention objectives, the indicator used is complex, albeit comprehensive, but provides a general picture of the development/underdevelopment of districts and is not particularly suitable for thematization. From a support policy perspective, the advantage of this method is that it does not narrow down the pool of potential applicants in advance, but its effectiveness is questionable. With the targeted selection of indicators, the methodology could be easily optimised for a specific set of objectives, but this would narrow down the circle of stakeholders in advance, which, although welcome from a resource concentration point of view, would increase the risk of resource-driven planning practices.

With regard to the resources that can be used specifically by the beneficiary regions, as underlined in our previous paper (Mezei, 2024), until 2010, a complex, significantly decentralised system of resources from the domestic budget was available to support disadvantaged regions and settlements, which was supplemented by EU funds in parallel with the EU accession process. Post-2010, the absence of substantial domestic regional development resources prompted the prioritisation of the use of EU funds. As a result, the number of municipalities in the beneficiary districts was positively discriminated against in the allocation of resources for the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 programming periods (Mayer & László, 2024). It should be noted, however, that decentralised actors (counties) have been designated to resolve this task, but given their lack of independent, free resources, they only dispose of EU funds, and are thus ill-equipped to support the beneficiary areas entrusted to them. However, as domestic regional development priorities can only be implemented to a limited extent through the use of EU funds, a centrally distributed domestic fund (the Hungarian Village Programme) was introduced to meet these priorities, primarily to support small-scale infrastructure developments in the smallest settlements. Although the decision-makers' intentions regarding the Hungarian Village Programme are commendable, it should be noted that this programme is explicitly aimed at settlement development, and although its scale does not allow for any regional impact, no expectations in this regard are formulated in the application procedure. Another problem with the Hungarian Village Programme is that it effectively competes with the LEADER programme, which is financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and, due to its simpler administration, is attracting potential applicants away from the LEADER programme. In other words, rather than filling a gap, it is creating

duplication. Based on an examination of direct instruments, it can therefore be concluded that the Hungarian system fundamentally lacks direct domestic, decentralised distribution channels to supplement EU funds. The Competitive Districts Programme, launched in 2025, takes the first steps in this direction, but in terms of the scale of resources and operating mechanisms, it should be treated as an experimental programme for the time being, and its implementation experience and impact on regional development can only be assessed at a later stage. That said, it is safe to conclude that the new Hungarian policy initiatives presented above, which are aimed at catching up, are not linked to a spatial planning and/or regional development system, and in this respect they differ significantly from the EU system.

Among indirect instruments, the OECD (2024) recommends examining factors such as the practice of multi-level governance (particularly in terms of the division of tasks and powers and financial autonomy), the functioning of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and the structure of the spatial planning system. In Hungary, however, the district is not the territorial level at which the above-mentioned factors can be meaningfully interpreted. The district does not have a local government, nor does it generate its own resources at this level, it is therefore obviously not involved in multi-level governance. The district is an administrative unit whose basic task is to organise public services at the regional level. No planning documents are prepared at this regional level, and since the district does not appear as an independent entity in calls for proposals, it does not perform any classic regional development activities either. Regional Development Agencies only operated in Hungary until 2013, and even then, only at NUTS2 level, while the districts were established in the same year.

Overall, it can be concluded that the system of beneficiary districts in Hungary faces a number of challenges, from setting objectives and designating the appropriate territorial level to the methodology used and the structure of the toolkit. As the review of the beneficiary regional system is also justified by time constraints, it is advisable to learn about European best practices and incorporate their experiences into the new system.

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BENEFICIARY REGIONS

Reducing territorial disparities is a priority of EU regional policy, and all Member States must commit to this objective. However, when defining beneficiary regions, Community rules only need to be followed if support is provided directly from EU funds. Where use is indirect (e.g. where eligibility only plays a role in prioritising applicants for EU funds, as is the case in

Hungary) or where domestic funds are used, an independent national eligibility system may be applied at Member State level.

When examining the national beneficiary systems of individual Member States, we attempted to select examples that appeared useful in some respect. In terms of geographical location, historical background and settlement structure, the most obvious choice would have been to examine the V4 countries, but a comprehensive study on this topic was recently published by Szabó and Szabó (2023). Instead, we chose England as the country with the longest tradition of regional development, seeking to determine to what extent the classification of beneficiaries was modified as a result of Brexit. The choice of Italy was justified by its fragmented settlement structure comparable to Hungary, but a regionalised state structure and a long tradition of multi-level governance, not only at the lower middle level but also in relation to the FUA.

