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Social Housing in Post-crisis Hungary: A Reshaping of the Housing Regime under 'Unorthodox' Economic and Social Policy

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Abstract: *Hungary embarked on a very specific path two years after the Global Financial Crisis and the ensuing recession. It replaced 'traditional' austerity programmes with measures based on an 'unorthodox' economic policy. This policy paradigm shift affected Hungary's emerging social housing policy in two ways. First, the mainstream approach to counteracting decreasing housing affordability (due to increased loan repayments and other housing cost items while incomes decreased) was primarily focused on providing strong support for the middle class. Second, interventions aimed at low-income households remained minimal, and were only introduced as a last resort in specific cases to resolve political tensions. This dual approach characterised the policy of the government, but, for political reasons, only the first part was communicated. Programmes aimed at the middle class were poorly targeted, and often helped the upper-middle class the most; but the latter did not react the way policy makers had expected (boosting economic growth through increased consumption). Programmes aimed at low-income groups made the social structure more rigid, decreased the chance of low-income persons to escape extreme poverty, and cemented the opportunity gap between the better-off and the poor. The most recent housing policy measures suggest that the errors made in the 2000s will likely be repeated, and there are no measures in place that could correct their course. Consequently, from the perspective of the housing regime, we can predict that the housing model of the early 2000s will remain dominant.*

Keywords: social housing; Hungary; welfare policy.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to summarise the main policy actions in the area of social housing after the GFC, which had a severe impact on the Hungarian economy. In our approach, housing policy is part of the broader economic and welfare regime, but individual housing policy interventions do not necessarily fit into any master plan, as they are more part of a 'trial and error' process. On the one hand, there are several quasi-independent players (municipalities, different ministries, financial institutions, non-profit organisations, social groups, etc.) with their own mission and power, and the interactions between them can lead to unintended results. On the other hand, unpredicted social housing problems may force the government to take actions that conform to the principles of a master plan.

After outlining the government's 'master plan' in economic and social development the paper will analyse housing policy measures in three areas: a) managing the housing affordability gap (helping households to cope with the increasing costs of housing services); b) helping households faced with hardship after the GFC to pay their mortgage; and c) improving the access of the poor to housing. These three areas cover the problems in social housing and go beyond a narrow interpretation where the focus is only on the role of social landlords. In our summary we try to show how housing measures that are seemingly part of a master plan lead to unintended results, and how the government is forced by possible social conflicts to introduce measures that do not fit into their master plan.

'Unorthodox' economic and social policy in a post-socialist housing regime

Housing regimes are embedded in the broader social and political system and develop as a consequence of the interactions among their stakeholders under the given macroeconomic and social framework. The approach followed in this paper is close to the 'structures of housing provision' approach used by Harloe and Martens (1987) and Ball and Harloe (1992), which argues that housing regimes emerged in interaction with economic development and expanded a particular set of institutional arrangements in response to specific development challenges (like urban growth, employment relations, income and wealth inequality, conditions in the financial sector etc.). The conceptual chaos that has accompanied attempts to understand post-socialist housing regimes is rooted in from the limited knowledge and available information about the specific development challenges of the political, economic, and welfare systems in the transition countries. The academic discussion surrounding these issues reflects this conceptual uncertainty, employing such expressions as 'housing system development by default' (Stephens et al. 2015), 'muddling through' (Tsenkova 2009), the relationship between the 'weak state' and housing (Hegedüs 2009), or policy collapse (Pichler-Milanovich 2001). Analyses published in the 1990s were even vaguer. However, by 2008, when the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) hit the transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the key elements their housing systems had in common became clear: the privatisation and residualisation of the former public rental sector, increasing social and regional inequalities, and the emerging market-based housing finance systems (Hegedüs 2017).

The GFC's impact varied across the new EU member states according to what their economic policy was prior to the crisis. The specifics of the housing finance system, especially the role of foreign currency-denominated (FX) mortgage loans, also varied the picture. Hungary was among the countries hit hard by the crisis, after which the government, in 2008 and 2009, introduced cautious austerity measures. After 2010, the conservative government (elected in 2010 and re-elected in 2014) introduced an 'unorthodox' economic (and political) regime, which deployed populist measures to move towards an authoritarian political system. The previous 'weak government' was then replaced with a decidedly strong one. As a method of crisis management, this policy sought to avoid the direct austerity measures that were economically necessary, and instead mobilised economic reserves. The main components of their economic and social policy were based on three pillars:

1. setting out an economic growth model based on EU transfers, and building up a 'national capitalist class' in control of the energy and utility sectors, banking, and retail franchises;
2. ensuring a fiscal balance by levying special taxes on foreign-owned economic enterprises and financial institutions, and by means of the 'national integration' of Private Pension Funds (accounting for 9% of the annual GDP);
3. an important element of this 'unorthodox' social policy is that it openly ignores low-income groups in favour of supporting the middle class; this focus/intention was signalled by the introduction of the flat Personal Income Tax, the structure of tax allowances for families with children, and so forth.

