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The Rise of Newcomer Governance: Local Power, Participation, and the Contradictions of Suburban Growth

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Abstract

This article analyses how, under specific local and institutional conditions, some newcomer-led or newcomer-influenced coalitions may gain disproportionate influence in suburban governance, and how this can reshape development priorities in ways that disadvantage other residents and complicate metropolitan coordination. The rapid expansion of the Budapest agglomeration since the 1990s has brought an influx of upwardly mobile residents to small towns, yet the political implications of these socio-economic shifts remain underexamined. This explorative study employs a qualitative approach to present cases when newcomers assume power and redefine development priorities of the given settlement. Our findings reveal that some organised higher-status in-migrant groups can leverage social, cultural, and economic resources to influence planning debates and promote selective quality-of-life agendas, which in the examined cases often sidelined the needs of long-term residents and hindered metropolitan-level cooperation. These examples present a central contradiction of suburbanisation: Beyond expansion, these political changes simultaneously fuel exclusivity and governance challenges that eventually work against metropolitan development. They also show that active engagement in local politics and issues of planning and development can lead to exclusive and unsustainable results, and one-sided political representation only causes further conflicts and social problems. The study contributes to international debates on suburban governance by illuminating the contradictions between local democracy and sustainable growth in expanding metropolitan regions. How to channel these local power shifts toward inclusive, sustainable urban development is an issue that needs to be dealt with by researchers, practitioners, and politicians alike.

Keywords

Budapest; local democracy; metropolitan growth; suburban governance

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the Budapest agglomeration has undergone one of the most intensive suburbanisation processes in Central and Eastern Europe. Following the collapse of state socialism, large-scale residential decentralisation reshaped the spatial, social, and institutional landscape of the metropolitan region (Bagyura, 2020). Population growth in suburban municipalities was driven not only by housing market liberalisation and expanding private car ownership, but also by the search for improved living environments, residential autonomy, and perceived distance from the social and infrastructural problems of the capital city. These motivations were diverse: For some households, suburban relocation meant access to more affordable family housing, while for others it was linked to more exclusive expectations of residential quality, tranquillity, and social distinction. As a result, formerly rural settlements and small towns were rapidly transformed into suburban municipalities integrated into the daily functional space of Budapest.

In many cases, this suburban expansion was accompanied by a profound socio-economic transformation. Middle-class, higher-status households—highly educated, professionally mobile, and economically resourceful—often became an important in-migrant group, reshaping the social composition of suburban settlements. This influx brought fiscal resources, skills, and new forms of civic engagement. In certain instances, however, it also altered local power relations, governance practices, and development priorities. In many municipalities, socio-economic growth coincided with increasing pressure on infrastructure, public services, and land use, intensifying political conflicts over development, environmental protection, and competing visions of suburban life (Csizmady et al., 2022).

Despite extensive research on post-socialist suburbanisation as a spatial and socio-economic process, its political implications remain insufficiently understood. Existing studies have largely focused on patterns of residential mobility, housing markets, and socio-spatial differentiation, often treating suburban municipalities as passive recipients of metropolitan growth (Ekers et al., 2012). Less attention has been paid to how socio-economic change can translate into political influence at the local level, or how particular newcomer-led or newcomer-influenced coalitions reshape local governance structures, participatory processes, and development agendas. This gap is particularly striking given the institutional characteristics of post-socialist governance systems, where fragmented metropolitan coordination, strong municipal autonomy, and uneven administrative capacity create fertile ground for the politicisation of social change. Under such conditions, quality-of-life claims may in some cases become connected to exclusionary agendas and NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard). The concept of NIMBYism suggests that citizens object to facilities being in their neighbourhood mainly out of self-interest. In the cases examined here, such dynamics could hinder service provision and other developments and could support regulatory changes disadvantageous for residents who lived there before suburbanisation (Kajdanek, 2014).

To capture these dynamics, we examine how socio-economic change may translate into local political influence, how particular coalitions redirect development agendas, and how these shifts affect long-term residents and metropolitan-scale sustainability. The analysis first focuses on capital mobilisation, institutional positioning, and legitimacy construction. It then examines how post-socialist institutional fragmentation, quality-of-life-oriented planning, and participatory expectations created arenas in which higher-status residents were often especially active. Finally, it analyses exclusionary development agendas and their consequences for political representation, resource allocation, and socially inclusive development.

This connects social change, local political influence, and planning outcomes in a context where privilege depends not only on economic status but also on political ties. It also shows that participatory processes may privilege higher-status actors when participation is socially selective, even when participation is formally open and framed as democratic inclusion.

The article's use of "newcomer governance" is therefore analytical rather than categorical. It does not imply that newcomers always share the same interests, motivations, or political orientations, nor that middle-class in-migration necessarily produces exclusionary outcomes. Rather, the concept refers to cases in which newcomer-led or newcomer-influenced coalitions acquire agenda-setting power under specific local and institutional conditions. The analysis focuses on these situations precisely because they reveal how classed resources, participatory institutions, and planning conflicts may interact in suburban municipalities.

While previous studies use newcomer governance mainly to describe the institutional incorporation of migrants into urban citizenship regimes, this article extends the concept to suburban political reconfiguration associated with middle-class in-migration. Newcomer governance operates through three interrelated dimensions. First, uneven political influence refers to the conversion of socio-economic change into formal or informal authority, as resourceful actors enter local decision-making through elections, civic engagement, and agenda-setting. Second, agenda redirection captures the reorientation of planning priorities towards quality-of-life concerns—environmental protection, development control, and residential order—that may privilege organised higher-status groups while marginalising long-term residents. Long-term residents are those who lived in the settlement before recent waves of middle-class suburban in-migration and the associated political and social transformation of the locality; in the examined cases, they are often older and occupy relatively lower socio-economic positions. Third, institutional embedding describes how such priorities become stabilised through participatory mechanisms, discursive strategies, and regulatory practices that can favour already advantaged groups.

