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## CASE STUDY

# Cultural renewal in Kisújszállás: A path to sustainability of a Hungarian small town?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – The aim of this study is to analyse the social, demographic (and wealth) problems and sustainability issues of a small town in the Hungarian lowlands (Great Plain), Kisújszállás, in the 21st century, and to present the town's search for a place, especially its attempt to respond and renew itself based on culture. In identifying “lowland” and “Cumanian” characteristics, in addition to (and beyond) the geographical environment and the (still) strongly linked economy, the focus was primarily on the local (for decades declining and ageing) society. In the course of the research, we observed a particular mentality and identity that today increasingly bears the hallmarks of disharmony in the small town society of the lowlands and the region of Greater Cumania.

In examining the resilience of the town, we found that while Kisújszállás has the right anchors, it is not enough to think in terms of point capabilities; we should plan for the future in processes. The town sees culture as a key breakout point and a possible response to the pressing socio-economic sustainability challenges. Respondents to our questionnaire survey of local opinion leaders were most concerned about the low level of cultural demand among locals, but also felt that PR and marketing activities related to culture were not satisfactory. In the case of municipal management, under-financing, a lack of decentralization, and networking were highlighted, while in the case of the economy, the lack of industrial parks and incubators and a low level of innovative local entrepreneurial mentality were highlighted. It can be seen that the town is facing the multifaceted problems of a shrinking, ageing society. The situation assessment underlines the social need for change in a (suffering) municipality stuck in an “old lowland” agricultural structure. In the case of Kisújszállás, renewal and identity building based on culture can be seen as a horizontal concept supporting existing development alternatives.

**Keywords** – age of crises, inner periphery of the plains, rural-urban culture, local specificities, resilience.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The plaguing problems of the 21st century can be traced back to the settlements of the Hungarian Great Plain, whether they are the consequences of climate change (drought, desertification), the drawbacks of an Americanized consumer culture (the formation of mountains of rubbish), or socio-demographic problems (shrinking, ageing, degenerating societies threatened by anaemia). However, identifying and tackling these problems, especially at the local level, including empirical evidence, seems increasingly difficult, expensive and a distant prospect. Why? In our view, the age of grand narratives, of absolute truths, the age of History is coming to an end (Fukuyama, 1992). There is a generalized doubt and uncertainty, both in everyday life and in the search for and response to answers through science – and we urban researchers (and residents, managers and visitors) are no exception. The complexity of the world economy (made more complex by its growing complexity and complexity, and more vulnerable by its growing complexity and complexity) and the intensification of local socio-economic-environmental problems are leading to an era of crisis. The crisis of the 2020 decade is a systemic crisis, which is why the market economy and the socio-economic and political factors within which it operates need to be redefined (Zsibók et al., 2022).

The fight against the symptoms of crisis has already required enormous efforts (if there had been any real will and action at all...), but the third decade of this century has brought new and shocking challenges, unknown until now – at least to the generations of Europeans and Hungarians living today – in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war that broke out in February 2022. In these circumstances, the question of how individuals, communities, nations, peoples, regions, regions and localities can cope with the (known and unknown) difficulties they face and respond to the global and local challenges of the time is of paramount importance. These responses depend, of course, on place and time and on the development, learning capacity, flexibility, innovation, creativity and resilience of each society. The developed societies of the world are constantly searching for theoretical answers and practical solutions to these challenges (which, incidentally, are largely due to their socio-economic-political actions and way of life over several centuries); however, our Central and Eastern European region, as in everything else, is showing signs of being late in this respect.

At the same time, science is obliged to conduct objective research into reality, to explore cause and effect relationships, and to provide practical answers based (also) on theoretical foundations – and urban research is not exempt from this requirement. In fact, the interweaving and interdependence of theoretical research and practical development is perhaps even more important here than in many other fields, since the city is the immediate living space of the majority of us. And, moreover, we must agree with Rem Koolhaas (1995: 1252) when he states that 'The ... city: it is all we have left' ...

Our theory can be supported by the fact that even (semi-) peripheral Hungary is not left out of the current of

globalization (economically speaking, Hungary is still among the most open countries), and for decades we have been experiencing the homogenization and Americanisation of culture (see, for example, the change in our mother tongue, its noticeable anglicization). Fortunately, however, there is a parallel and perhaps even growing appreciation of the importance of locality, uniqueness and differentiation, and in this context the re-creation and production of old, local/regional 'ancient' culture/identity, and then – in many places, in the absence of any significant local industrial output – its commercialization, often as an intellectual enterprise (*horribile dictu* 'white-collar big project'), as a particularly important point of resilience for some settlements.

What is really important in the 21st century, in the postmodern experience economy (would be and could be - according to the social science mainstream and our own view), is the creation, production, marketing, sale and consumption of culture in the broader sense (in this case, lowland, specialized Greater Cumanian), because "*culture is big business. It is one of the leading sectors of the post-Fordist economic revolution and the foundation of countless urban renewal programmes*" (Allen J. Scott, cited in Süli-Zakar et al., 2006: 313). Closely related to this, the basic question of how to market local culture is also a fundamental one: how to preserve the viability of such an inner periphery settlement, ensure its survival and possibly set it on a path of moderated development in the medium term. The answer may be obvious: local resources, in particular the specific culture of the municipality, must be developed, promoted, marketed and sold – including to tourists. Local cultures are linked to a specific space, they are unique, if you like, and can be understood as a well-integrated system, defined precisely by their link to a specific space (Hannerz, 2004).

As a preface, we can say that our research and the experience of the geography we have lived through have led us to conclude that Kisújszállás perceives and lives its lowlandness. However, it does so essentially through its being a large town. It can be stated that this lowlandness and "Greater-Cumanian-ness" is mostly a culture-based intellectual (re)construction, a great post-regime undertaking of the Greater Cumanian identity reconstruction. And whether we can speak of lowland city (cities) beyond the meaning of the word as a record of geographical facts? According to our positivist research orientation, in the case of Kisújszállás (despite the many and varied, stressful and presumably growing socio-economic-environmental problems), for the moment yes: this is what we explain below.

In a study of one of the shrinking, ageing cities of the Great Plain, with complex socio-economic-environmental problems, it is impossible to avoid at least a brief summary of the findings of the earlier great Hungarian researchers of the Great Plain of the past on the specificities of "lowlandness" and "lowland path" (and most importantly: they are still valid in principle, unfortunately!).