The effect of the GFC on social housing policy

The GFC hit the Hungarian economy hard, partly because of its loose fiscal policy in the 2000s (high deficit and external debt), and partly because of the huge FX mortgage portfolio that grew between 2004 and 2008. GDP fell by 5-6% after the crisis, unemployment increased substantially, the exchange rate of the HUF plummeted, and even the banks raised the interest rate to offset expected losses, which led to a huge crisis in the FX portfolio. The country entered into a recession that lasted for years but eventually stagnated and then turned into growth thanks to EU transfers and a strict fiscal policy. Below the consequences that the GFC and the new political system have had on the housing regime will be analysed in three areas:

1. managing housing costs affordability,
2. the consequences of the mortgage rescue programmes; and
3. access of the poor to housing.

The paper will identify how the 'new master plan' that introduced an 'unorthodox' economic and social policy affected social housing policy, and it will try to answer the question of how the new master plan shaped the features of the current housing regime.

Managing housing affordability

One of the most important changes the transition brought about in post-socialist housing regimes was a drastic increase in households' housing costs. Housing-related spending grew from 9% in 1989 to 21% in 1993 and stabilised around that level (see Table 1), while income disparities (the ratio of average income in the highest decile to that in the lowest decile) had

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increased from 4.7 to 7.3 by the late 1990s. Consequently, housing costs became a serious problem for the lowest quintile of the population, while even the long-term housing security of lower-middle-class households was compromised.

Table 1: Income, housing costs and the housing cost/income ratio in 1993, 2003, and 2015 for the lowest quintile and for the entire household sector

	1993			2003			2015		
	Income	Housing cost	Housing cost/income ratio	Income	Housing cost	Housing cost/income ratio	Income	Housing cost	Housing cost/income ratio
	HUF/month/hh			HUF/month/hh			HUF/month/hh		
Lowest quintile	10 101	4 086	40%	50 836	15 200	30%	86 846	29 500	34%
Total	32 063	6 718	21%	112 381	23 600	21%	182 353	40 300	22%

Source: Tárki, Hungarian Household Panel 1993; CSO (Central Statistical Office) Housing survey in 2003, 2015.

After privatisation and the introduction of the first mortgage programme (Hegedüs and Várhegyi 1999), the majority (90%) of homeowners became the outright owners of their home (without a mortgage), and thus the critical housing costs in a household became energy (gas, district heating, electricity), water, waste management, local tax and condominium fees. Difficulty affording the housing cost [the costs connected with housing] was the number one social problem that ***determined how households behaved in the housing market and the strategy of different stakeholders (service providers, municipalities, and banks).*** Government policy was inconsistent, as the central budget did not want to take over the financial responsibility [as the government did not want the gap between the capacity of the household sector to pay for housing-related services and the actual costs of the sector to be bridged with resources from the central budget] for bridging the gap between the capacity of the household sector to pay housing-related services and the actual costs of the sector. The real difficulty the emerging welfare system faced was the expanded informal economy, which made means-tested programmes very inefficient. Government measures were therefore very cautious (in terms of eligibility and the scope of the programmes) and put the responsibility on the shoulders of local stakeholders (municipalities, service providers, condominiums).

The real sign of the seriousness of the affordability problem was the accumulation of housing-related debt since the beginning of the 1990s. A significant proportion of households struggled with serious housing debt. Reliable statistics are not available on the size of the problem, but it can be estimated based on two sources. Firstly, reports from utility companies on unpaid utility costs and the reported number of consumers cut from the these services (but not all services), although this information cannot be used to estimate the exact number of households affected owing to overlaps among service providers. Official reports estimated that at least 20-30 percent of households were in arrears in their services payments. (Herpai 2010; MEKSZ 2016). Secondly, household surveys contain information on the number of households unable to pay their utility fees on time. Based on these sources, roughly one-third of all households faced affordability issues, and around 15 percent had serious problems making payments/paying their debts (Hegedüs 2013). The limited ability of central programmes to deal with household indebtedness is indicated by the fact that a debt management service programme was introduced

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in 2003, but only 15-20,000 families, very few of which were in arrears, participated in it. Very low income households continued to accumulate new debts.