Understood in this way, newcomer governance is neither a general feature of newcomers nor a necessary stage of suburban transition. It is a possible outcome of suburban political economy under conditions of rapid socio-economic change, fragmented metropolitan governance, and unequal access to political resources. The concept foregrounds the classed and relational nature of political influence and shows that suburban settlements actively shape, rather than merely receive, metropolitan growth. This also keeps the analysis focused on governance mechanisms rather than on newcomers as a homogeneous social group.

The study makes three contributions. First, it addresses the political dimension of suburban growth by showing how, in certain cases, socio-economic change reshapes local power relations. Second, it identifies a contradiction of suburban expansion: Higher-status in-migration can bring resources and civic engagement, but particular forms of newcomer-influenced governance can also generate exclusionary dynamics. Third, it contributes to debates on governance, participation, and inequality by highlighting unequal political and participatory representation. By linking these issues to the Budapest agglomeration, the article also adds evidence from a post-socialist metropolitan context where municipal autonomy, weak coordination, and informalised governance make local power relations especially consequential.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Suburban Growth and Governance

Suburban growth is neither linear nor universal, but highly contingent on governance configurations and broader political and economic contexts (Csizmady et al., 2022; Olt et al., 2024). The interaction and division of power between state institutions, local governments, market actors, and residents can play out differently by context. Besides market forces or planning rationales, political interests can determine the processes too (Maloutas, 2003).

Suburban governance varies across welfare systems, planning traditions, and intergovernmental relations (Ekers et al., 2012). North American suburbanisation has often been shaped by market-oriented governance, while Western European contexts have stronger vertical coordination, as municipalities depend more heavily on regional or national authorities (Hanlon et al., 2010). Housing regimes, legal frameworks, and planning cultures further mediate how suburban growth unfolds (Keil, 2018). Post-socialist suburbanisation followed a distinct trajectory rooted in state-socialist legacies and post-1990 transformation. Under socialism, housing construction was largely state-led, while detached-house suburbanisation to small towns and villages was not actively promoted. Later suburbanisation therefore remained closer to self-led models in which private property acquisition became a central motivation (Bučaitė-Vilkė & Krukowska, 2020; Csizmady et al., 2022).

After the regime changes, suburbanisation became increasingly market-driven in the absence of effective regional planning. Housing privatisation, deregulated land markets, and weakened strategic planning created a fragmented institutional environment in which suburban expansion often outpaced regulation (Csanádi & Csizmady, 2002; Z. Kovács & Tosics, 2014). These conditions produced uneven development paths across post-socialist countries (Ekers et al., 2012; Hirt, 2007; Leetmaa et al., 2009). Limited public resources, weak coordination, and institutional uncertainty constrained policy interventions, leaving many suburban municipalities unprepared for population inflows. Consequently, infrastructural deficits persisted, suburban centres remained underdeveloped, and dependence on the core city continued to characterise post-socialist metropolitan regions (Bučaitė-Vilkė & Krukowska, 2020; Hirt & Kovachev, 2015). At the same time, the expansion of built-up areas frequently outpaced population growth, indicating extensive land consumption and low-density development even in the absence of strong socio-economic pressure (Hardi, 2022; Z. Kovács et al., 2019; Pénzes et al., 2023).

Post-socialist urban sprawl is marked by weak development control, fragmented land ownership, and limited metropolitan coordination (Kübler, 2012; Stanilov & Sýkora, 2014). In Hungary, municipalities have significant formal powers over planning, but fiscal dependency and national regulatory frameworks constrain effective autonomy. This produces a system in which suburban development is formally decentralised but shaped by uneven power relations and selective intervention (Kőszeghy & Csizmady, 2019; Olt & Lepeltier-Kutasi, 2018). Similar political reconfigurations linked to in-migration have been documented in the Budapest agglomeration (Bagyura, 2020).

2.2. Local Democracy and Political Participation

Local democracy and political participation are widely conceptualised as normative pillars of decentralised governance (Barber, 2013), particularly in suburban and small-town contexts where spatial proximity between decision-makers and residents is assumed to enhance accountability and responsiveness (Fung, 2006). However, a substantial body of critical scholarship questions whether local arenas automatically produce more democratic outcomes, especially under conditions of social inequality and uneven access to political resources (Purcell, 2006). Rather than functioning as neutral spaces of representation, local political arenas often reproduce or intensify existing power asymmetries.

Purcell's (2006) critique of the "local trap" demonstrates how decentralisation may reinforce hierarchical power relations when access to participatory mechanisms is uneven. Institutional design plays a decisive role: Participation tends to privilege actors with greater time resources, organisational capacity, and institutional literacy (Fung, 2006). From this perspective, participation operates less as a universal channel of representation than as a selective governance tool that amplifies certain voices while marginalising others. Higher-status actors have become disproportionately dominant in local political and associational life, even within formally open democratic systems (Silver et al., 2010).