In Hungary as a whole, and in the eastern half of the country as well, in the decades following the regime change, social

and territorial disparities in terms of property, education, culture, employment, demography, health and social conditions have not decreased, but on the contrary, have increased. From the point of view of peripheralization, the Great Plain is perhaps the most typical example not only of the antecedents but also of the consequences of historical processes and the specific features of the post-regime change (Baranyi, 2004)

The historically evolved specific “lowland path” of social development, which bore the hallmarks of both underdevelopment (economic production structure) and relative (social) development, has been stalled by the historical-social changes of the past seventy years (most spectacularly in the thirty years after the regime change). Even among the most valuable factors of the former dual development, the earlier foundations of the ‘otherness’ of Lowland society, the ‘historical syndromes’ of the Lowlands – peasant-civil-rural development, a relatively well-developed network of rural institutions, the presence of progressive-civil trends in the Reformed Church, a high degree of social mobility, an ‘innovative’ peasant mentality, etc. – the positive effects of these factors have been eroded over the last three quarters of a century (Beluszky, 1992; Csatóri, 1993, 2005).

Perhaps, apart from the remaining traits of a specific mentality and identity, there is no other positive social factor that could have a positive social impact in the Great Plain as before. In the era of postmodern Hungarian digital semi-feudalism in the 21st century (Kovács, 2009), we have reached the point where the disharmony of economic and social development, which was previously beneficial to the latter, has been replaced by a complete (negative) ‘harmony’, i.e. the correspondence of an outmoded social structure adapted to an outmoded economic structure, sometimes with the opposite sign, and this time with a complete disharmony that is now detrimental to social movement processes (Beluszky, 1992; Csatóri, 1993, 2005).

Unfortunately, the thoughts quoted above have lost none of their relevance over the past years or decades: in fact, it is only the number of years that need to be updated, the essence of what has been said remains. And until the much-awaited signs of development and recovery appear, we must face the depressing reality of today: the towns and villages of the lowlands are still among the most disadvantaged in the country, even if there is a difference in development between them, depending on their size (population) and location (distance from the national border).

But why didn’t we manage to do it this time either, and this one? It is because successful nations – in addition to respect for tradition – are not oriented towards the past but towards the future, are willing and able to learn, to persevere, to make a concerted effort, to create networks and to co-operate (quoted by Ferenc Pataki, Hovanyecz, 2008). Unfortunately, we have developed a strange tradition: the belief that it is possible to recreate the past. We missed something when the regime changed, and we have been missing it ever since,

without stopping. We have not seen the start of socio-economic integration processes; on the contrary, differentiation and even polarization have become increasingly exclusive, and overall social trust has been lost. The concept of democracy has become synonymous not with the ‘common good’ but with partisanship. Things have taken a dangerous turn: the danger stems first and foremost from the mass increase in existential anxiety, insecurity, mistrust and unpredictability. The masses of people have the impression that “the future has run out” (quoted by Ferenc Pataki, Hovanyecz, 2008).

After outlining the above, rather gloomy past and present situation, the question may be asked: in the meantime, with the spread of globalisation, artificial intelligence, digitalisation, technical development at an unprecedented pace, sustainability, circular economy, tactical urbanism, etc., the future has really “run out” in the Great Plain, in the Greater Cumanian Region?

We hope not (completely). One reason for this is that a few years ago a new, fashionable concept emerged in the field of spatial and urban development at home: resilience. Resilience has been widely used to describe the ability of cities (regions) to resist and renew themselves in the face of external crises (Simmie, 2014). György Enyedi (1997) pointed out that successful cities make decisions, but today most (Hungarian) municipalities are faced with the fact that the really important decisions are made elsewhere.

At the same time, “*resilience is a social construct created by a spatially organised community linked by institutionalised and informal relationships. It is a set of skills and knowledge carried by these relationships that allows for continuous adaptation to changing social, economic, political and ecological conditions external to the community, the ability to maintain the community’s viability, the capacity to expand and restructure its own skills and knowledge, and thus to reduce its vulnerability*” (Pirisi, 2019: 67).

Studies on resilience in the social sciences make it possible to identify the key characteristics of resilience (Pirisi, 2019). These are the following:

- the safest element is diversity;
- the role of cohesion is also important;
- the third characteristic is *autonomy*.

If anyone doubts the relevance of these three key attributes, it is worth turning the question around: “*is a community that is monolithic in its society, economy and politics, otherwise polarised and divided, and excluded from decision-making about its own destiny, not inherently very vulnerable?*” (Pirisi, 2019: 74). Beyond the theoretical approach, the practical is very important: “*a single (!) citizen’s specific ‘ability’, a single ‘capability’ based on a single historic building, or a single specific natural resource unique to a given municipality can be the starting point or driving force for strengthening resilience and creating new strengths*” (Fejérdy and Z. Karvalics, 2015: 119).

Of all these, Kisújszállás is in principle very well off: The spiritual heritage of the town's native, the nationally renowned fairy tale writer István Csukás and its local cultivation, which has become world-famous, can be immediately mobilized and can be referred to as a unique intellectual heritage, a point of resilience, Katalin Karikó, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in December 2023, the multifunctional building of the Vigadó as part of the built heritage, while the special local lowland production culture of traditional rice and Indian rice cultivation as a unique resource.

However, we must agree with Tamás Fejérdy and László Z. Karvalics (2015: 119): *“However, it is not enough to think in terms of point capabilities: we need to base them on processes, acknowledging their cyclical nature and properly identifying the essential characteristics of each cycle stage”*.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to answer the question posed in the introduction, a questionnaire survey was carried out targeting local prominent people. The survey was carried out between summer 2022 and January 2023 by means of a series of enquiries. We contacted all local ‘key players’. First, we collected the email addresses of the people concerned and sent them the questionnaire. For those who could not receive the questionnaire by email, we sent it to them by post on paper. Due to the low response rate, in a second round, we called the target group members to ask them to respond. Finally, a total of 21 key players in the life of the city – mayors, deputy mayors, notaries, minority representatives, chief architects, NGO leaders, school directors, cultural organizations, local clergy, GPs, entrepreneurs (i.e. the “local voice”) – were interviewed (81% response rate). We asked them to assess the cultural assets of the town, the local municipal management and the culture of production and services – i.e. the economy – in order to get as comprehensive a picture as possible of the general situation and characteristics of Kisújszállás in the lowlands.

