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Rescuing a small village school in the context of rural change in Hungary

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A B S T R A C T

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The paper discusses local responses to schooling policy in the context of the uneven differentiation and sharp social polarisation of the Hungarian countryside. Counter-urbanisation, on the one hand, has brought affluent urban middle classes to suburban spaces, on the other hand, peripheral areas are becoming impoverished with high unemployment, while there are rural areas where a process of ghettoisation is taking place. Parallel with these processes, rural education has had to face demographic decline and the shrinking ability of municipalities to maintain schools. The case study presented in this article illustrates the cultural and spatial barriers impeding the creation of co-operation in the field of education. Given that the community of the village concerned is remarkably vibrant, with strong intra-community horizontal ties, the concept of social capital is used to explain how bonding and bridging networks as well as “missing links” influence community actions, in this case a school-rescue operation.

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1. Introduction

In Hungary, as elsewhere in East Central Europe, rural change has been increasingly reshaping the countryside. Agriculture has been shrinking and provides livelihoods only in more remote rural areas and even there only for a rather limited number of people. Differentiation has been highly uneven; in the richest parts, the countryside has been transformed into suburban spaces reshaped by middle-class urban migrants, whilst in the peripheries, weak economies and scarce employment opportunities impede development and undermine the well being of the population. In the worst cases, the absence of resources coupled with ethnic segregation as a consequence of selective migration have resulted in a drain of human resources from the area, including both Roma and non-Roma people.

In 2004–2005, almost 15 years after the passing of the Local Government Act in 1990, measures were taken to reform the system of local authority funding. Local authorities were suffering from sharply declining financial viability and – particularly in rural areas – problems in relation to service provision. The funding of public services was secured through co-financing: central government covered the greater part (in the case of primary education

80–90% of costs were paid centrally) while municipalities provided the rest. But, by the turn of the millennium, the share of state support had dropped to 60–70% on average and 50% in small village schools.

Despite this, closures or amalgamations occurred only rarely; the rural school network was kept relatively intact until as late as 2004 as a result of state support provided specifically to small villages to maintain schools, on the one hand, and a new act passed in 1997 promoting voluntary associations of local governments, on the other. In 2004, however, an Act on Multi-Functional Micro-Regional Local Government Associations (hereafter MLGAs) came into force¹ which rechanneled state incentives and promoted the amalgamation of rural schools. The combination of legislative changes and fiscal arrangements of the central government brought the prospects of small rural schools to a turning point: there was a dramatic speed-up in the number of grassroots reorganisations and within four years the number of villages maintaining primary schools dropped by a half. An estimated 10% of small schools were closed, whilst some 30–35% were amalgamated and continued under the administration of a central unit.

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¹ Multi-Functional Micro-Regional Local Government Associations stipulated by the Act No CVII of 2004 represent a special type of so-called voluntary actions of local governments. (See Section 3.3 below.)

These processes were background influences for the events of 2007 when the closure and merger of rural schools as a consequence of top-down pressure on local governments attracted considerable media attention. One of the most eminent NGOs ('Human Chain') took up the issue and campaigned against closures ('Human Chain for Rural Schools'²). This movement directed interest to a group of small schools that had survived the harsh times. The school of Erdőkürt was selected from among these primary schools as our research site because of the villagers' remarkably strong community engagement, which raised the question of the impact of a strong local community on saving the school.

Section 4 below explores in detail the complex dilemmas surrounding the question of whether or not to maintain the village school in the context of financial constraints and demographic decline influenced by geographical conditions as well as ethnic and social processes within a rural neighbourhood. The ambiguous significance of the vibrant village community combined with a rich network of horizontal inter-community ties and a considerable stock of social capital in resisting amalgamation with any of the neighbouring primary schools is also discussed in this section. Prior to this detailed discussion of the case of Erdőkürt school, the paper explains the wider research project from which data have been drawn for this article and then offers a detailed discussion of rural transformations in Hungary and in the research location more specifically, and of recent political, financial and demographic factors influencing the maintenance of village schools in this context.

2. Research questions and methodology

The empirical research on which this article is based took place in Erdőkürt and its vicinity in three phases during 2008 and 2009 as part of a "research methodology seminar" at the Sociology Department of the Eötvös Loránd University.³ Two broad themes were explored in the research: (1) the community itself with particular focus on civic engagement and its roots, and (2) the dilemma of whether or not to maintain the local school with issues ranging from pupil-recruitment policies, via alternatives to maintaining the school, to the attitudes of decision-makers.

The research approach was qualitative and included a number of different methodological elements. Seventy semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors including, decision-makers and administrative leaders of the local governments in Erdőkürt and its vicinity, leaders of the local NGOs, teachers, respected figures and opinion-shapers in the village. Focus-group discussions were undertaken with teachers, parents and a mixed group of decision-makers, NGO leaders and teachers. A set of structured interviews gathered insights and opinions from villagers (one fifth of the 280 households was sampled on a random basis, 51 questionnaires were completed). A total of 61 parents of pupils and 18 parents of children enrolled in the nursery were surveyed about parental choice (enquiring into their motivations and expectations in relation to the

school).⁴ In addition to these various interview methods, the research team gathered information on the membership of local NGOs: membership lists with a basic set of information⁵ were compiled. Finally, the minutes of local council and village assemblies were collected and analysed from 1990 to 2008.

3. The countryside and the researched village

3.1. Structural changes in the Hungarian countryside

In Hungary, as in advanced countries worldwide, rural areas are increasingly differentiating as they become more and more "integrated into regional formations which are proceeding along their own distinctive trajectories of development" (Murdoch et al., 2003: 10). Counter-urbanisation that had already appeared sporadically in Hungary before the fall of the socialist system and then accelerated in the second half of the 1990s still continues to affect rural areas around the capital and big cities intensively. The spreading suburban zones signal fundamentally changed (urbanised) villages and small towns with disappearing agriculture and an over-representation of better-off urban migrants. In parallel with shifting land use, traditional agricultural activities have increasingly been displaced from the spreading suburban (transformed rural) area and pushed towards more distant rural spaces. However, most of the new 'villagers' in the suburbanised zones have remained dependent on the urban labour market and service provisions, despite the economic boom which suburban areas have witnessed over the last 15 years, primarily due to the rapid growth of logistics, trade and service industries (Koós, 2007). The point here is that new rural settlers' dependency on urban spaces sets geographical limitations on the process of middle-class outflow.

