

Land Tenure and Population Exchange: *Intermarginal Disintegration* in the Ormánság

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Abstract: **Background:** The study explores the demographic and social challenges in peripheral rural regions shaped by a self-restrictive “one-child strategy” among the Reformed majority and the long-standing exclusion of Roma communities, leading to cumulative marginalization.

Research objectives: The main objective of this study is to introduce the concept of intermarginal disintegration to elucidate how overlapping forms of social, ethnic, and demographic marginality exacerbate crises in peripheral regions.

Research design and methods: The research is grounded in a qualitative approach combining content analysis of secondary sources, historical documents, and selected demographic indicators. The Socio-Ethnic Exclusion Index (SEK-index) was developed as a composite measure to integrate five dimensions of socio-ethnic exclusion.

Results: The findings indicate that classical core-periphery models are insufficient to capture the complex and interrelated marginalization processes affecting the region.

Conclusions: The proposed framework provides novel insights into the process of rural social restructuring. It offers analytical support for the development of more effective social and regional policies that are aimed at promoting long-term recovery in peripheral regions.

Keywords: intermarginal disintegration, rural marginality, Roma communities, one-child strategy, composite SEK-index

JEL Codes: R11, R23, J15, Z13

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1. Introduction

The Ormánság region of South Transdanubia is one of the most marginalized areas in Hungary. Its social and demographic decline has been recognized for decades yet remains an underexplored research problem. The region’s distinctive features – its dense network of small villages, geographical isolation, and ethnic diversity – make it particularly suitable for examining processes of intergenerational decline and rural marginalization.

The study focuses on the historical phenomenon known as the “one-child strategy,” a Reformed inheritance strategy in which families deliberately had only one heir to avoid the fragmentation of land. While this practice initially reflected economic rationality and social prudence, it gradually led to long-term depopulation, the weakening of community ties, and a transformation of the local ethnic composition. The legacy of this self-restrictive strategy,

combined with later structural disadvantages, continues to shape the demographic and social realities of the region.

The research aims to uncover how these intertwined historical and cultural patterns have contributed to Ormánság's contemporary status as an "internal periphery." Using qualitative and secondary data – historical sources, census statistics, and local case studies – the study explores the social norms behind the one-child system and their long-term effects on population structure and community reproduction.

Ormánság is situated in the southern part of Baranya County, along the Drava River, in the vicinity of Sellye and Vajszló. It consists of more than fifty small settlements where population decline, ageing, and social marginalization have persisted for decades. The region's settlement structure was consolidated after the Ottoman occupation and the 18th-century resettlement, but its exclusion from modernization left it with severe infrastructural and economic disadvantages.

Geographical conditions – such as sandy and clayey soil, floodplain farming constraints, and recurring floods – were unfavorable to industrialization and large-scale agriculture. During state socialism, local employment was maintained by collective farms, forestry, and public institutions, but these were not replaced by competitive opportunities after the political transition. Small and medium-sized enterprises lacked sufficient capacity, and by the 2000s, public employment had become the main livelihood source.

According to data from the Ős-Dráva Programme area (2019–2020), the employment rate was 55.2% and the activity rate 63.7%, meaning that over 13% of the working-age population had no job at all. This points not to temporary disruption but to a deep, long-term structural crisis (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2021).

In recent decades, a sharp social contrast has emerged between the ageing Reformed majority and the Roma population, which has become dominant among younger generations. This ethnic realignment results from both demographic differences (e.g., higher fertility) and migration. The symbolic and institutional presence of the Reformed community has gradually declined, while the Roma population remains concentrated in segregated, under-serviced areas.

Limited accessibility, poor transport, and deficits in education, healthcare, and digital infrastructure further reinforce social exclusion. High rates of early school leaving and the absence of educational or mentoring hubs exacerbate the situation, especially for young Roma people.

Overall, Ormánság has become an internal periphery in both geographic and socio-economic terms. The combined effects of historical legacies, missed modernization, economic contraction, and ethnic stratification have produced a unique developmental dead end that continues to drive the region into a spiral of social disintegration. Understanding this complex background is essential for interpreting both the long-term consequences of the one-child system and the contemporary challenges of Roma integration.

2. Literature Review

One of the most decisive historical factors in the demographic decline of the Ormánság is the phenomenon of the so-called "single-handedness," which can be interpreted not only as a set of family decisions but also as a collective social strategy. The predominantly Reformed population of the region consciously sought to pass on family land to a single descendant from the 18th century onwards, avoiding the impoverishment resulting from the fragmentation of land ownership. This practice was not only an economically rational but also a moral expecta-

tion: a family was considered honest if it could provide land and a vision for its children. The logic of inheritance was deeply embedded in religious and community norms. The biblical ideal of the “good farmer” played a central role in the Reformed faith, elevating the inheritance of wealth to a moral obligation as the earthly equivalent of maintaining divine order. Presbyteries, pastors, and local opinion leaders reinforced this practice with the folk wisdom “you can plow, but you don’t have to sow.” (Koloh, 2021). Following the community norm was also justified by the fact that families with many children often faced emigration and social declassification, while single-their families retained their wealth and status. However, this strategy caused a demographic distortion in the long term, from which the region could not recover. Population stagnation and then gradual decline can be observed from the 1890s, especially among the Reformed communities (Koloh, 2013). Communities aged, younger generations often left their homelands, and emigration resulted not only in an economic but also in a cultural vacuum. The consequences of single-handedness go beyond population processes. Church life, as a fundamental pillar of community cohesion, has now become dysfunctional in several settlements: merged congregations, abandoned churches, and increasingly infrequent services. In parallel, cultural heritage – family oral tradition, folk crafts, festive ceremonies – has also been disrupted. The connection between generations has weakened, and local identity has been pushed into the background, often associated with a sense of shame. The state of the built heritage is also an imprint of demographic and social decline. The adobe houses and wooden-towered churches left without heirs have begun to decay, and there are no community or state resources available to maintain them. Cultural memory and the power to shape identity have also faded: the younger generations’ attachment to the region has gradually ceased, while the Roma communities, whose population is growing proportionally, are starting to develop new forms of identity. Thus, single-handedness is not merely a historical peculiarity but a hidden social norm that disrupted the framework of communal reproduction in the long term and contributed to the internal social disintegration of the Ormánság. The strategy chosen to protect land ownership ultimately undermined the foundations of communal existence and generational continuity.

