

TAMÁS SIKOS T. & DÓRA MOLNÁR (EDS. 2024): BUDAPEST – PAST AND FUTURE (LUDOVIKA UNIVERSITY PRESS, BUDAPEST, P. 304)

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The volume *Budapest: Past and Future*, edited by Tamás Sikos T. and Dóra Molnár, was published in 2024 to mark the 150th anniversary of the unification of the Hungarian capital. The book was jointly issued by Ludovika University Press and the University of Miskolc, with the primary aim of examining Budapest's past, present, and future prospects from a multidisciplinary perspective. Among the contributors are renowned human geographers, economists, sociologists, and urban scholars such as Pál Beluszky, Zoltán Kovács, Gábor Michalkó, Viktor Pál, Tamás Sikos T. and Annamária Uzzoli. The studies are written with academic rigor yet remain accessible to the interested general readership.

The scientific starting point of the volume is Budapest's dual identity: it is simultaneously a national capital and a major urban centre of East-Central Europe. The studies highlight that throughout its historical development, the city has always been embedded in a dual – local and international – sphere of influence. Over the 150 years since the unification of the city (1873), Budapest has become one of the region's leading economic, cultural, and administrative hubs, although its development has not been uninterrupted. The dichotomy of “past and future” in the book's subtitle serves not only as a temporal frame but also as a methodological foundation: the authors complement historical analyses with interpretations of contemporary processes and forward-looking strategic recommendations.

The collection of studies outlines a 150-year historical arc that takes the reader from the medieval functions of Pest-Buda through 19th-century metropolitan development to 21st-century Budapest facing global challenges such as climate change, digitalisation, the creative economy, and artificial intelligence. The authors place particular emphasis on examining the relationship between the city and its agglomeration, as social and economic processes are increasingly difficult to describe within administrative boundaries.

The introductory studies and foreword emphasise that the book's thematic structure is built around three main dimensions: (1) historical urban development, (2) contemporary urbanistic

and social challenges, and (3) future-oriented development proposals. This structured approach not only enhances the clarity of the volume but also supports its use for policy-making, planning, and educational purposes.

A key feature of *Budapest: Past and Future* is that it not only conveys scientific knowledge but also seeks to outline a clear vision for the future. Among the future-oriented concepts discussed are the “smart city,” issues of liveable urban environments, and the potential for advancement in the creative economy and social well-being. The volume therefore functions as a kind of scientific and strategic foundational document, useful for decision-makers, urban planners, researchers, educators, and students alike.

In the opening study of the volume, Pál Beluszky analyses the capital’s centuries-long development from a historical-geographical perspective, aptly describing it as a “roller coaster.” The history of Pest-Buda appears as a series of rises and declines in which natural geographic endowments, geopolitical processes, and socio-economic structures all play decisive roles. Beluszky provides a detailed account of how the geographical location of Pest-Buda has favoured urbanisation from the very beginning: situated at the centre of the Carpathian Basin at a key crossing point of the Danube, where important commercial and military routes intersect. The region’s topography, hydrography, and transport geography virtually predestined it to become a regional centre.

Budapest’s true “take-off” occurred after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867: following the unification of the city (1873), metropolitan development began in earnest. Commerce, the financial sector, industry, and infrastructure (railways, bridge construction, public utilities) expanded rapidly, leading to a dramatic increase in the city’s structure, population, and economic weight. By the turn of the century, Budapest had become one of the most dynamically developing major cities not only in Hungary but in the entire region. Beluszky also stresses that the city’s development has never been linear: Ottoman occupation, Habsburg dependence, the Treaty of Trianon, the Second World War, and Soviet influence repeatedly hindered the city’s full unfolding. Thus, development depended not only on internal endowments but was always strongly shaped by external power relations and economic conditions.

Several studies in the *Budapest: Past and Future* volume deal in detail with the historical formation, structural development, and socio-economic characteristics of the capital and its immediate surroundings – the metropolitan agglomeration. Based on these works, it becomes clear that today’s Budapest can no longer be understood within its administrative boundaries:

it in fact functions as a complex urban-regional system in which the capital and its surrounding settlements mutually shape each other's development.

Dóra Molnár's study provides a comprehensive overview of how state-organisation and administrative reforms have influenced the relationship between Budapest and its agglomeration. From the age of Dualism, through the "Greater Budapest" concept (1950), up to the post-transition decentralisation period, numerous transformations have taken place. After earlier centralising efforts, today's development policies increasingly emphasise cooperation and coordination – although these often materialise in unstructured, ad hoc ways. According to the study, one of the greatest challenges for the future will be the establishment of coordinated, sustainable agglomeration governance.

The work by Kovács and Dövényi presents the stages of spatial development in the agglomeration from the interwar era to the present day. They highlight that urban sprawl began already during the socialist period but intensified significantly after the political transition. Due to residential and economic suburbanisation, the classic monocentric urban structure has loosened, and the functional urban region has taken on an increasingly polycentric character. Key drivers of suburbanisation include differences in housing prices, the search for higher quality of life, and the development of transport infrastructure.