Our questionnaire contained 37 questions. Based on the indicators, respondents rated the potential of their municipality on a 5-point Likert scale (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). A score of 5 indicates critical problems, a score of 4 indicates serious problems, a score of 3 indicates moderate problems, a score of 2 indicates mild problems and a score of 1 indicates negligible/not typical problems, i.e. satisfaction. The results of the questionnaires were coded and recorded in SPSS for Windows database management software and analysed using this software and MS Office Excel. QGIS software was used for map representation.

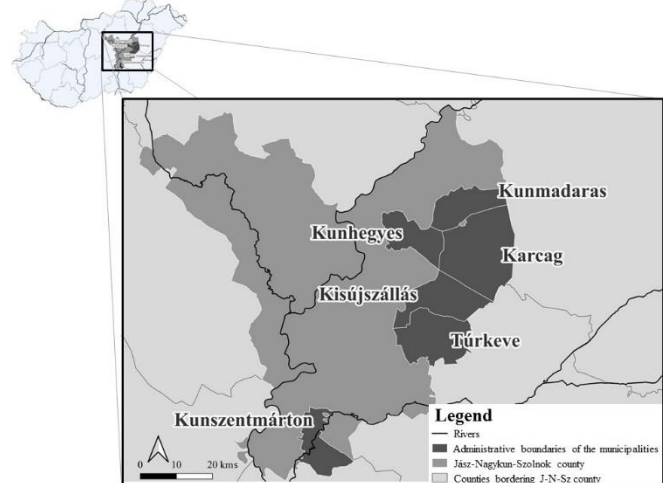
We also used the available relevant national and municipal statistics, analysed the development documents of the municipality, and applied the (perhaps subjective, but all the more useful) methodology of “lived geography” to really reveal and nuance the deep layers.

Descriptive statistical methods were used to process the data

from the databases and questionnaires (clustering, categorisation, distribution indicators, calculation of means).

### 2.1. Why exactly Kisújszállás?

For the above reasons, we feel justified to analyse the socio-economic and cultural aspects of a typical, shrinking and ageing lowland rural town, and to evaluate its search for a 21st century path. In this paper, we will look at the “cultural capital” of Greater Cumania, Kisújszállás, one of the original “Six Cumanian” settlements (Karcag, Kisújszállás, Kunhegyes, Kunmadaras, Túrkeve, Kunszentmárton, Figure 1).



**Figure 1: The traditional Greater Cumania**  
Source: Kovács et al., 2023

### 2.2. Challenges and responses in Kisújszállás in a historical context

Kisújszállás is located 150 km east-southeast of the capital, Budapest, 80 km west-southwest of Debrecen (second-largest city of Hungary), in the eastern part of Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County, a typical lowland, Greater Cumanian field town with a population of just over 10 thousand inhabitants. According to the cadastral classification of the small towns of Hungary, it is situated on the Mezőtúr-Karcag plain, 89 metres above sea level. The present-day town lies on the flood-free riverbed of the loessy ridge from Szolnok. Its surface is a perfect plain formed by filling up of the table (Tóth, 2013). The Turkish occupation period (1526-1686) was a decisive political-social-demographic-economic-environmental challenge in the history of Greater Cumania, which resulted in the depopulation of the former small settlements. In 1699, the Pentz census of the Chamber of Commerce registered Kisújszállás as a deserted wasteland (Pálóczi Horváth, 2013). Subsequently, it can be considered a successful “response” that the remaining Kisújszállás inhabitants who had fled (mixed with people of other religions and cultures) returned from the Rakamaz estate of the Great Prince Ferenc II. Rákóczi in 1717 and “repopulated” and revived the settlement (Tóth, 2013). However, dynamic development only started after the “Redemptio” – the self-redemption of the Jászkun district (6



May 1745). In addition to the typical agricultural farming, industrial and commercial activities slowly developed. Initially, industry was of a craft nature (weaving, spinning, woodwork, etc.) and met the internal needs of the inhabitants of the settlement (Ducza, 2013).

The lives of the people of the study area have always been linked to water: sometimes for water, sometimes against it. In the 18th century, the flood-free, well-soiled 'back lands' were increasingly used to grow cereals, tobacco, hemp and melons, and vines and fruit trees flourished in the gardens. In the vicinity of the natural water bodies, the gently sloping banks also became more and more arable land, while at the same time the ancient floodplain farming began to decline (Tóth, 2013). Due to the regulation of the Tisza and its complex environmental-social-management consequences, a dam was built on the Mirhó-trench near the Tisza Taskony bank as early as 1754. Before the dam was built, farmers had to flood pastures for their cattle because of the water, and afterwards because of the lack of water. The previously established ecological balance was disrupted, and the landscape around the inhabitants of the Great Plain slowly changed. One of the unintended consequences of river regulation was that in years with less rainfall, the summer heatwave became an unprecedented calamity, a drought (Ducza, 2013).

As a result of water management and the blocking of the gradients, vast areas were freed up and became the stage for agriculture (Tóth, 2013). This far-reaching change in agrarian culture also had an impact on natural vegetation: after wetlands, loess grasslands also declined or even disappeared. At the end of the 1800s, another major change in agricultural culture occurred: the phylloxera crisis almost completely destroyed the local vineyards, which had flourished in the past (Tóth, 2013).

The most radical transformation of the landscape-shaping forces of the 20th century was the development of socialist large-scale agriculture. For a few years after the 1945 land distribution, the small-plot form of farming persisted. At the same time, the communist voluntarist economic policy of the 1950s led to the dismantling of the farm economy, and the 'teething troubles' of agricultural production were most pronounced: experiments were made with the production of alien crops (cotton, rubber plantations, etc.), but within a few years this unfortunate agro-ecological experiment was put to an end by nature itself and by common sense (Tóth, 2013).

After the 1960s, large-scale monoculture farming, which was the dominant feature of the new landscape, finally took hold. In addition to the traditional wheat, maize, sunflower, sugar beet and fodder crops, a 'new' crop was introduced: rice, an aquatic cereal well adapted to the soil conditions.

The transformation of agricultural culture also changed the landscape. New, artificial elements of the landscape appeared: farms, grain and drying silos, cattle sheds, stables, machinery sheds, assembly halls, agricultural airports, water towers, AC irrigation, linear irrigation systems, transmission

lines. Numerous new canals were built, and many associated structures (Tóth, 2013).