Family norms and communal ethos in rural societies

The peasant society of the Ormánság functioned not only as an economic organization, but also as a normative, value-based community. The concept of family did not only mean the nuclear family, but also an extended, multi-generational economic unit. Its internal norms – such as the division of labor, prestige-related honor, or the ethic of “contentment” – determined the life opportunities of the family members. The Reformed religious background and the resulting Puritan value system strongly influenced the functioning of the family. The role of the presbytery was not only a religious, but also a moral and disciplinary institution. Community control and the so-called “village public opinion” were crucial in shaping family norms. The order of marriages, the role of the elderly, the place of women in the division of labor, and patterns of family decision-making were closely aligned with the local ethos (Putnam, 2000). In this environment, having children was not a purely individual decision, but a strategy intertwined with social expectations and economic rationality. The social acceptance of single parenthood cannot therefore be understood without an understanding of the relationship between family and community.

Periphery theories and structural disintegration

The interpretation of the Ormánság as a social space cannot be separated from the processes of peripheral formation. The concept of periphery is used here not only in a geographical but also in a socio-structural and economic sense. According to Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory, peripheries depend on core regions and operate under their resource-extractive influence. While the theoretical framing of rural peripheries has been widely discussed in international literature, the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* also relates to notions such as *compound marginality* (Shucksmith, 2012) and double periphery (ESPON, 2017). These frameworks emphasize cumulative or multi-layered exclusion processes in rural Europe, where spatial, economic, and social disadvantages overlap. By situating intermarginal disintegration within this conceptual lineage, its novelty can be demonstrated as a model that captures not only additive but also mutually reinforcing forms of marginalization. This theoretical approach can also be applied to the Ormánság, especially considering the structural inequalities in infrastructure and land tenure that developed during the period of Dualism.

Theoretical background – research gap

International literature increasingly interprets rural poverty and exclusion not merely as an income deficit, but as a combination of spatial-access, institutional and relational deficits. The ESPON inner peripheries framework identifies the lack of access to essential services, the weakness of mobility and network connections, and the lack of coordination of multi-level (local-regional-national-EU) governance as structural causes (ESPON, 2017). The European Commission's 2040 rural vision links the same problem space to demographic decline, connectivity disadvantages, and resilience deficits, emphasizing the need for new indicators and coordinated policy trajectories (European Commission, 2024).

Woods (2019) describes the expansion of rural geography beyond agrarian and settlement foci, highlighting governance, cultural representations, and "invisible regions" alongside multi-scalar perspectives. Similarly, Shucksmith (2012) embeds rural inequalities in class and power relations and – together with Shucksmith et al. (2023, pp. 24–26) – draws attention to institutional barriers and the recalibration of support systems. The theme of temporality – crisis shocks and biographical/time schedule breaks – is also prominent: Shubin and McCollum (2021) show that the temporal flexibility of Central and Eastern European migrants is fragmented due to precarious employment and rural labor market characteristics, which can indirectly erode the relational and identity capital of peripheral areas.

In the post-socialist context, the Polish qualitative tradition provides detailed, micro-level descriptions of exclusion: Warzywoda-Kruszyńska & Kruszyński (2023) presents urban-industrial spaces of "enclaving" poverty, while Tarkowska (2013) analyzes patterns of deprivation within the family according to gender and age. In the institutional-legal dimension, Szarfenberg et al. (2020) describe the regulatory gaps and fragmentation of service access. On the methodological front of measurement, Łuczak & Kalinowski (2025) propose a fuzzy-hybrid MCDM approach for synthetic estimation of subjective poverty, emphasizing the role of past experiences and future expectations. Although the above directions adequately identify the main elements of the causal chains (access gaps, institutional fragmentation, demographic decline, temporal breaks, cultural-identity vulnerability), an integrated, micro-territorial decision support tool that combines them in a model and a composite indicator, and links it to an operationalizable intervention matrix, is missing. Most European frameworks operate at the NUTS level or coun-

try aggregation. Qualitative urban or regional case studies rarely reach the settlement, street network, or cohort level, nor do they offer priority rankings for local implementation.

This research gap is filled by the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* introduced by this study – a mutually reinforcing, feedback process of social and spatial marginalization – and the associated SEK-index, which quantifies the degree of disintegration by means of an indicator fusion of (R%, ESL, UΔ, DI, ISR) components. The novelty of the model is that:

- (1) it diagnoses at a micro-territorial level (Ormánság case), (2) it integrates the historical-cultural heritage (e.g., single-handedness, land ownership, and settlement structure) with the access-institutional dimensions in a single framework, (3) it makes feedback loops and path dependence explicit (service withdrawal ↔ emptying), and (4) it maps it directly onto an intervention matrix that generates prioritized, schedulable action proposals for multi-level governance actors.

Thus, the SEK-index is not only a diagnostic indicator, but also a local decision-support tool that operationalizes international theoretical-empirical insights in a particularly vulnerable, inner-peripheral Hungarian region.

Since the 1990s, international literature has been describing the dynamics of peripheries and exclusion using multidisciplinary and multi-scale (household-settlement-regional-European) approaches. Qualitative research at the urban and family levels shows that poverty is a spatial-social embeddedness, not merely an income deficit. Warzywoda-Kruszyńska & Kruszyński (2023) explored the “enclaving” poverty and its intergenerational legacy in the industrial districts of Łódź. Tarkowska (2013) highlights the gender and age differences in deprivation within households.

After the change of regime, socio-economic isolation in Hungary took a new form: the decline of agriculture, the narrowing of job opportunities and the reduction of state involvement were accompanied by disintegration. Adapting Wacquant’s (2008) concept of urban outcasts, we can speak of rural exclusion in the Ormánság, the deterioration of infrastructure (roads, public works) and the lack of state and civil presence. Together, these led to the creation of a kind of inner periphery, whose population was not only isolated but also symbolically devalued (Virág, 2006). The concept of *intermarginal disintegration* aims to capture precisely this multiple disadvantageous situation: a region that is both outside the development centers and inside its own, but dysfunctional, social logic.

Patterns of the Roma population

The demographic transformation of the Ormánság region is intricately linked to the change in the proportion of the Roma population. Since the 1990s, the Roma community has become an increasingly dominant player in local society, partly through natural increase and partly through internal migration. Based on the data for the settlements in the region, a clear trend can be observed, according to which the ageing and emigration of the non-Roma population has taken place in parallel with the spatial concentration of the Roma population (KSH, 2022). The table below summarizes the demographic and infrastructural data for the fifty-two settlements of the Ormánság for the period from 2011 to 2022. The table shows the change in the total population, the proportion of the Roma population, and the presence or absence of basic public services (doctor’s office, school, kindergarten, post office, railway). The data provides an opportunity to examine the extent and forms of marginalization at regional level, and their relationship with service provision and ethnic composition. The limited spatial and social mobility of the Roma population therefore contributes to the persistence of the intermarginal

situation of the Ormánság. In the region, not only the marginalization of the Roma population can be observed, but also the structural reproduction of ethnic differences.