Serious problems with housing affordability were caused by the inequality and unpredictability of household incomes and the increasing housing costs. The arrears issue is the most critical element in the social housing system because households in arrears for different amounts are constantly at risk of losing their homes. The specific institutional element of the problem of housing arrears is the fragmented structure of the utility companies, municipal housing companies, condominiums, and financial institutions. Poor households developed their own strategy to pay bills based on their evaluation of their risk of being cut off from services or being evicted. Household budget constraints, however, often force them to move to a lower segment of the housing ladder (segregation, marginalisation). In the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods usury-type loan networks emerged keeping poor households under continuous pressure and exploitation.

After 2010 the government introduced two important programmes relating to housing affordability, both of which fit its unorthodox social policy. Firstly, they abolished the national housing allowance scheme in 2015, which had been distributing HUF 30 billion (annually?) among 400,000 applicants (and typically targeted the lowest quintile), and the responsibility for introducing housing allowance programmes was transferred to local municipalities. These policies corresponded to the general trend of shifting responsibility for affordability-related social issues (i.e. poverty) to the local level and and leaving service providers, municipalities, condominiums, on the one hand, and consumers, on the other, to negotiate solutions to their conflict/problems without state help. Secondly, the government launched a ***political campaign in 2015 called the 'war against utility costs'***, and utility prices (energy, water, waste management and other elements) were decreased and frozen across the board, in parallel with the partial re-nationalisation and centralisation of the utility companies. As a consequence of this programme, the household sector saved HUF 242 billion on utility costs in 2015 (MEKH 2016); however, the targeting of this 'subsidy' was regressive, and did not offer any solutions for the segment of the population facing the greatest hardship. According to our calculations based on the household survey, the top two income quintiles received a 34 percent larger share of this subsidy than the bottom two quintiles.

The consequences of the mortgage rescue programme

The most significant shock after the GFC was in the FX mortgage stock, as 25-30 percent of households had mortgage loans. The story of the mortgage rescue programme provides insight into how public decision-making worked (at that time?/in relation to this problem?) (Hegedüs and Somogyi 2016; Csizmady and Hegedüs 2016). First of all, there was no clear vision for solving this problem. Several programmes were launched in parallel, in order to test the reaction of the stakeholders. The strategy according to the 'master plan' was to put the burden on the banking sector (especially on foreign-owned banks), and let the middle and upper-middle class get rid of FX loans at a low cost. At the same time, the real pressure came from low-income borrowers who had serious difficulties paying their monthly instalments and had accumulated arrears in the early stage of the crisis. The political message from different parties and

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politicians was that the greedy behaviour of the banks was the cause of their troubles. This and the moratorium on foreclosures increased the number of people unable to pay.

Although the FX loan crisis placed the heavest/hardest burden on the poorest borrowers, the government proposal[government policy?] was aimed at offering help to the relatively high-income population, who had access to the necessary financial sources to repay their debt in a lump sum at a discount price. The *early FX loan repayment scheme* ran from September 2011 to the end of February 2012, and it allowed borrowers who had obtained loans denominated in Swiss Francs (CHF) before 2008 (when the CHF was trading at around HUF 150-180) to repay their FX mortgages in full at an exchange rate of just HUF 180 to the Swiss Franc, and this at a time when the CHF was trading at HUF 235-250. A similar scheme was applied to EUR- and YEN-based mortgage loans. Through the early repayment scheme (2012/2013) 20-25 percent of borrowers – the relatively better-off – paid back their loans at a discount rate, while the banking sector had to bear the financial burden of the programme. This programme was unproductive, as it worsened the situation of the remaining borrowers.

The strict and prolonged moratorium on eviction and the communication strategy of exclusively placing the blame on the banking sector contributed to high levels of non-payment and to social conflict in the sector. The *ad hoc* nature of government interventions in reaction to increasing social tensions was well illustrated by the plan to construct social dwellings for the victims of the FX crisis. The plan quickly became a priority in government communications without any public discussion. The programme was criticised at an early phase by observers and experts, who questioned its feasibility and even the need for it for many reasons, the most important of which was the remote location of the allotted site for the housing construction project. The designated site was an external area of Ócsa municipality, a small town 30 km south of Budapest, with no existing infrastructure or public transport options. Future residents, who would already be in financial trouble, would have clearly had a hard time finding a job nearby or a convenient way to commute to work elsewhere. The plan was to add large gardens to the houses to allow subsistence farming for residents, although from the beginning it was suggested that the residents would be more in need of job opportunities. Infrastructure development drove up construction costs significantly. Opponents of the programme even questioned the need to build new dwellings. Although no official (government) studies were prepared, experts and some policy-makers suggested that buying or renting existing smaller apartments would be a more reasonable investment. Eventually, 80 units were built instead of the planned 500, and renters have moved into half of these, while later it was declared the remainder would be used as emergency shelters in the future.