The change of ownership in the 1990s, the reorganisation of the whole agrarian structure – analysed and experienced by local society – was the trigger of a process with overall negative socio-economic-environmental consequences (Tóth, 2013).

Many studies have already analysed the effects of the economic (and social) transformation of Hungary's small towns after the regime change, and they also highlight the economic marginalisation of towns in the Greater Hungary region, including Kisújszállás (see for example Molnár et al., 2023). This paper uses the typology published in the National Atlas of Hungary, which considers the complex character of our settlement as "barely a town", while its position in the urban hierarchy as "a small town with incomplete functions" (Kovács et al., 2021).

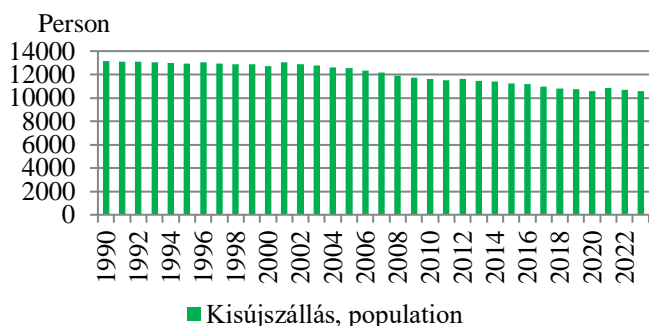
And what should be done in the future in the economic field? In addition to the landscape-shaping role of water, the region is also characterised by extreme climatic and ecological conditions. Part of the city is a rice-growing area of national importance. (In addition, Kisújszállás rice production is located on the northern border of European rice production: traditional rice [*Oryza sativa*] and Indian rice [*Zizania aquatica*] are currently not cultivated further north on our continent.) In addition to their basic agricultural function, the rice fields are secondary wetlands of special function and appearance in our Great Plain – and within the region on the border of Kisújszállás: for a significant part of the year they function as a priority habitat for many bird species (Monoki, 2011).

In view of the changing, increasingly extreme climate, changes of cultivation should also be envisaged in the outskirts of Kisújszállás. Taking into account the possibilities and endowments, low-quality arable land that cannot be farmed economically should be managed as pasture, forest or orchards, or – extending existing areas – as rice plantations (KVÖ, 2023). The municipality, businesses and, perhaps most importantly, the population should pay particular attention to maintaining existing urban development achievements, saving energy, using renewable energies, reducing waste, preventing and combating the effects of climate change, and, as a basis for all this, continuous formal and informal learning and training. At the same time, however, the will and activity to tackle these challenges, not only at local level but also at national level, can be described as lacking, to say the least.

In line with the "mainstream" demographic trends in some European regions and in our country, the city has been facing demographic erosion and population problems for decades. The population of Kisújszállás peaked in 1930 with 14,532 inhabitants (Vincze, 2004), and since then – due to socio-political traumas at European and Hungarian national level, economic reasons, cultural changes in the willingness to have children, etc. – it has been generally decreasing: in the year

of the regime change the town had 13,159 inhabitants (Vincze, 2004), but since then it has been steadily shrinking (Figure 2) and ageing.

In the last decades, the number of registered residents in Kisújszállás has decreased almost continuously and significantly in a linear fashion: the situation is further aggravated by the fact that some of the registered residents do not live in Kisújszállás. The ageing index was already high in 2000 (80.4%), rising to over one and a half times the millennium value (130.9%) in 2013 and reaching 156.4% in 2021 (KVÖ, 2022). Population shrinkage is due to natural attrition and negative migration differentials (Figure 3), fertility instability/imbbalances and the migration of young and skilled labour to larger cities and the capital, as well as ageing. However, Figure 3 shows a positive shift in 2019, which can be attributed to several factors.

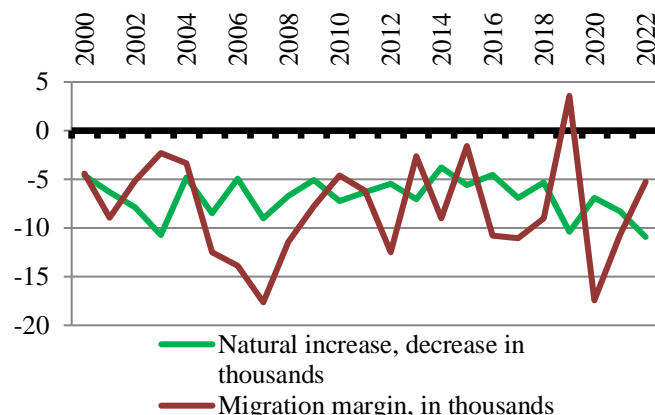


**Figure 2: Change in the reported population in Kisújszállás (persons) (1990-2023)**  
 Source: based on data from KSH and Kisújszállás Mayor's Office, own editing.

Firstly, the “Kisújszállás is waiting for you at home” and “Kisújszállás is your home” support programmes of the municipality “matured” by this time, with several young people in Kisújszállás receiving support for the purchase of real estate. This was followed by the family support scheme (CSOK) announced by the central government, which was also available in the municipality. In addition, the location of the town on the inner periphery makes the low local property prices compared to the national average a particular advantage. Together, these factors have created favourable conditions for some young people to remain in the area and for some young people who have left the town to return with their families. Unfortunately, as the graph shows, the trend is not yet sustainable. The population and migration data of Kisújszállás reflect the typical trends of the region, and according to the data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, similar trends are also observed in the surrounding settlements (e.g. Karcag, Kisújszállás, Kunhegyes, Kunmadaras, Túrkeve, Kunszentmárton).

In addition to the above processes, the urban population is also threatened by the increasing re-emergence of declassified strata that have been marginalised or already

marginalised, and by the migration of people from other settlements to Kisújszállás (KVÖ, 2020).



**Figure 3: Natural decrease and inward migration margin of Kisújszállás (thousands) (2000-2022)**  
 Source: TEIR (based on KSH data) own editing.

Many young people are in higher education, and many take jobs in larger cities or in the capital. Young people with a degree rarely return home, finding their way in larger cities and regional centres or going abroad to study languages and work. It can be assumed that the outward migration of young people will continue the population decline in Kisújszállás, with the older age group predominating in the composition of the remaining population (KVÖ, 2020). The population remaining in the city is ethnically transformed and is constantly (increasingly?) lagging behind the national averages in terms of education/skills.

