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Educational mobility at the top and the bottom of the social structure in Hungary

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Abstract

According to recent studies, both absolute and relative mobility in Hungary have recently declined. In our paper, we seek to explain how these processes evolved in the lower and upper segments of the social structure. Is the decline in mobility more due to the fact that parents in a more favourable position manage to pass on their privileged social position successfully, or rather to the fact that those starting from below are less able to overcome their disadvantages? To what extent have these processes occurred simultaneously in the last almost twenty years, and to what extent have they taken place independently? According to our results, the decrease in social mobility can be detected in both the lower and upper segments of society. However, processes at the two poles have not involved the same dynamics over the past nearly two decades. In the 2000s, educational expansion fuelled immobility in the upper segment of society, but also created mobility channels for those with an unfavourable social background. In contrast, in the 2010s the proportion of the immobile increased among both the high and low educated. In terms of relative mobility, quite similar processes have taken place in the upper and lower segments of society: the already unequal relative mobility chances became even more unequal during the nearly twenty years under study.

Keywords: social mobility; social closure; sticky floor; sticky ceiling; Hungary

Our paper seeks to explain to what extent it depends on the family background of individuals whether someone is currently in a favourable or unfavourable social position; how strong this association is in Hungary; and whether any change can be observed in this respect in the last two decades. This form of questioning is embedded in the tradition of social mobility research, but now we focus on two of the possible mobility routes: mobility paths leading to the upper and lower groups of society. These mobility routes require special attention, as their study can shed light on two phenomena that are of decisive importance in terms of the openness and closedness of a society. On the one hand, by examining the mobility pathways leading to the upper segment of society we can obtain information about the extent to which privileged social groups inherit their social position. On the other hand, by focusing on the mobility paths to the lower segment of society we can estimate how much disadvantaged positions reproduce themselves. These two phenomena are aptly illustrated by the metaphors

of the 'sticky floor' and the 'sticky ceiling' (OECD, 2018). In the following, we first clarify our research questions by introducing the theoretical and methodological grounds of our research, and then present our results.

1 Mobility and social closure

Social mobility research has traditionally distinguished between absolute and relative mobility. The absolute mobility rate, from an intergenerational perspective, refers to those whose social position has changed compared to that of their parents. Absolute mobility depends mostly on how much the structure of society itself changes. If the proportions of different social groups change from one generation to the next, this increases the degree of mobility in itself: structural changes force individuals to leave their parents' social group and move to another one. Relative mobility measures, on the other hand, try to provide information about mobility processes while filtering out the effects of structural changes. In this respect, relative measures of mobility are much more suitable for shedding light on how and to what extent the equality of opportunity has changed in a society, i.e., how far the latter can be considered open or closed (Andorka, 1982; Breen, 2010; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019; Marshall, Swift & Roberts, 1997).

Both absolute and relative mobility have been declining in Hungary since the 1970s (Andorka, 1982; Harcsa & Kulcsár, 1986; Andorka, Bukodi & Harcsa, 1994; Luijkx et al., 2002; Bukodi, 2002; Róbert & Bukodi, 2004; Németh, 2006; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2010; 2021; Róbert, 2018; Jackson & Evans, 2017; Balogh et al, 2019; Huszár et al., 2020; 2022); moreover, according to the latest studies, Hungary (in European comparison) belongs to the group of countries considered most disadvantaged in terms of social mobility (Bukodi, Paskov & Nolan, 2017; 2019; Bukodi & Paskov, 2020; Eurofound, 2017; OECD, 2018). The simultaneous unfavourable change in absolute and relative mobility means that on the one hand Hungarian society is becoming more and more rigid – i.e. the class structure is changing to a lesser extent than before –, and on the other hand that it is becoming more and more closed, which means that the chances of changing one's social position relative to that of one's parents is smaller and smaller.