Table 1 provides an empirical basis for the typological foundation of the concept of *inter-marginal disintegration* and helps to identify the types of settlements where different marginalization patterns prevail.

Table 1. Infrastructural provision of the Ormánság

Settlement	Popula- tion 2013	Popula- tion/ 2022	Roma % 2011	Roma % 2022	Medical office	School	Kinder- garten	Post	Railway
Besence	126	108	19.5	18.8	0	0	0	0	0
Bogdása	283	222	24.3	12.2	0	0	0	0	0
Csányoszló	677	538	11.8	14.0	0	1	1	0	0
Drávafok	509	438	26.8	18.0	1	1	1	0	0
Drávaiványi	220	154	69.3	36.8	0	0	0	0	0
Drávakeresztúr	99	115	16.7	15.7	0	0	0	0	0
Drávasztára	418	365	3.2	1.4	0	1	1	0	0
Felsőszentmárton	950	705	0.7	0.7	1	1	1	1	0
Gilvánfa	398	332	56.3	69.9	0	0	0	0	0
Gyöngyfa	140	138	36.8	29.7	0	0	0	0	0
Kákics	224	188	18.8	22.3	0	0	0	0	1
Királyegyháza	956	827	2.2	2.7	1	1	1	1	1
Kisasszonyfa	186	182	16.3	6.9	0	0	1	0	0
Magyarmecske	324	290	19.8	14.4	0	1	1	1	0
Magyartelek	216	184	10.6	8.4	0	0	0	0	0
Markóc	72	64	23.4	14.5	0	0	0	0	0
Marócsa	104	71	39.6	21.2	0	0	0	0	0
Nagycsány	152	130	0.7	7.5	0	0	0	0	0
Okorág	173	139	29.9	27.1	0	0	0	0	0
Sellye	2727	2340	3.2	3.5	1	1	1	1	0
Sósvertike	169	149	15.0	36.4	0	0	0	0	0
Sumony	430	395	10.2	21.1	0	0	0	0	1
Adorjás	184	165	72.4	33.1	0	0	0	0	0
Baranyahídvég	188	174	36.2	31.0	0	0	0	0	0
Bogádmindszent	433	361	39.2	14.3	0	0	0	0	0
Cún	245	190	13.9	19.3	0	0	0	0	0
Dióviszló	695	600	13.9	28.9	1	1	1	1	0
Drávacsehi	208	154	13.1	8.7	0	0	0	0	0
Drávacsepely	209	186	7.3	3.7	0	0	0	0	0
Dráwapiski	94	107	23.3	10.9	0	0	0	0	0
Drávaszerdahely	193	149	2.2	0.6	0	0	0	0	0
Hegyszentmárton	416	388	25.6	24.7	0	0	0	0	0
Hirics	238	231	45.6	21.3	0	0	0	0	0

Settlement	Popula- tion 2013	Popula- tion/ 2022	Roma % 2011	Roma % 2022	Medical office	School	Kinder- garten	Post	Railway
Ipacsfa	194	189	n/a.	0.5	0	0	0	0	0
Kemse	56	51	6.8	n/a.	0	0	0	0	0
Kémes	499	419	0.8	8.0	1	1	1	1	0
Kisszentmárton	243	214	23.3	19.7	0	0	0	0	0
Kovácsbida	283	222	8.2	3.0	0	0	0	0	0
Körös	220	163	10.2	4.5	0	0	0	0	0
Lúzsok	232	196	12.3	3.0	0	0	0	0	0
Ózdfalu	167	147	52.1	16.7	0	0	0	0	0
Páprád	158	136	5.1	6.9	0	0	0	0	0
Piskó	250	221	59.5	80.3	0	0	0	0	0
Rádfalva	187	187	8.3	3.1	0	0	0	0	0
Sámod	187	193	27.6	14.6	0	0	0	0	0
Szaporca	241	201	6.4	4.0	0	0	0	0	0
Tengeri	55	61	2.2	n/a.	0	0	0	0	0
Tésenfá	192	151	4.7	16.1	0	0	0	0	0
Tésény	305	292	21.6	24.2	0	0	0	0	0
Vajszló	1821	1601	5.6	4.6	1	1	1	1	1
Vejtő	176	153	13.8	28.8	0	0	0	0	0
Zaláta	239	205	6.9	8.7	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Own compilation based on statistical data from settlement websites, 2025.

The data clearly illustrates the uneven distribution of public services across the 52 settlements. Villages with high Roma population shares, such as Gilvánfa or Piskó, show a complete lack of schools, kindergartens, or postal services, which supports the argument that infrastructural deprivation and ethnic segregation reinforce each other in the region.

However, the presence of Roma communities did not automatically lead to social integration. Segregated living environments, low educational attainment, and exclusion from the labor market characterize a significant part of this population (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2016; Kállai, 2019). For example, school segregation is not only a consequence but also a reproducerfactor of social exclusion (Virág, 2006).

Reflection – from the social legacy of one-child strategy to intermarginal disintegration

To integrate the social, historical, and spatial processes described above, it became necessary to create a new interpretative framework. The concepts of “inner periphery” and “structural disintegration” highlight some aspects of the social decline taking place in the Ormánság region, but they do not capture the complexity, especially the combination of ethnic components and historical heritage. In response to this problem, the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* was born, which refers to:

- spatial marginalization (lack of infrastructure, accessibility, services),
- social exclusion (unemployment, poverty, lack of education),
- and identity crisis (cultural cohesion, disintegration of community roles).

The concept aims to provide an integrative theoretical tool that helps to analyze regions in similar situations and contributes to the development of intervention strategies.

Intermarginal disintegration is therefore not only a descriptive but also an action-oriented category, which points out that the fate of the Ormánság cannot be separated from the responsibility of state, regional and local actors. The exploration of the historical practice of single-handedness points not only to demographic anomalies, but also to a deeper social legacy that played a role in laying the foundation for the region's subsequent structural degradation. Inheritance and family planning strategies ensured the unity of land ownership and the maintenance of social status for a long time (Koloh, 2013; Erdei, 1980), while at the same time gradually weakened the possibility of communal reproduction and generational continuity.

This process did not stop at population decline. The structural vacuum created by single-handedness – an aging population, disintegrating family chains, the withering away of communal spaces – developed patterns of social disintegration that over time became a self-perpetuating spiral. As posited by Virág (2006) and Kovai et al. (2025), economic and symbolic separation are concomitant phenomena in peripheral regions. The erosion of community identity, institutional crises, and reduced accessibility give rise to a state of social “external closure”.