A significant proportion of the working age population in Kisújszállás currently has a job. The largest employers are in the public sector and manufacturing. The existing jobs require mainly skilled workers with vocational and secondary school qualifications. Higher education graduates are mainly employed by educational institutions and the Mayor's Office: the scarcity of these jobs is also a factor in the outflow of young graduates from the city. The employment of young people starting their careers is mainly influenced by the number of job opportunities, inadequate career choices, lack of work experience and educational qualifications. (KVÖ, 2022).

The situation is further complicated by the fact that, in the case of jobs that are available with low educational attainment but are of higher quality (higher wages or more favourable working conditions), competition for jobs is also being fuelled by the entry of people with higher qualifications (e.g. graduates), thus crowding out low-skilled people from these jobs. Among the skills, it can be said that both the lack of “effective job search techniques” and the lack of skills to build a network of contacts to provide job information are common among unemployed people with low levels of key competence. The most important competences are punctuality, perseverance, cooperation, creative problem-solving, accurate understanding of job roles, opportunities

and scope, ability to navigate hierarchies, accurate assessment of the consequences of decisions in the workplace, effective communication, etc. These skills also play a key role in job search, and are perhaps even more important than qualifications: experience shows that they are a key determinant of job success. Their low level therefore contributes to the persistence of unemployment in the city (KVÖ, 2022).

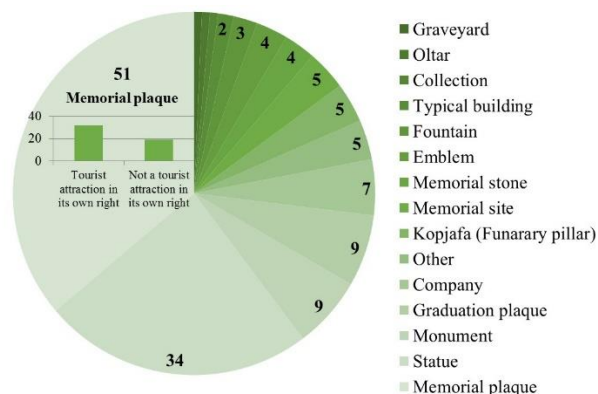
All in all, it can be concluded that knowledge is not really valued in the settlement (nor in the wider region), and unfortunately, a part of society still does not perceive that “education is a necessity of social existence” (Becsei, 2006: 49). For further development, it would be essential to recognize that in a resource-poor (if it is...) settlement, human resources and their development would play a key role, because local social capital can be the hidden reserve of a small town (Horeczki, 2023).

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Results on the cultural assets of Kisújszállás

One of the – perhaps most important – breakthroughs is culture. It has both physical and symbolic foundations on which Kisújszállás can build as a key point of resilience for the municipality, both now and in the future. The material expressions of the spiritual values of society are overwhelmingly buildings, statues and monuments. During the field visit in 2013, a total of 141 attractions were found at 79 sites – in a decade, this number has increased to 88 sites and 154 attractions (cultural attractions of Kisújszállás are summarised in Figure 4). The municipal heritage collection consists of 159 items: buildings, natural environment, social life, objects, food and works of art (Kovács, 2022). Attractions and heritage elements do not fully coincide: this is understandable, since, for example, intellectual works or social life are not necessarily tangible manifestations of assets that can be sold as tourism.

It is worth mentioning that the 32 memorial plaques, which are part of the cultural heritage, represent a tourist attraction in their own right in Kisújszállás (the plaques mark objects that can no longer be seen in their original physical state, only the plaques indicate their former existence). 27% of the cultural attractions commemorate writers and poets (e.g. János Arany, Zsigmond Móricz or the Kisújszállás-born István Csukás), 12% are related to revolutions and liberation struggles, the First and Second World Wars and their aftermath. The memory of the Cumans (10.6%) is preserved by the Cumanian mounds (the ancient settlement of Turgony), the memorials to the migration, battles and settlement of the Cumans, or the promenade in the park of the town hall commemorating the Cumanian captains. Nature-related assets account for 6%. Among its “lowland” attractions are the monuments of river regulation (Mirhó-gates, Csivag-accommodation, “Priest-dam”, etc.), and the historical monuments of the past, such as the plaques and the company buildings commemorating the founding of the Smallholders’ Party or the existence of the KUNSZÖV (textile mill).



**Figure 4: Cultural attractions of Kisújszállás (piece)**  
**Source: Vigadó Cultural Centre (2013), Kisújszállás Municipal Register and Kisújszállás city website.**

Kisújszállás currently has a day nursery, two kindergartens, two primary and three secondary schools, an art school, a single special education centre, a cultural centre and library, and the Vigadó multifunctional cultural centre, which also has a cinema and bowling alley. These institutions may not in themselves highlight the cultural importance of the city in the region, but those behind them play an important role in preserving the living city and its culture. There are around half a hundred NGOs and associations in the city, proudly preserving their heritage and cultivating their culture. These include the Kisújszállás Town Protection and Construction Association (the largest and most important NGO in the town), the ‘48 Readers’ Circle, the Bokorvirág Traditional Association, the Kisújszállás Association of Charitable Volunteers, the Morgó Handicraft Circles, the Association of Friends of Straw and Shoe Weavers, the Kisújszállás Greater Cumanian Civic Circle and the Greater Cumanian Nádor-Huszár Cultural Association. There are also traces of lowlandness in the operation of professional organisations that preserve the town’s agricultural roots (e.g. the National Association of Hungarian Rice Growers and Processors, Farmers’ Circle of Kisújszállás).