However, from the point of view of assessing how rigid or open a society is, it is not irrelevant to consider what mobility paths total mobility consists of. Relative proportions of horizontal and vertical mobility do make a difference, for example, as well as what social distances vertical mobility can bridge, i.e., what proportion of society can change their social situation significantly. The issue of how much mobility affects the lower and upper segments of society (i.e., the extent to which mobility channels are available to the most disadvantaged and the extent to which mobility paths are open to those in higher positions in society) is just as important.

In the present paper, we focus on these two mobility pathways. We seek to investigate to what extent the closure of Hungarian society after the regime change stemmed from processes taking place in the upper or lower part of society. Did these trends occur in parallel at the two poles of society, or as a result of periodically changing, or perhaps opposite, trends? The latter may easily have occurred, and is even very likely, as mobility and immobility mean completely different thing in the lower and upper segments of society; accordingly, different factors determine whether someone's social position changes or remains unchanged.

Those in the most disadvantaged situation due to their origin start from a position that is not a destination for other social groups. Thus, for those starting from the bottom, mobility means moving upwards compared to their parents, and improving their social situation. Mobility here therefore holds the promise of progress, thus in this case it is a goal to be mobile. Whether this goal is actually achieved depends on a number of factors. Above all, it depends on structural factors, which primarily involve changes in the education system and the occupational structure. If more and more people have the opportunity to complete higher levels of education, or if the proportion of jobs associated with higher prestige and more favourable income and working conditions increases compared to that of unskilled jobs, it will open up mobility channels for those starting from below. However, in addition to structural factors, mobility also depends on the various characteristics of the people involved – what economic, cultural, and social resources they have; whether their family relationships are peaceful and secure; the extent to which their homes provide a supportive environment for children; and may also depend on other hidden factors.[1] Moreover, mobility may depend on the willingness and ability of potentially mobile people to pay the potential costs of mobility (Chan, 2018; Hajdu, Huszár & Kristóf, 2019; Durst & Nyírő, 2021; Dés, 2021). Therefore, in the lower part of society, closure always means failed or derailed mobility. This occurs when, for various reasons, individuals are unable or to a lesser and lesser extent able to realize their mobility aspirations. Expanding the metaphor of the sticky floor (OECD, 2018), this phenomenon means that the way that society operates 'sticks' those at the lower end to their position of origin, despite their (potential) ambitions, effort, and talent, depriving them of the opportunity to move upward.

Closure in the upper part of society means something completely different. Positions here are considered the most desirable destinations in term of social mobility. However, for those in the best positions due to their origin, intergenerational change would mean that their situation worsens compared to that of their parents. In this case, therefore, it is not mobility but immobility that is the main goal. The extent to which this is accomplished may also depend on various factors. Increasing access to higher education and an increase in the proportion of higher-prestige occupations will facilitate the transmission of a favourable social situation between generations, but will also allow new groups to enter these positions. However, other factors may specifically facilitate closure, such as the concentration or direct inheritance of wealth; degrees obtained in elite schools and the social networks established therein; and, as in the case of the bottom, homogamous marriage (Tóth & Szelényi, 2019) can facilitate closure at the top as well. 'Stickiness' thus has a different meaning in relation to the ceiling. This phenomenon is not rooted in the lack of realization of mobility aspirations, but in the successful transmission of the position of origin. In addition, in contrast to the sticky floor phenomenon, the successful blocking of mobility occurs in terms of positions that are considered to be desirable destinations for other social groups as well, thus preserving a privileged social position is potentially achieved by excluding those who start from a disadvantaged position.

[1] Regarding the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and poverty, see above all the work of Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi (2005), which systematically takes into account the factors determining this. See also the comprehensive work by János Ladányi and Iván Szelényi (2004), as well as András Gábos and Péter Szívós (2008), and Balázs Kapitány (2012).