The following chapter attempts to capture the typology of this social disintegration. The concept of *intermarginal disintegration* offers a new theoretical framework that can simultaneously interpret the region's confinement to the geographical periphery, its symbolic exclusion, and its internal social fault lines. According to Horváth (2018), the internal peripheries are characterized by a “structural densification” crisis formation, in which inherited social patterns and the lack of modernization strain the normative frameworks of local society. The introduction of the concept presented here is not only a descriptive category, but also a diagnostic tool that targets the structural conditions under which social reproduction becomes impossible.

Methodological positioning – theory and method development study

After presenting the theoretical and empirical background, the methodological positioning of the research follows, clarifying the genre and ethical framework of the present study, as well as the logic of developing the SEK-index. This manuscript is primarily of a theory and method development nature. Its aim is to systematically introduce the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* and to provide a conceptual and technical foundation for the SEK-index.

Phase I. Conceptual and index-building stage

In this genre, primary, qualitative fieldwork is not a prerequisite, because the main contribution is conceptual clarification, variable architecture, metric formation, and the development of decision-support logic. The thesis strives for analytical generalization (not statistical generalization): the validity of the model rests on internal coherence, the literature-based foundation of the variables, and robustness tests. In the small, vulnerable, and stigmatized communities of the Ormánság, rapid, targeted interviews carry research ethical risks (identifiability, research fatigue, gatekeeper dependence). In this phase, the author consciously avoided “rapid qualitative” data collection and relied on triangulation of secondary data (census, administrative statistics, historical sources) and indicator-level validation. This approach reduces the community burden and prevents model building from being done at the expense of the field. The primary qualitative phase is not omitted, but is given a time-delayed, targeted validation function.

Phase II. Targeted qualitative validation

In the next phase, semi-structured interviews and small group workshops (settlement leaders, teachers, health workers, local civil society actors) are prepared, with a hypothesis-driven protocol: the qualitative material does not serve the creation of the model, but rather the fine-tuning and local prioritization of the model (intervention matrix). The study does not contain in-depth interviews or new qualitative data. This is a genre decision: this phase of the report is a conceptual and methodological foundation study that structures and targets the subsequent fieldwork.

The primary qualitative part is conducted in Phase II, according to a pre-established protocol. The reported robust tests and multi-source triangulation ensure the internal validity of this phase. Decision-makers often need a quick, transparent ranking. The SEK-index provides – even without primary interviews – a priority list of intervention areas, which is validated on site by the qualitative work of Phase II. This two-step model (synthetic diagnosis → targeted field validation) is cost- and ethics-conscious and reduces the risk of unnecessary field visits with the “wrong questions.” International literature describes the phenomenon of inner peripheries in detail, but a micro-territorially resolved, operationalized decision-support framework that combines social, spatial, and institutional dimensions in a composite index and translates them into an intervention matrix is lacking. The present study fills this gap. The primary qualitative phase is under preparation; its function is not to create a model, but to fine-tune and legitimize it locally.

3. Material and method

The present study is grounded in a qualitative research methodology, which encompasses analysis, document analysis, and a theoretical framework based on secondary sources. The examination of the social structure, historical development, and current situation of the Ormánság was based primarily on previous empirical research, ethnographic monographs, sociological and social history writings. Szabó (1938) drew attention to the demographic characteristics of the Ormánság between the two world wars, while Erdei (1980) described the process of the collapse of the peasant social structure and community norms. Koloh (2013) pointed to new waves of regional marginalization and ethnic exclusion, while Virág (2006) analyzed the reproduction of the inner peripheries.

The empirical background of the research is provided by the population and social changes that took place between 1990 and 2022 in five selected settlements of the Sellye district (Kémes, Sellye, Cún, Drávafok, Gilvánfa). The increase in the proportion of the Roma population, the development of educational indicators, and the dynamics of unemployment were the dimensions based on which the patterns of exclusion can be mapped.

During the study, a five-factor analysis indicator, the SEK-index (Socio-Ethnic Exclusion Index), was developed, which integrates the following dimensions:

(1) The data are the proportion of the population (R%), (2) Early school leaving rate (ESL), (3) Change in unemployment rate (UΔ), (4) Demographic index (DI), and (5) School segregation ratio (ISR).

The SEK-index is a composite indicator that combines individual factors based on Z-score standardization¹, allowing comparison between settlements. This allowed for analysis not only of the extent of exclusion, but also of its spatial and structural differentiation.

The typology revealed by the SEK-index allowed for the theoretical operationalization of the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*. This category is used to describe regional situations where structural, ethnic, and spatial disadvantages do not occur separately, but cumulatively (Wacquant, 2008). The typology therefore served not only descriptive but also an interpretative purpose. The methodological background included socio-historical reconstruction and comparative territorial analysis, which allowed for the connection of historical and contemporary tendencies. The qualitative approach allowed for the complex examination of social exclusion facilitated by multi-level, institutional and cultural mechanisms. Segregation, as a social practice, in many cases did not develop spontaneously, but was also facilitated by educational policy and regional development decisions (Virág, 2006).

Limitations

The study has several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged. The reliability and comparability of secondary data sources vary considerably across settlements. Statistical records often underreport the Roma population due to self-identification bias, while local government datasets may contain inconsistencies or missing values. Furthermore, the qualitative analyses presented here cannot be generalized to the entire region; they are intended to provide interpretive depth rather than statistical representativeness. Despite these limitations, the triangulation of sources – combining demographic indicators, historical literature, and local reports – helps to mitigate data distortions and ensures analytical coherence.

4. Results and Evaluation

Transition to a new interpretative framework. The contemporary social reality of the Ormánság region is shaped not only by successive, clearly distinguishable processes – such as the population decline due to single-handedness and the growth of the Roma population – but also by their interacting, mutually reinforcing dynamics (Virág, 2006; Kállai, 2019; KSH, 2022). While the majority community gradually withdraws from social and economic activity (Szabó, 1938), Roma communities cannot structurally fill the resulting void – neither institutionally, culturally nor economically (Havas, 2005). This situation is not only marginalization, but also a double disintegration, where two different social groups slide into each other. There is no organic social reorganization, and no coherent community dynamics emerges that could regenerate the area (Ladányi & Szelényi, 2006). As Dupcsik (2009) emphasizes, the historical interpretation of Roma identity and exclusion in Hungary has been shaped by long-term structural inequalities and shifting social discourses, which are still visible in rural peripheries such as the Ormánság. This recognition leads to the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*, which is the central theme of the next chapter. Based on census data and demographic indicators, the Roma population in the Ormánság region has significantly increased in recent decades, with a younger age structure and higher fertility rate than the non-Roma population.