Though the emblematic social layers of counter-urbanisation have been the urban middle and upper classes, this does not mean that the process has been restricted to them. Members of the lower-middle class and the urban poor have also fled the cities in considerable numbers for two key reasons: 1) they sought lower living costs or 2) they moved to the countryside to live in a quiet and healthy rural environment in their old age. Neither of these groups could usually afford to move to the suburban villages and towns; rather, they chose villages outside the suburban area, but still relatively close to the city. Pensioners dominate this group of migrants, particularly among returnees. The few middle-aged migrants, confronted with scarce local employment opportunities and expensive commuting costs usually soon found themselves on public work schemes or in receipt of social assistance. The 'second ring settlers' are therefore less dependent on the urban labour market and services than the active aged middle-class of the more prestigious suburban zones. The intensity of the outflow of these migrants has been lower and geographically less concentrated than that of the middle class in the suburbanised area, therefore rural characteristics of the 'second ring' villages and their communities have been reshaped to a lesser extent than within the more attractive and prestigious 'first (suburban) ring'.

In sharp contrast to (rural) areas which attract an urban population, the countryside, especially in rural peripheries, has also been suffering from the consequences of the declining local and regional economy, such as high unemployment, the outmigration of youth and an ageing population profile. Adapting Marsden's typology these can be seen as 'clientelist' rural spaces, where "much of the ... rural economy can be sustained by state subsidy" (Marsden, 1998: 108). In rural hinterlands of regions hit by the collapse of heavy industry and the absence of viable economic

² <http://www.elolanc.hu/kisiskola/>.

³ The project was led by András Lányi and supported by the Norway Grants. Five students from the seminar participated in two phases of joint fieldwork during the spring of 2008 and the summer of 2009 under the supervision of two teachers, Katalin Kovács and Katalin Rác, researcher of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Most of the material was collected during these common fieldwork endeavours, with some additional material collect during subsequent individual visits.

⁴ The questionnaires were either distributed to their parents by the pupils, or the parents themselves took them from the school/nursery and returned them once completed.

⁵ The data collected included: date of first membership, age, occupation, local roots and any role taken in the NGO.

restructuring, the impoverishment of the population has reached critical proportions and ‘deep poverty’⁶ has appeared, frequently coupled with ghettoisation.⁷

In the Hungarian context ghettoisation means an increasing spatial segregation of Roma, a process influenced by the speed of selective migration⁸ which, combined with the high birth rate amongst the Roma, can generate a rapid increase in the proportion of Roma – especially in tiny villages of some hundreds of inhabitants – resulting in ethnically pure or almost pure, segregated settlements.⁹ The vulnerability of tiny villages derives from decreasing and ageing populations, poor transportation and limited access to public services as well as jobs (Kovács, 1990; Havas, 1999). Accounts of village ghettos reveal convincingly that manifestations of social anomie in these communities are just as widespread as in their urban counterparts (Ladányi and Szelényi, 2004; Durst, 2008; Váradi, 2008; Virág, 2006, 2010).¹⁰

With the fall of socialism, most of the Roma were crowded out of the rapidly shrinking labour market, since many were unskilled labourers who had been employed for the most part in industries that collapsed first (mining, heavy industry, construction, large-scale agricultural co-operatives). Significantly, many Roma have not been able to re-enter the labour market, resulting in an extremely high unemployment rate. The complete deterioration of Roma livelihoods, the decentralisation of responsibilities for this problem from central to local levels, as well as the complexity of negotiating better living conditions have been highlighted recently in the Hungarian and Romanian rural contexts (Thelen et al., 2011).¹¹

The impoverishment and degradation of rural space represents the negative extreme of a highly uneven process of rural differentiation. Rural differentiation in Hungary has therefore been compounded by economic and social polarisation (see also Kovács, 2010). The absence of alternative pathways from agriculture to the service or manufacturing industries has hit the more depressed regions the hardest, thus increasing the gap between developed and the most disadvantaged rural areas. However, a similar level of deprivation might appear in mosaic-like structures outside the most disadvantaged regions as well, typically in so-called inner peripheries or border-line settlements like the neighbourhood introduced below.

3.2. Erdőkürt, the researched village and its micro-region

The village of Erdőkürt (population 560) is located along the border-line of Pest and Nógrád counties, 60 km from the capital, too far to be part of Budapest’s ‘first ring’ commuter zone but too close to be independent of its influence. The micro-region, South-Cserhát (in northern Hungary), to which it belongs, is

⁶ The notion of deep poverty appeared in the beginning of the 2000s when the literature on poverty began to distinguish two groups: people with low income and people with multiple deprivations. According to Szalai, in the case of the first group, poverty could be alleviated relatively easily, whilst for the latter, “poverty has been fixed into a social status and way of life coupled with exclusion.” (Szalai, 2002: 42–43, see also Bass et al., 2007).

⁷ See also Schwarzc (2012) in this volume on differential construction of rural poverty in Hungary.

⁸ Selective migration signifies a process by which non-Roma and also better-off Roma families migrate to better endowed localities from marginalised villages (settlements) leaving the poorer families behind.

⁹ According to experts’ estimations in 2007, there were 125 villages in Hungary (4% of total villages) populated entirely by Roma (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007).

¹⁰ See also Ruzicka (2012) in this special issue on spatial segregation of Roma in Czech Republic and Slovakia.

¹¹ See also Schwarzc (2012), this volume and Ruzicka 2012, this volume on the situation in former Czechoslovakia.

a hilly area with small villages. The ethnic composition of the villages in the area consists of Slovak, Hungarian and Roma populations in various mixtures. Erdőkürt is the only village with a relatively homogenous population of Slovak origin. People no longer speak Slovak – the last women who spoke the local dialect died in 2008 – nevertheless, most of the families retain Slovak or dual (Slovak and Hungarian) identity. In terms of religious affiliation, the village is split: roughly half of the villagers belong to the Catholic, the other half to the Protestant congregation.

Due to its location, the Budapest Metropolitan Area provides a livelihood for the active age residents of Erdőkürt, although with the added expense of a daily commute. The unemployment rate is therefore low (at the time of our research), despite the fact that in the village there are very few employment opportunities: 10–12 jobs in the public sector and similarly few in the business sector, three farmers and their labourers. Agriculture is restricted mostly to garden-scale production in the village. Erdőkürt has also experienced the most steeply ageing population within its vicinity for the last decades. The rate of natural population decline was 12.4% between 1990 and 2008, and could not be offset by an immigration rate of 3.2%.

