

Urban Planning in the Context of Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Hungary

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Abstract

This article explores the potential and limitations of integrated urban planning (IUP)—a key concept in the spatial planning paradigm of the European Union (EU)—in the context of democratic backsliding in contemporary Hungary. Following the country’s democratic transition from 1989/1990, which included the establishment of local governments with extensive mandates, among others, in urban planning, IUP emerged as a planning paradigm related to Hungary’s EU accession in 2004. However, since 2010, significant democratic backsliding, including a decrease in local autonomy, has affected urban planning in Hungary. This article reveals how trends associated with democratic backsliding challenge the principles of IUP and, drawing on a survey and semi-structured interviews with urban planning practitioners, explores their impact on IUP in practice. The analysis identifies key factors influencing the implementation of IUP principles in this context, including reduced local political and economic autonomy, inadequate local government funding, the rise of individual bargaining in urban development, and non-negotiated top-down project allocation. While the findings are based on empirical evidence from Hungary, they may provide valuable insights into identifying risk factors concerning IUP in other contexts as well.

Keywords

autocratisation; democratic backsliding; Hungary; integrated urban planning; local development; local governments; urban planning practice

1. Introduction

Democratic backsliding (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021) fundamentally alters the political, social, and economic context of urban planning, which is highly contingent on such contexts (S. Fainstein & Novy, 2023; Metzger

et al., 2014; Tsenkova, 2014). This article aims to identify specific factors through which democratic backsliding affects urban planning practices, particularly integrated urban planning (IUP).

In Hungary, the contextual factors of urban planning have undergone significant changes in recent decades. The fall of state socialism in 1989/1990 brought about a substantial shift, including the reintroduction of a plural democracy, a market economy, and the establishment of a highly fragmented system of local governments with a wide range of autonomy, including in urban planning. Related to the country's EU accession in 2004, with the increasing role of EU funding in urban development, a new planning approach became increasingly embedded in Hungarian urban planning: IUP, the strategic planning-based spatial planning paradigm of the EU, with key principles including a vision-based approach that engages all relevant aspects, interests, and actors, as well as the integration of planned interventions across policy areas, government levels, and also spatially and temporally (Albrechts, 2006; Holden, 2012; Kotzebue, 2016).

Since 2010, the landslide election victory of the right-wing Fidesz party, under the successive governments of its leader Viktor Orbán, the political, economic, and social context of urban planning in Hungary has undergone further changes. Significant democratic backsliding began, with the European Parliament declaring in 2022 that, due to the breakdown of democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights, Hungary can no longer be considered a democracy but rather a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy (European Parliament, 2022). Analyses differ in terms of the conceptual framework applied to the current Hungarian political system. Besides the concept used in the cited European Parliament report, other concepts include autocracy (without any adjectives; Kornai, 2015), externally constrained hybrid regime (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018), simulated democracy (Lengyel & Ilonszki, 2010), populist democracy (Pappas, 2014), illiberal populism (Kukovič & Just, 2022), diffusely defective democracy (Bogaards, 2018), authoritarian state capitalism (Scheiring, 2021), and autocratic legalism (Scheppele, 2018). Despite conceptual debates, the main trends of a transition from liberal democracy to an increasingly authoritarian system can be clearly defined. These include an institutional structure that favours government forces and significantly reduces the probability of a democratic change of government (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018); concentration of power with the prime minister as the sole power centre; the political capture of various social sub-spheres, with the prime minister and government forces asserting control over the extraction and distribution of resources (M. Csanádi, 2022); legislative backsliding (Sebők et al., 2023); lack of separation between the legislative and executive branches of government; weakening of institutions designed to protect the rule of law; restrictions imposed on freedom of expression and association—including political attacks against NGOs; the development of feudal-style relations between the state and economic actors; and reduced political and financial autonomy of local governments (Kornai, 2015).

Our research aimed to explore the impact of democratic backsliding on urban planning practice in Hungary, with specific regard to IUP. In doing so, we highlight the systemic factors that shape recent urban development projects, which often fail to respond to local needs or consider the local social, economic, and environmental contexts. Examples include mass housing and office constructions that disregard the local socio-spatial fabric and architectural heritage, and fail to provide a balanced functional mix and sustainable mobility options; tourism and housing projects in protected natural areas that damage the environment and restrict locals' access to natural resources; oversized sports facilities the maintenance of which strain municipal budgets; and expensive tourism investments in economically deprived areas where more socially targeted public interventions would be needed (see Olt et al., 2024).

While cross-national analyses concerning the development of planning systems involving Hungary are available (Nadin et al., 2021; Nedović-Budić, 2001), their spatial and temporal scope is broader, and they do not focus on country-specific underlying factors. Additionally, a systematic analysis of the impact of democratic backsliding on urban planning, specifically on IUP, which remains a key concept in the spatial planning paradigm in the EU (Čamprag, 2024), is lacking. Through such an analysis, we hope to shed light on some key risks that an increasingly centralised and authoritarian context poses to IUP. Given the current global political trends, with several countries experiencing democratic backsliding, this may provide useful input for the analysis of urban planning and the identification of factors that pose challenges to IUP in other local contexts as well.

This article begins with a critical overview of IUP from a planning theory perspective, based on the notion that although it is at the core of EU spatial development policies, its theoretical foundations are rarely discussed. It presents IUP as the key urban planning paradigm of the EU and its principles, which serve as the theoretical basis for the empirical analysis. It then reviews the major changes in Hungary since 2010 that have influenced urban planning and discusses how these developments challenge the core principles of IUP. This is followed by an analysis of urban planning practices based on quantitative and qualitative empirical research, including a survey and a series of semi-structured interviews with urban planning professionals conducted between 2021 and 2023. In its conclusion, the article identifies the key factors hindering the application of IUP principles in the context of democratic backsliding in Hungary.

2. IUP From a Planning Theory Perspective

2.1. *The Roots of IUP in Planning Theory*

IUP is considered by planning theory to be a response to contemporary urban challenges resulting from major global trends (Albrechts, 2006; Suvák, 2010). These include significant societal transformations such as the globalisation of the economy and culture, the weakening of nation-states and representative democracy, the transformation of traditional social structures, and the increasing influence of social movements. Further transformations posing fundamental challenges to urban planning include the impacts of climate change, shifts in production processes—including the rise of innovation and flexibility that intensifies competition among localities—and technological advancements, particularly in information and transport technology, which also necessitate an urban planning response. Within the EU, urban planning must also address the simultaneous objectives of reducing socio-spatial disparities, enhancing economic competitiveness, and ensuring environmental sustainability, while the emphasis on place quality and the tension between local/regional identities and supranational integration add further specific challenges. In this context, instead of regulatory, bureaucratic planning systems—which find multifactorial, rapidly occurring changes difficult to follow and tend to try to reduce rather than manage complexity—a more strategic, development and implementation-driven approach has emerged, based on the premise that complex problems in a changing, complex environment require coordinated, integrated responses (Kotzebue, 2016).