The study examining housing market processes (by Zoltán Kovács and Gáborné Székely) shows that the structure and quality of the housing stock have undergone radical changes over the past century and a half. After the political transition, the system of state housing allocation disappeared and market-based solutions emerged, resulting in unequal access. Opportunities for acquiring housing, the necessity of commuting, and social inequalities together shape the spatial pattern of social stratification that still characterises Budapest and its region today.

In their study, Viktor Pál and Annamária Uzzoli dedicate special attention to the spatial inequalities of well-being across Budapest. Based on objective and subjective indicators of quality of life, they find considerable differences between inner-city districts and more advantaged suburban settlements in terms of healthcare access, environmental conditions, and social infrastructure. These inequalities intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic – residents of high-density, service-poor areas were exposed to greater risks. From the combined perspective of the studies, Budapest's agglomeration is both an opportunity and a source of risk: social polarisation is reflected spatially as well. Mobility pressure, shortcomings in transport infrastructure, uneven distribution of public services, and access to green spaces all shape the region's quality of life. According to the authors, future urbanistic and social-policy interventions can only be effective when approached from a regional perspective.

The studies in the second half of the volume approach the city not primarily from a historical or descriptive viewpoint, but from a future-oriented, strategic perspective: they outline alternative development trajectories for Budapest based on the creative economy, the smart city concept, and public opinion. A shared idea across the contributions is that the capital must not only adapt to global challenges but also proactively shape its own future – through the triad of knowledge, innovation, and quality of life.

Dóra Szendi's analysis begins with the theoretical foundations of the “smart city” concept and continues with practical examples of Budapest's smart-city efforts. The author presents in detail the intelligent systems and developments (e.g., transport digitalisation, e-governance, energy management, smart public-space solutions) that may enhance the city's competitiveness among East-Central European capitals. However, the study also points out limitations: uncoordinated projects, lack of strategic vision, and weak public engagement significantly slow Budapest's progress toward becoming a smart city. In international rankings (e.g., the IESE Cities in Motion Index), Budapest currently performs only at a medium level – which, while somewhat commendable, does not indicate a major breakthrough in the region.

Tamás Egedy's study examines Budapest's cultural and economic potential based on Richard Florida's “creative class” concept. According to the analysis, the city possesses the conditions (higher education institutions, cultural venues, international connections, tolerance) that could allow it to become a stronghold of the knowledge and creative economy. However, despite these opportunities, the capital often exploits its advantages only partially: the concentration of research and development, the emerging startup ecosystem, and the presence of international capital are promising but have not yet produced systemic breakthroughs. A key element of the study is the spatial distribution of creative labour: while inner districts (e.g., Districts V, VI, VII, XI) remain focal points, creative activities increasingly appear in certain areas of the agglomeration as well. Major challenges include rising housing costs, overburdened inner districts, and the underfunding of creative industries.

Tamás Sikos T.'s study offers a new perspective on Budapest's spatial structure through shopping habits and commercial land use – not from a classical urbanistic or sociological angle but based on the spatial dynamics of commercial functions. The city's commercial zones have radically transformed in recent decades: downtown street shops have been increasingly overshadowed by the dominance of shopping malls. The study discusses in particular detail the “western gate” area (Budakeszi-Budaörs-Törökbálint), which exerts a kind of commercial suction effect, drawing purchasing power away from the inner districts of the capital. The research is based on empirical surveys: consumer preferences, habits, and the accessibility of

commercial nodes all play a role in the spatial economic reorganisation of the city. According to Sikos, future commercial development can only be sustainable if it considers residents' spatial behaviour, mobility options, and the role of local supply systems.

The volume *Budapest: Past and Future* provide a comprehensive and rich synthesis of the historical development, contemporary challenges, and future possibilities of the Hungarian capital. The editors' aim – to present Budapest from a fresh, multidisciplinary perspective on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the city's unification – is fully achieved. The book is not only a scholarly read but could also serve as a strategic document: it informs, explains, reflects critically, and formulates recommendations. One of the volume's greatest strengths is its thematic and methodological diversity: from historical descriptions to spatial modelling, administrative analysis, economic geography, and population attitude studies, all the way to future-oriented urban development approaches, nearly everything is represented. This diversity allows scholars from various fields to connect with the text, although it may also pose a challenge for readers who do not come from a specific discipline.

The volume's main message is that Budapest is not merely a city but a spatial-social system shaped at the intersection of historical endowments, economic cycles, social mobility, and political decisions. Its future is not predetermined but not independent of the past either: earlier "roller-coaster" patterns still echo in today's social and economic processes. The Budapest of the future can only succeed if it adopts coherent development directions, considers the needs of its residents, and can integrate global trends (smart technologies, green transition, creative economy) with local particularities. This volume both warns and inspires: it reminds us that Budapest's development is not self-evident, yet also shows what resources and knowledge exist to guide the city strategically. It is an important work from scientific, educational, and urban policy perspectives.