The situation of Erdőkürt and its school cannot be understood independently of the social and ethnic composition of its neighbouring villages, particularly that of Kálló, the nearest. Kálló village fulfilled central functions during socialism but has suffered dramatically from unfavourable social and economic conditions in the new era. The agricultural co-operative went bankrupt, only twenty jobs from hundreds survived the changes and the joint council with Erdőkürt and a third village dissolved, generating further job losses. All these processes led to a remarkably selective migration from Kálló to towns. As the mayor put it in an interview in 2009: “peasants left, Roma people stayed” because “they could not afford to leave”. During the last decade – parallel to the increasing proportion of Roma in the local community from an estimated ratio of 15 percent in 1990 to 40 percent in 2008 – there has also been a sharp increase in the number of Roma children enrolling in the village primary school from 60 percent in 2000 to 90 percent in 2008. “Peasant” parents who were still willing to send their children to the local nursery, started to enrol them in schools elsewhere, including Erdőkürt, which has neither Roma residents, nor Roma children in its tiny school. Locally, Kálló represents the negative extreme, the impoverishing and segregating rural community and Erdőkürt the resisting one.

The people of Erdőkürt were rather optimistic in 2008–2009 despite the emerging financial difficulties. They were also convinced that the village could provide any newcomer with an attractive and suitable dwelling environment based on the combination of tangible and intangible assets. As a concrete step towards attracting new settlers, the village development plan of 2005 determined to establish a residential estate. This was realised with investment capital: an entrepreneur from Budapest with local family ties bought some abandoned vineyards from the villagers and hooked up water and electricity, establishing about 40 lots in the new estate.¹² His calculations proved justified to a limited extent: some city people had already moved to Erdőkürt – albeit that wave at first brought mostly retired people (including two pensioners from Holland) who settled in the village and not in the estate. Roughly one quarter of the lots were bought by locals, who

¹² The entrepreneur’s wife came from Erdőkürt. Although his family lives in Budapest at present, they also keep a “second home” in Erdőkürt – albeit not in the residential estate: they have restored the old family house on the main street of the village.

expected a return from sales to urban settlers, but the majority of them had not found a buyer at the time of our research, which depressed prices. The nursery and the primary school as public service providers were also supposed to be essential parts of the 'offer', given that the targeted 'consumers' were members of the urban lower-middle class, preferably young couples or families with children.

The village had no tourist attractions; therefore its potential to attract urban consumers is based primarily on the qualities of the surrounding landscape and the almost untouched rural environment: "This is a beautiful village in a valley, the air is fine, people are friendly and life is safe" as one of the survey respondents put it. "Erdőkürt is a quiet, peaceful, friendly village with no Roma." This is how the village was depicted by another interlocutor. Ethnic composition (i.e. no Roma) qualifies here as a kind of 'social asset' in relation to the surrounding villages, in particular Kálló, which are more or less affected by ghettoisation. Being "peaceful and quiet" signifies a village with no social tensions, where unemployment is low and people can lead a modest life from their income earned as commuters in the industrial and service sectors.

4. Hungarian local administration and the provision of education in rural areas

4.1. Coping with service provision in small villages

After the fall of socialism, the Hungarian local government system became extremely fragmented due to the disintegration of forcibly amalgamated rural municipalities. As a result, the number of local authorities doubled. The average population of the approximately 3200 local authorities in Hungary was 3200 per locality in 2008, which is twice as many as the respective figure in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, meanwhile it is half of the Romanian and Croatian, and one fifth of the Polish average (Péteri, 2008). These numbers illustrate that the countries of East Central Europe followed different patterns, according to their own traditions, when establishing their local government systems in the early 1990s.¹³ Hungary returned to the administrative (spatial) structures of the 1960s,¹⁴ which meant that even the smallest villages could and did re-establish their own local authority. To illustrate the challenge deriving from fragmentation: 53% of local authorities govern villages with less than one thousand inhabitants, representing 8% of the population.

And yet, despite 'political' fragmentation of local governments, joint provision of local administration and primary education among the smallest settlements survived the changes. After 1997, when the first relevant legal framework¹⁵ came into force, the number of associations increased significantly. According to Imre's research results, 70–77% of villages with fewer than 2000 inhabitants participated in one or more associations in 2000/2001 (Imre, 2004). Voluntarily run associations, particularly those aimed at the joint running of nurseries and primary schools, were promoted by state subsidies until 2004. Despite this generous central government assistance, the operating costs of rural schools became less and less affordable for small municipalities. The smaller the village

(and its school), the larger the gap between real maintenance costs and state subsidies (basic entitlements and supplementary subsidies); the municipality's own contribution reached more than 50% in villages with fewer than 1100 inhabitants (Horn, 2004). Despite these difficulties and the continuing demographic decline – the number of school children had dropped to 70% of the 1990 figure by 2004 – the number of school closures remained relatively low until 2003, when the financial viability of small rural schools came under increasing threat for the following reasons:

1. seepage to nearby urban schools speeding up the decline of enrolment in rural schools
2. seepage to non-Roma schools in rural areas where a process of segregation of schools appeared leaving ghetto schools behind
3. attempts by central government to rationalise public services, most importantly the provision of primary education entailing cuts in funding.

4.2. Segregation at school

The phenomenon of segregation within primary and secondary education has been accelerated in the last two decades and is identified by scholars as one of the major weaknesses of the educational system in Hungary. It appears in urban and rural neighbourhoods alike, and between as well as within schools. Havas warned in 2008 that in 180 primary schools – making up five percent of the school network at that time – Roma pupils represented a majority and in a further 70 schools they made up between 40% and 50% of pupils (Havas, 2008). Restricting the discussion to rural neighbourhoods similar to Erdőkürt and its surroundings, free parental choice could result in extreme, almost 100%, segregation of Roma pupils in village schools where the proportion of the Roma within the village population was still much less, 40%–50%. Havas had depicted the selection mechanisms in one of his earlier articles (Havas, 2002) illustrating how the birth of 'ghetto schools'¹⁶ was connected with non-Roma and the better-off Roma parents' enrolling their children in schools where the rate of Roma children was low or nonexistent. This is precisely what happened in Kálló, where the parents of 20 non-Roma pupils decided to enrol their children at the Erdőkürt school. When they made this decision in 2005–2006, the proportion of Roma children in the primary school of Kálló was already around 70%.