The so-called new planning paradigm, emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, brought about a shift from a top-down to a bottom-up planning approach, grasped by various concepts, including communicative, participative, transactive, deliberative, and collaborative planning (Anafo & Appiah Takyi, 2021).

Strategic planning, which originated in the corporate sector, began influencing urban planning in the 1960s and 1970s in response to socio-economic changes. Western European and North American countries adopted this model to better navigate dynamic external conditions and uncertain futures. Its influence declined in the 1980s due to neoliberalism and postmodern scepticism towards planning (Albrechts, 2006; S. S. Fainstein & Fainstein, 1997) but re-emerged in the context of urban regeneration projects around the millennium, designed to respond to rapid, fragmented, and chaotic urban changes.

The principles of IUP can also be linked to the planning theory literature on community participation. A detailed discussion of the extensive literature on this topic is beyond the scope of this literature review; however, it is important to highlight that public participation as a relevant exercise in urban planning is derived from a changed recognition of the nature of urban planning in several important aspects: (1) urban planning is an inherently power-related activity embedded in power relations and has a significant impact on the distribution of advantages and disadvantages (Albrechts, 2003; Flyvbjerg & Flyvbjerg, 1998; Forester, 1989); (2) no single, clearly definable public interest exists that could guide planning decisions; (3) relevant interests and values are diverse—there is no single key player who, based on specific expertise or political position, is aware of all of them and can incorporate them into planning; (4) there are many sources and forms of knowledge and experience relevant to planning, all of which are legitimate; and (5) instruments of representative democracy alone are insufficient to channel all relevant interests, values, knowledge, and experiences into the planning process, necessitating the application of other mechanisms too.

2.2. Definition and Key Principles of IUP

There is no single definition of integrated urban development planning. According to the literature (Albrechts, 2006; Holden, 2012; Kotzebue, 2016), IUP is a spatial-social process that is guided by a vision concerning a given territory; aims to identify actions and tools to achieve it; focuses on a defined (limited) number of strategic areas; is transformative; is preferably driven by the public sector; identifies and engages key aspects, interests, and actors (both public and private) and may reinforce and override existing power relations; is integrated horizontally (across policy areas and departments), vertically (between levels of government, organisations, and policy actors), spatially, and temporally; and considers power structures, uncertainty, and competing values. Furthermore, an important feature of IUP is that it is a circular process from planning to implementation, monitoring, feedback, and the corresponding reiteration of plans. We use the above key principles of IUP as the theoretical framework for our empirical analysis.

2.3. IUP as an EU Planning Paradigm

Theoretical debates concerning IUP include questions regarding the novelty of the approach, its presentation as a purely procedural framework without making explicit its embedded normative values concerning sustainable development, social equity, and economic competitiveness, the weakness of its theoretical foundations, and the lack of research on its effectiveness (Allmendinger, 2009; Holden, 2012; Sandin, 2020).

Notwithstanding such critiques, IUP has become a key concept in the spatial development policy of the EU since the 1990s (Nadin et al., 2021; Pastor-Seller et al., 2023) and continues to serve as a guiding approach to urban planning. A detailed analysis of EU norms, rules, and regulations concerning IUP is beyond the

scope of the present article. Key source documents include the 1999 European Spatial Development Perspective, which provides the first high-level recognition of IUP, describing integrated spatial development with the sectoral, spatial, horizontal, and vertical cooperation of actors as key to fulfilling the aims outlined in the document (Committee on Spatial Development, 1999). Details of IUP as a planning approach were elaborated in the Leipzig Charter in 2007 (Territorial Agenda 2030, 2007), which includes the consideration of all relevant concerns and interests, the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, a vision-based approach, and coordination between spatial, sectoral, and temporal aspects of urban policies. The Charter also recommended that European cities develop integrated urban development programmes for their territories. It also was influential in the formation of the Urban Agenda for the EU, launched in 2016, which, referring to the Charter, confirms an integrated approach to urban development as its guiding principle (Urban Agenda for the EU, 2016). More recently, the New Leipzig Charter, adopted in 2020, reaffirmed the integrated approach as a key principle of good urban governance and the need for cities to establish integrated and sustainable urban development strategies as a response to newly emerging global challenges (Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2020). The Territorial Agenda for 2030, referring to the New Leipzig Charter, called for the development and implementation of integrated place-based strategies, with cooperation across sectors, levels of government and governance, and engaging local communities (Territorial Agenda 2030, 2020).

Spatial planning remains within the competence of national states in the EU. However, the management of shared visions concerning sustainable development, social and economic cohesion, and the need for transparency and coherence among national administrations and planning procedures connected to the management of EU (co)funding for spatial development to achieve such visions requires common concepts and planning procedures. Therefore, such concepts and procedures, outlined in the aforementioned documents, were added to or merged with existing national planning systems (Maier, 2012).

3. Key Post-2010 Changes in Hungary Affecting Urban Planning and Resulting Challenges to IUP Principles

3.1. Decreasing Local Autonomy

A significant shift in Hungary's urban planning landscape after 2010 involved changes to the mandates and funding of local governments. Following the end of state socialism in 1989/1990, a decentralised local government system was introduced, granting each settlement, regardless of its size, the right to form its own government. This "one-municipality-one-government" principle aimed to establish local autonomy after decades of centralisation. Local governments were entrusted with wide-ranging responsibilities, including authority over urban development, spatial planning, public services, public administration, and local economic development (Országgyűlés, 1990). Despite its ambitions, the system faced criticism early on. One key issue was the mismatch between the broad responsibilities assigned and the often-limited capacity of small municipalities, many of which lacked the necessary financial and administrative resources. There were also shortcomings in institutional frameworks for spatial coordination and regional planning. Another persistent concern was the inadequate funding of local governments. Debates centred on whether local authorities received sufficient resources to fulfil their duties, and the degree of their financial autonomy, with the related issue of the balance between earmarked funds and those freely distributable. Furthermore, questions arose regarding the central government's role in mitigating disparities between municipalities in

different socio-economic positions, and consequently, differing revenue collection potential, through the redistribution of locally collected revenues (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015; Kákai & Kovács, 2023).

After 2010, the Hungarian government initiated significant centralisation in public service provision, including education, healthcare, and public administration. Many responsibilities were transferred from local governments to deconcentrated state bodies, diminishing the role of locally elected leadership (Pálné Kovács, 2021). This deprived local governments of competencies relevant to strategic urban planning and increased their dependence on the central administration. In the context of decreasing mandates, state funding to the local government sector declined. A major change occurred in 2013 when the long-standing system of normative, population-based subsidies was replaced by task-based funding (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015). Central subsidies often fail to cover the full costs of mandatory services, forcing local governments to allocate their discretionary funds to the provision of such services. Parallel to this, the influence of individual bargaining in local governance and development funding increased (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015). These developments have weakened local autonomy and are viewed as a key aspect of Hungary's democratic backsliding (Kornai, 2015).