¹ Z-score standardization (also known as standard score normalization) is a statistical technique that transforms raw data values into a standardized scale with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. It allows for comparison across different datasets or variables by expressing values in terms of their distance from the mean in standard deviation units.

These demographic tendencies are consistent with national-level findings that show the spatial concentration and temporal growth of the Roma population in peripheral areas of Hungary (Pénzes et al., 2019). The contemporary social processes of the Roma cannot be interpreted solely in terms of the inner periphery; population decline or the transformation of the ethnic structure. A complex marginalization mechanism is taking place in the region, which is not fully described by either the classical center-periphery theories (Tagai & Lennert, 2023) or the traditional categories of social exclusion (Levitas et al., 2007). According to European social exclusion theories (Room, 1995; Silver, 1994), this situation is no longer a simple deprivation, but a complex, regional-ethnic stratification pattern. The recognition of this led to the introduction of the concept of intermarginal disintegration, which sheds new light on the deep structural crisis of the Ormánság. This chapter examines how two different paths of social disintegration overlapped:

- on the one hand, the self-destructive, population-reducing inheritance and socialization pattern of the majority, Reformed Hungarian community (e.g. single-handedness – cf. Szabó, 1938),
- on the other hand, Roma communities are characterized by settling, embedded from the outside, but with low social mobility (Virág, 2006; Kállai, 2019).

The dual, not compensatory but mutually reinforcing, decline has led to a specific regional crisis model. We call this *intermarginal disintegration*: a situation where two social groups simultaneously find themselves on the periphery of the periphery but follow different historical and social paths (Tésits et al., 2021). This new concept is based on dysfunctions embedded in opportunity hierarchies. This phenomenon is related to the concept of “inner peripheries” described by ESPON (2017) but is more microregional and sociocentric: it captures not only the lack of access to services, but also the combination of identity loss, community cohesion and institutional degradation.

The model fits particularly well with the new theoretical horizons of European rural marginality (Woods, 2019; Shucksmith et al., 2023), which emphasize the dual logic of rural development – the simultaneity of global integration and local vulnerability. *Intermarginal disintegration* is a hybrid concept in comparison: it places structural (infrastructural, economic) disadvantages and symbolic (cultural, identity-related) exclusion on a common plane of analysis. Thus, the concept is suitable for application in other European regions – for example, in the southern Italian Mezzogiorno, eastern Slovakia, in the rural zones of the Balkans or in the peripheral villages of the Scottish Highlands – where similarly overlapping demographic, ethnic and economic gradients shape the structure of social space (cf. Tagai & Lennert, 2023; Shucksmith et al., 2023).

At the international level, the concept has comparative value because it can bridge the research directions of European “inner peripheries” and global “neglected rurality’s.” Research such as Shubin and McCollum’s (2021) temporality-based marginality analyses or Łuczak and Kalinowski’s (2025) fuzzy-hybrid poverty measurement models also strive to interpret social exclusion as a dynamic, multidimensional system. *Intermarginal disintegration*, in line with these, is a flexible theoretical framework that allows for the identification of cumulative patterns of marginality (structural, spatial, cultural, temporal) and thus makes rural areas of different countries comparable. The global relevance of the concept lies in the fact that it treats marginality not as a simple deficit, but as a self-reproducing social and spatial mechanism. Such self-reproducing peripheral processes have been observed, for example, in the depopulated mountain regions of Southern Europe, the agrarian peripheries of Latin America, and the

marginalized regions of Southeast Asia (Woods, 2019). The intermarginal approach can also be applied here, because it can reveal how the processes of structural underdevelopment, symbolic exclusion, and loss of local identity are interconnected. Thus, the case study of Ormánság is not an isolated one, but an illustrative micro-laboratory of the global problem that social science describes with the concepts of “rural resilience” and “multi-layered exclusion” (ESPON, 2017; European Commission, 2024).

Intermarginal disintegration is therefore a transferable diagnostic tool that can be used in any peripheral area where social, economic, and cultural disadvantages reinforce each other. Its comparative application can contribute to the recalibration of rural development policies, especially in the EU LEADER, CLLD and Smart Villages programs, which are still primarily infrastructural in approach. The model treats marginality as a system, not as a condition – thus the analysis offers not only a descriptive but also an interventionist logic.

Overall, the case study of Ormánság is not only a local description, but also an internationally adaptable theoretical contribution to the new generation of research on rural marginality. The concept of *intermarginal disintegration* provides an opportunity to interpret the social, spatial and identity dimensions together and synergistically in periphery research – thus making the experience of Ormánság comparable with the structural experiences of other European and global peripheries.

The concept of intermarginal disintegration

Intermarginal disintegration describes a social and spatial state where overlapping marginalization processes, such as the structural peripheralization of a region and the ethnic-social exclusion of a social group living there – mutually reinforce each other, thus transforming the given region into a complex, new type of periphery.

As a definition, intermarginal disintegration is understood as a socio-territorial state in which the structural disconnection of a region and the marginalization of a social group (e.g. an ethnic minority) mutually reinforce each other and cause the disintegration of the local society and economy. Regional isolation, institutional deficit, employment vacuum, and ethnic stigmatization of the low-status population build on each other and perpetuate the peripheral situation. The concept of intermarginal disintegration therefore describes a complex state of marginalization in which regional underdevelopment (e.g., a lack of infrastructure, economic decline, and inadequate services) and social exclusion (e.g., stigmatization, institutional discrimination, and limited education) together and interwoven create a state of lasting disintegration (Author's own definition).

The resulting intermarginal zone becomes:

- geographically isolated,
- economically inactive,
- socially stigmatized, where the possibilities for social mobility are minimized, and the reproductive mechanisms (e.g. education, labor market, healthcare) are constantly underperforming.

The persistence of long-term unemployment and the limited impact of public work programs in the Ormánság (Pulszter, 2020) exemplify the structural employment vacuum characteristic of intermarginally disintegrated regions.

Intermarginal disintegration therefore means a situation where the encounter of a backward region and a socially disadvantaged community results in double exclusion: the region itself is on the periphery, but the situation of the people living there – for example, in the case of Roma

communities – is also particularly disadvantaged. Together, these two perpetuate the disconnection. The form and typology of *intermarginal disintegration* are built on two dimensions:

- the degree of regional marginalization (infrastructure, accessibility, economic opportunities),
- the socio-ethnic exclusion reason (status, discrimination, education, etc.).