In our paper we seek to identify to what extent the recent decline in absolute and relative forms of social mobility is due to processes materializing in the upper and lower segments of society. Have they evolved simultaneously, or can some periods be distinguished when sticky floor or sticky ceiling effects prevailed? In the absence of comprehensive stratification and mobility studies, little is known about this, and only rough hypotheses can be formulated in this regard. The deep occupational crisis of the early 1990s probably contributed most strongly to the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and poverty (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2005), while the political and economic changes that followed the regime change may have generated greater movement in the upper segments of society. György István Tóth and Iván Szelényi (2019) take a much firmer view about the current processes. According to them, factors contributing to the closure of the upper middle class dominate today; however, they consider this assumption to be a research hypothesis that may be confirmed by targeted empirical studies. In this study, our goal is to generate empirical evidence that may help evaluate such hypotheses, even if we cannot fully test them.

2 Data and methods

In our work, we aim to review the mobility processes of Hungary over a relatively long period of almost 20 years. For this purpose, we relied on data from the *European Social Survey* (*ESS*). The ESS is a longitudinal survey that uses the same methodology and questionnaire and is conducted every two years in many European countries, including Hungary. The ESS was initiated by the European Science Foundation back in 2001 with the aim of obtaining internationally comparable data about the demographic and social situation of European societies, the evolution of the political and public preferences of the population, and changes in the values that influence social attitudes and activities. ESS data are valuable not only for academic purposes but also for European and national governments and public policies and make a significant contribution to understanding the social processes currently taking place in Europe. Surveys are conducted in each country based on a multi-stage probabilistic sample design using nationally representative samples. The first phase of data collection took place in 2002, and nine ESS waves have been recorded, the last one in 2018.[2]

Reviewing the factors through which individuals can enter the upper and lower groups of society during different periods, as well as how the size of these groups has changed over time, could be the subject of independent research. Such preliminary research might make it possible to grasp our subject more accurately, However, instead of this complex approach, we sought to make several, simple, reliable measurements that allow for temporal and international comparison. Each of these measurements is less comprehensive in itself, but we believe that together they are more suitable for drawing conclusions about the processes that have taken place in different segments of society.

In the field of social mobility research, capture of the origin and current positions of individuals is most typically attempted in three ways: based on occupational class, education, and income status.[3] The ESS contains information on all of them.

[2] More detailed information on the survey is available at https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/

[3] The vast majority of sociological studies apply the occupational-based approach, while there is lively debate about the different approaches. A study by John Goldthorpe (2013) provides good insight into these debates.

The most difficult task in mobility research is assessing *the position of origin* of individuals, as this information can be collected only retrospectively, apart from in specific cohort surveys and potential administrative data sources. In most cases, including the ESS, this prevents researchers from obtaining reliable data on the income status of respondents. However, although not in a uniform way, information is available about the educational level and occupational group of the respondent's father and mother. Information on parents' educational attainment is available for the whole period under review on the basis of ISCED classification, which was included in our analysis in four categories (Primary education: ISCED 0 and 1; Lower secondary education: ISCED 2; Upper and post-secondary education: ISCED 3 and 4; Tertiary education: ISCED 5-).[4] However, comparable data for the father's and mother's occupations are available only for the period after 2008, and not as detailed occupational codes, but as pre-defined occupational categories. Information on parents' occupation is therefore not the most appropriate, so we omitted the use of this in this study. Thus, the position of origin of the respondents was determined by education using the dominance approach – i.e., the data of the parent with the higher educational level was taken into account.

Much more information is available to capture the social position of respondents; however, the situation is not ideal in this case either. Above all, the variable of educational attainment is available, the assessment of which is exactly the same as that for parents. Occupation is also available in the form of four-digit ISCO codes, which we aggregated in line with the five-category version of the *European Socio-economic Classification* (ESeC) scheme.[5] However, after examining the change in the distribution of class categories, we decided not to use this information in this work either. Unfortunately – primarily due to the change in the ISCO nomenclature – the proportion of lower- and upper-class categories has fluctuated to an extent that makes the data unreliable. In the case of respondents, the ESS also includes an income decile variable that would have been especially useful for the purpose of our study. However, unfortunately, we also had to give up the idea of using it due to the quality of the data.[6]

Thus, in our study the position of origin and the current social position of respondents is measured by educational attainment. Our preliminary plan was to capture the top and bottom social positions by using multiple indicators, but unfortunately, we had to give up on this idea.