In post-socialist contexts, these dynamics are intensified by low institutional trust, weak civic cultures, and enduring informal power relations (Kębłowski & Van Criekingen, 2014; Olt & Lepeltier-Kutasi, 2018). EU accession reinforced participation as a normative requirement, but participation often remained limited to consultation with little effect on substantive decisions (Barta, 2009; Kőszeghy & Csizmady, 2019). Local democracy is therefore not a panacea. In post-socialist settings, it is further shaped by neo-feudal relations between national power and local political and economic actors (Szelenyi & Csillag, 2015).

In the absence of strong institutions representing disadvantaged groups, the engagement, resources, and connections of higher-status actors can become decisive. Drawing on Bourdieu, this can be understood as capital conversion: Economic, cultural, and social resources are transformed into political authority (Bourdieu, 1986). Yet this conversion depends on local power relations, established elites, newcomers' motivations, and settlement structure. Newcomer governance is therefore not an automatism of suburbanisation. At the same time, middle-class newcomers may possess advantages in local politics because of professional status, educational credentials, and institutional familiarity (Benson & Jackson, 2013; Savage et al., 2005). The key point is that local political influence remains unevenly distributed, shaped by social inequalities, institutional design, and context-specific power relations rather than by formal democratic access alone.

2.3. Planning and Development Priorities: Exclusionary Residential Politics and the Reconfiguration of Local Interests

Urban and suburban planning priorities are increasingly understood as outcomes of contested social processes rather than neutral technical responses to growth, reflecting the interests of actors best positioned to define land use, allocate resources, and legitimise particular visions of place (Fainstein, 2010; Logan & Molotch, 2007). In suburbanising regions, these dynamics are intensified by socio-economic change, as the in-migration of higher-status populations reshapes not only the social composition of settlements but also the normative frameworks through which development priorities are articulated and contested.

Higher-status suburban residents can mobilise around exclusionary residential politics: a political orientation prioritising environmental protection, low-density development, traffic regulation, and residential order (Tissot, 2015; A. Walks, 2013). Such priorities may express legitimate concerns about liveability, environmental quality, and the management of rapid growth. Yet when advanced by socially advantaged groups with disproportionate influence, they can become embedded in classed notions of space and belonging (Benson & Jackson, 2013; Savage et al., 2005). In these cases, environmental and quality-of-life claims can become strategies for controlling development trajectories, regulating social composition, and protecting property values. They can also support conservative or NIMBYist approaches that portray certain social groups as sources of problems and oppose services or developments needed by lower-status residents, such as those without access to private cars (Csizmady et al., 2022).

Fischel's (2001) "homevoter hypothesis" conceptualises homeowners as actors seeking to protect perceived property values through local regulatory control. In suburban settings, this logic can support growth restrictions and resistance to developments seen as threatening residential stability or neighbourhood character. Although developed in a different institutional context, it helps explain how owner occupation intersects with local political power in fragmented governance systems (R. A. Walks & Maaranen, 2008). In practice, exclusionary residential politics may operate through intertwined discursive, participatory, and regulatory mechanisms. Development restrictions can be legitimised through environmental and community-based narratives, while organised resident groups may dominate participatory arenas and influence zoning and regulatory decisions. Together, these mechanisms enable socially advantaged actors to shape suburban development trajectories in ways that protect residential order, status, and property values (Tissot, 2015; A. Walks, 2013).

In post-socialist contexts, planning priorities are further shaped by institutional legacies, fragmented governance, and dependence on external funding. Hungarian urban planning has often been dominated by project-based logics that privilege visible interventions over long-term social objectives (Barta, 2009; Kőszeghy & Csizmady, 2019). In suburban municipalities with limited capacity and fiscal vulnerability, socially resourceful actors may therefore become important agenda-setters (Hirt et al., 2013; Stanilov & Sýkora, 2014).

The capacity of newcomers to redirect planning priorities is closely linked to unequal patterns of participation. Empirical research on participatory planning in Hungary and other post-socialist contexts has shown that, as anywhere, formal participation mechanisms tend to privilege actors with higher levels of education, institutional literacy, and time resources, thereby reproducing social inequalities within ostensibly inclusive governance frameworks (Csanádi et al., 2010). Participation thus operates as a selective filter rather than a neutral channel of representation, enabling socially advantaged groups to exert disproportionate influence over agenda-setting when no strong countervailing institutions are present.

2.4. Exclusionary Outcomes and the Limits of Social Sustainability

Exclusionary residential politics may enhance satisfaction for some higher-status groups, but it can also narrow local development and undermine social sustainability. Narrow ideals of middle-class residential life can produce specialised settlement functions, high turnover, and limited urbanisation. Comparative studies show that exclusionary outcomes often emerge not through direct displacement but through restrictive

land-use policies, selective service provision, and resistance to socially mixed development (Tammaru et al., 2019). In this sense, suburban planning can become a mechanism of social closure, normalising particular priorities while marginalising groups with weaker political voice or fewer resources (Csanádi et al., 2010).

This tension is central to suburban growth in post-socialist contexts. The capacity of resourceful newcomer groups to redirect development agendas reflects not only socio-economic status but also the ability to mobilise resources, participate effectively, and legitimise selective outcomes through environmental and community-based narratives. These processes are reinforced by weak metropolitan coordination, fragmented municipal authority, and limited regulatory enforcement (Csizmady et al., 2022).

3. Context: Budapest Agglomeration

3.1. Post-1990s Suburbanisation Trends

Budapest concentrates economic activity, high-order services, and employment, making surrounding municipalities functionally dependent on the capital despite formal autonomy. The collapse of centrally planned housing, privatisation, and land-market liberalisation reshaped residential mobility. While suburbanisation existed at a limited scale during late socialism, its intensity, social selectivity, and territorial consequences increased substantially after 1990 (Csanádi & Csizmady, 2002).