These two dimensions appear in the social space in interaction with each other, often reinforcing each other. Regional marginalization means that the accessibility, infrastructural provision, and economic opportunities of the settlement – or even entire micro-regions – are limited. This includes the quality of roads, the lack of transport connections, the lack of jobs, and the regression of the institutional system (schools, medical clinics, community spaces). In parallel, the dimension of socio-ethnic exclusion reflects the internal structure, hierarchy, and equal opportunity relations of the local society. For example, the limited access of Roma communities to education, employment, housing, and social participation, as well as the symbolic and structural discrimination against them, appear here. When these two dimensions intersect at a high value – that is, a region is both closed, infrastructurally degraded and its population is strongly marginalized and stigmatized – then we can speak of *intermarginal disintegration*. The aim of this typology is to reveal the different forms of marginalization that require different socio-political interventions.

Hidden marginality

- Almost urban infrastructural conditions.
- Social exclusion of a minority community (e.g., Roma) is present.
- Example: suburban Roma settlement on the edge of a prosperous small town.

In this type, regional accessibility, accessibility of public services and infrastructure can typically be said to be good – so there are no signs of physical or economic periphery. In such settlements, members of the community live close to integration systems (school, workplace, transport), yet they are socially marginalized. Exclusion here is more manifested in symbolic and structural factors: for example, the stigmatization of the Roma population, hidden forms of school segregation, or discrimination based on address (Virág, 2006; Kállai, 20; Ladányi & Szelényi, 2006). The phenomenon of hidden marginality is particularly dangerous because superficial development masks deeper social problems (Wacquant, 2008). Authorities and decision-makers tend to underestimate the need for intervention, since objective indicators (e.g. public utilities, number of school places) do not make the area appear peripheral. However, minority communities struggle with invisible barriers to integration, which preserves exclusion in the long term (Powell, 2013; van Kempen & Bolt, 2009).

Segmented marginality

- Well-served area.
- Ethnic or social groups are deeply marginalized, stigmatized.
- Example: Roma residential area on the outskirts of a city, with strong social prejudices.

This type typically occurs in areas where infrastructure, accessibility of services and economic opportunities are given, but certain groups of society – especially ethnic minorities – are deeply marginalized. In the case of such segmented marginality, exclusion is not linked to physical space, but to social space: the presence of the minority community often entails ghetto-like separation, stigmatized identity, and social exclusion. (Ladányi & Szelényi, 2006; Török, 2018). The isolation of the communities strengthens prejudices, while the receiving

institutions (schools, workplaces, housing market) operate with latent or overt discrimination. One of the main characteristics of segmented marginality is that the chances of social integration are not only limited but also institutionally closed - even if the region is economically prosperous.

Structural marginality

- A closed area with a lack of services.
- The population living there is still partly integrated and of mixed composition.
- Example: an aging village in Ormánság with a minimal Roma population.

Structural marginality can be observed in settlements where regional disadvantages – inaccessibility, transport isolation, lack of services – have existed for a long time, but the social composition of the population living there has not yet become homogeneous or excluded (Tagai & Lennert, 2023). The community still has some connections to the dominant society, for example through the access of older generations to permanent pensions (Pálné Kovács, 2013). Despite this, the gradual degradation of the area, the emigration of young people and the closure of institutions (schools, post offices, shops) slowly preserve the peripheral situation, in which the possibilities for social mobility are narrowing.

Intermarginal disintegration

Intermarginal disintegration denotes a socio-territorial condition in which regional peripheralization and the socio-ethnic exclusion of a local community mutually reinforce each other. The outcome is a complex and persistent form of disintegration, characterized by geographic isolation, economic inactivity, and social stigmatization.

This represents the most complex and severe type of marginalization, where regional isolation and socio-ethnic exclusion interact to produce a deep and lasting structural disconnect. Such settlements are typically characterized by minimal institutional provision, limited access to healthcare, and low educational opportunities for young people, while the community remains largely excluded from the labor market. The majority presence of the Roma population often constitutes not only a site of social but also of political and symbolic exclusion.

The community becomes trapped in a self-reinforcing social cycle, where escape routes are blocked and, in the absence of external intervention, marginality reproduces itself. This form represents the “full” version of *intermarginal disintegration*, serving as the most critical manifestation of permanently marginalized zones forming on the fringes of society. Recent empirical findings confirm that the Ormánság region suffers from severe competence deficits and low employability among older workers, which further exacerbate the employment vacuum and social exclusion (Pohl et al., 2022).

To operationalize this typology, the socio-ethnic exclusion dimension can be measured using both objective (quantifiable) and qualitative (descriptive) criteria that define “low” and “high” levels of exclusion. Based on these indicators, any settlement can be classified. The proposed operational measure is the composite SEK-index (Socio-Ethnic Exclusion Index) – a newly developed indicator designed to quantify the level of socio-ethnic exclusion in each settlement by integrating multiple social and ethnic parameters. Its aim is to capture and quantify the complex state of marginalization that particularly affects Roma communities in peripheral regions. The components of the SEK-index are:

- R% (Roma ratio): the proportion of the Roma population within the total population,
- a high value may correlate with segregation and stigmatization,

- ESL (Early School Leaving): the proportion of early school leavers in the population aged 18–24
- an indicator of structural backwardness,
- UΔ (Unemployment Gap): the unemployment gap between the Roma and non-Roma population.
- DI (Dissimilarity Index): the degree of residential segregation of the Roma and non-Roma population.
- ISR (School Segregation Rate): the proportion of Roma students in segregated educational institutions.

These values are standardized (e.g., based on Z-score), and then the SEK-index is calculated with a weighted average, which takes a value between 0 and 1:

- 0–0.25: Low exclusion
- 0.25–0.50: Moderate exclusion
- 0.50–0.75: High exclusion
- 0.75–1.00: Critical exclusion

Advantages of the SEK-index

Complexity: The SEK-index simultaneously includes several indicators – education, employment, housing and spatial, thus providing a more realistic picture of the structure of socio-ethnic exclusion.

Quantitativeness: The level of exclusion of individual settlements becomes comparable, which allows for an objective ranking of regions.

Plannability: It is a development policy tool that is well-suited for decision-makers, as it provides clear guidance on where to intervene and in which dimensions (e.g. education, transport, social services).

Practical application of the SEK-index – on the example of five Ormánság settlements

The following section contains an analysis of these Ormánság settlements based on the components of the SEK-index, presenting the extent and nature of socio-ethnic exclusion. The following data are based on the latest local and statistical sources, with particular attention to the revised proportions of the Roma population.