Due to the sample size, the results are not presented according to each wave of the data collection, but separated into four periods. The first period includes the first three waves of the ESS, which covers 2002–2006, and the subsequent waves were combined in units of two. To avoid our results being distorted by respondents who had not or had just entered the labour market, as well as those who had already left, we included in the analysis only those individuals between the ages of 25 and 64.

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[4] Unfortunately, due to the fieldwork in Hungary, Hungarian data on parents' education level are missing from the sixth wave of the ESS (for 2012).

[5] Regarding ESeC, see above all the work by David Rose and Eric Harrison (2010).

[6] In the ESS questionnaires, respondents are asked to classify their income into one of multiple income categories that have been defined in advance based on external data sources so that they correspond to each income decile. In the case of Hungary, this was not really successful: e.g., in 2008, 4 per cent of respondents were included in the bottom income tenth, compared to 18 per cent in 2014. For more details on ESS income data, see https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round8/survey/ESS8_appendix_a2_e02_1.pdf

In the following, we first examine to what extent children inherited the favourable or unfavourable social position of their parents by relying on absolute indicators of mobility. We then shift the focus to see how the relative chances of mobility at the top and at the bottom changed during the period under review.

3 Absolute mobility

When we focus on the lower and upper parts of society, we are in fact dividing society into three distinct parts. It is important, however, to interpret in the light of the specific measurement which social groups the borderlines we draw are separating, and which are treated together (i.e., what is included in each category). It is important to note that in this triple division the middle cannot be identified with the middle class, nor can the upper category be associated with the elite, nor the lower with those living in deep poverty.

In our study, those with a university or college degree are included in the upper group. This is a broad and very heterogeneous group that may include owners and managers of large corporations, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and other professionals working as employees. Thus, when referring to the upper part of society, we do not intend to refer to the superrich or the elite, or even the upper middle class (Tóth & Szelényi, 2019). In terms of its sociological content, this category can best be characterized as grouping those with at least a rather stable middle-class status (cf. Tóth, 2016a; 2016b; Éber, 2020, pp. 191–212; Huszár & Berger, 2020; Szalai, 2020). Thus, when examining the change in the mobility characteristics of this group, our question can be refined to the following: to what extent have those with a middle-class position managed to pass on their social position to the next generation?

The lower group, on the other hand, includes those who, based on their qualifications, have at most a primary or lower secondary education (they do not have a high-school diploma). This lower category is thus much more homogeneous than the upper one, as it includes those who, based on their qualifications, are clearly disadvantaged in the labour market and at the greatest risk of unemployment. This precarious group can be considered deprived in many respects, but it is far from identifiable with those in a multiply disadvantaged situation and living in deep poverty (cf. Spéder, 2002; Havasi, 2002; Kapitány & Spéder, 2004; Kertesi & Kézdi, 2005; Ladányi & Szelényi, 2004). Therefore, based on the mobility characteristics of this group, it is possible to examine to what extent precarious social situations are reproduced.

Taking a closer look at the change in the size of the groups in the periods concerned, the direction of the change is basically favourable, and this trend can be observed for both respondents and their parents (see Tables 1–3 in the Appendix). The proportion of the tertiary educated increased in each period in the case of both parents and respondents, and at the same time the proportion of those with low level of education clearly decreased.[7] Over-

[7] These tendencies are fully in line with the results identified by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office based on censuses and microcensuses (KSH, 2017).

all, these structural changes help the children of parents with a low level of education to improve their social position, while they also make it easier for those from tertiary-educated families to retain their position of origin.[8]