Nonetheless, since 2010 the government had been continuously talking about a programme to set up an agency to help defaulted borrowers. By 2012, a special buy-to-rent scheme had been introduced, managed by the newly established National Asset Management Company (NAMC). NAMC can buy a limited number of delinquent loans and offer a renting option to the former debtor. The ex-owner becomes a tenant with a lease (with no fixed term) with an option to buy back the unit for[after?] 5 years. By mid-2014, NAMC received more than 25,000 offers, and actually bought 16,500 properties at an average price of 3.7 million HUF, which was approximately 46% of the average market price at the time when the original loan contracts were concluded (Csillag 2015). The scheme first targeted the most vulnerable borrowers with children, but the conditions were later relaxed and other vulnerable groups became eligible. The government increased the number of flats available for purchase to 35,000 in 2016. A significant problem with this scheme is that 30% of the families targeted by the scheme could not even afford the low rent set by law owing to their pre-existing debts (e.g. for public utility fees). The scheme does not provide a private insolvency solution to the former debtor. While this may be the largest social housing programme since 1989, problems surrounding its financing and the maintenance of the housing used remain unresolved. An important element of the programme is its voluntary nature, that is, both the debtor and the lender have to agree to join the scheme. In 2016, the evictions were initiated for the non-paying tenants, which provoked protests from lobbying organisations. Attempts are being made to manage the problem of non-paying tenants by involving social institutions (with contributions from the Maltese Charity Service and the Calvinist Church's social organisations) but no considerable change has occurred in the attitudes[position?] of non-paying tenants so far. There have been several other attempts to manage the crises (e.g. the FX Loan Cap scheme, compensation for unfair banking practices, the moratorium on eviction), but the most radical step was the forced conversion of the FX loan portfolio into HUF-denominated loans in January 2015. There are already several vacancies in the new state-owned sector, resulting from when people leave their home owing to a lack of employment. The NAMC worked out its own targeted allocation procedures. The housing stock is scattered regionally, which makes maintenance expensive.

The results of the programmes have been contradictory. The most successful part was the NAMC social housing programme, which was the most significant intervention in the sector in the period after the transition. Interestingly, in the government's public communications this programme was/has been pushed into the background. However, its future is questionable: on the one hand, developing the programme towards becoming the new foundation for social housing is one possibility, but on the other hand, it is also possible that the government could eventually offer renters a privatisation option. Another question is the cost of the programme. There are no exact calculations, but it is estimated that it could be as much as HUF 1,000-1,500 billion, which is 2-3% of GDP, which the lending banks are forced to pay. The banking sector survived the rescue programmes, though some of the foreign banks left the country (which was probably consistent with government plans); the banking sector had continuous losses in the years 2010-2015, and the first year in which they made a profit was 2016. The banks, according to our hypothesis, increased their revenue through higher fees for financial services, which was an indirect tax on the middle class. The social effect of the programme was clear: strong support for higher- income groups and tough conditions for the lowest-income groups. The number of households in arrears has not decreased dramatically, but the problem of arrears has been integrated into the general housing affordability problem.

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Table 2: The housing and income position of different social classes, 2016

Social status	% of substan-dard home	% of overcrowded units	% of hh with arrears	% of hh who can pay for windfall cost	Equivalent per capita income ('000 HUF/month)	Estimated value of the home (million HUF)	% of rural settlements	% of hh with loan	% of hh in public rental	% of hh in private rental	Share of the group
upper	3%	15%	6%	49%	211	16,0	19%	23%	1,6%	4,4%	14%
middle - white collar	4%	22%	8%	34%	176	12,9	18%	24%	2,6%	6,8%	20%
middle- blue collar	9%	24%	22%	17%	128	9,6	36%	24%	2,9%	6,2%	27%
middle - pensioners	6%	5%	6%	27%	148	10,7	28%	6%	3,1%	1,0%	20%
lower class	32%	32%	51%	5%	85	7,4	44%	17%	6,9%	8,3%	19%
Total	11%	20%	19%	24%	145	11,0	30%	18%	3,5%	5,4%	100%

Source: TARKI, 2016.