According to Szalai, this phenomenon represents the aspirations of impoverished "white" lower-middle and lower classes to distinguish themselves sharply from the poorest, and especially the Roma, and maintain their relative social distance from them (Szalai, 2008; Messzing et al., 2010). Mechanisms of distinction allow them to maintain their self image and pride as members of the lower classes struggling (temporarily) with material deprivation. However, the immediate decisions of parents usually have to do with practical matters such as the spread of aggressive behaviour on the part of the pupils, the poor quality of teaching and the low achievements of pupils in heavily segregated schools. As Messzing and Molnár have pointed out, in parallel with an increasing proportion of Roma pupils, the achievements of non-Roma pupils worsen proportionately, something also expressed in children's aspirations for further education. In their sample, in classes where the proportion of Roma children was over 40%, the rate of non-Roma students who planned to continue their studies into secondary schools providing a general certificate dropped

¹³ See Pallot (2012) in this volume on the conflicting nature of rural administrative reforms in Russia.

¹⁴ The amalgamation of the local councils of the smallest villages started in the early 1960s and peaked at the beginning of the 1970s when a systematic concentration and reorganisation of local councils took place in the framework of the so-called National Conception of Settlement Network Development (Országos Településhálózatfejlesztési Koncepció) issues in 1971.

¹⁵ Act No. CXXXV of 1997 on the Associations and Co-operation of Local Self Governments.

¹⁶ The term 'ghetto school' or 'segregated school' is usually used when the proportion of Roma pupils exceeds 70–80% of the enrolled children.

dramatically. According to the authors their results proved that “when middleclass parents rescued their children from schools threatened with full segregation they made decisions based on rational criteria” (Messing and Molnár, 2008: 84).

4.3. Top-down pressure towards cost-effective operation

Under the pressure of growing public expenditure and an increasing budgetary deficit in the wake of European Union accession, the Socialist–Liberal government decided to rationalise local government financing and public service delivery in rural areas. Act No CVII of 2004 on the MLGA Act built on the 1997 regulation. But since the coalition government could not command the two-thirds majority necessary to amend the local government act and stipulate mandatory associations, assembling into multifunctional associations was voluntary rather than compulsory. The voluntary nature of the associations was, however, illusory in most cases because of the strong pressure put on local authorities to join. Multifunctional associations were established within mandatory spatial and organisational units (between local and county levels with the exclusive membership of local governments). Tasks were also stipulated by the Act signalling the most important goals of the central government, i.e. fostering the cost-effective operation of inter-community planning and such human public services as education, social services and health care. With the MLGA regulation, new, supplementary subsidies appeared in 2005–2007 to promote the joint operation of nurseries and primary schools where the minimum number of children per group or classroom stipulated by the Act was met. Due to the rearrangement of state incentives and conditions for accessing them, within three years, the country was fully covered by multifunctional associations. In the meantime, standard state support for primary education first stagnated and then, from 2007, fell by 10% and funding shifted from a pupil headcount to a mixed (classroom as well as pupil headcount) basis. Subsidies promoting the small schools of tiny villages also fell, as did those favouring maintaining associations of rural local governments. As a consequence, the processes of school merger and school closure accelerated.

Fig. 1 shows the number of villages with fewer than 2000 inhabitants maintaining primary schools in 2004, when the MLGA Act was issued and in 2008, four years later, when the desired structure was expected to be operational. The data clearly prove the efficacy of financial incentives and the desperate need for supplementary resources on the part of municipalities, which together resulted in a dramatic, 50 percent decline in the number of rural local authorities providing their own independent educational services. Fig. 2 indicates not only the mainstream avenue towards

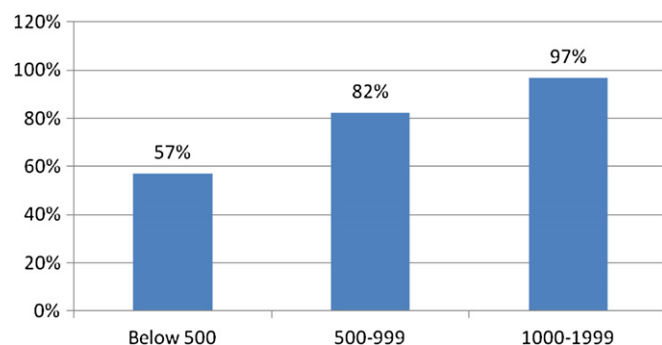


Fig. 1. The decline in small villages with schools by population categories between 2004 and 2008 (2004 = 100%). Source: Public Education Statistics (KirStat Database) 2004, 2008.

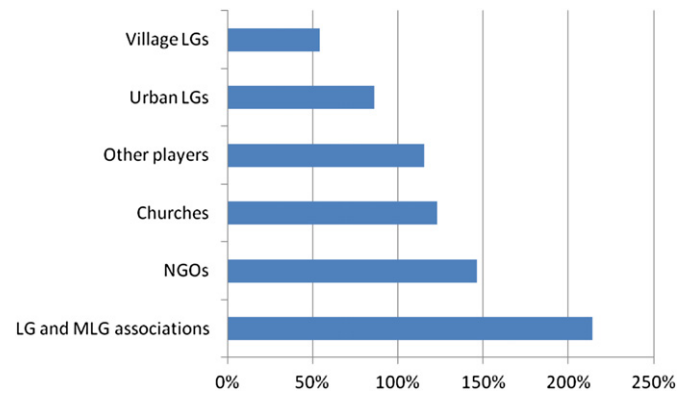


Fig. 2. Winners and losers: change in the bodies maintaining primary schools 2004–2008 (2004 = 100%). Source: Public Education Statistics (KirStat Database) 2004, 2008. Abbreviations: LG = local government, MLG associations = multifunctional local government associations).

joint operation within formal associations, but also the less common “escape routes” towards churches, NGOs and other players functioning as bodies maintaining village schools.

Parallel processes can easily be identified in Europe: the practice of amalgamating or closing rural schools is well-known especially in sparsely populated and hilly areas. Decreasing rural school networks have been reported recently from Finland, Sweden, Norway, Scotland and England (Kalaja and Pieterinen, 2009; Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Kvalsund, 2009; Dowling, 2009; Galton and Hargreaves, 1995; Hargreaves, 2009), as well as from the Czech Republic (Kucerova and Kucera, 2009). The size of rural primary schools might be different in various contexts (frequently fewer than 100 pupils on the roll). They are threatened with closure mainly because of their inevitably high relative costs. It is also common that regardless of the body charged with maintenance/management, basic financial resources are generally provided on a pupil headcount basis hitting small schools disproportionately. Accounts of the performance of rural schools vary; according to most the quality of teaching is comparable or better than in large schools, something also reflected in the pupils’ achievements. In Hungary, central government rhetoric stressed the poor achievements of small schools and disregarded the extent to which the increasing number of segregating or ghetto schools in small villages distorted the average figures for small-school performance.