From the mid-1990s, suburban expansion accelerated. Budapest lost population while the agglomeration grew, producing a territorially expansive but differentiated metropolitan region (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2025). Built-up areas often expanded faster than population, reflecting low-density development and weak planning coordination, a pattern consistent with broader Central European trends (Hardi, 2022; Pénzes et al., 2023). Growth was uneven. Western and north-western sectors of the agglomeration attracted many in-migrants, while eastern and south-eastern areas followed slower and socially distinct trajectories. Rather than reducing inequalities, suburbanisation reinforced settlement hierarchies: Higher-status areas consolidated advantages, while lower-status zones faced infrastructural and social pressures (Z. Kovács & Tosics, 2014).

Suburban migration was linked to family formation, housing aspirations, and improved living environments, but access to desirable locations remained socially selective. Higher-status households were better positioned to translate preferences into spatial advantage, while lower-status groups often moved to peripheral or weakly regulated areas (Csanádi & Csizmady, 2002; Vasárus & Lennert, 2022). This also produced unequal political opportunity structures (Bagyura, 2020; Csizmady et al., 2022).

Formerly rural settlements gradually assumed suburban functions while remaining dependent on Budapest. Population growth, land-use change, and pressure on services often outpaced institutional capacity, producing long-term governance challenges rather than short-term adaptation (Hardi, 2022; Vasárus & Lennert, 2022). These pressures also reshaped local politics by changing who had the resources and legitimacy to influence decisions.

3.2. Local Governance Structure

Local governance in the Budapest agglomeration operates within a formally decentralised but substantively constrained political-administrative system. Municipalities retain elected councils and mayors; however, their effective autonomy has been progressively limited by fiscal centralisation, regulatory restructuring, and the re-scaling of competencies to the national level since the 2010s (I. P. Kovács, 2020). Municipal government is centred on directly elected mayors with strong executive authority. In suburban municipalities, limited administrative capacity and small councils often intensify personalised decision-making and increase the importance of informal coordination (Csanádi et al., 2010). This gives strategic importance to organised local actors able to mobilise resources, networks, and public visibility.

Electoral systems further structure suburban politics. Mayors are elected through single-round, majoritarian elections, while councillor systems vary by settlement size. In rapidly growing municipalities, socio-economic change can alter electoral balances and create opportunities for newcomer groups where they mobilise effectively around development control and quality-of-life concerns (Csanádi & Csizmady, 2002). Municipalities remain responsible for development plans and zoning, but their room for manoeuvre is limited by national regulations, building permits issued by governmental offices, fiscal dependency, and weak metropolitan coordination. Planning decisions are therefore often negotiated through informal channels and ad hoc arrangements rather than comprehensive strategic frameworks. This governance environment reinforces actor-driven practices and amplifies the political relevance of organised groups able to access decision-making processes (Csanádi et al., 2010; Olt & Lepeltier-Kutasi, 2018). In the post-socialist neopatrimonial context under study, the primacy of personal networks over formal procedures is not an anomaly but a structural feature of local governance (Olt et al., 2024).

Fragmented metropolitan coordination, limited institutional capacity, and personalised local leadership created conditions under which organised newcomer groups could exercise disproportionate influence over planning agendas and local political competition. Suburban political transformation in the Budapest agglomeration is therefore not only a demographic outcome, but also a governance process shaped by unequal capacities for participation and mobilisation.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design combining semi-structured interviews with a longitudinal dataset on municipal councillors. It analyses how socio-economic change is translated into political representation and local governance in a sample of seven suburban municipalities in the Budapest agglomeration (Figure 1).

Municipalities were selected purposively from the Budapest agglomeration based on predominant middle-class in-migration since the 1990s. The selected cases capture variation in the political consequences of suburbanisation, including municipalities where newcomer governance became politically significant and others where representation remained more balanced. They therefore serve as analytically informative rather than statistically representative cases for examining broader processes of suburban political reconfiguration. The aim is exploratory and conceptual: Rather than identifying universal causal mechanisms, the study examines recurring tendencies and the local conditions under which these dynamics may emerge.



Figure 1. Settlements analysed in the Budapest agglomeration.

The empirical material consists of 50 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2017–2019 and 2022–2024 with mayors, deputy mayors, councillors, planning officials, other local decision-makers, and residents. Interviewees were recruited at settlement events and through snowball sampling. Interviews covered the following topics: trajectories into local politics, interpretations of socio-economic change, participatory practices, and narratives of development priorities and planning conflicts. To protect interviewees, settlements have been anonymised, and pseudonyms are used throughout the text.

Because local political conflicts in small municipalities are sensitive, further details on interviewees' occupations, roles, or residential histories could compromise anonymity. Interview excerpts are therefore used mainly to illustrate broader analytical patterns, while respondent protection is prioritised.

A longitudinal dataset on the residential backgrounds of municipal councillors in seven suburban settlements (1994–2024) is used to trace changes in political representation over eight electoral terms. Councillors are classified as original residents, suburban newcomers from Budapest, or rural in-migrants, with the analysis focusing on the first two categories that are most closely linked to middle-class suburbanisation. The dataset is compiled from multiple public and archival sources, and councillor composition is standardised to a uniform council size to enable comparison across municipalities.

Hungarian local electoral systems vary according to settlement size. Municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants operate under an individual-list electoral system, whereas municipalities above this threshold

use a mixed electoral system combining single-member districts and compensation lists. These institutional differences may influence patterns of political representation and the opportunities for newcomer groups to gain local political influence. Among the examined settlements, only Diósd exceeded the 10,000-inhabitant threshold, and this occurred by the 2019 and 2024 municipal elections.