3.2. Changing Power Relations Between the Political Power Centre and Economic Actors

Concerning economic framework conditions, a major shift involved the transformation of the range of domestic and international key economic actors, partly in line with the government's explicit political goal of strengthening a loyal "national capital class" (Scheiring, 2021), and partly related to its endeavour to establish closer ties with and acquire development funding from non-EU countries, notably China. These developments were accompanied by an expansion of project-based and politically driven, "recombinant" redistribution of resources (Czibere et al., 2017). The state also reasserted its central role in spatial development, particularly through large-scale public investments. Such an increased centralisation of economic control and restructuring of power dynamics between political and economic actors are considered key features of Hungary's democratic backsliding (Scheiring, 2021).

3.3. Changes in the Urban Planning System: EU Convergence With Legal Inconsistencies

The fall of state socialism in 1989/1990 brought extensive political and economic changes that necessitated the reform of Hungary's urban planning system, mirroring broader trends in post-socialist countries (Nadin et al., 2021; Tsenkova, 2007, 2014). In the early 1990s, strong scepticism towards planning emerged, as a reaction to the previous era's centrally planned economy (Maier, 2012; Nedović-Budić, 2001). Simultaneously, global trends necessitating the reconsideration of planning (Albrechts, 2003; Suvák, 2010; Tsenkova, 2014) and the influence of EU policy paradigms—amplified by Hungary's EU accession process—began to shape planning practice. Elements of IUP, such as public participation, were increasingly introduced, and strategic approaches to planning appeared in select localities (Kőszeghy & Ongjerth, 2009). IUP principles were first formally required for EU co-financing of urban rehabilitation and were later integrated into the planning system during the 2010s (Magyarország Kormánya, 2012). Such a shift towards the increased significance of strategically based, multisectoral, multiactor development planning marked a major change in a planning culture with strong traditions of physical planning perceived as a professional, technical exercise, lack of embeddedness of public participation and spatial coordination, long-standing practices of resource-driven planning (G. Csanádi, Csizmady, Kocsis, et al., 2010; Gébert & Bajmóczy, 2017;

Kószeghy, 2010) and a conformative planning system characterised by pre-assigned land-use rights via binding—and upon requests related to new development initiatives, amended—general plans (Berisha et al., 2021).

Despite extensive political and economic transformations after 2010 and legislative changes in urban planning, IUP formally continues to serve as the urban planning paradigm in Hungary. Major legal changes include Government Decree 314/2012 (Magyarország Kormánya, 2012) which legally introduced IUP to the national planning system by requiring the elaboration of integrated settlement development strategies; Act No. XXXIX of 2021 (Országgyűlés, 2021) and the associated Government Decree 419/2021 (Magyarország Kormánya, 2021), which streamlined the set of planning documents to two, one for development and one for construction/zoning regulation; and Act No. C of 2023 (Országgyűlés, 2023), which aims to consolidate Hungary's legal framework for urban planning and construction (see Hoffman, 2018). According to Act No. C of 2023 (Országgyűlés, 2023, § 80), municipalities are required to create a development plan that is “integrated, strategic, and territorially based.” This legal provision also makes explicit references to further principles of IUP as substantial requirements for such plans, such as a vision-based approach, the formulation of strategic development goals and operative measures to achieve them, the concentration of interventions in predefined action areas, and the spatial and temporal coordination of objectives and interventions.

While the legislative framework in Hungary continues to recognise IUP as the paradigm for urban planning, notable inconsistencies have emerged in the relevant legislation with the revised regulation of “priority investments,” a legal instrument that significantly impacts local governments' planning autonomy. Originally introduced in 2006 (Országgyűlés, 2006), the concept aimed to accelerate EU cohesion fund absorption and facilitate large-scale, job-creating investments by designating them as “investments of priority national economic importance.” These projects benefited from simplified administrative procedures but were criticised from the outset, among others, due to loosened rules on public participation. Subsequent legal reforms broadened the scope of eligible investments. Today, any project involving EU or national funds can be designated a priority investment, including investments in national security, energy, education, culture, healthcare, social services, ecclesiastical buildings, national memorials, and brownfield redevelopment. Crucially, these investments are not obliged to comply with local development and zoning plans. This provision, in practice, allows investments that override local development and zoning plans without consultation with local authorities or any other local stakeholders. The centrality of this instrument in the current urban planning system is underscored by the fact that when a public referendum initiative aimed at repealing its legal basis was launched by opposition parties and NGOs, the government responded by pre-emptively revoking the relevant legislation and simultaneously transferring the legal instrument to the new Law on Construction, thereby preserving its applicability under a different legal framework (Országgyűlés, 2023; Átlátszó, 2025).

The re-emergence of the state as a central actor in local development may pose a risk in urban planning. In Hungary, many state-funded projects—including those labelled as “priority investments”—have been delayed or cancelled since 2022 to cut central budget spending (Építési és Közlekedési Miniszter, 2023). The rationale for these decisions lacks transparency: projects with clearer economic relevance were halted, while some sports and representative building projects have continued.

3.4. Measures Referring to Crises Further Limiting Local Autonomy

Due to the imbalance between operational costs and decreasing funding, as well as the uncertain availability of development resources, Hungarian municipalities have become increasingly dependent on mobilising their own revenues, particularly from local business taxes, to fulfil their responsibilities (Pálné Kovács, 2020). However, their financial autonomy has been further constrained in recent years by state interventions justified as crisis responses, such as those introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. These included bans on increasing or introducing local taxes, the abolition of tax reliefs, the halving of the local business tax for small and medium-sized enterprises, and the removal of the car tax. Additionally, there was an expansion in the number of municipalities obligated to pay a “solidarity contribution” to the central budget and an increase in the contribution required by those with higher revenue capacities. These measures have not only reduced municipal revenues but also significantly limited the proportion of non-earmarked funds in the budget of municipalities.

Moreover, in some cases, local revenue capacities were further undermined through the establishment of “special economic areas,” where business taxes were redirected from municipal governments to county authorities. Though this measure, introduced in 2020, was discontinued in 2025, it was replaced by a new system whereby municipalities must transfer the growth in their business tax revenue (vis-à-vis 2024 levels) to a spatial development fund. This fund will be disbursed at the microregional level via a competitive tendering process, likely increasing the role of individual bargaining in resource distribution.

4. Hypotheses

Based on the analysis of post-2010 changes, we hypothesise as follows concerning their impact on the implementation of IUP principles:

H: In the context of democratic backsliding, the strategic nature of urban planning and the implementation of key principles of IUP are limited.

H1: The centralisation of service provision, including public administration functions, has introduced new coordination needs in urban planning, as state organisations tasked with former local government mandates have emerged among relevant actors. This alone would not compromise—only complicate—coordination, however, as IUP needs meaningful cooperation, it poses a risk in case of non-cooperation of such actors.

H2: Due to decreased financial revenues, local governments face an increased need for external funding, both public and private. This undermines local governments’ potential for urban planning responsive to local needs, as they must adapt to the preferences of external funding sources. This compromises the implementation of IUP, particularly as a process that identifies and engages key aspects, interests, and actors.