After this brief overview of the structural changes in educational attainment, we review how far parents with low and high educational attainment transferred their own social position (see Figure 1). Figure 1 shows the immobility rate of the high and low educated groups; i.e., the proportion of children of tertiary-educated parents who themselves have a university degree as well, and the proportion of children of parents with up to primary education who have a primary or secondary education without a high-school diploma. According to our results, the extent of immobility in the case of higher education shows a clear trend to increasing: while in the first half of the 2000s about half of the children of highly educated parents obtained a high educational level themselves, at the end of the 2010s two-thirds did. Overall, therefore, children of parents with a high educational level are increasingly likely to attain the educational level of their parents. It is important, however, that as a result of the educational expansion, the group of the tertiary educated has expanded, which has opened up mobility paths primarily for the children of parents with a high-school diploma.[9]

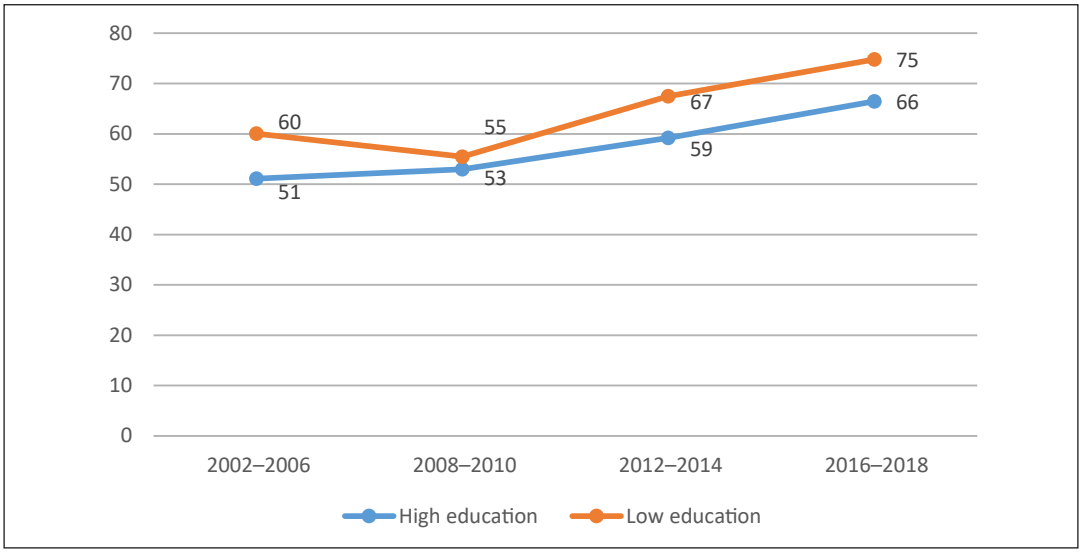

Figure 1 Immobility rates among the low and high educated in Hungary, %

Source: Authors' calculation based on ESS

Note: High education: the proportion of children of tertiary-educated parents who also have a university degree; low education: proportion of children of parents with up to primary education who completed primary or secondary education without obtaining a high-school diploma.

[8] It must be added in explanation of these changes that just as the structure of qualifications changes, so does the relative value of each level of education. The value of a university degree is higher if there are fewer tertiary educated in a society, and as their proportion increases the relative value of higher education will decrease. Of course, this is also true for the other side of the qualification structure.

[9] Regarding this issue, see Table A3 in the appendix.

The other line in the figure provides information on the proportion of children of parents with up to primary education who have a primary or secondary education without a high-school diploma. In this case, the trends are less straightforward than in the case of the inheritance of higher positions. In the second period, the proportion of those with a low-level education like their parents decreased compared to the first period, but it has been rising continuously since the beginning of the 2010s.[10] While in the beginning of the 2000s 40 per cent of the children of parents who had no more than a primary education were able to obtain a high-school diploma, and in the second half of the 2000s approx. 45 per cent of them could achieve the same, this figure had fallen to below 25 per cent by the end of the decade. These results suggest that while the mobility chances of those who started at the bottom somewhat improved in the 2000s, they steadily deteriorated in the 2010s.