Italy: National strategy for internal territories

In 2012, at around the period of the first assessment of district development in Hungary, Fabrizio Barca, Italian Minister for Territorial Cohesion, launched a national strategy for internal areas (*Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne*) (Porta et al., 2022), in order to promote a place-based approach to economic growth and development interventions and to respond more effectively to territorial challenges (Barca et al., 2012). The initiative gained further momentum during Italy's Presidency of the European Commission between July and December 2014, drawing attention to the internal peripheries across Europe (Servillo et al., 2016).

The programme initiated by Barca aims to explore and develop internal peripheral areas, characterised by small and medium-sized towns as centres, generally located in rural, in many cases mountainous areas (Servillo et al., 2014). An important feature of the programme is that it analyses territorial inequalities not at a regional level, but at a deeper, intra-regional level (Brovarone, 2022). The motivation behind this initiative is that in previous decades, these areas had become significantly marginalised in terms of population, age structure, employment and the quality of public services (Lucatelli et al., 2013).

The strategy, first defined in the 2014 National Reform Programme and the 2014-2020 Partnership Agreement, was also given a prominent role in the 2021-2027 Partnership Agreement (European Commission, 2022) as a key instrument for Italy's territorial cohesion. The document defines groups of settlements characterised by a significant distance from main service centres, particularly in terms of education, mobility, and social and health services.

The Italian model therefore identifies peripheral areas primarily on the basis of their distance from service centres, while emphasising that remoteness from the centre does not necessarily mean below-average development. To resolve this contradiction, the programme offers a two-stage selection mechanism.

The first stage involves identifying less urbanised areas located far from urban centres, which consists of two steps. The first step is to designate the centres that will serve as reference points for identifying rural areas. The methodology was originally based on the initial hypothesis that towns with a population of 35,000 or more occupy a central position. However, subsequent analyses led to the conclusion that there is no necessary correlation between the 'physical' size of a centre and its ability to provide certain services (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2021). The methodology for designating centres has therefore shifted over time towards examining the availability of services (education, health and public transport).

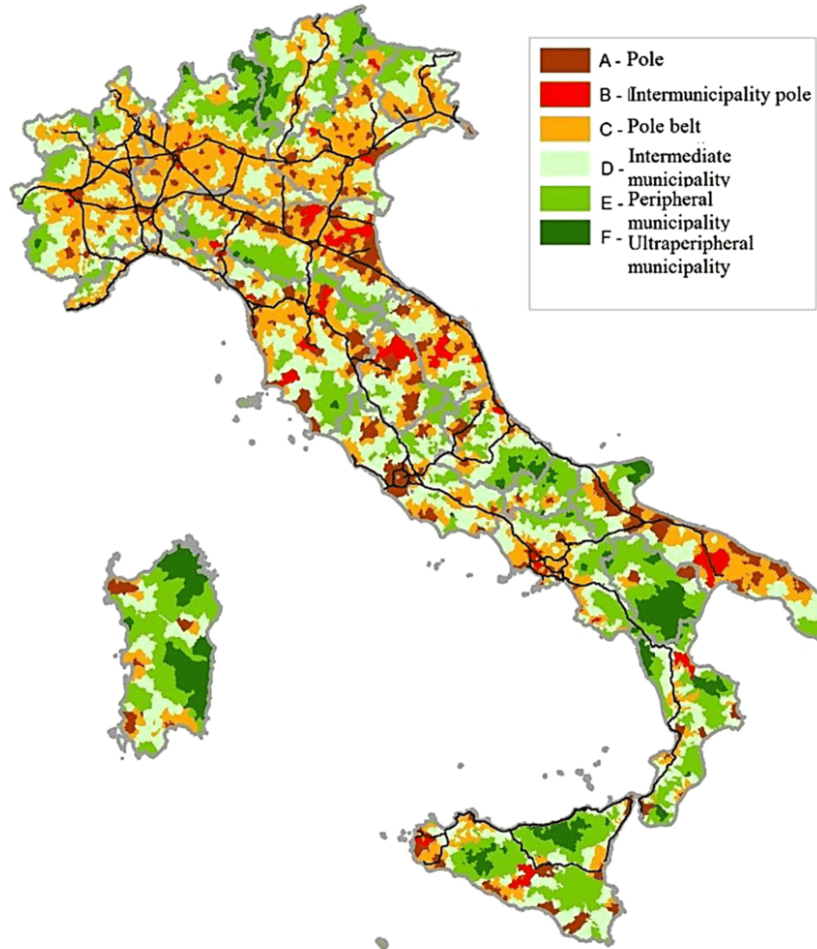
As a second step in the first stage of the identification of internal areas, municipalities not meeting central position criteria are classified into four categories (Fig. 4): belt, intermediate, peripheral and ultra-peripheral areas, based on their distance from the nearest central municipality (Barca et al., 2014).