H3: The increased role of individual bargaining between local governments and other actors concerning local development projects, alongside the practice of top-down project allocation using the legal instrument of “priority investments,” is incompatible with several core principles of IUP,

including a vision-based approach, sectoral, spatial, and temporal integration, and effective public participation. According to certain analyses (M. Csanádi, 2022; Fazekas & Tóth, 2016), such a system opens up possibilities for corruption, however, as such a phenomenon could not be explored with the applied methodology, we will not deal with the presence, operation, and role of such practices.

5. Methodology

The analysis is based on quantitative, as well as qualitative data: a survey and semi-structured interviews conducted among planning professionals working in Hungary.

To gain a comprehensive view of urban planning experiences and opinions in Hungary, an online survey was conducted in 2023. The sample included urban planners registered with the Hungarian Chamber of Architects, municipal chief architects responsible for local urban planning, county chief architects overseeing municipal planning within the state administration, as well as professionals working in spatial planning companies and universities. The total sample frame consisted of 749 individuals, of whom 355 provided full or partial responses. Although the findings are not representative of the entire professional community, they are suitable for identifying opinion trends among Hungarian urban planning professionals.

To gain a more in-depth understanding of urban planning practice and to gather more thorough empirical material on the complex issues we intended to explore, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2021 and 2023 with mayors, chief architects, urban planners, and other experts from diverse settlements differing in size, economic profile, and location.

The operationalisation of measuring the implementation of IUP principles was consulted with urban planning practitioners.

Concerning the survey results, quantitative analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS software. In respect of the qualitative empirical material from the semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis was performed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through Atlas.Ti software. In the analysis, we applied pattern matching (Hak & Dul, 1999; Sinkovics, 2018; Trochim, 1989) to explore how current Hungarian urban planning practices align with key principles of IUP. This method involves the precise identification of patterns based on theory, the acquisition of observed patterns, and an attempt to match these. The theoretical patterns used were the principles of IUP identified in Section 2.

6. Impacts of Post-2010 Contextual Changes on Urban Planning Practice

6.1. Implementation of Key Principles of IUP

First, we examined practitioners' experiences concerning some key principles of IUP, referring to the definition provided in the literature (Albrechts, 2006; Holden, 2012; Kotzebue, 2016): (a) sectoral coordination and the coordination of "hard" (e.g., infrastructure) and "soft" interventions (e.g., interventions in education, development of employability, etc.) to explore the implementation of the principle of horizontal integration; (b) spatial and temporal coordination to explore the implementation of the principle of spatial and temporal integration; (c) vertical coordination to explore the implementation of the principle of

vertical integration; (d) the monitoring of implementation and feedback based on monitoring results, to explore whether the principle of IUP being a circular process from planning to implementation, monitoring, and feedback and the reiteration of plans based on such feedback, is applied.

According to the survey results, these principles are rather partly, then well implemented, however, principles vary in terms of the thoroughness of implementation (Figure 1). Principles embedded in administrative planning procedures—such as vertical, sectoral, and spatial coordination—are more thoroughly implemented, unless overridden by simplified “priority investment” regulations. In contrast, principles linked to funding mechanisms, such as coordinating “soft” and “hard” interventions and aligning interventions over time, are implemented less effectively. The most poorly implemented principle is the monitoring of project implementation, crucial for providing feedback for future planning processes and improving strategic alignment over time.

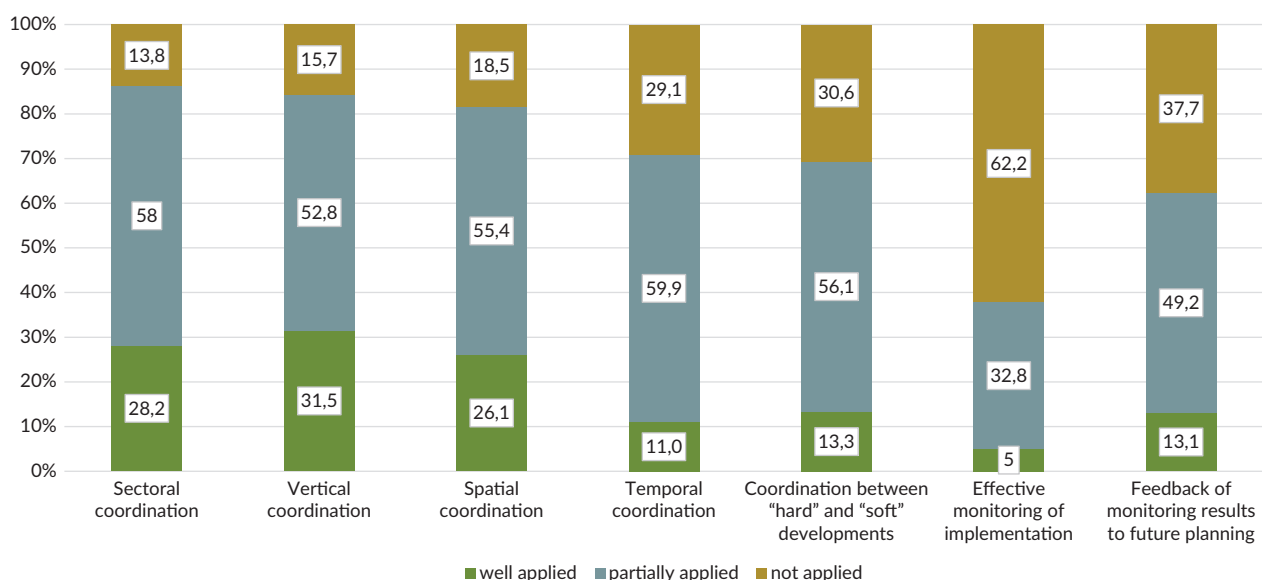


Figure 1. Practitioners’ experiences regarding the application of key IUP principles. Notes: Respondents could indicate whether respective principles were “well applied,” “partially applied,” or “not applied” in planning practice, according to their experiences; number of valid responses: 178–184. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

Interviews suggest that the partial implementation of IUP principles can be interpreted as a limited and inconsistent application, with specific difficulties stemming from the changing urban planning context since 2010. A key challenge lies in vertical and sectoral coordination, particularly between local governments and deconcentrated central government bodies. Interviewees highlighted frequent and unclear changes in task reallocation, resultant confusion about responsibilities, and inefficiencies, such as the slow or inadequate performance of deconcentrated bodies. In some cases, planning practitioners also reported the reluctance of deconcentrated bodies to cooperate:

The responsibilities were so scattered that for a very long time, even those involved didn’t know what their tasks and mandates were. (interview 41)

They [the government office] are not making things easy for us. The building authority is obstructing us at every turn, and they expect us to comply perfectly with everything, even though I think it's almost impossible to achieve. (interview 31)