The SEK-index (Socio-Ethnic Exclusion Index) was calculated on the example of five Ormánság settlements – Kémes, Sellye, Drávafok, Cún, and Gilvánfa. When selecting the settlements, I tried to include the district center (with more than two thousand inhabitants, Cún, a medium-sized settlement by the Hungarian standard) in the survey. Also, Gilvánfa, which is also referred to as a “*gypsy village*” in national terms. Table 2 shows the individual indicators and the overall SEK-index value.

The table above clearly shows the SEK-index values of the five settlements. The critical level of exclusion is clearly shown by the high value of Gilvánfa, while the other settlements fall into the moderate or high category.

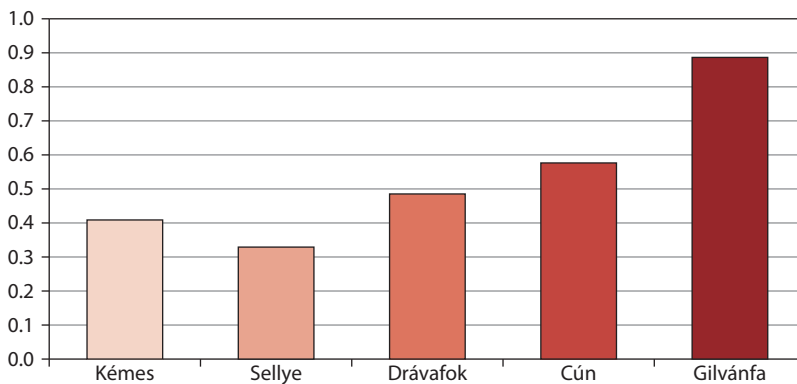
As shown in Figure 1, the SEK-index values reveal a clear hierarchy of exclusion: while Kémes and Sellye fall into the moderate range, Gilvánfa reaches a critical level, representing a case of complete social disintegration. This visual comparison demonstrates the diagnostic power of the SEK-index in distinguishing different stages of marginalization.

In the case of Cún, the level of exclusion is high, due to the educational and housing indicators, but it does not reach the critical threshold. The settlement is already approaching the

Table 2. Overall SEK-index values

Settlement	R%	ESL	UΔ	DI	ISR	SEK-index	Exclusion level
Kémes	8%	22%	11%	0,28	21%	0,41	Moderate
Sellye	3,5%	18%	9%	0,20	17%	0,33	Moderate
Drávafok	18%	26%	13%	0,35	25%	0,49	Moderate
Cún	19,3%	32%	17%	0,44	37%	0,58	High
Gilvánfa	69,9%	47%	29%	0,71	63%	0,83	Critical

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

**Figure 1. Evaluation of the SEK-index**

Source: Own compilation, 2025.

intermarginal disintegration category in several respects. Gilvánfa remains severely disadvantaged: the critical SEK-index value indicates outstanding exclusion in all indicators, so it can still be interpreted as a typical example of intermarginal disintegration. Based on the data, after correcting the originally overestimated Roma proportions, the SEK-index of Sellye, Drávafok and Kémes also fell into a lower category: their exclusion is moderate, and they cannot be classified as examples of intermarginal disintegration. Ethnic exclusion is present to a lesser extent in these settlements, although certain signs of regional underdevelopment still exist (Figure 1).

Transition to a new interpretive framework

The contemporary social reality of the Ormánság is not only shaped by successive, clearly distinguishable processes – for example, the population decline resulting from the single-handedness, followed by the rise of the Roma population and the perceptions of local communities – but by their interacting, mutually reinforcing dynamics. While the majority community gradually withdraws from social and economic activity, the Roma communities are unable to structurally fill the resulting void – neither institutionally, culturally nor economically.

This situation is not just marginalization, but a double disintegration, where two different social groups slide against each other. There is no organic social restructuring, nor are there any coherent community dynamics that could regenerate the area are formed. This recogni-

tion gives rise to the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*, which is the central subject of the next section. Contemporary social processes in Ormánság cannot be interpreted exclusively in terms of the inner periphery, population decline or the transformation of ethnic structure. A complex mechanism of marginalization is occurring in the region, that is neither described by either the classical center-periphery theories (Tagai & Lennert, 2023) nor the traditional categories of social exclusion (Atkinson et al., 2002; Levitas et al., 2007) fully describe.

The recognition of this led to the introduction of the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*, which sheds new light on the deep structural crisis of the Ormánság. The analysis of regional data confirms this interpretative framework. Based on the population and Roma ratio change data for the 52 settlements of the Sellye district between 2011 and 2022, a non-homogeneous process is taking place: in some villages the proportion of the Roma population is exceptionally high (e.g. Piskó 80.3%, Gilvánfa 69.9%), while in other settlements it is negligible (e.g. Királyegyháza 2.7%, Felsőszentmárton 0.7%). This internal structural dispersion forms the basis of *intermarginal disintegration*: two different social trajectories determine the future of the region in parallel and by projecting onto each other.

The service data further nuance the picture: in several settlements with a high Roma ratio (e.g. Gilvánfa, Adorjás, Piskó) neither schools, kindergartens, post offices nor railways are operating. However, in other villages with a similar population – for example Kémes or Királyegyháza – these institutions still exist. This also supports the fact that social exclusion has not only an ethnic but also a structural dimension: the lack of physical infrastructure and low social mobility simultaneously preserve the disadvantaged situation. However, objective indicators (such as public utilities or service presence) often mask the reality of social disintegration – this is especially true for cases of hidden or segmented marginality. The settlement-level data of the Sellye district therefore not only support, but also quasi-typify the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*: the different Roma population ratio, the lack of institutions and the decrease in population are all indicators that can be associated with different types of marginalities.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The social marginalization of the Ormánság is not merely a consequence of current political or ethnic conflicts, but a deep-rooted social heritage, shaped by historical processes and long-term structures. The region's "dead end" is not just a metaphor: it is a real situation, sustained by structural disintegration, identity crisis, and the aggravation of ethnic relations. There is no quick or superficial solution to this situation. Development policy interventions can only be effective if they are able to move away from symptomatic treatment and access the deeper cultural and social layers that maintain the current conditions. Roma–non-Roma tensions often are ethnic in nature, but this is only the surface. Deep down, there are social structural fractures, the segregating functioning of the education system, the closed nature of the labor market and structural inequalities in housing.