The internal areas of the country are made up of municipalities belonging to the peripheral and ultra-peripheral zones.

The second phase of the national strategy for the inner areas involves the selection of specific municipalities to receive funding under the programme.

As stipulated in the Partnership Agreement, project areas are selected on the initiative of the regions, following instructions from the Ministry responsible for Cohesion Policy, taking into account demographic, economic, social and environmental indicators that point to critical problems in the area. In line with the Barca Report (Barca, 2009) and its efforts to create more spatially sensitive sectoral policies, the Italian Government proposed a multi-level governance system through the cooperation of the relevant ministries, the regions and local authorities, as well as the economic and cultural actors in the project areas. During the process, each region/autonomous province must submit a nomination dossier specifying the geographical area covered by each area proposed for support (list of municipalities). On the basis of the application documentation, the Ministry responsible for Cohesion Policies will carry out an examination, including direct discussions with the proposing municipalities, to verify that the applications comply with the principles and criteria set out.

Figure 4 Map of Italian municipalities according to the classification into poles and areas with different degrees of peripherality



Source: Perchinunno et al, 2019, p. 1303.

In the evaluation process, the following conditions/criteria are examined for each candidate area:

- a) the coherence of the applicant area with the map of internal areas for 2021-2027;
- b) the morphological-geographical and historical-identity unity of the area, as well as its size and population;
- c) demographic trends in the area;
- d) basic services available in the area;
- e) the willingness of local authorities to cooperate and form partnerships;

These criteria can be considered as the principles underlying the decision and are not assessed on the basis of a checklist. Their interpretation is largely based on the experiences gained during the implementation of the Programme between 2014 and 2020 (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2021).

The applicant areas are evaluated based on 161 indicators in a 9-dimensional indicator grid aligned with the above principles. This methodology has been criticised due to the large number of indicators and the limitations of data collection at the municipal level, and proposals have been made to simplify it (Rossitti et al., 2021).

Using the above methodology, 72 internal areas were selected for the 2014-2020 programming cycle. Overall, this group of beneficiaries comprised 1,060 municipalities with a population of approximately 2 million, covering an area of approximately 51,000 km². This area covers 13.4% of all Italian municipalities, 26% of municipalities classified as internal areas, 3.4% of the national population and 15.5% of the population living in municipalities classified as internal areas. Its territory accounts for 17% of the country's total area and 28.4% of the total area of all Italian inland areas.