Interviewees identified limitations to spatial cooperation as an important problem. Limiting factors mentioned include the legal framework, which fails to incentivise cooperation among local governments, and the lack of clear mandates and effective coordination capacity at the middle level of public administration. Furthermore, individual bargaining in resource allocation appeared in interviewees as a factor which severely limits the motivation of local governments to cooperate, as they compete for available resources. Consequently, collaboration between local governments is often limited to the fulfilment of formal legal requirements, such as planning consultations, rather than meaningful engagement. Despite this, some cooperative efforts exist, particularly where shared problems, such as those concerning suburbanisation or tourism, encourage joint action:

Everyone is trying at all costs to increase their own revenue sources, and from that point onward, it's quite difficult to reach any consensus on anything. (interview 14)

We have a multi-purpose municipal association consisting of eight settlements, with our municipality serving as the centre. Unfortunately, due to the narrowing scope set by legislation, it is now only basic social tasks we now jointly handle. Nevertheless, this still provides such a strong cohesion among these eight settlements that it has manifested in broader cooperation, experience sharing...and even, in some cases, financial assistance over the past years. (interview 39)

Besides horizontal, vertical, spatial and temporal integration; and the application of the principle of IUP being a circular process from planning to implementation, as key principles of IUP, to test our hypotheses, we examined planning's ability to respond to local needs and the participation of stakeholders, referring to the literature's recognition of IUP as a process that identifies and engages key aspects, interests, and actors (Albrechts, 2006; Holden, 2012; Kotzebue, 2016).

6.2. Responsiveness to Local Needs

Survey results reveal a mixed picture regarding local needs vs. external influences in planning. Nearly two-thirds of respondents stated that plans often reflect local needs well, while one-third believed this occurs only occasionally. Concurrently, 60% noted that plans are frequently adjusted to satisfy external expectations, regardless of local needs. Resource dependency was also highlighted as a concern: nearly half of the respondents reported frequent adjustments of plans to available resources, and another half indicated this occurred occasionally. Overall, the findings point to the significant impact of external expectations and resource dependency on the responsiveness of planning to local needs (Figure 2).

Interview findings emphasise that resource scarcity and resulting resource dependency significantly shape planning. Plans are frequently created or adapted to match available funding opportunities, especially as tenders tend to support only a limited scope of interventions, rather than actual local needs. This often leads to misaligned development projects and inefficient resource utilisation:

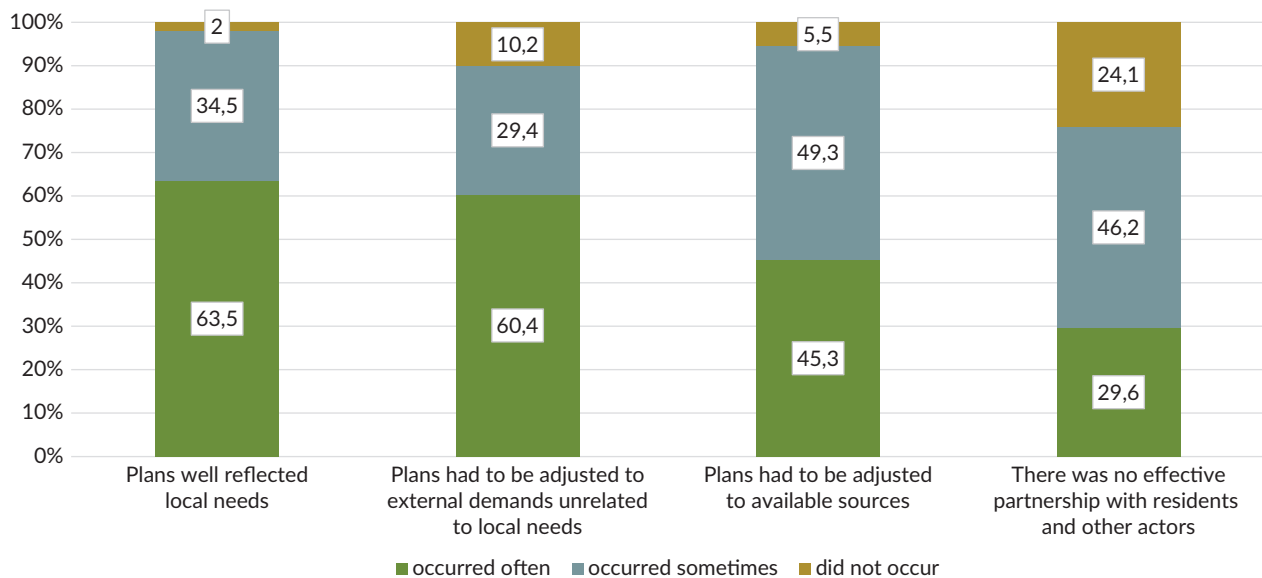


Figure 2. Practitioners' experiences concerning planning vs. local needs and partnership with residents. Note: Number of valid responses: 197–201. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

Either there is a deal behind it, or the state declares something like “this will come to this city”; things do not necessarily stem organically from local needs, or maybe this is the case in some localities, but not in others. (interview 37)

Interviewer: “Is there any development that would be necessary but not included in the plans?”

Interviewee: “If there are no resources available for it, then yes.” (interview 3)

6.3. Public Participation

Nearly one-third (30%) of the survey respondents reported that effective partnership with residents frequently lacked according to their planning experiences, while nearly half of them reported that it sometimes lacked (Figure 2). In terms of difficulties of partnership, factors mentioned by respondents—both in the survey, and in the semi-structured interviews—were similar to those found in earlier studies on Hungarian urban planning (G. Csanádi, Csizmady, Kocsis, et al., 2010; G. Csanádi, Csizmady, & Kőszeghy, 2010; Kőszeghy & Ongjerth, 2009). These include attitudinal and knowledge-related factors, such as a lack of recognition of the importance of participation by local governments, local governments' fears concerning public participation, and low resident motivation, particularly in case of higher-level plans, as well as systemic issues, including difficulties in incorporating different types of knowledge and language, and lack of time for effective public participation. Additionally, several interviewees pointed out that with the increasing prevalence of individual bargaining and top-down project allocation, the group of actors excluded from decision-making has expanded. Notably, in some cases, the range of actors without access to decision-making on local development may include local governments themselves, besides local residents and NGOs:

[With priority investment projects] they literally rewrote district building codes, overstepped the structural plans of [the city]... so they simply did not consider the intentions and will of the local

governments. They were not even consulted, so they were not even allowed to express their opinions. (interview 33)

6.4. Impact of “Priority Investments” on Local Planning

As contextual information suggested that “priority investments” were a key instrument limiting the strategic approach to planning, we explored practitioners’ views on this issue. In the survey, we examined the impact of the legal instrument in six dimensions: its potential in responding to local needs, its impact on local government autonomy, on the development of the local economy, on solving social and transportation problems, and on the environmentally sustainable development of the given locality (Figure 3).

The overwhelming majority of planning practitioners view the legal instrument of “priority investments” as detrimental to local government autonomy, with 75% indicating a negative impact and only 4% considering it positive. Almost two-thirds of planners have a rather negative view of its impact on solving local social problems, and half of them assess its impact rather negatively concerning responsiveness to local needs and ecologically sustainable development. More favourable views appear in two areas: addressing local economic and transport problems. This relative positivity aligns with many projects classified as “priority investments” falling under economic development and transport infrastructure, alongside projects with less obvious relevance concerning their public benefit.