The isolation of Roma communities without mobility channels, spatial separation at the settlement level and the lack of a common social space reproduces distrust and social distance. *Ethnic conflict* is thus a misleading concept: it is not a moral or policing issue, but a deeply structured social problem that can only be addressed through complex, integrated, long-term development policy intervention. The rethinking of the region cannot be postponed any longer. If we are serious about the future, we must redefine what "village" and "community" mean today. The former cultural and economic density has been replaced by fragmented,

alienated social structures in which community life has completely emptied. Rebuilding community relations is not only a symbolic but also an existential issue. The first step in this is to bring back community spaces and institutions – not only in a physical sense, but as a shared social experience.

Then, integrative economic developments can follow that offer not only jobs, but also social status and a framework for interpretation. Ensuring real access to education does not mean supplements, not “school-like” side solutions, but a systemic increase in opportunities. All of this must be accompanied by a conscious, reflective memory policy that does not allow the single-handedness, the Reformed culture, the Roma presence, or the history of the region to degenerate into folklore – these are collective social experiences that need to be retold. Processing the past of the Ormánság is not optional: it is a prerequisite for building the future. Local communities cannot be able to redefine themselves if they perceive their own past exclusively as a history of loss. Collective reflection – in which the self-liquidation of the Reformed peasantry is included as well as the exclusion of the Roma communities – is essential for social self-interpretation.

The formation of Roma identity requires special attention, as it takes place through a different logic than in the case of the majority population. The identity of the majority, Reformed villages, flees into nostalgic enclosures, while the identity of the Roma communities is being formed between the lines of strengthening ethnic self-awareness and social exclusion. This identity is not institutionally or culturally articulated but is often built on survival strategies: internal assistance, residential cohesion, a robust system of norms – in enclosed, defensive structures.

The duality of self-image – torn between internal pride and external stigmatization – causes conflict, especially in the younger generations. One path is assimilation, the other is distancing, but neither is a truthful answer until there is a third path: an autonomous, self-interpreting Roma identity. Its formation is currently local and fragmented: often linked to families, not to movements. Deep poverty and a segregated environment only further limit this process. Yet, new spaces for identity formation are also emerging through education, religious communities, and digital media. The Gandhi Gymnasium or the scholastic schools, for example, create opportunities for the formation of a dual identity – Roma and intellectual. Evangelical and Pentecostal communities open a new moral horizon, where family, self-discipline and community ethics take on a new role. In the digital space, young Roma try to give their own face to their culture (e.g. rap culture), reflecting on social stereotypes and creating new publics. Identity is therefore not merely a cultural issue, but a survival strategy.

In Ormánság, Roma identity formation is both a response and a constraint: it provides a response to exclusion but cannot break through structural barriers. It can only become a resource if it is able to extend to political, economic, and cultural dimensions. However, external support is not enough for this: internal involvement, grassroots initiatives, Roma community leaders and role models are needed. The question is therefore not whether the Roma community is capable of renewal – this question is prejudiced. The question is whether it will be given the opportunity to become capable of renewal. Currently, there are serious deficits in terms of education, social capital, relations with institutions and the attitude of the majority society. But these are not insurmountable – if there is political will, if there are long-term, mentored, facilitated programs, and if we truly view Roma communities as partners. Roma communities do not need passive stakeholders, but potential change-makers, if they are given the opportunity and space to develop. The aim of this study was to explore the peripherality of the

Ormánság region, regarding the long-term effects of ethnic and demographic processes, as well as the possibilities for social renewal. The focus of the study is on the so-called theory of intermarginal disintegration, which we have put forward to describe the mutually reinforcing processes of social and territorial marginalization in this region.

The Ormánság region is not only suffering from economic deprivation but is also undergoing a complex social decline in which the loosening of community structures, loss of identity, the degradation of the institutional background and ethnic tensions occur simultaneously. The historical legacy – especially the single-handedness as a communal rationality – has undermined the demographic sustainability of the local society in the long term, while the rise of Roma communities is not a cause, but a consequence of this structural crisis.

To describe this specific state, the thesis introduced a new concept: *intermarginal disintegration*, which denotes the socio-territorial crisis where regional underdevelopment (e.g. economic exclusion, transport and infrastructural exclusion) and ethnic-social marginalization (e.g. segregation, stigmatization, low education) are embedded in each other and mutually reinforce each other, maintaining the loss of social function. Recovery cannot be achieved simply by applying development policy tools, but by a profound social reinterpretation. Place embeddedness – i.e., the reactivation of local identity, cultural heritage, historical experience, and community ties – can be the basis for social regeneration. The currently underutilized human and material resources found in the villages of the Ormánság – such as vacant properties, land, local knowledge – can be suitable for creating the foundations for community enterprises, agricultural cooperatives, care services or even agrotourism developments.

The possibilities for recovery can only be imagined in multi-level and intersectoral cooperation. The active participation of stakeholders, i.e. those affected, is essential in this process. Local communities, local governments, state actors, civil organizations, churches, and Roma communities are only able to rebuild the social fabric of the region in cooperation, not separately. Development can only be sustainable if it is based on will and capacity formed locally, not externally directed. Strengthening the currently missing grassroots willingness to act and community initiative is a basic condition for all interventions.

In this framework, actors promoting social innovation cannot function as mere “developers” – they must become embedded mediators, able to mediate sensitively between local realities and strategic interventions. The goal is not to restore old structures, but to rethink a new, community-based village world.

6. Future Research Directions

This study identifies several key directions for future research that aim to deepen our understanding of rural disintegration, demographic decline, and ethnic restructuring, while further empirically validating the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* introduced herein.

A primary objective is the settlement-level application of the SEK-index developed in this paper – comprising five indicators: Roma population ratio, early school leaving rate, change in unemployment, dependency index, and infrastructure-to-services ratio – across all 52 municipalities of the Ormánság. The use of this composite index allows for high-resolution comparative analyses and the detection of spatial patterns of disintegration. Integrating these indicators into a GIS-based platform (e.g., GPS mapping) would provide visual representation of marginalization dynamics, supporting more targeted and spatially informed development policies.

Another significant direction involves linking historical demographic trends with local community narratives, through interviews, participatory mapping, and archival research. This approach would help uncover the cultural and identity-related dimensions of social fragmentation beyond the statistical indicators.

Furthermore, comparative regional studies – with areas experiencing similar processes of dual marginalization, such as parts of eastern Slovakia, northern Serbia, or Romania's Székelyföld – would enable a broader understanding of whether and how the Ormánság fits into wider patterns of structural crisis in post-socialist rural peripheries.

Ultimately, future research should not only serve descriptive or diagnostic purposes but also contribute to transformative agendas. The goal is to support place-based, inclusive development strategies that offer real agency to the communities of intermarginal areas – strategies that are rooted in local knowledge, shared identity, and long-term participation

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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