5. Results

The cases examined in the Budapest agglomeration show that suburban in-migration reshaped local politics in uneven ways. In some municipalities, newcomers gradually became important actors in local councils and planning debates, while in others original residents retained stronger positions or political representation remained more mixed. These differences suggest that newcomer governance depends on how social change intersects with local political trajectories, institutional arrangements, and conflicts over development.

Across the cases, however, a recurring pattern can be observed. Where higher-status newcomers or newcomer-influenced coalitions became politically influential, their growing role was not limited to electoral representation. It also affected how local problems were defined, which development goals were prioritised, and whose interests were treated as legitimate in planning and everyday governance. The following sections examine these dynamics through the changing composition of local councils, the pathways through which some newcomers entered and consolidated local influence, and the development conflicts that followed.

5.1. From Socio-Economic Change to Local Political Influence

The first dimension concerns the uneven conversion of middle-class in-migration and associated forms of economic, cultural, and social capital into formal and informal authority within local governance. The empirical material shows that this conversion was neither automatic nor uniform. Rather, newcomer political influence depended on the timing and intensity of suburbanisation, the social profile of in-migrants, the capacity of newcomers to organise locally, and the extent to which existing local elites could maintain their positions.

5.1.1. Uneven Trajectories of Political Representation Across Seven Settlements

Analysis of councillor composition across seven suburban settlements over three decades reveals marked heterogeneity in the political trajectories of suburban municipalities. The longitudinal data demonstrate that rapid demographic growth does not in itself produce political dominance by suburban newcomers. Instead, representation patterns reflect interactions between migration intensity, settlement characteristics, local electoral dynamics, and the organisational capacity of newcomer groups (Tables 1 and 2).

The data reveal three main trajectories of local political influence. In settlements characterised by early, intensive suburbanisation and strong high-status in-migration, most notably Telki and Páty, newcomers from Budapest established decisive council majorities relatively early. Telki represents the clearest case: After the population increased threefold between 1990 and 2001 and nearly doubled again by 2011, councillors from Budapest reached 60% in 2002–2006, peaked at 100% in 2019–2024, and remained at 86% in the most recent term. Páty followed a similarly consolidated trajectory: Budapest-origin councillors constituted at least two-thirds of the council from 1998 onward, indicating that newcomer presence was translated into stable political representation.

Table 1. Composition of municipal councils.

	Csobánka		Leányfalu		Páty	
Period	Original Resident	From Budapest	Original Resident	From Budapest	Original Resident	From Budapest
1994–1998	50.0%	10.0%	60.0%	40.0%	16.7%	41.7%
1998–2002	41.7%	16.7%	60.0%	30.0%	33.3%	66.7%
2002–2006	33.3%	41.7%	40.0%	50.0%	50.0%	42.9%
2006–2010	25.0%	66.7%	50.0%	50.0%	14.3%	64.3%
2010–2014	28.6%	42.9%	57.1%	42.9%	33.3%	44.4%
2014–2019	42.9%	28.6%	42.9%	42.9%	22.2%	66.7%
2019–2024	28.6%	42.9%	42.9%	42.9%	22.2%	66.7%
2024–2029	14.3%	42.9%	0.0%	57.1%	22.2%	55.5%
	Telki		**Szada**		**Diósd**	
Period	Original Resident	From Budapest	Original Resident	From Budapest	Original Resident	From Budapest
1994–1998	37.5%	25.0%	70.0%	0.0%	91.7%	0.0%
1998–2002	37.5%	37.5%	80.0%	0.0%	58.3%	8.3%
2002–2006	0.0%	60.0%	66.7%	0.0%	71.4%	7.1%
2006–2010	20.0%	70.0%	75.0%	0.0%	57.1%	14.3%
2010–2014	14.3%	85.7%	71.4%	14.3%	44.4%	22.2%
2014–2019	14.3%	57.1%	100.0%	0.0%	22.2%	66.7%
2019–2024	0.0%	100.0%	55.6%	33.3%	54.5%	9.1%
2024–2029	14.3%	85.7%	55.6%	33.3%	66.7%	33.3%
	Délegyháza					
Period	Original Resident	From Budapest				
1994–1998	80.0%	10.0%				
1998–2002	70.0%	20.0%				
2002–2006	60.0%	20.0%				
2006–2010	40.0%	30.0%				
2010–2014	57.1%	28.6%				
2014–2019	57.1%	28.6%				
2019–2024	71.4%	14.3%				
2024–2029	44.5%	22.2%				

Table 2. Population at each census (persons) and population change compared with the previous census.

	1990		2001		2011		2022	
Csobánka	2,040	100.0%	2,840	139.2%	3,153	111.0%	3,562	113.0%
Leányfalu	1,603	100.0%	2,412	150.5%	3,385	140.3%	4,099	121.1%
Páty	4,006	100.0%	5,264	131.4%	7,009	133.1%	8,620	123.0%
Telki	629	100.0%	1,892	300.8%	3,661	193.5%	4,577	125.0%
Szada	2,215	100.0%	3,174	143.3%	4,721	148.7%	6,293	133.3%
Diósd	3,719	100.0%	5,785	155.6%	9,056	156.5%	11,627	128.4%
Délegyháza	1,821	100.0%	2,412	132.5%	3,378	140.0%	5,912	175.0%

A second trajectory is more gradual and less complete. In Csobánka and Leányfalu, both located in the northern sector of the agglomeration, newcomer representation increased over time but did not stabilise into the same level of dominance. Csobánka experienced a rise from 10% Budapest-origin councillors in 1994–1998 to 67% in 2006–2010 but subsequently fluctuated between 29 and 43%. Leányfalu similarly stabilised around 40–50% newcomer representation for most of the observation period. These cases show that newcomer influence can remain partial even under sustained suburban growth.