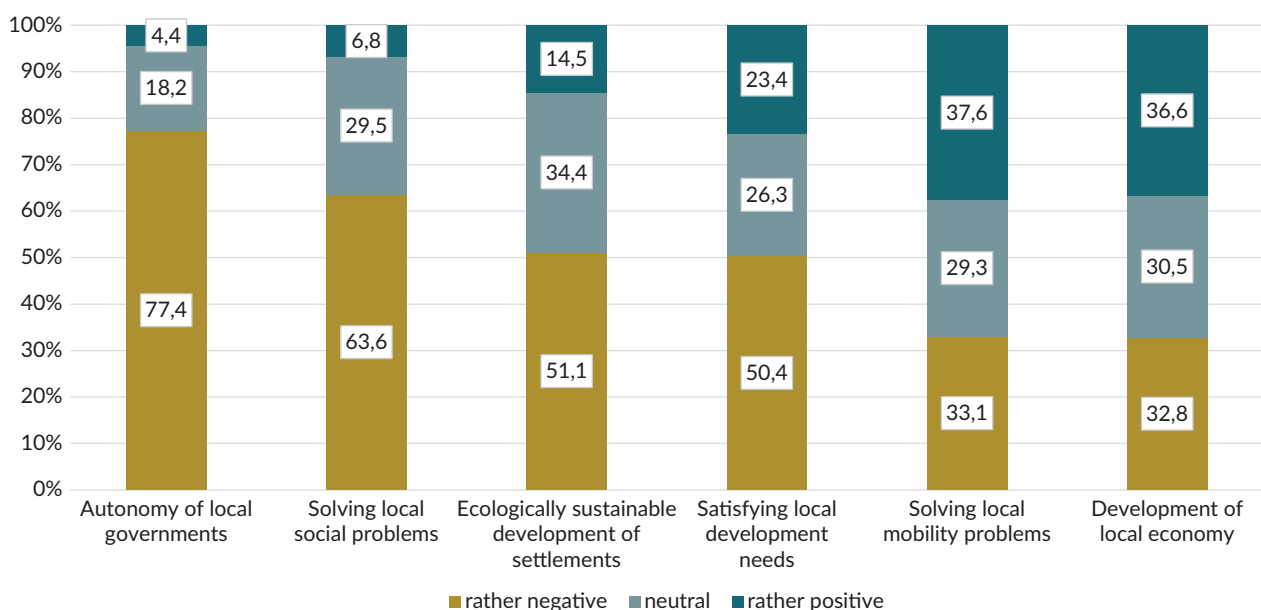


Figure 3. Practitioners’ views on the impact of “priority investments.” Note: Number of valid responses: 134–140. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

The interviews identified the lack of stability in the regulatory framework as a further barrier to implementing a strategic approach to urban planning. Frequent changes to key legislation—covering urban planning, construction management, local government financing, and instruments like “priority investments”—often occur through “omnibus laws”: single laws covering several, often unrelated topics, that are difficult to track, even for professionals. Moreover, such changes are typically made without meaningful consultation, offering stakeholders minimal time to comment or allowing them only to learn about new

legislation post facto, upon its immediate entry into force. This unpredictable environment undermines the utility of long-term strategic planning and discourages the use of resource-intensive planning processes. Interviewees noted that the Integrated Settlement Development Plan, a central document of IUP, has lost much of its relevance under these conditions. Still, some practitioners continue to view it as a helpful tool for identifying and guiding local development interventions.

Additionally, Hungary's economic instability—particularly the devaluation of the Hungarian Forint against the euro—adds uncertainty to urban planning, as planned interventions may become unfinanceable and require revision:

Two days ago, I met a colleague from a different county, and he showed me a letter from the county government commissioner stating that a law had come into effect three weeks ago, but its implementation deadline is just one week away. (interview 35)

We...decide to start developing industrial parks, but maybe the day after tomorrow Mr. Lázár [the Minister of Construction and Transport] changes his mind and says, "okay, from now on, the designation of industrial parks belongs to the state, as well as the revenue." (interview 11)

In practice, the central money distribution system operates completely independently of integrated urban development strategies....In practice, the message is that these plans are not important. (interview 37)

6.5. Power Relations in Planning

To explore power relations in planning—recognising that urban planning is fundamentally embedded in power dynamics (Flyvbjerg & Flyvbjerg, 1998; Forester, 1989) and that IUP specifically acknowledges the need to consider power structures (Albrechts, 2003; Kotzebue, 2016)—we asked practitioners about the potential of various actors in urban planning to shape planning according to their preferences (being aware that this is only one aspect of how power manifests in planning; Figure 4).

According to the survey findings, local mayors—elected representatives in Hungary's local government system—are perceived as the most influential actors in urban planning. However, the influence of central government actors, such as the area's parliamentary representative, the sectoral minister, and the prime minister, closely follows, highlighting the constrained autonomy of local self-governance. Professional actors are viewed as having limited influence: only 43% of respondents believed that chief architects can significantly impact planning decisions, and just 34% said the same about planners. Additionally, neighbouring settlements were seen as having minimal ability to assert their interests, while residents and NGOs were also perceived as having limited influence.

Interviews confirm that mayors play a central role in shaping the local development agenda, often influenced by informal local power holders, such as prominent business owners. This key role is sometimes manifested by a local monarch-like perception and role performance:

The governance of the settlements incredibly depends on the individuals in charge. (interview 37)