Overall, therefore, compared to the 2000s, by the end of the 2010s the proportion of those with a similar social position to that of their parents increased remarkably. In the case of tertiary education, the trend is clear and unbroken: an increasing proportion of children with tertiary-educated parents obtained a higher education degree themselves. In the case of lower education levels, the data show the trend reversal in the early 2010s: while by the end of the 2000s the proportion of those with a low level of education like their parents decreased compared to the previous period, this started to increase after 2010. The increase in immobility among the highly educated is not surprising at all in the light of the structural changes. The increase in the proportion of the tertiary educated in society indicates that an increasing share of children of highly educated parents will themselves reach the educational level of their parents. What is more surprising, however, is what we see in the case of the low educated. As a result of structural changes – that is, the expansion of education – we might have expected a reduction in the share of the low-educated immobile. However, this expectation is only met in the case of the 2000s, while after 2010 the share of the low-educated immobile increased despite the favourable structural changes.

4 Relative mobility chances

So far, we have examined how far parents passed on their more favourable and less favourable social position based on absolute indicators. In the following, we seek to explore, regardless of structural changes, how strong the association is between the social position of parents and their children in the lower and upper parts of society, and how it has changed over the past twenty years. We therefore examine the relative chances of a disadvantaged as well as a privileged social situation being passed on from one generation to the next, and whether this chance has changed over time.

The effect of origin was examined using hierarchical logistic regression models for each of the key mobility destinations on the complete database. Thus, we examined independently how the social position of parents explains whether someone receives a higher

[10] The same trend emerges even if only primary education is taken into account in the case of respondents. See Table A3 in the Appendix in this regard.

education degree, or reaches a level of education lower than a high school diploma. In order to find out how the effect of origin changed in the lower and upper segments of society in Hungary, we also included the interaction of time (i.e., period and origin) into our models. The regression models were constructed in two steps in each case. In the first step, the variables of origin – i.e., parents' educational attainment, period variables, and the main sociodemographic background variables (the respondents' gender, age, household size and type of place of residence) – were included in the analysis. In the second step, our models were extended with the interaction of the origin and period. The interaction of the origin categories and the periods is relevant to our study because they can provide insight into how the relative mobility chances of the children of parents with different qualifications evolved from one period to another. The results of the models constructed in relation to completing higher education are summarized in Table 1, and the results of the models constructed for primary or lower secondary education are summarized in Table 2.

Based on the results of the models for obtaining tertiary education, we can first conclude that both the variables of origin and period have a significant independent effect on the respondents' educational attainment (and this does not change when the interactions are included in the model either). In the case of the educational level of parents, understandably, the coefficients are negative, which indicates that children of parents with a lower-level education have less chance of getting a diploma. In the case of the period, however, the direction of the relationship is positive, which means that in general the chance of completing tertiary education increased in later periods compared to the first one.

In the following, we examine how the chances of children of parents with different qualifications indicating high educational attainment have changed over time based on the interaction terms. In the case of upper-secondary education background, none of the interactions were significant – in this case, therefore, no substantive change can be observed. There are, however, significant changes in the case of children of parents with lower secondary and primary education. In both cases, the coefficients are negative, indicating that their relative chance of obtaining a university diploma deteriorated compared to the descendants of tertiary-educated parents. In the case of children with a lower secondary education background, compared to the early 2000s it was more difficult to obtain a degree in each of the following periods. In the case of descendants of primary education parents, however, in the second half of the 2010s their relative chances narrowed greatly.

Mobility processes that took place in the lower segment of society followed similar dynamics. According to the regression models for low educational attainment, the independent effect of family background and period variables is significant, as in the previous case. On the one hand, this means that the higher the educational level of the parents, the smaller the chance that their children will have a low level of education. Thus, the relative mobility chances of individuals from different social backgrounds are unequal and the degree of inequality is even higher in the case of low educational attainment than in the case of obtaining a degree. On the other hand, these results again indicate that as a result of educational expansion the chances of someone obtaining a low level of education decreased by the end of the 2010s compared to the beginning of the 2000s.