Access to housing for low-income groups

The very limited amount of social housing stock is one of the most general (shared) features of the CEE transition countries. In Hungary 3% of the stock is owned by municipalities, and privatisation continues. Investment in municipal housing is less than the number of units sold in any given period. This is a consequence of the financial and political interests of the municipalities, where the social rental stock generates both a financial loss and a political risk for the municipalities. Rents cover generally 30% of the costs of the sector, and 20-25% of tenants do not pay the[default on their] rent, which basically forces the property managers to evict tenants, which is a political risk for the municipalities. Between 2007 and 2013 the volume of arrears increased (Czirfusz and Pósfai 2015). The number of evictions doubled between 2007 and 2015, which indicates that this tension in the system intensified; however, evictions concern only 1.5% of the social housing stock per year (CSO 2016).

The typical strategy municipalities adopt in response to the lack of a national housing policy is to continue the privatisation of their dwelling stock. However, low-income tenants do not want, nor do they have the resources, to buy their homes. Grotesquely, many municipalities introduced minimum-income levels to their eligibility criteria for municipal rental housing, which means poor families are explicitly excluded. Moreover, some municipalities are under pressure from activist groups for leaving dwellings vacant (especially the rundown units), while people are becoming homeless; they criticise municipalities for allocating better-quality units to better-off families with good political connections or to the decision-makers themselves.

However, some municipalities are aware of the contradiction resulting from this approach and are open to cooperating with social NGOs on a small scale. Examples include the ‘From Street to Home Association’, an NGO that specialises in helping homeless people access housing, and obtains some homes for its clients from municipalities. The NGO renovates the housing unit and engages in social work to help clients get to work to pay housing cost.. The Hungarian branch of Habitat for Humanity has also been implementing similar programmes.
The Maltese Charity Service has been working to set up an agreement with the city of Veszprém in Hungary, where the Charity oversees the management of the municipal housing stock. Beside the municipally owned units, the housing agency also looks for private rental units to be used

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for public tasks (social rental agency model), and they also have their own housing units for social accommodation. The novelty of their model extends beyond its integrated management of various subsectors of affordable housing; it also integrates housing management and social work, which adds greater efficiency to their work. This is something that is often recommended by social policy experts, but seldom ever happens. This programme will continue in other cities (Paks and Miskolc), and new investments (in the form of rent cooperatives) are also being planned.

The EU programmes in the field of affordable housing are typically small-scale pilot programmes targeting marginalised and excluded social groups (homeless and the Roma population). These programmes have not led to a substantial change in the housing and living environment of the excluded groups. The poorest and most marginalised households often move towards the low end of the homeownership sector (segregated urban neighbourhoods, marginalised communities on the outskirts of cities, and remote rural areas), or are forced to enter the low end of the private rental sector, which often means substandard housing and unattractive neighbourhoods.

Conclusion: back to the old system

After eight years with no specific housing policy the government once again introduced subsidy programmes to support housing investments. The most important recent programme is explicitly not a social programme. It supports instead young families with children to help them have better access to housing. The housing investment subsidy (which has a long history that dates back to 1971) was reintroduced with special conditions, which gave a disproportionately high subsidy to families with three children, and (also granted them) optional access to a large housing loan. Families with two or fewer children are also eligible for a construction grant to build new housing units. The decrease in the VAT on construction also fits the (government's) policy intention to generate more investment through increased household demand, and has a regressive subsidy allocation scheme. Moreover, there are plans to allocate a huge subsidy to special 'consumer groups', who will first have to save for 10 years, and then housing units will be allocated through a lottery or based on bidding. This (plan/programme) is similar to the existing contract saving scheme, which offers 30% of the amount saved annually as a state-financed premium (an exceptionally high rate compared to similar schemes in Europe), with the difference that it can only be used for newly built units and the maximum subsidy is four times higher. The new subsidies can be used only for homeownership. Critics supported by activist groups demand that the same programmes be extended to rental solutions[policy]. However, the rental housing programme does not fit into the conservative social policy vision of the government, which seems to believe that private ownership is key for the middle class.

We can conclude that Hungary adheres to an 'unorthodox' model of housing policy, which even in times of economic hardship focuses on supporting the middle and upper middle classes, while it buries and neglects social conflicts emerging at the local level between the utility companies, landlords, municipalities and the poor. However, its middle class-oriented housing policy seems also to have proven unsuccessful, because instead of the middle class it is the top two (income) deciles that (most) enjoy the benefits of the (country's housing policy) programmes.

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