A third trajectory is characterised by the persistence or recovery of original-resident dominance despite substantial population growth. Szada maintained original-resident majorities through most of the period, even as its population grew by 184% between 1990 and 2022. Diósd also maintained original-resident dominance through 2010–2014, experienced a notable newcomer shift in 2014–2019, and then reverted to original-resident majorities. Délegyháza similarly shows that intensive growth does not necessarily produce newcomer political control. These cases qualify any deterministic account of suburbanisation: Demographic transformation creates opportunities for political influence, but local histories, institutional arrangements, and coalition-building determine whether those opportunities are realised.

Across the cases, political transformation generally lagged socio-economic change. Where newcomers achieved dominance, it usually occurred several electoral cycles after the onset of intensive population growth. This time lag indicates that political influence requires more than residential presence: Newcomers had to acquire local legitimacy, enter public debates, form networks, and convert social status into electoral support. The non-linear patterns in several settlements further show that newcomer governance is reversible and contested rather than a simple demographic effect.

5.1.2. Capital Conversion, Social Positioning, and Legitimacy

Interview data clarify the mechanisms behind these divergent trajectories. Increased newcomer influence rarely occurred through sudden electoral ruptures. More often, newcomers gradually embedded themselves in local public life and benefited from professional status, institutional literacy, and confidence in administrative settings. Interviewees repeatedly described a shift in who was perceived as a competent or legitimate local actor, linking political authority to education, occupation, and lifestyle:

> Mostly, those who have entered the representative body in recent years have actually been able to contribute something in terms of quality, based on their appropriate qualifications, experience and commitment. (Resident, Naphegy)

Such accounts show how socio-economic change altered not only the population of suburban settlements but also the symbolic hierarchy of local political life. In some cases, newcomers were increasingly treated as actors with the skills, networks, and cultural authority required for local decision-making, while long-term residents often experienced a declining capacity to define the settlement's future.

A central mechanism was the conversion of economic and cultural capital into political influence. In several cases, the social profile of incoming residents was shaped by developers, land markets, and municipal actors even before newcomers entered formal politics. Earlier interview material from the 1990s documented selective admission practices by investors, showing that the social selectivity underpinning

newcomer governance was present from the beginning of post-socialist suburbanisation rather than being a recent development:

> Among the buyers of the housing development, we do not find representatives of big entrepreneurs; the dominant group consists of highly qualified managers and executives in well-paid positions in the competitive sector….The managing director assesses whether the potential buyer is able to adapt to the elite residential lifestyle before deciding whether to offer instalment payment. (Developer interview cited in Váradi, 1999)

Municipal actors could also contribute to the same process by informally screening incoming residents and aligning local development with a preferred social profile:

> Before buying a municipal property, the mayor interviewed us to see who wanted to move to the settlement. Only after a successful interview was the property sold. (Resident, Naphegy)

These practices indicate that later political influence was prefigured by socially selective residential strategies. Newcomer authority was therefore not only acquired after settlement; it was made more likely by the production of an affluent and institutionally confident local population whose members could later claim competence, responsibility, and legitimacy in public affairs.

Legitimacy claims were closely tied to the protection of local character. The authority of newcomer-influenced coalitions was often framed through narratives of competence, engagement, and responsibility, but long-term residents experienced these claims as a form of symbolic exclusion. Their historical attachment and practical knowledge of the settlement carried decreasing political weight as local debates became organised around middle-class visions of liveability and residential quality:

> After the regime change [1989], our village had the reputation that rich people moved here. That's basically what I knew about it. (Resident, Naphegy)

> That's not what I signed up for. When we moved here, it was a quiet village where even a bird wouldn't pass. If a car went down our street, I knew it was coming to us. And then suddenly they inflated it. (Resident, Naphegy)

High residential turnover further supported the consolidation of socially selective local governance in some cases. Continuous in- and out-migration sustained the elite profile of certain settlements while weakening stable cross-generational ties that might otherwise have counterbalanced political concentration:

> Honestly, this is a transit house. Everyone comes, then leaves. I don't think people live here for very long. (Resident, Naphegy)

> Those people who mattered for us disappeared, and they were not reproduced. That's why we were here. (Resident, Naphegy)

Taken together, the council data and interviews show local political influence as a cumulative process: Selective in-migration, capital conversion, lifestyle-based legitimacy, and weakening older local networks created conditions under which some higher-status newcomers could gain authority. This authority then became the basis for the second dimension of newcomer governance: the redirection of development agendas.

5.2. Agenda Redirection: From Growth and Service Provision to Quality-of-Life Governance

Agenda redirection refers to the reorientation of planning and policy priorities towards quality-of-life concerns such as environmental protection, development control, tranquillity, and residential order. These goals were usually presented as universal interests of the settlement and could express genuine concerns about the effects of rapid growth. In the examined cases, however, they often reflected the preferences of organised higher-status groups and narrowed the range of development claims considered legitimate. The empirical material shows a shift from earlier growth- and supply-driven priorities towards selective restriction, anti-densification narratives, and the defence of a particular middle-class residential ideal.