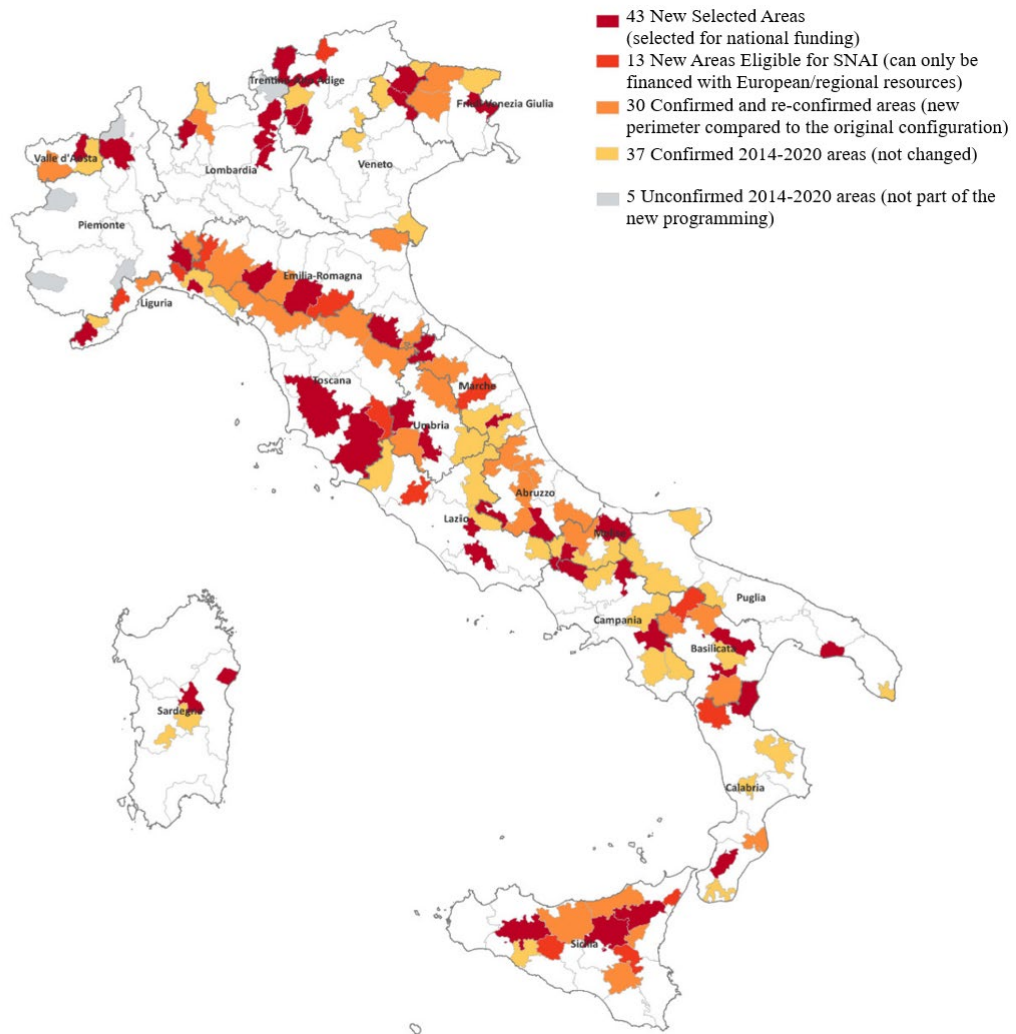
In the 2021-2027 programming cycle, in addition to the review of the target areas for the 2014-2020 period by the regions, new areas were designated and the number of project areas increased significantly. Overall, 124 project areas, 1,904 municipalities and 4,570,731 inhabitants will participate in the Programme in the 2021-27 period (Fig. 5).

The UK's regional selection system for development policy programmes based on a deprivation index

The regional inequality that characterizes Great Britain is a long-standing problem, not one that arose after Brexit (McCann, 2016). A wide range of programmes have been launched to help “futureless” and “left behind” areas catch up (2021 – Levelling Up Fund; 2022 – UK Shared Prosperity Fund; 2023 – Levelling Up Partnership). Support for the most deprived areas and a commitment to “levelling up” often become a key part of political programmes, with the current government in power sometimes merely changing the slogans and packaging (Fransham et al., 2023).

This aspiration has been further strengthened in the island nation after Brexit. The British governments have sought to replace programmes previously implemented under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Structural Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund with national programmes. The latest such initiative is the “Plan for Neighbourhoods” programme, announced by the UK government on 4 March 2025, replacing the Conservative government's “Long Term Plan for Towns” programme, which was due to run until 2024.

Figure 5 Internal areas of Italy (2021-2027)



Source: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – Dipartimento per le Politiche di Coesione, 2025. p. 69.

Although a more detailed exploration of the motivations behind raising the programme targeting small towns to the neighbourhood level is undoubtedly an exciting topic for research, our study does not aim to provide a comparative analysis of the structural, political, settlement or spatial development aspects of these programmes, but rather to understand the theoretical background for the selection of intervention sites.

The programme, with a budget of approximately £1.5 billion, aims to bring the 75 most deprived areas of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland up to speed. According to official government communications, this financial allocation will be used over a period of 10 years to tackle the root causes of deprivation in three areas: thriving places, stronger communities, and taking back control (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), 2022).

