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Project title: The scalar organisation of state power and the changing scope of local agents to respond to global crises in various CEE contexts

1. Please present yourself and your research project.

I'm a social geographer and work as a senior research fellow at the Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Institute for Regional Studies in Békéscsaba, Hungary. I'm also a lecturer at the University of Debrecen and in the 'Geoscience' Doctoral School, University of Szeged. My current research projects are focused on socio-spatial inequalities in local spaces stemming from peripheral industrialization and dependent financialization in CEE, on the centralisation of state power and uneven development and alternative food production systems, all anchored in a combined critical political economic and feminist approach. I'm also part of initiatives which support the joint work and actions of critical social scientists in Hungary, and contribute to the work of the editorial board of Tér és Társadalom/Space and Society (https://tet.rkk.hu/index.php/TeT).

The project supported by the EEGA was a desk research focused on the rearrangement of state power and spaces in CEE to reveal, how subsequent crises since 2008 impacted the position of local communities in the changing regulative-institutional fixes. Hence, I placed municipalities in the focus as the agents of place-based development which mobilise resources in times of shocks to cope with the unfolding crises in the local economy and society, as the manifestations of state power and its spatial organisation, and as the bodies representing the interests of local communities therefore, the sources of citizenship. The project rested on a comparative approach to reveal changes in state spatial strategies, institutional systems and the underlying power relations in selected CEE countries (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Estonia and Slovenia) which repositioned municipalities in the systems of development policies and collective consumption and changed their scope to control social and environmental processes in local spaces. This thematic focus entailed a multiscalar inquiry, i.e. studying municipal agency as the 'resultant' of global processes (economic crises, dependent financialization, imposed austerity schemes, peripheral industrialization, etc.), European policies, national political constellations, struggles, institutional systems and cultures, and also of local social relations. The project inevitably emerged as an interdisciplinary endeavour embracing results and debates in the fields of geographical political economy, political science and sociology.

The desk research revealed a diverse picture of municipal agency in the countries studied which is rooted in their modern (pre- and post-transition) political history. Nevertheless, powerful structural processes such as the collapse of state socialism, integration in the European institutional systems and the emergence of the region as an economic (semi)periphery entailed problems, deficits and conflicts inherent to all CEE polities emerging after 1990. Here I refer only to three of them. (1) Since (re)municipalization was unfolding along with state-building in CEE, it was deeply politicized process which has been impacting the organisation of state power and political debates on state agency up until today. It manifests in the intrusion of party politics in local institutions (which looks a more successful strategy for them than penetrating in society at its grass-roots level), and also in grassroots movements which raised counter-narratives of state policies locally and beyond. (2) Finance is clearly one of the greatest weaknesses of municipal systems in CEE; the share of local

governments in public spending is among the lowest in Europe and communities are strongly dependent on state revenues reallocated by central governments. It makes communities vulnerable in times of depression and austerity, limits their scope to counteract social crisis and undermines the legitimacy of municipalities which is reflected by the low voting turnout at local elections throughout the region. (3) The weaknesses of the municipal systems are also amplifying uneven spatial development regionally and along urban-rural divide. Decentralisation without institutionalising solidarity at national scale entails cementing inequalities at the expense of rural spaces and regions hit by structural crisis; moreover, the lack of local grassroots agency in such places entails the shift of power to the local government which for most, does not contribute to citizen participation, transparency of activities undertaken by public authorities, orientation towards consensus and a more balanced development locally.

2. How did you come up with your research project?

The motifs to develop a project on municipal agency in CEE are rooted in the research projects I contributed to in the past 10 years which provided a rich empirical knowledge on multiple state agency in uneven development, i.e. in the reproduction of socio-spatial marginalities in rural spaces, the conflict-laden and uneven recovery of old industrial spaces, and in the systems of social reproduction in Hungary and beyond. The projects revealed how the centralisation of state power was interrelated intimately with dependent financialization and post-crisis austerity measures entailing the loss of power at municipal scale and unfolding clientism locally and within (state) institutional hierarchies, undermining the legitimacy of self-governance in Hungary. Yet we failed in our projects to explain how far such processes are the outcomes of structural conditions shaping all CEE polities and how much they are shaped by national institutional contexts, culture and history. Hence, studying CEE paths to establish municipal systems was also meant to understand more of my home context and identify alternative scenarios to the current political system in Hungary. Consequently, my project also aimed to contribute to the theoretical debates on state power and agency from a non-core context, highlighting the limits of municipalities to go beyond the contested, hierarchical nexus of state institutions and related dependencies in the European periphery.

3. How did you get to know EEGA ScienceCampus? What is the EEGA ScienceCampus for you?

The EEGA scholarship was an opportunity to unfold my research and embed it more in a CEE context. Although, I applied for it in 2023 for the first time, the EEGA has been well-known to me for more than a decade, when I got involved in a joint project of the IfL and our institute (2013) and got first-hand information about the goals and activities of the Science Campus. I found the concept of an umbrella organization with a sound institutional background set up to support a systematic international networking of academics engaging. What I appreciated particularly was the concept of including east European scholars in developing joint projects and the flows of knowledge; they have limited resources yet a lot to say about the context they were (are) coming from and also about the (non-)relevance of powerful concepts and theories shaping academic discourses. This inclusive way of knowledge production is not only scientifically relevant but also represents a most welcome counter-narrative and praxis within a highly uneven world of academia.

Finally, I've been following and contributing to EEGA events online and in-person (e.g. the RSA CEE conference in Leipzig) for years and it's my plan to go on with it, as the campus works as a

sound framework for developing and sharing ideas by organizing forums for scholars thinking critically about actual power relations and institutional arrangements which are shaping socio-spatial processes in Eastern Europe. We do need such opportunities today, in the time of environmental, political and social crises which challenge existing institutional systems yet also create possibilities for alternative narratives of development such as social and spatial justice, well-being, ecologically sustainable production and consumption, solidarity and self-organisation which should be articulated, discussed and translated to social praxis by the community of researchers.