Various forms of co-operation or clustering have emerged as survival strategies in the Czech Republic and in fact in the UK (Kucerova and Kucera, 2009; Hargreaves, 2009). In the UK, the size of school clusters ranges from two to more than ten; the intensity of co-operation and the organisational structures varied from loose collaboration of fully independent establishments to federations, where the amalgamated schools were retained in their own locality, and kept their distinct identity, but “they all formally unite [d] under a single name, budget, head and governing body” (Ribchester and Edwards, 1999: 58). This is very similar to the Hungarian co-operation model, but there are some significant characteristics in the Hungarian case that are not necessarily shared. In the Hungarian context, schools rarely unite on a fully voluntary basis, but rather to avoid immediate closure. Although previously established voluntary co-operation, that is maintenance associations of local governments, were also accepted, the new rounds of mergers/closures were pressed by circumstances and implemented very fast. The amalgamated schools create a hierarchical structure in Hungary with one central school and one or more subsidiary-schools. The central school should be an eight-grade school, the subsidiary-school(s) should not: they are eligible

for supplementary subsidies if they have maximum six grades. Finally, in the Hungarian context, the greater part of funding (basic and supplementary subsidies) is transmitted from central government to the school via the multifunctional associations. In the best case local authorities pool resources to share the maintenance costs not covered centrally, in the worst case they do not and all costs are covered by the seat of the central school.

It is also the case that in the UK rural schools were protected by the Labour government from the late 1990s when school closures were reduced from approximately 30 to only two or three per year. Some supplementary funds available for co-operation and a strict approval procedure resulted in the almost total disappearance of closures, at least until 2008. According to one of Ribchester and Edwards' respondents, "All the levels of the community would strongly oppose any suggestion of closure as the school and the children are the heart of the village life. Without the school the village would 'die'" (Ribchester and Edwards, 1999: 57). Exactly the same fear was expressed by school activists in Erdőkürt.

5. A village school and its supporting community

5.1. The Erdőkürt village school

5.1.1. School enrolments

The village school of Erdőkürt operated with eight grades and 61 students in the school year 2008/2009, partly on the basis of mixed-year classes. Three quarters of the students lived in Erdőkürt, the rest commuted from neighbouring Kálló. At the beginning of the 1990s there had been about 65 pupils enrolled in the primary school in Erdőkürt, a number which, due to a sharp drop in the birth rate had decreased to 35 by 2003. At this point a formerly unimaginable tacit agreement came into being between a group of non-Roma parents in Kálló and some influential figures (council members, teachers) in Erdőkürt. According to the agreement from the school year of 2003/2004 onwards the Erdőkürt school would accept non-Roma children from Kálló so increasing the size of its student body. Erdőkürt used the 'market niche' generated by local ghettoisation and capitalised on ethnic segregation 'from the other side' by providing 'escape' from a ghetto school. One of the councillors, the public nurse, played the role of mediator or broker, since her service area also covered Kálló; she therefore had a rather extended set of external networks at her disposal.

5.1.2. Segregation tendencies in the vicinity of Erdőkürt

In the micro-region to which Erdőkürt belongs, eight settlements maintained six schools in 2008. The MLGA centre, Pásztó, adopted a rather liberal approach and did not exert pressure on villages to merge schools. Two ghetto schools had come into being over the past decades as a consequence of free parental choice, leading to the 'flight' of non-Roma pupils from the schools in ghettoising villages. Three other schools witnessed an increase in Roma children (from 20 to 60 percent). The single school where Roma children were not present in 2008 was that of Erdőkürt. The Erdőkürt school also adopted 'Slovak minority education' in 1993, a reflection of village and school leaders' dedication to their cultural roots, and, equally importantly, of the additional supplementary state support that Slovak minority education brought with it.¹⁷

¹⁷ Paradoxically, non-Roma Kálló pupils of Hungarian roots participated in the Ethnic Slovak education. As those pupils whose home village was Erdőkürt did not speak Slovak either, the gap between the two groups of pupils was easily bridged by the teachers.

Table 1
Parents' level of education.

| Highest level of educational attainment | Erdőkürt parents (%) | | Non-catchment area parents (%) | |
|---|----------------------|---------|--------------------------------|---------|
| | Mothers | Fathers | Mothers | Fathers |
| Secondary education with maturation | 53.3 | 40.0 | 47.6 | 14.3 |
| Higher education | 6.7 | 3.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| In total | 60.0 | 43.3 | 47.6 | 14.3 |

Source: Parents' survey, $N = 51$.

What we are witnessing here is not the well-known aspirations of middle-class parents to find the right education for their children as was portrayed recently in British rural contexts (Walker and Clark, 2010). Our parents' survey¹⁸ revealed some significant differences between the social background of Erdőkürt parents and those of the non-catchment area. Though working class employees made up the largest cluster in both sub-groups, 'outsider parents' were less educated, and for both sexes unemployment rates were higher among this group, as Tables 1 and 2 illustrate:

The justification for school choices in the parents' answers also shows remarkable differences between the two groups. As Fig. 3 indicates, the school preference of villagers was governed primarily by the proximity of the school (87%), its "good atmosphere" (63%) and the high quality of teaching (53%), whilst 'outsiders' valued the quality of teaching the most (71%), classmates second (67%) and the "good atmosphere" of the school in the third place. In other words, non-catchment parents chose the Erdőkürt school because they wanted to make sure that their children were educated at a school where the (social/ethnic) composition of the students allowed for a good education. The primacy of the students' composition from the point of view of the outsiders is clear from the low rating given for teacher quality among the motivations of parents (14%).

5.1.3. A pressure to associate

The legal and financial contexts outlined in Section 3 above, induced Erdőkürt to establish an association. Kálló was excluded from the list of potential partners because of its ghetto school, therefore a third village (Egyházásdengeleg), situated 16 km away, was singled out as a partner. Erdőkürt and Egyházásdengeleg had to cope with similar problems (the small size of their settlements and schools) and previously regular contacts had taken place between them around the issue of Slovakian minority education (e.g. joint applications for funding). The smoothly formed association fulfilled expectations, guaranteeing entitlement to additional state subsidies without resulting in organisational change.¹⁹ In the case of Erdőkürt additional subsidies of all kinds secured one third of the maintenance costs, while in the case of Egyházásdengeleg almost 40 percent was secured, a clear indication of the importance of these (additional) resources.