Table 1 Hierarchical logistic regression models of tertiary education attainment

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Coef.	**S.E.**	**z**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**z**
Education level of parents (Ref: Tertiary education)						
Upper and post-secondary education	−1.85***	0.08	−21.75	−1.87***	0.15	−12.21
Lower secondary education	−2.89***	0.12	−23.38	−2.31***	0.19	−12.13
Primary education	−3.46***	0.17	−19.64	−3.11***	0.25	−12.38
Period (ref: 2002–2006)						
2008–2010	0.36***	0.09	3.89	0.46***	0.19	2.31
2012–2014	0.40***	0.09	4.45	0.55***	0.21	2.58
2016–2018	0.53***	0.09	5.45	0.68***	0.18	3.74
Control variables	Yes	Yes				
Interactions						
2008–2010 x Upper and post-secondary education				0.07	0.23	0.31
2012–2014 x Upper and post-secondary education				0.16	0.25	0.65
2016–2018 x Upper and post-secondary education				−0.17	0.21	−0.78
2008–2010 x Lower secondary education				−0.90**	0.32	−2.77
2012–2014 x Lower secondary education				−0.74**	0.33	−2.23
2014–2018 x Lower secondary education				−1.07***	0.33	−3.18
2008–2010 x Primary education				−0.31	0.40	−0.79
2012–2014 x Primary education				−0.61	0.54	−1.14
2016–2018 x Primary education				−1.64**	0.77	−2.14
Constant	0.27	0.19	1.42	0.16	0.19	19.77
Number of obs.	8,349	8,349				
Log pseudolikelihood	−3491.11	−3475.65				
Wald chi^2	941.12	1001.24				
Pseudo R^2	0.170	0.174				

Source: Authors' calculation based on ESS

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2 Hierarchical logistic regression models of primary or lower secondary education

	Model 3			Model 4		
	Coef.	**S.E.**	**z**	**Coef.**	**S.E.**	**z**
Education level of parents (Ref: Primary education)						
Tertiary education	−4.16***	0.28	−14.60	−3.72***	0.40	−9.30
Upper and post-secondary education	−2.76***	0.11	−24.52	−2.25***	0.15	−14.51
Lower secondary education	−1.10***	0.09	−11.77	−1.20***	0.12	−8.21
Period (ref: 2002–2006)						
2008–2010	0.09	0.09	−0.26	0.22	0.16	1.31
2012–2014	−0.31*	0.10	−1.70	−0.47*	0.21	−1.58
2016–2018	−0.45**	0.10	−2.26	−0.97***	0.23	−3.09
Control variables	Yes	Yes				
Interactions (Education level of parents x Period)						
Tertiary education x 2008–2010				−0.28	0.65	−0.43
Tertiary education x 2012–2014				−1.88**	1.09	−1.72
Tertiary education x 2016–2018				−1.35**	0.73	−1.84
Upper and post-secondary education x 2008–2010				−0.30	0.23	−1.30
Upper and post-secondary education x 2012–2014				−1.21***	0.30	−4.03
Upper and post-secondary education x 2016–2018				−1.71***	0.31	−5.51
Lower secondary education x 2008–2010				−0.38*	0.22	−1.18
Lower secondary education x 2012–2014				−0.20	0.26	−0.78
Lower secondary education x 2016–2018				−0.17	0.28	−0.60
Constant	0.29	0.26	1.12	0.15	0.27	0.58
Number of obs.	8,349	8,349				
Log pseudolikelihood	−3298.25	−3254.16				
Wald chi^2	1004.5	1024.36				
Pseudo R^2	0.227	0.237				