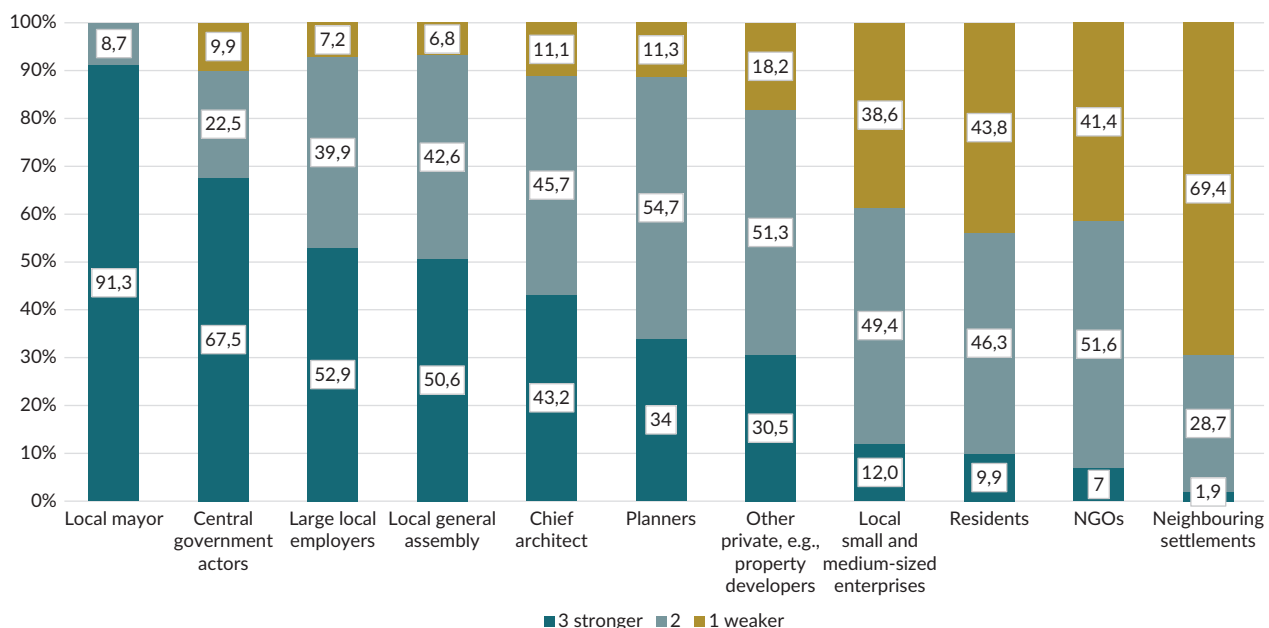


Figure 4. Practitioners' views on stronger and weaker actors in the planning system. Note: Number of valid responses: 158–168. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

The mayor...operates a cabinet, and within the cabinet, the [handling of] funding applications operates within the framework of a department or office. This naturally considers the often unwritten, but conceptually existing ideas of the city's leaders. (interview 16)

The mayor believes that he should make all the decisions. He is the one who knows how things should be done, and who can secure funds through various tricks, political connections, and lobbying. He is the one who can leverage these resources, and everything else is just a technical issue—figuring out how to make something out of them. (interview 32)

The political affiliation of local mayors and parliamentary representatives significantly influences individual bargaining processes that shape local development opportunities. A change in political leadership often results in an immediate shift in a municipality's capacity to attract development funds, as observed in several municipalities, including the capital Budapest, where opposition party mayors replaced those from the ruling party in the 2019 local elections. Beyond party affiliation, local power dynamics also vary by settlement size, i.e., in larger cities, power tends to be more evenly distributed among stakeholders, allowing professionals and experts to exert greater influence in planning processes:

So, basically, today, what the government says is: Look, I like you, you'll get 200 million forints to fix those five streets [or] I don't like you, you'll get nothing; let the residents come to you to complain. (interview 11)

We maintain a very good relationship with the county leaders. Now, the government has decided to set up certain development funds that operate through the county, allowing us to apply for grants.... For example, we secured funding for a nursery from leftover funds....In this regard, they helped us significantly. We are truly grateful for this, and our Member of Parliament also supported us. (interview 38)

The limited role of professional actors was also emphasised:

Professionals in a mayor's office are also in a completely vulnerable position. There is only one thing to do: serve local politics, and that's it. Zero, zero, so it's a very devalued role. (interview 32)

Interviews highlighted the significant influence of central government actors, including their capability to override local planning documents. Beyond the locally elected MP, practitioners cited interventions by the sectoral minister and in some cases, even the prime minister. These examples illustrate the high level of centralisation in the system and an exercise of power where political power dynamics between specific persons play a key role in decisions concerning localities:

Very often, there is a hot-headed mayor or an MP who comes up with an idea like building the Eiffel Tower in the centre of [city X], you know? Or if not, then at least Disneyland or something similar, or let's construct Notre Dame, you know? (interview 32)

Such power relations are reflected by market actors often communicating directly with central government actors, as the strong players in local development, about their planned investments, while local governments may remain in the dark until they have no room for manoeuvre, e.g., when the project is labelled as a "priority investment":

It's not that we didn't get to the [settlement development] contract [with investors]; we didn't even reach the negotiation stage. (interview 40)

To explore practitioners' preferred power structure, we asked about the potential influence of different actors in an "ideal planning system" (Figure 5). Results show that practitioners envision a power structure

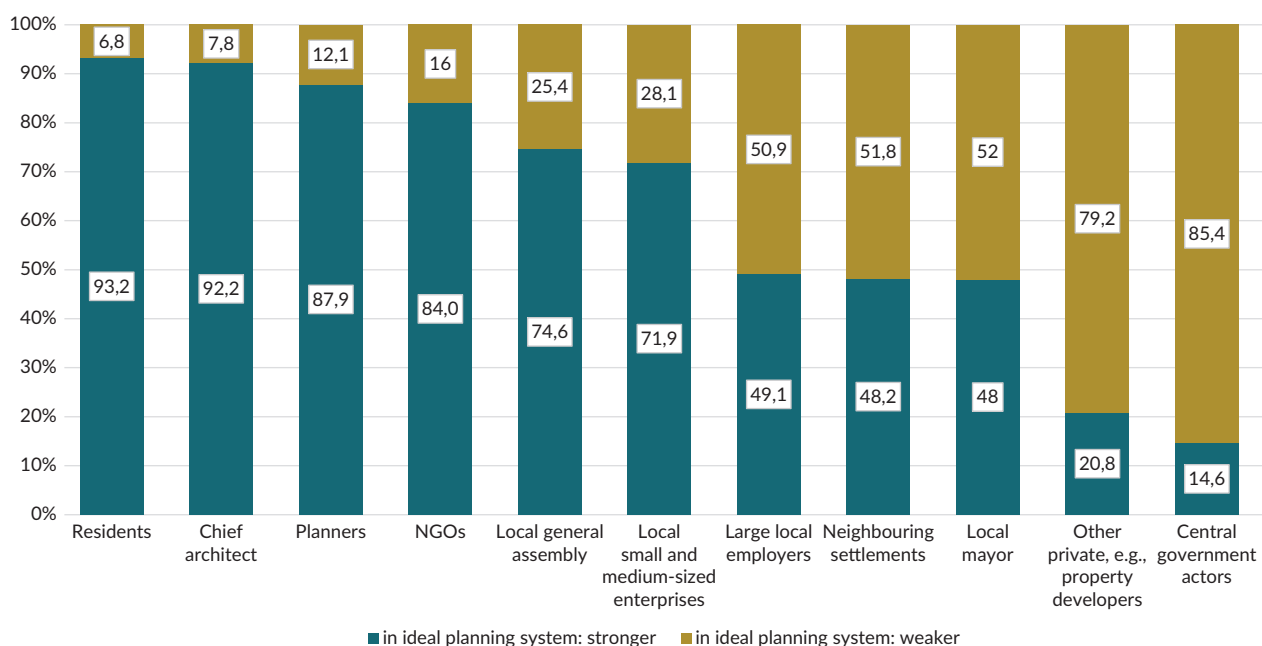


Figure 5. Practitioners' view: stronger and weaker stakeholders in an ideal planning system. Note: Number of valid responses: 113–146. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

substantially different from the existing one. According to the survey, 85% would reduce the influence of central government actors in local planning, and nearly as many would curb the power of large economic actors, such as property developers. Meanwhile, practitioners would prefer a much more significant influence of local residents, NGOs, and professional actors such as local chief architects, the relevant local government department, planners, and other planning-related professionals. A similar proportion of practitioners also envisage a greater role for local general assemblies and small and medium-sized enterprises in urban planning. While the difference between the actual and ideal role is much less significant for local mayors, more than 50% of respondents would prefer to reduce their influence in urban planning.