In spite of the vital importance of joint operation for both villages, the association dissolved in school year 2008/2009, when only three pupils were enrolled in the first class of the Egyházásdengeleg school,²⁰ all of whom came from outside the village. This demographic decline forced the village leaders of Egyházásdengeleg to search for a real amalgamation, and they succeeded

¹⁸ Parents of the children enrolled in the Erdőkürt school in the 2008/2009 school year were surveyed.

¹⁹ Such semi-amalgamations were eligible for additional funding in 2004–2006.

²⁰ The minimum number of pupils in the first class was five in schools with national minority teaching.

Table 2
Parents' occupation.

| Occupation structure | Erdőkürt parents (%) | | Non-catchment area parents (%) | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|---------|--------------------------------|---------|
| | Mothers | Fathers | Mothers | Fathers |
| Blue collar employee | 60.0 | 83.3 | 52.4 | 57.1 |
| Entrepreneur | 6.7 | 3.3 | 19.0 | 4.8 |
| Unemployed | 16.7 | 10.0 | 23.8 | 28.6 |
| Home-maker/being on maternity leave | 16.6 | 0.0 | 4.8 | 0.0 |
| Other | 0.0 | 3.3 | 0.0 | 9.5 |

Source: Parents' survey, $N = 51$.

in establishing a merged school with the neighbouring village.²¹ Erdőkürt was also invited, but refused to amalgamate.

5.1.4. Reactions to the dissolution of the association

A meeting of Erdőkürt local council held in June 2008 in the presence of some parents and teachers, evaluated the situation following the disintegration of the association with Egyházszerveg. By then it was widely known that the village leadership had built up a 20 million Forint reserve, and the parents enquired about it, suggesting that this reserve should be spent on keeping the school going.²² The councillors²³ shared the parents' convictions, whilst the council clerk and the mayor argued against the maintenance of the village school without an association. They favoured finding another partner with a potential central school but they could not convince the council members and the parents.

The mayor and the leader of the mayor's office, the clerk, agreed upon the necessity of association, but they could not agree on a partner. The lack of shared possible partners must have played a role in their failure to reach an agreement with any of the village leaders in the vicinity although they started negotiations right after the split with Egyházszerveg. Councillors and the school principal rejected all emerging alternatives: none of the offers was attractive enough; one of the potential schools was "too far away", another had a reputation for "alcohol problems and aggression", a third was "too big with a commanding leadership (...) not offering Slovak teaching", a fourth was "across the hills" approachable on a curvy, dangerous road, etc. One of the councillors summarised the state of affairs in an interview as follows: "That the school should remain here was OK for everybody. But there was no consent about the best choice if we opt for a new partnership with another village. None of the five alternatives could win the majority of votes". According to the council clerk there was another important reason which impeded amalgamation: the representatives of the local government did not want to be associated with such a shameful deed. "It shall not be tied to their names that the school was closed down. It was not ambition, but honour that motivated the representatives." According to the minutes, several proposals were submitted aimed at increasing local government income, such as the sale of street names by auction, increasing local taxes, or the establishment of a joint mayor's office with an available partner. Councillors counted,

²¹ Lower classes were retained in Egyházszerveg whilst children in the fifth to eighth grades were taught in Héhalom, the seat of the central school.

²² According to the estimates of the council clerk the full amount of the reserve (equivalent of 80 thousand Euro) would cover the operation of the school for just one year.

²³ The elected body of Erdőkürt local government comprised one female and four male members, namely, the community nurse, an entrepreneur, one of the teachers and two commuting employees, who both worked in manufacturing industries. All of the council members were from families with local Slovak origins. By contrast, the part-time mayor, who earned his living from his building enterprise, was born outside the village; his parents had worked as agricultural labourers in a nearby hamlet.

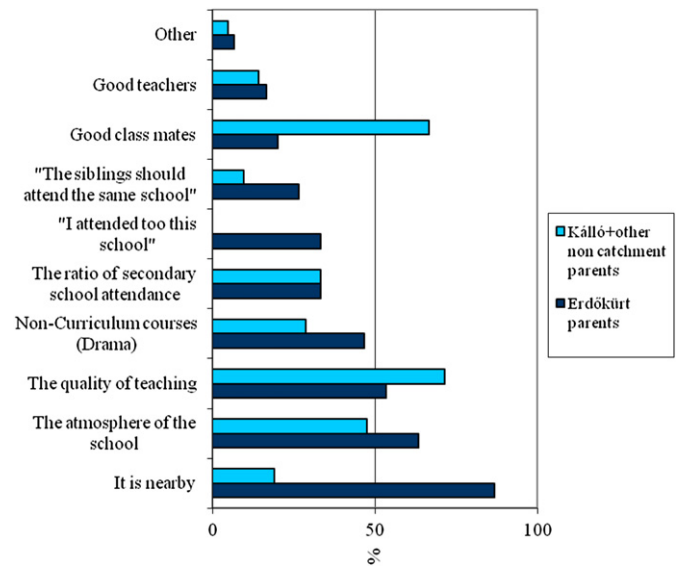


Fig. 3. Reasons for parental choice of school. Source: Parents' survey, $N = 51$.

with reason, upon mobilising the support of local NGOs, in which they played crucial roles (see Rácz and Tóth, 2010).

As a result of the joint action of different stakeholders (parents, council members, NGOs), the Erdőkürt school avoided closure. The gap between the costs and state funds (basic educational entitlements) was filled from local savings and sharp spending cuts in other areas: the mayor's office shrunk further, the council clerk left the village for a better job, and nobody was hired to replace him, one of the nursery teachers was also made redundant – thus the nursery was left with only two staff: the head (a trained nursery teacher) and an unskilled assistant. The school did not allow any further cuts to its staff; the body of six teachers was already too few to fulfil teaching tasks properly.