In the apparent reality of the present – sensing the problems of local society and looking for solutions – the city is clearly building on culture as a local outlet and development opportunity: eight years ago, it created the Vigadó building as a physical framework for this, which has since become a centre of cultural events for locals (and visitors from the countryside). The municipality also pays special attention to the care, preservation and development of the municipality’s culture, as well as to the transmission of local cultural values to the population (and tourists visiting the municipality) – both popular and high culture (if such a distinction still exists). In its Decree No. 46/2012 (XII. 19.), the local representative body defined the cultural services to be “produced” and provided locally, and made the Kisújszállás Cultural Centre and Library, operating as a multifunctional public cultural institution, the main custodian and responsible body. The Vigadó is the jewel in the crown of this institution, and although it is the most important part, it is not the only one. In addition to the Vigadó, it also includes the Arany



János Municipal Library, the House of Culture, the Ethnographic Exhibition Hall, the Lajos Papi Art House, the Bocskai House, the Village Hall and the Greater Cumanian Club: all of these places are constantly engaged in the work of creating and preserving value, which is the aim of the local cultural managers, organisers and shapers of the cultural experience (vigadokisuj.hu). In addition to serving the cultural needs of the locals, the Vigadó also offers programmes and information for visitors to the city. It tries to make the days of tourists visiting Kisújszállás as colourful as possible: its staff can help visitors to go fishing, horse riding, pony trekking, or to find out about the sights of the town (facebook.com).

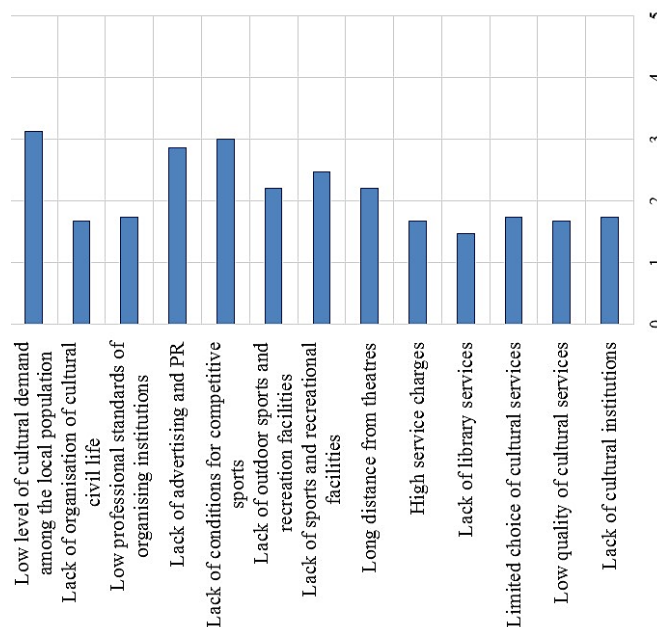
### 3.2. Results of the questionnaire survey

Figure 5 shows how respondents rated the cultural assets of Kisújszállás. The low level of cultural demand from local (average) residents was the main concern, although those interested could find their match in the many civil associations outlined above: the supply side is assured, it is the lack of motivation that is the problem. The activation of local people is a challenge in several areas, although this may be a general (Eastern) Hungarian social paralysis: if the city and the municipality tighten up, it cannot achieve better results in this area (general empiricism that only those who are willing to do something for a cause can be helped). In the field of culture, respondents also highlighted the shortcomings in advertising and public relations, but this was not only a problem in terms of cultural assets, but also in terms of municipal management (Figure 6), where they stressed the lack of communication and public relations (3.5). They believe that very little money is coming into the city from central sources, i.e. there is a general and persistent underfunding that is getting worse (4.3). Locally, this is also indicative of the nearly one and a half decade-long process in Hungary of recentralisation, the emptying out of self-government, and the rebuilding of vertical rather than horizontal “partnership” between territorial levels.

In their responses (as an expression of “subjective perception”), they highlighted the lack of sports facilities and recreational venues, especially for competitive sports. This was despite the fact that Kisújszállás has the Porcsalmi Lajos Sports Park (football field, running track), the Extreme Sports Field, the Motocross track, the running track and the adult fitness park in Park, and the Kumánia Spa and Beach Baths with swimming facilities. The network of cycle paths around the city can be attractive for cyclists and the surrounding area offers great hiking and trekking opportunities. Local people can also find sports that suit them through civil society organisations, such as the Arany János Student Sports Association, the FALCON Riflemen Sports Association, the Kisújszállás Equestrian Sports Association, the Weightlifting and Recreation Association.

Respondents also mentioned – in a negative context – the long distance between theatres (2.3). The “big” theatres (Csokonai National Theatre – Debrecen City, Szigligeti National Theatre – Szolnok City) are indeed further away, but the

multifunctional Vigadó Cultural Centre in Kisújszállás, which has been operating since September 2015 (after a decade and a half of Sleeping Beauty dreams again), has a theatre hall (including a 3D cinema) with a capacity of several hundred people, where concerts, nostalgia evenings, fairy-tale plays and theatre performances are also organised.



**Figure 5: Assessment of the cultural assets of Kisújszállás**

Source: own editing.

The lowland character of the city, beyond its cultural heritage, its quantitative and qualitative characteristics, is reflected in the management of the municipality and the current economic situation. In terms of municipal management, respondents gave the worst scores (above 4) for under-financing, lack of decentralisation (i.e. increasing recentralisation, empty municipalities), low levels of networking and inequalities in the central allocation of development resources (Figure 6).

When assessing the economic situation, industrial development was lacking and industrial parks, incubators and start-up centres were underestimated. In addition, they stress the use of outdated technologies and the low support for entrepreneurship (Figure 7).

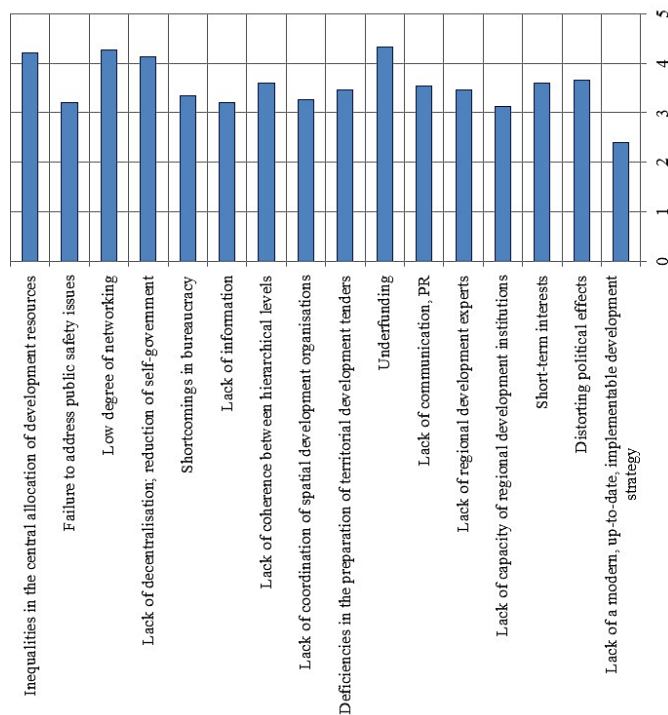
Both the management of the settlement and the perception of the economic situation underline the need for change in a settlement stuck (suffering) in the old lowland agricultural structure. Of course, it is a contradiction that the majority of local people do not want (dare?) to take action, to actively participate in change, and that overall civic activity is very low.