7. Discussion

Our results identified specific factors through which democratic backsliding affects urban planning practice and limits integrated urban planning, underpinning the context-dependence of planning in Hungary (Albrechts, 2006).

Consequent to the centralisation and ongoing reorganisation of public administration, with the increasing role of deconcentrated bodies concerning the administrative affairs of local communities—factors contributing to the decreasing political autonomy of local governments, one of the components of democratic backsliding (Kornai, 2015)—the need for vertical and sectoral coordination in urban planning has increased, and non-cooperation of deconcentrated bodies, which some surveyed practitioners encountered in their practice, poses a difficulty as we hypothesised (H1). The empirical research identified additional challenges to implementing IUP principles arising from these changes. These include the unclear rationale behind task reallocation, ambiguities concerning the mandates of respective organisations, and the deconcentrated bodies' inability to perform or slow the execution of tasks transferred to them from local governments.

Empirical findings confirm that problems with local governments' funding, relating to both the level of funding and the underlying logic of local government financing, and the resulting exposure to external funding—factors contributing to the decreasing financial autonomy of local governments, another component of democratic backsliding (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015; Kornai, 2015)—worsen the responsiveness of local development to local needs, as local governments have to adapt to the preferences of funders (H2). The most spectacular examples of this include state-initiated developments either based on bargaining between local actors and the central government, or carried out as interventions implemented in a top-down manner, and, especially in the case of local governments with poor access to public funding for local development due to political tensions between local and central governments, a strong need to adapt to market actors' preferences. At the same time, resource-driven planning is widely present in the planning practice.

The deterioration of local self-governance, as one of the key components of democratic backsliding (M. Csanádi, 2022; Kornai, 2015), is spectacularly expressed in the processes through which the emergence of individual bargaining (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015), and the practice of top-down investment allocation through projects labelled as "priority investments," systematically and comprehensively undermine the implementation of IUP principles (H3). In the case of individual bargaining, the political affiliation of local mayors and MPs, along with their relationships with central government actors deciding on resources, are

key factors, overriding urban development considerations. Regarding participation, such practices may push local governments themselves outside the scope of participants involved in the planning procedure. The weakening of the position of local governments is reflected in market actors negotiating planned developments directly with central government actors in some cases, rather than with local governments, which may become aware of them only after the project allocation decision. In such an environment, the role of professionals is decreasing: planning documents developed according to IUP principles do not effectively guide local development due to a lack of resources and/or the uncertain planning context.

An important result of the empirical research, highly relevant due to its spatial development impact, is that the emergence of individual bargaining systematically reduces the motivation of local governments to engage in spatial coordination. Local governments compete for resources, and those who succeed tend to keep the resources they gain for themselves in a resource-poor environment. Although there are examples of cooperation between local governments—often between those with limited or no access to development resources, or where access to sources, especially EU funds, requires cooperation—in most cases, local governments pursue an individual rather than a cooperative strategy to access sources. This has a precedent in the state socialist era, when the state was the largest and most exclusive development force, leading local councils—the local level of state administration, in the absence of local self-governance—to compete for state development sources, with individual formal and informal bargaining mechanisms being a typical form of resource allocation (Vági, 1982).

In addition, the uncertainty of the planning context, characterised by frequent legislative changes, non-transparent legislative procedures, and, in some cases, ambiguous legal content, which reflects more general trends of legislative backsliding (Sebők et al., 2023), as part of democratic backsliding, emerges as a significant factor limiting the application of IUP. The increased role of the state in local development through state-funded interventions adds a specific economic component to the uncertainty of the planning context, as the state may decide to withdraw resources based on economic or political reasons. Within such a context, many interviewed practitioners consider the development of planning documents based on IUP principles to be irrelevant.

The analysis has focused on the implementation of procedural principles of IUP, with less emphasis on their implicit normative content. However, the available empirical findings suggest that limitations concerning the implementation of procedural IUP principles also restrict the articulation of its normative expectations, contributing to the ongoing debate in the literature regarding IUP's technical vs. normative nature (Holden, 2012). Based on the available empirical material, this could only be hypothesised; to examine this, focused research using other methods, such as case studies, would be required.

Finally, our analysis does not suggest that no context-specific factors had a potentially limiting impact on the implementation of IUP principles before 2010, nor that no other factors currently have an impact. However, the analysis aimed to identify the factors that emerged after 2010 related to democratic backsliding that impacted the implementation of IUP principles.

8. Conclusion

The analysis confirmed that democratic backsliding (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021), through various factors, systematically constrains the implementation of integrated urban planning, the key spatial planning paradigm in the EU (Nadin et al., 2021; Pastor-Seller et al., 2023), and identified specific factors of democratic backsliding with such an impact. These include the centralisation and ongoing reorganisation of public administration, which deprives actors responsible for local planning of mandates in policy areas relevant to local development; poor funding and lack of financial autonomy of local governments, which increases the resource dependency of planning; a comprehensive deterioration of local self-governance, which is expressed, among others, through the emergence of individual bargaining as a practice in local development and the limitation of local planning autonomy through non-negotiated top-down project allocation decisions; as well as non-transparent legislative procedures, and the insecurity and, sometimes, non-transparency of the legal context. The results also suggest that limitations concerning the implementation of the procedural principles of IUP negatively impact the articulation of its normative components, such as sustainability, social inclusion, and economic competitiveness; however, such results only allow the formulation of a hypothesis for further research.

Due to the highly context- and path-dependent nature of planning (Albrechts, 2006), factors limiting the implementation of integrated urban planning principles may vary, and may be significantly different in countries with a fundamentally different planning approach and traditions, such as in neo-performative planning systems (Berisha et al., 2021), planning systems with stronger public participation traditions, or stronger traditions concerning cooperation for joint interest articulation (Maier, 2012). However, experiences from Hungary may provide input for identifying risk factors concerning the implementation of IUP principles in other contexts as well.

Conducting empirical research on the implementation of abstract concepts in urban planning practice poses a challenging methodological issue. In this analysis, a combination of a survey and semi-structured interviews was used to enhance the validity and reliability of the results, but it remained difficult to grasp the highly complex issues we intended to explore. Therefore, further research, incorporating diverse methodologies such as case studies and discourse analysis, could substantially enhance, elaborate, or refine the results presented in this article.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Primary quantitative and qualitative data used in this article are stored in the secure cloud storage of the HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences and can be obtained from the authors upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this article, DeepL and ChatGPT were used for grammar and style improvement. The accuracy of the text was carefully checked by the authors. No other use of LLM models was involved.

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