5.2. The village community, networks and social capital

The fact that the Erdőkürt village school could continue as an independent eight-year school had much to do with its strong and organised village community. Its community strength might be expressed by the number and activity of NGOs within its borders: this village of 560 inhabitants had 11 NGOs in 2009, five of them officially registered, with a total of 250 active members. However, comparison of the lists of NGO members revealed that due to overlapping memberships, this figure actually included only 120 individuals, with a core group of 10–15 activists all of whom have very strong ties of friendship or family relations. Still, it means that roughly half of the adult village population was active in community life in 2008–2009, a phenomenon rather atypical in Hungary: in most rural locations in Hungary if there are NGOs at all, they do not really reflect strong ties and active community life. Many rural NGOs were established and owned by local governments with the overt goal of receiving funds from the state budget or from other sources, having little or nothing to do with true civic actions (Kovács, 2002; Depraz, 2006).

Although the Erdőkürt case is unusual, it is not unique. Unlike in the Czech Republic or Slovakia, the "...relatively liberal Hungarian version of state socialism had let 'politically innocent' voluntary associations exist," (Mansfeldová et al., 2004), therefore such associations did operate in fairly high numbers even before the fall of socialism. Buchowski also emphasised the importance of such "innocent" organisations, even family circles in building civil

society during the last decade of communism in spite of state control (Buchowski, 1996). At the start of the 1990s, Hann did not find much structural change in the recruitment and activities of the few voluntary organisations of a Hungarian village, Tázlár before and after the fall of the socialist system; therefore he stressed the continuities across late socialism and the first years of the new era (Hann, 1993). Elsewhere, he pointed out that the notion of ‘civil society’ “refers to a wide range of associational activity outside of, and usually opposed to, the state” and invited a more inclusive usage of the term “civil society, in which it is not defined negatively, in opposition to the state, but positively in the context of the ideas and practices through which co-operation and trust are established in social life” (Hann, 1996: 21–22). This conceptualisation of civil society can be fruitfully applied in the post socialist rural context.

In spite of the significant increase in the number of civic organisations and the widening scope of their activities after the fall of socialism, in many rural communities, continuity with the socialist past remained rather strong, for example, three of the eleven local associations in the researched village were established before 1990 (the Cultural Circle, the Sports Club and the local unit of the Red Cross). What is unique in Erdőkürt is that villagers have not only kept these organisations alive, but that they also established new organisations in order to enhance the fundraising potential of the village and to meet specific group interests. In addition to the three organisations founded during the late 1980s, two others (the Village Protection Association and the Evangelist Choir) were officially registered from the time of founding; six others²⁴ have remained ‘informal’ circles of specific age- or interest-groups (see Rác and Tóth, 2010).

When searching for the background to the intensive civic engagement of Erdőkürt, ethnicity and active religious engagement – not independently of one another – should be highlighted: four of the NGOs were directly related either to ethnicity or religion in 2009 and five of them could be considered as “pro-community” organisations. The important role of ethnicity in generating shared values and common actions has been reported in a community study of an ethnic German community (Schwarcz, 2011). Cultural and ethnic organisations could provide the communities with the appropriate framework for gathering and cultivating community life according to local ethnic traditions. The entitlement of such organisations to access state funds and funds raised by the nationwide organisations of ethnic groups were equally important before and after the fall of socialism thus inevitably underpinning continuities.

The strong community ties and activities clearly express a considerable stock of social capital accumulated in the village and being constantly produced and reproduced in the formal and informal circles. At this stage I use the term ‘social capital’ in a broad sense after Woolcock as “a broad term encompassing the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefit” (Woolcock, 1998: 155). I will discuss the types of social capital and show not only its ‘benefits’ but also its ‘costs’ in the coming section of this paper.

The most appreciated formal circle of gathering of all was the choir attached to the Lutheran Church, which has been shifting towards an ecumenical outlook since the mid 1990s. The choir is the most eminent and loved forum in the village, where villagers with the same ethnic identity, but with differing religious affiliations, gather regularly and practice mainly for their own pleasure.

Singing in the choir provides the singers with the chance to represent an essential element of local (religious) traditions as roots of cultural assets they might capitalise on (at least for the members of the Lutheran congregation). The ties between choir members are strengthened during rehearsals on the basis of their shared membership and identity, bonding the members of the Lutheran congregation. The choir can also be regarded as a ‘platform for integration’ (Svendsen and Sorensen, 2007) of the two religious communities, thus it is a locus for enhancing bonding and bridging social capital as well as “provide members a sense of belongingness” (after Lin, 2008: 60). Active religious life itself also strengthened ties in Erdőkürt, the feasts and holidays spent within the framework of the religious communities, together with piety and reverence for authority, and the shared belief that acquiring a proper education is paramount. This latter has been traditionally stronger in the Lutheran community of the village; cantor teachers have had a definitive role in shaping the community, going back for centuries. This role was partially taken over by the school leaders of the socialist era – in line with the expectations of the village population.²⁵

According to Ritzen and Woolcock, “linking relations that connect people from different socio-economic and demographic groups are presumably the most important of these, compared to bonding (family, friends) or bridging (colleagues, horizontal ties) relations. The definition also implies that people trust that their collective action – which may entail short run losses – generates in the long run benefits (on average).” (Ritzen and Woolcock, 2000: 9). Given that the forms of social capital are generated by networks or relationships, the terms in this study are used accordingly: *bonding social capital* signals close intra-group ties of members of the Erdőkürt community, *bridging social capital* is used when different, horizontally connecting social groups are brought together (like Catholics and Evangelists in the Choir), whilst *linking social capital* is identified as missing.

Actions aimed at rescuing the school like the charity balls and talks in public reinforced the binding links between villagers within the two biggest associations as did the repeated arguments in various forums as to why the school should be maintained in its current form (as an eight-year school). This further increased the cohesion of the village community. From the analysis of narratives, the school itself appears as the most important terrain for the production of local culture and identity, where Slovak roots are cultivated within the curriculum and more or less independent of it: students attend extracurricular (Slovak) drama courses and also enter national competitions. Being excellent in something which is Slovak and related to the local culture – cultivating drama at school – has become a firm element of the “routine” of village cultural (educational) life in the past decades, a shared experience of children and their parents.²⁶ In the eyes of Erdőkürt parents and villagers the local school “produced” perfect Erdőkürt citizens and, understandably, they did not want to relinquish it.

Active engagement in associations reinforces intra-community trust and vice versa. Trust, however, in this case is restricted to group members or at best to the population represented by NGO activists (that is the villagers of Erdőkürt), therefore it is ‘particularised’, rather than ‘generalised’. ‘Particularised trust’ refers to

²⁴ They are as follows: the Youth Club, the Pensioners’ Club, the Tradition-Preserving Group, the local unit of the Slovak Organisation and the Association of Erdőkürt-Origin People.