## 4. DISCUSSION

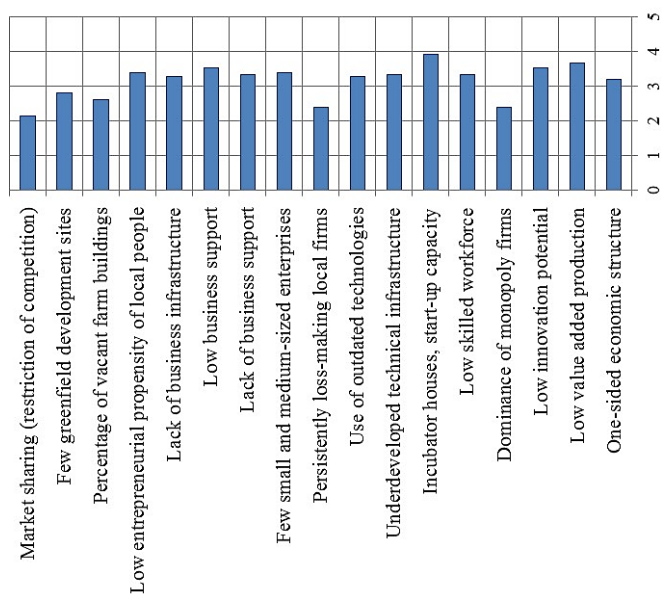
On the basis of surveys and analyses, it can be stated that in the case of Kisújszállás, too, the argument in favour of strengthening urban cultural economic activities is that the



role of small and medium-sized enterprises and the importance of traditions are generally significant in this segment (Süli-Zakar et al., 2006). As a counter-current to the uniformised, globalised consumer culture, a consumer stratum has also emerged that is increasingly looking for uniqueness, the typical, the special – and paying for it.



**Figure 6: Assessment of the settlement management situation in Kisújszállás**  
Source: own editing.



**Figure 7: Assessment of the economic situation in Kisújszállás**  
Source: own editing.

The craft industry can thus successfully integrate into the (global) cultural economy by combining traditional elements with modern ones, producing high-quality, unique products and a modern market organisation. The revival, modernisation and promotion of local traditional products to a wider audience can be a success at national and international level. An excellent example of this is the global success story of the revitalised local handicraft industry in Koniakow, Poland, which began in the 2000s (Koniakow Lace). Local traditions, festivals and folklore attractions can stimulate tourism and revitalise craft activities that have been declining in the era of industrial mass production (Süli-Zakar et al., 2006). It is therefore worth noting that the urban cultural economy is particularly sensitive to the quality of local society, i.e. the quality of the local human resource base.

It is an old axiom that settlements should be “sold” to three main target groups: the local population, businesses and tourists (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; Kozma, 2006). Tourism plays an important role in increasing the competitiveness of a settlement, influencing its image, image and positive perception (Máté and Nagy, 2015). In the life of a local community, tourism can support the intentions to preserve local cultural heritage, to cultivate traditions and to showcase values (Maccannell, 2003). It is important to note that the continuous physical and symbolic renewal of a municipality, as well as the development and sale of local specialities to tourists, is a real possibility, since “*tourism is a process that involves the continuous re-creation of practice and space in a shared context*” (Edensor, 2012: 241), i.e. urban development can generate a boost in tourism and thus further development of the city. It is also now well established that “*the development of cultural tourism is no longer just a tourism issue but a community issue*” (Richards, 2021: 8), i.e. tourism revitalisation has a significant potential for municipal (local business) development.

In the context of 21st century tourism trends, it can be seen that “*the combination of more actors entering the tourism system and a wider range of contexts for cultural tourism experiences means that many new cultural tourism practices are emerging*” (Richards, 2021: 8), opening up new avenues for communities and local businesses that have few traditional attractions. For some time now, the tourist has been looking for the special, the unique, the authentic experience: perhaps for this reason, there has been an appreciation of the approach of ‘going where you would never have gone otherwise’. Beyond physical attractions, “*the search for distinction by tourists means that the contemporary city must be ‘eventful or die’*”. Increasingly, cities are using events as a political tool to underpin culture-led development, create a distinctive image or promote social cohesion” (Richards, 2021: 8).

Another important cornerstone of the development of the cultural economy is the active policy of the local community representative, the municipality, in this field, which can be seen, for example, in the increase of cultural expenditure, the reorganisation and efficiency of urban cultural institutions, the increase of the number and quality of events, or the

revitalisation of the built heritage to expand its functions (Süli-Zakar et al., 2006), thus contributing to the economic success of the city and the improvement of the quality of life of the local population. Because of its symbolic, image-creating and image-enhancing nature, the cultural economy can generate an attraction that has a significant impact on the city's society and economy, and on urban life as a whole.

The municipality of Kisújszállás (like so many of its Hungarian and Eastern European, East German and former socialist counterparts) has suffered the changes of regime: the post-World War II communist regime abolished the virilistic consciousness and action (i.e. the patronage of the most tax-paying local citizens for the community), while the post-1990 new capitalism abolished the free labour of the socialist-era Saturday volunteering, free work by the socialist brigades for the benefit of the community. In any case, it is interesting and instructive to note how the changes in the political and economic systems in the city (and in the region) have brought about fundamental changes (mainly a general social and consequent economic decline), and how the renewal has been only punctuated both spatially and sectorally (and hardly by self-production, but largely based on external material resources).

The city is also a clear example of how the externally funded (predominantly infrastructure-engineering related, so called hard) developments have not generated automatic social development and progress, competitiveness improvement since the regime change – not even in Hungarian terms, let alone in European terms. The decline of local society is clear, and halting and possibly improving it is extremely difficult, and at the moment it seems virtually impossible. At the moment, renewal would have to come partly from the outside (attracting younger, better educated people with families or planning to have families back to the area) and partly from the inside, through very conscious and effective partnership-building (which would first require building trust between local people).