The Plan for Neighbourhoods announces support for 75 locations in the country's most deprived areas through the evaluation of complex indicators in two stages (55 locations in October 2023 and then 20 more locations in March 2024).

As a first step, lower tier local authorities (LTLA) are ranked according to their 'levelling up need' based on the methodology set out in the Levelling Up White Paper published in 2022 (DLUHC, 2022).

The document identifies the most deprived local authorities separately for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland using a methodology based on a combined assessment of four performance indicators, in accordance with the initial methodology (later modified for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). The indicators examined are: gross value added per hour worked, the proportion of people with vocational qualifications, median gross weekly pay and healthy life expectancy.

All local authorities in the United Kingdom are ranked according to the four indicators, and those in the bottom quartile are assigned a value of '1'. The number of occurrences in the bottom quartile for each local authority is summarised in the four rankings.

The priority list for local authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is drawn up separately for local authorities in the bottom quartile for three or more indicators (Fig. 6.).

In order to achieve a more even geographical distribution, regional caps have also been introduced within the nations of Great Britain. A maximum of 10 local authorities per ITL2 (NUTS2 equivalent) region in England, a maximum of 3 in Scotland and a maximum of 2 in Wales have been included in the shortlist.

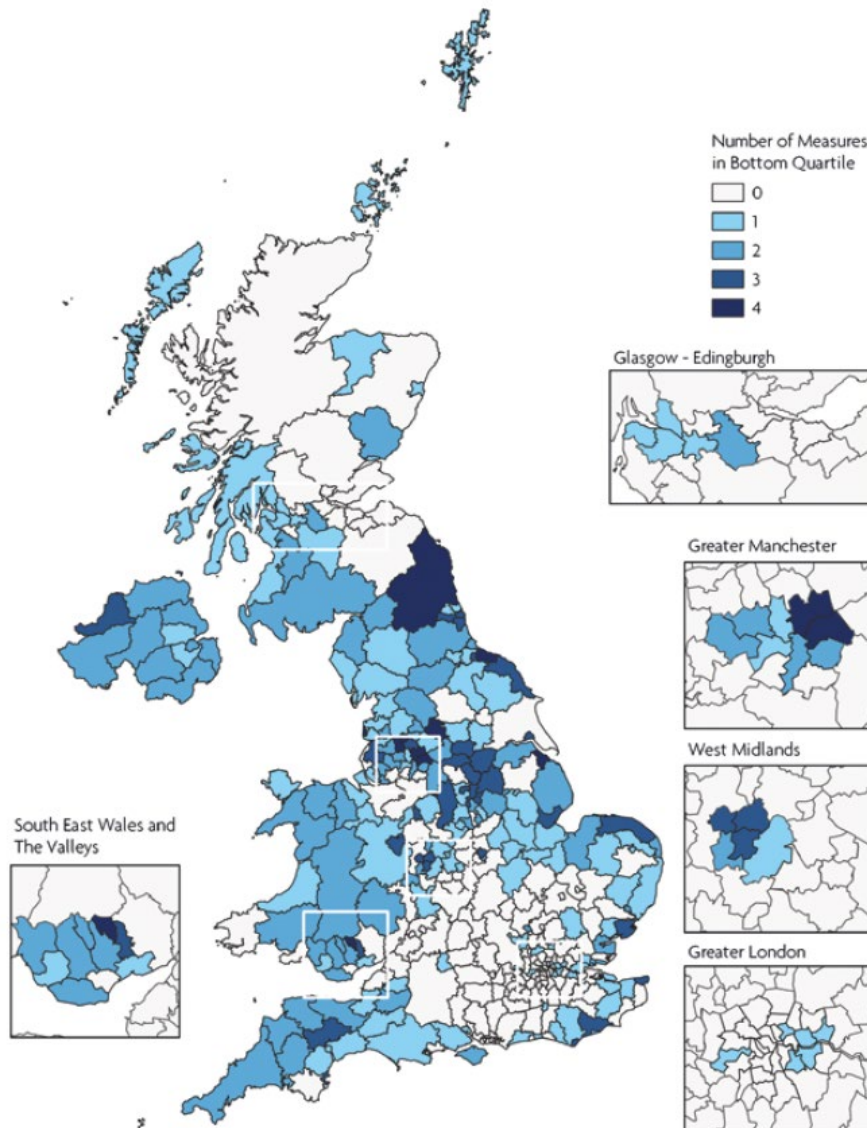
As a result, the first 58 local authorities in England, the first 10 in Scotland, the first 5 in Wales and the first 2 in Northern Ireland were selected based on their deprivation ranking.