²⁵ Both former principals of the Socialist era still played an important active role in the community life of the village in 2008–2009 despite their old age.

²⁶ See also Trell et al. (2012) in this volume for a discussion of local cultural activities, in this case dancing, as an important source of place-making, inter-generational socialising and supporting a sense of belonging for young people in rural Estonia.

“faith only in people like yourself” unlike “generalised trust” which “refers both your own kind and people different from you” (Uslaner, 2008: 104). The nature of trust prevailing in a community matters because it determines openness as well as the ability to co-operate with people ‘different from you’.

Unlike generalised trust, the in-group oriented “particularised” trust does not lead to “conciliation and co-operation” (Uslaner, 2008). The only person in the village who possessed specific external networks was one of the councillors, the public childcare nurse, and she used these networks when recruiting non-Roma pupils to the Erdőkürt school. This action, and her firm conviction that the school had to be saved as it was, did not allow her to accept any other alternative. The shortage in respect of generalised trust in this village might reflect its relative geographical isolation, its maintenance of Slovak identity, its active religious life and its strong community spirit which translated into an intense sense of belonging to the locality. Most of these aspects are also listed by Uslaner as background factors of weak generalised trust (2008).

The lack of external networks deprived the decision-makers from developing *linking social capital* thus excluding them from seeing alternative solutions for similar problems, from sharing experiences and simply from becoming more informed. Svendsen and Sorensen found positive examples when they investigated two marginal communities in rural Denmark. According to their findings, supra-local networks, and linking social capital based on them are important local resources, “by extending local networks to the whole region and further it becomes possible to get access to information and advice” (Svendsen and Sorensen, 2007), something the Erdőkürt decision-makers desperately missed.

When trying to explain the weak external networks of the Erdőkürt community members, two concepts, Bourdieu’s on the ‘volume’ of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and that of the ‘optimum quantity’ of social capital articulated by Michael Woolcock could be applied (Woolcock, 1998). In Bourdieu’s theory:

the volume of social capital (...) depends on the size of the network of connections (an agent) can effectively mobilise and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected (Bourdieu, 1986: 209).

Social capital is not independent of economic and cultural capital, what is more, it “exerts a multiplier effect on the capital he (the agent) possesses on his own right.” (Bourdieu, 1986: 209). To translate this to the Erdőkürt case: the volume of social capital amongst the Erdőkürt community members must be low, since they are relatively poorly endowed either with economic or with cultural capital.

According to Woolcock, social capital has both benefits and costs “[a] group can possess too much or too little of it ...” Therefore the stock of social capital “is to be optimized not maximized.” (Woolcock, 1998: 158) When trying to understand successes and failures in relation to the school saving action in Erdőkürt, what Woolcock calls “excess of community” is at work discouraging villagers from building external networks. As he states in the context of development: “intensive intra-community ties (integration) must begin to co-exist with more extensive albeit “weaker” extra-community networks (linkages)” (Woolcock, 1998: 180).

To conclude this section, analysis has revealed that strong inter-community horizontal networks do not furnish either the individuals, or their collectivities with power to obtain new resources, better positions and establish sustainable co-operations. The volume of social capital was too low in the community of Erdőkürt which was well endowed with strong horizontal networks but its members missed vertical

relationships, therefore linking social capital. The volume and the kinds of social capital assigned the scope of collective action and also its success, which was not unequivocal: the school was rescued but generated a huge financial burden without longer-term prospects for sustainability.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper has discussed some important structural changes taking place in the Hungarian countryside. Though counter-urbanisation has been a highly influential process in Hungary too, reshaping extended rural areas, restructuring rural communities, economies and cultures, nevertheless, compared to the advanced countries its geographical scope has remained relatively narrow, restricted to the suburban areas and developed rural districts of north-west Hungary. Due to the uneven differentiation of the Hungarian rural space, in extended rural areas, primarily in classic and so-called inner peripheries, the economy has been declining since the political turn generating impoverishment of the villages and the population alike. In some rural districts, poverty has reached critical proportions, deprivation has multiplied, coupled with spatial and ethnic segregation.

The paper reports on a small rural community lying at the edge of the metropolitan area and the North-East Region which suffers from both impoverishment and ghettoisation. The impacts of counter-urbanisation were weak in Erdőkürt, therefore demographic decline in the village led to a sharp drop in school enrolment. This stimulated the attraction of non-Roma children from the neighbouring village, Kálló, to the Erdőkürt school. This action depended on the aspirations of non-Roma parents in Kálló and the niche that they generated on the educational market. The case study points to the mechanisms of ghettoisation from the “other side”: when the proportion of Roma children in the Kálló school reached 70% the demand for a nearby non-Roma school increased. This is what the Erdőkürt school could capitalise on.

The series of joint actions of local associations supported by the local government saved the small school of Erdőkürt. However, the success is not unequivocal, there are several possible readings of the story. According to one reading, it is a story of the strength of a village community, which undertook a series of actions aimed at preserving the village school from closure. Due to their activity, a remarkable unity amongst the villagers came about. This reading of the story calls for a celebration of civic virtue and strong community spirit; it is a show of the villagers’ respect for their school as a locus for socialising local citizens and forging local identity. The strong ethnic and religious affiliations of the locals, as well as the relatively isolated geographical location of the village, explain the high volume of bonding and bridging social capital prevailing here and also, cultural capital in the sense of shared ownership and practice of local culture. Though Erdőkürt is a relatively small village with a shrinking and ageing population, this reading of the tale suggests that the people living here are confident, that they are conscious holders of their assets, and to maintain such precious elements of these assets as the local school, they are ready to make sacrifices and mobilise themselves in joint action.

According to another reading of the school’s rescue, it is a tale of a series of failures and mistaken decisions by community leaders when they were required to find partners to associate with and establish a viable, jointly run school. Physical (geographical) barriers with some of the neighbouring villages, on the one hand, an unbridgeable cultural gap between Erdőkürt and Kálló generated by ghettoisation, on the other, represented “objective” impeding factors. But the weak negotiating abilities of village

leaders, the inappropriate stock of information from 'outside' and from 'above' and the missing experiences collected from 'others' also played major roles in the failure. In short, the villagers were trapped by their own strong and closed community.

Both readings are relevant and neither is entirely true without the other.

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