5.2.1. Preserving Tranquillity, Low Density, and Residential Status

Before the rise of exclusionary residential agendas, local development in suburban municipalities was largely shaped by the need to address housing shortages, extend basic infrastructure, and deliver visible project-based investments inherited from late socialist and early post-socialist planning logics. Contemporary quality-of-life governance appeared to continue these concerns by emphasising liveability, environmental protection, and local character. Yet in the examined cases it often marked a partial rupture: Planning was redirected from expansion and service provision towards restriction, exclusivity, and the defence of a narrow residential status.

In several settlements, development agendas increasingly centred on preserving an imagined rural or semi-rural character: low density, low traffic, and natural surroundings, but without the agricultural or industrial activities historically associated with rural settlements. Interviewees described how planning rhetoric shifted from growth and service expansion towards restraint, framed as the protection of tranquillity, nature, and liveability:

> From 2014 onwards, the official position was always about preserving the tranquillity and the village-like character—at least at the level of words. (Resident, Sasliget)

The narrative that the settlement was already "full" became a political instrument. In Sasliget, it appeared as an explicit campaign message in the early 2000s; by 2023, similar exclusionary logics had materialised as formal construction restrictions in other suburban municipalities as well:

> Sasliget is full—became a campaign message. (Resident, Sasliget)

These discursive shifts did not necessarily halt development. Rather, they redefined acceptable development by judging projects according to their perceived effects on residential calm, environmental quality, and property-related status. Housing, services, and infrastructure were thus increasingly filtered through a particular vision of what the settlement should remain.

5.2.2. Selective Infrastructure and the Management of Suburban Side Effects

The redirection of agendas was especially visible in the treatment of infrastructure and services. Interviewees repeatedly pointed to a paradox: Although quality of life was prioritised rhetorically, everyday services and basic infrastructure often lagged population growth. The lack of local services was not simply an administrative failure; it was also connected to resistance against developments associated with densification, traffic, or social diversification:

> In terms of services, the settlement is extremely weak. There is basically only one grocery shop. No drugstore, no other shops, and even government services are not available locally. (Resident, Sasliget)

Despite these deficits, service expansion was not always supported by higher-status residents, including some newcomers, who associated it with unwanted urbanisation and the erosion of exclusivity:

> High-status groups are openly hostile to the development of services in the village, because they want to preserve its exclusive character. (Local expert, Naphegy)

When infrastructure investments did occur, they were often framed as environmentally responsible or community-oriented interventions, but their scope was limited to managing the side effects of an already suburban lifestyle. Local car-sharing initiatives or P+R (park and ride) facilities, for example, addressed traffic and environmental concerns without challenging car dependence, low density, or the limited service base of the settlement:

> We see the convoys of cars leaving the settlement every morning….This is why the municipality introduced the free local car-sharing service. (Resident, Sasliget)

Agenda redirection therefore did not simply replace development with non-development. It selected certain investments while excluding others. Projects compatible with the residential ideal of tranquillity, environmental responsibility, and social exclusivity could be legitimated, whereas services, density, and social infrastructure needed by less mobile or lower-status residents remained politically weaker claims.

5.3. Institutional Embedding: Participation, Regulation, and Exclusionary Outcomes

Institutional embedding refers to the ways in which newcomer-influenced priorities become stabilised through formal and informal arrangements that can reproduce the influence of already advantaged groups. The findings show that once particular coalitions gained political authority and redirected agendas, their priorities were sustained through participatory practices, fiscal choices, regulatory restrictions, and everyday narratives of legitimate belonging. This third dimension links local political influence and agenda redirection to longer-term outcomes: symbolic exclusion, unequal resource allocation, and reduced prospects for socially inclusive and metropolitan-scale sustainable development.

5.3.1. Participatory Mechanisms and Unequal Voice

Participation played an ambivalent role in the examined municipalities. Formally, participatory arenas and online public debates were open to residents. In practice, however, they often amplified the voices of those with greater time, institutional literacy, communication skills, and confidence in public conflict. This made participation a mechanism through which the priorities of more active and resourceful residents could appear as the general interest of the settlement.

Long-term residents frequently reported declining opportunities for meaningful participation. Local debates increasingly shifted to online platforms, where polarisation and personal attacks discouraged less confident participants and narrowed the scope of deliberation:

> On Facebook, the tone has become increasingly radical, often personal and insulting. (Resident, Sasliget)

This dynamic institutionalised unequal voice without necessarily requiring formal exclusion. Those best positioned to speak in public forums could define the problems of growth—traffic, density, noise, loss of village character—while other concerns such as affordability, access to services, or the needs of older and lower-status residents became less visible.

5.3.2. Fiscal and Regulatory Practices as Instruments of Social Closure

The embedding of newcomer-influenced governance was also visible in fiscal and regulatory decisions. In several settlements, interviewees linked rising local taxes to the pressures generated by continuous in-migration, perceiving these burdens as disproportionate and unjust. Although tax increases affected all residents formally, their consequences were socially uneven because decision-making was dominated by those least constrained by rising costs:

> In the 2000s, the property tax was 400 forints per square metre; by 2020, it was well over 1,000. People who have lived here for a long time feel this happened because of the newcomers. (Resident, Sasliget)

Regulatory practices had a similar effect. Anti-growth rhetoric, construction restrictions, and selective development controls were justified through environmental and community narratives, but interviewees also described a disconnect between official restraint and informal development interests:

> Everyone complains about newcomers—even those who moved in recently. But when someone wants to buy a plot, they [the local government] sell it happily a few months later. (Resident, Sasliget)

These examples show how institutional embedding works through selective application rather than simple prohibition. Formal restrictions and informal flexibility can coexist, privileging actors with better access to information, networks, and local decision-makers. As a result, governance practices can reinforce the social closure generated by unequal political influence and agenda redirection.