The key question would be to reduce the peripheralization in the minds of the locals, to eliminate it in the medium term (today, the general question in the city is: "Why should a qualified young person stay, come and live in Kisújszállás, because 'there is nothing here'?"), to solve the mental paralysis and sense of hopelessness that causes it. It would be particularly important to continue marketing to young qualified people, emphasising the advantages of the town, its liveability, the existence of its educational institutions, the existence of NGOs, the diversity of cultural opportunities available in the town, its good traffic and transport situation, the relative cheapness of its real estate and the cost of living.

The lesson is the failure so far to harness unique, internal resources for the benefit of the city as a whole, to stimulate development (and the shocking lack of awareness of their existence, let alone their use, in urban society in general - the geography of the city shows that many people are not even aware that rice is grown on its outskirts) (the authors' firm conviction, that in the US, a municipality with such unique

assets would be one of the richest and most successful in its category, because the local community and businesses would maximise these opportunities and not always look to others for outside help), and how important it is in such a social environment that the relationship of the municipality's (the local government) number one leader with local businesses and residents is. It also became clear that it is almost futile to attract significant external (largely EU and some state) development funding, because without meaningful involvement of local businesses and residents, the medium and long-term sustainability of all this is clearly in doubt.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Taking the above ideas and "translating" them to the city of Kisújszállás, our research based on primary, secondary and lived geographic methods shows that the city is clearly building on culture as an attraction and as a potential pillar for the city's renewal and future development. This culture-based development approach for a large traditional rural town with a great cultural tradition like Kisújszállás, in principle, reveals very good opportunities, since culture is one of the very important soft factors in the 21st century, and as we have seen, the analysed town was and is very well-equipped for this.

Although from a traffic- and transport-geographical point of view the location of the settlement is very good (between Budapest and Debrecen, on main roads and railways), unfortunately the governments of the last half century or so owe a debt to the development of the most congested European transport corridor, the main road No.4 (shown as a death road on German transport maps) (which has recently perhaps finally shown some, but far from adequate progress towards becoming a motorway). Failure to do so is not conducive to development intensity, which is one of the reasons why the city is not attracting investment.

Its internal peripheral location means that the city cannot build on the potential dynamic role of the country borders.

The research found a kind of intellectual-mental paralysis of the local urban society, its stagnation, its weak entrepreneurial and innovative capacities, and confirmed the existence of an outdated (or rather Janus-like) economic structure resulting from an outmoded social structure (a ramshackle society, an almost absent local middle class, a broad lower class living only day-to-day + the declassed, the visionless).

The researches, the experience of lived geography, show how the average local resident has no sense of ownership of the city; they are full of complaints (see the experience of the local social media sites), how they only look to the municipality for solutions, and how they are unable/willing to act on their own, how they have no vision – not to mention the low environmental awareness of the locals. A particularly painful finding of the research (based partly on dry statistics and partly on daily practical experience) is how knowledge, continuous learning, persistent effort has no value in local society, and how, to the extreme, only material 'values' matter

– and the way to obtain them should always be as easy as possible...

At the same time, our research has shown that the town has a unique symbolic (Katalin Karikó's, István Csukás' spiritual heritage), physical (rice, Indian rice) and built heritage (the renewed, multifunctional cultural centre of regional and local importance, the Vigadó), which no other town in Greater Cumania (or even in other similar categories in the lowlands) can boast. It is unique and positive that the town is clearly building on culture as a breakthrough (as indicated by the slogan 'Kisújszállás, the cultural capital of Greater Cumania'), and Kisújszállás sees an opportunity to use culture to strengthen its economy in the medium and long term and to create social cohesion.

The present situation, however, still shows that at the level of the income- and profit-generating economy, there is hardly any exploitation of local specificities (see straw weavers, embroiderers, etc. who work rather *l'art pour l'art*, and there is no umbrella organisation, no economic society to coordinate and bring them together, to consciously promote and sell the specific local products locally and to tourists, or even via the internet, now worldwide, according to the long tail model, to special interested consumer communities).

PR and marketing are also weak and insufficient (neither in the cultural nor in the city as a whole).

We conclude that further research could be directed at: how to improve and focus marketing, and what methods should be used to improve communication and cooperation between the municipality, entrepreneurs and residents, and to market local unique intellectual and physical assets in a proper and sustainable way.

From a tourism point of view, cultural tourism is one of the most prominent tourism products because: 1. It has a season-extending effect; 2. It has very good synergies with other tourism products (strong synergies with urban, rural, MICE, VRF tourism, while medium synergies with active and ecotourism and thematic trips); 3. It is characterised by high unit costs; 4. It requires the cooperation of people with different skills.

After the tourism aspect, a pragmatic approach could be that cultural tourism in the city should not only focus on the segment based on traditional roots, but as a municipality in an inner peripheral area, it could build on traditional culture and allow creative industries to enter, which play an increasing role in culture-based urban development. Recovering from this peripheral fate (the resilience of the municipality) is an excellent means of re-considering and revitalising cultural values, as Kisújszállás is doing.

Obviously, it is important to look not only at tourists, but also (and this is also true for resilience) at the extent to which different groups in local society can identify with the new constructions, i.e. interactive partnership communication with the local community is of paramount importance.

In addition to municipal marketing development, new lines of investigation in the future could include: examining the possibilities of culture-based urban development; analysing the interrelationship between development policy and cultural planning; researching the local potential and impact of cultural tourism; exploring the synergies of urban cultural tourism with other tourism products; and examining the interrelationship between the city's endowments and its resilience capabilities.

It would be important that the results and proposals of theoretical research and science should also be reflected in practical urban development activities, ad absurdum, and become the basis for them (Hungarian reality vs. dreams).

The fundamental question is whether culture-based renewal and identity building can be seen as a new development alternative or as a "horizontal" concept supporting existing development alternatives (mobilisation of local resources vs. channelling external resources, or development of food economy, industry, tourism, etc.)? We believe that a nuanced answer to this question can be given. Since even in the lowland, "Greater Cumanian" conditions, the concept of a multi-legged existence is necessary, culture-based renewal and identity building can be seen as a horizontal concept supporting existing development alternatives. With the proviso that all existing physical and intellectual resources are part of (local) culture in the broadest sense ('culture is what man has added to nature'), they are also points of resilience for the municipality, which in principle can provide a good basis for survival and, optimally, for the longer-term balanced development of the city.

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