The next step is to identify the most deprived built-up areas of local authorities (LTLA) using the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

The Deprivation Index is a tool for measuring deprivation at a low territorial level in many countries (Republika Hrvatska, World Bank Group, 2017) and has a long history in the United Kingdom. As some of the national statistical methodologies in Great Britain differ in terms of the territorial level and timing of the production of several indicators, separate country indices are produced, but using the same methodology (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019; Scottish Government, 2020; Welsh Government, 2025; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2017). These use a set of indicators organised into seven clusters (income, employment, education, health and disability, crime, housing and services,

and living conditions) at a low territorial level, the so-called Lower Super Output Areas, to describe territorial inequalities. The main criterion for delimiting these territorial units (32,844 in total), which form neighbourhood levels, was comparable population size. Accordingly, their average size is 1,500 inhabitants or 650 households.

Figure 6 The most left behind places in the UK, 2020



Source: Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper, 2022. p. 18.

After standardising and normalising the indicators within each indicator group and then weighting them using factor analysis, a score is produced for the given area. Based on the value of the deprivation index, the 32,844 LSOAs are ranked according to their level of development (where 1 is the least developed and 32,844 is the most developed).

The deprivation indices of LSAs can also be used to create development indicators at higher territorial levels. Among other things, this allows for the analysis of deprivation patterns at the level of local authorities (Local Authority Districts) and the assessment of built-up areas (BUAs). The latter provides the basis for identifying the places that will benefit from the Plan for Neighbourhoods programme. Within each BUA unit of the 75 selected local authorities, the LSOAs located within its boundaries are aggregated by simple addition. The final beneficiary of the programme is the town with the lowest aggregate score in each local authority.

The efforts of British regional development policy are certainly noteworthy as they seek to uncover regional inequalities through detailed regional analyses. However, the scientific basis of the Levelling Up White Paper's set of indicators and methodological principles has been criticized in recent years (Nurse & Skyes, 2023). Most of the criticism in the literature has focused on the details of the programme's implementation: schemes supporting job creation programmes that finance low productivity activities, as well as cultural and recreational urban regeneration interventions instead of real levelling-up interventions (Jones, 2024).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our article presents three distinct methodologies for identifying and selecting regions that are lagging behind and are considered to be key target areas for territorial cohesion. The approaches of the three European countries differ significantly in several respects, but in certain areas they provide useful experiences that can be transferred across countries.

Hungary has been using LAU1-level assessment since 2014, taking districts as administrative units as the lowest level in examining the country's development patterns. The assessment is made through the complex analysis of several social, economic, infrastructural, and environmental indicators. Although districts provide a good framework for the territorial organisation of public services that are accessible on an equal basis, in recent years, social and economic processes that occur independently of administrative boundaries and are becoming increasingly significant have been at the center of both scientific and policy discussions. Their effects and consequences raise the need for a more spatially sensitive, place-specific approach that allows for greater cooperation between central and local government and sectoral actors. In reviewing the current Hungarian regional benefit system, both the Italian and British models offer examples worth considering in this regard.

The Italian “Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne” programme focuses on the development of internal areas that are physically (based on road distance) separated from

metropolitan and highly urbanised areas, thus enabling a more targeted response to the problems of peripheral areas. In this approach, cooperation between central (government) and local (municipal, civil) actors plays an important role: decisions on projects receiving support are made jointly, thus creating a balance between local motivations and central mechanisms.

The British deprivation index model offers an alternative for more accurate territorial targeting, which is similar in many respects to the Hungarian district classification system: it measures relative deprivation, forms clusters from the indicators and carries out the assessment using thematic indicator groups. However, the strength of the British model lies in its use of a well-structured and regularly updated system of indicators to measure and monitor territorial disadvantages, which is able to respond flexibly to social and economic changes.

A common feature of the models used in the three European countries is that they have been subject to a series of critical comments regarding both the methodology used and the effects achieved in terms of regional convergence. A more in-depth analysis of the various practices and an exchange of experiences also provide a good opportunity to take European Union cohesion policy to the next level.

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