5.3.3. Marginalisation of Long-Term Residents and Metropolitan Consequences

Across settlements, long-term residents described how their everyday concerns—affordability, access to services, and the preservation of older ways of life—were increasingly sidelined. Several respondents interpreted development decisions as prioritising high-status residential separation over broader social sustainability:

> The only political rationale was high-status self-segregation. (Local expert, Naphegy)

The marginalisation of long-term residents was therefore not only material but also symbolic. Their settlement knowledge, memories, and needs were displaced by a newer image of the locality as a protected residential environment for higher-status households. This produced feelings of exclusion even when direct displacement did not occur.

Institutional embedding also had consequences beyond individual settlements. By privileging low-density residential order, anti-densification politics, and selective service provision, newcomer-influenced governance could weaken the capacity of suburban municipalities to contribute to metropolitan-scale solutions. Affordable housing, effective public transport, service accessibility, and coordinated land-use planning were de-emphasised in favour of localised protection of residential status. Thus, the outcomes analysed here were not limited to conflicts between newcomers and long-term residents; they also constrained more inclusive and sustainable development across the Budapest agglomeration.

Overall, the results demonstrate the interdependence of the three dimensions of newcomer governance. Uneven political influence explains how some newcomers obtained authority; agenda redirection shows how that influence reshaped planning priorities; and institutional embedding reveals how these priorities became stabilised in participatory, fiscal, and regulatory practices. This sequence also explains the central contradiction identified in the article: Local democratic engagement and quality-of-life planning can produce exclusionary and socially unsustainable outcomes when participation and representation are structured by unequal access to resources and political voice.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we analysed cases in which suburbanisation was shaped not only by market processes, planning systems, or demographic growth, but also by local political reconfiguration. The findings show that, in the Hungarian context of strong municipal autonomy, weak regional-level coordination, fiscal constraints, and informalised governance, some newcomer-led or newcomer-influenced coalitions were able to become politically consequential in suburban municipalities (I. P. Kovács, 2020; Olt & Lepeltier-Kutasi, 2018; Stanilov & Sýkora, 2014). This does not mean that newcomers as a group are inherently exclusionary or self-interested. Rather, it shows how particular social groups, when advantaged by education, income, institutional familiarity, and local networks, can gain disproportionate influence over planning and development debates.

In the cases examined, some influential coalitions sought to preserve the image of the settlement that had made suburban relocation attractive: a low-intensity residential environment with tranquillity, green space,

and limited urban functions. These aspirations were often framed as quality-of-life and environmental goals, and such concerns should not be dismissed as illegitimate. The problem arises when these goals are translated into selective development control, NIMBYist politics, and the neglect of the needs of earlier, lower socio-economic status residents (Tissot, 2015; A. Walks, 2013). These cases therefore show how local democracy, participation in local issues, and deliberation are not by themselves sufficient to ensure just representation of social, economic, and political interests, especially when participation and representation are biased toward higher-status groups (Fung, 2006; Olt & Lepeltier-Kutasi, 2018; Purcell, 2006; Silver et al., 2010).

Yet, as our data show, newcomer influence is far from necessary or uniform. Simple deterministic logics, such as the idea that higher status and more disposable income mean unconstrained access to political power, do not apply. The earlier development trajectory of the settlement, the size of the village or city, the social composition of newcomers, the strength of established local elites, and the motivation for moving (for example, affordability versus an idealised image of a certain way of life) all shape whether newcomer governance emerges. Further research is needed to explain how and why, in certain contexts, newcomer-influenced governance becomes dominant, while in other cases the political representation of earlier residents remains stronger, or representation becomes more balanced (Stanilov & Sýkora, 2014; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012).

The exclusionary, anti-investment, and anti-development logic found in some examined settlements can decrease quality of life and contribute to high residential turnover. However, these outcomes should be understood as the result of specific coalitions, institutional conditions, and planning conflicts rather than as the general motivation of newcomers. In these cases, the imagined ideal way of life for certain high-status families with small children, and the perceived requirements of this imagined way of life, can be more important than the simple financial logic of land rent (Benson & Jackson, 2013; R. A. Walks & Maaranen, 2008). The article also identifies a specific form of symbolic displacement, in which, beyond economic pressures such as affordability of real estate and higher taxes, the loss of political representation adds a further dimension of feeling out of place, excluded, or invaded (Fainstein, 2010; Tissot, 2015).

These dynamics also make cooperation among settlements more difficult and hinder metropolitan-level inclusive and sustainable development. The issue is therefore not a moral opposition between newcomers and long-term residents, but a governance problem: When one socially advantaged segment becomes disproportionately influential, issues such as affordable housing, effective transport connections, accessible services, and coordinated land-use planning can be de-emphasised. In the long run, this may harm long-term residents, newcomers, and the wider metropolitan society alike. The article therefore points to the need for stronger metropolitan coordination and more inclusive local institutions. Yet, in the Hungarian institutional context, there are few political or planning tools to counteract such disproportionate representation of socially advantaged residents in local decision-making (I. P. Kovács, 2020; Olt & Lepeltier-Kutasi, 2018).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

Large language models (Grammarly, Claude.ai) were used solely for language editing and proofreading, as well as for formatting the reference list. They were not used for data analysis, interpretation of the results, or the generation of scientific content.

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