Source: Authors' calculation based on ESS
Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Turning to the analysis of the interaction terms, however, we again see that against the background of the general trends the relative chances of those with different family backgrounds developed differently. For children whose parents have a lower secondary education, almost none of the interaction terms are significant. Thus, the relative chances of these children obtaining a low level of education did not change between the early 2000s and the second half of the 2000s. However, the situation is different for those of more favourable origin. The already small chance of the children of parents with a degree or a secondary-school diploma not receiving at least a secondary-school diploma decreased significantly in the 2010s compared to the previous decade.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the examination of the relative mobility chances of achieving high or low educational levels. On the one hand, the structural changes that took place in the period that are reflected in an upward shift in the distribution of educational categories have had an overall positive effect on the relative mobility chances of individuals. Compared to the early 2000s, the overall chance of individuals obtaining a tertiary education increased by the second half of the 2010s. Additionally, the chance of someone getting at most a low level of education decreased during the period under review. On the other hand, however, this overall increase in probability was not accompanied by a reduction in the inequality of opportunities of those with different social backgrounds. Actually, the opposite is the case for both high and low educational levels. By the second half of the 2010s, inequality of the relative mobility chances of children with a more favourable and less favourable family background increased compared to the early 2000s.

5 Conclusions

According to the latest studies of social mobility in Hungary, both absolute and relative mobility have decreased, and in our paper we sought to explain how these processes manifested at different levels of social structure. Is the decrease in mobility typically due to the fact that parents in a more favourable position can pass on their privileged social position successfully, or rather to the fact that those starting from the bottom are less and less able to overcome their disadvantages? To what extent have these processes occurred simultaneously in the last almost twenty years, and to what extent have they taken place independently? In our study we try to answer these questions by examining the mobility paths leading to higher and lower education attainment. Of course, these examinations cannot provide an exhaustive account of the factors that promote or hinder social mobility, nor of the specific strategies pursued by individuals with more or less favourable family backgrounds. More detailed quantitative and qualitative studies may answer these questions. Our study aims to provide a rough picture of the main structural processes that are taking place in the lower and upper parts of society.

According to our results, in the almost twenty-year period under review, tertiary-educated parents have managed to pass on their more favourable social position with increasing success – i.e., an increasing proportion of their children have also obtained university degrees. However, it is important to point out that the proportion of tertiary educated themselves has increased during this period, which has allowed those from disadvantaged backgrounds to join these groups in increasing numbers. Accordingly, the relative chance of obtaining a tertiary education increased overall during the period under review. However,

the overall increase in the chance of reaching a high educational level was not accompanied by a reduction in the inequality of opportunity. On the contrary, the already unequal opportunities of children with different social background became even more unequal during the period under review. As a result, by the second half of the 2010s the relative chances of children of parents with a lower-level education had deteriorated compared to the chances of children with a tertiary-education family background.

A slightly different picture emerges in terms of the changes taking place in the lower part of society. By the end of the 2000s, the proportion of those from low-educated families with low levels of education themselves had fallen, but after 2010 began to rise again in the following periods. Thus, while the proportion of low-educated immobile decreased in the 2000s, it started to increase in the 2010s despite the favourable structural changes. In terms of the relative chances of obtaining a low level of education, the processes are very similar to those we saw in the case of high educational attainment. The relative chances of individuals with a different social background obtaining a low level of education are very unequal. They are more unequal than in the case of those with a high educational attainment. However, compared to the beginning of the 2000s, these otherwise sharp inequalities had become even greater by the second half of the 2010s.

Overall, therefore, the decline in absolute and relative mobility in Hungary that has been indicated by comprehensive mobility surveys can be detected in both the lower and upper segments of society. However, the processes taking place at the two poles have not followed the same dynamics over the past nearly two decades. In the 2000s, educational expansion fuelled immobility in the upper segment of society, but also created mobility channels for those with an unfavourable social background. In contrast, in the 2010s the proportion of the immobile increased among both the high and low educated. In terms of relative mobility, quite similar processes have taken place in the upper and lower segments of society: the already unequal relative mobility chances of those with a different family background became even more unequal during the nearly twenty years under study.

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Appendix

Table A1 Distribution of parents by educational attainment (%)

	2002–2006	2008–2010	2012–2014	2016–2018
Primary education	18	13	10	6
Lower secondary education	24	24	25	18
Upper and post-secondary education	45	47	51	60
Tertiary education	14	15	14	16
Total	100	100	100	100
N	3169	2018	1287	1998

Source: Authors' calculation based on ESS

Table A2 Distribution of respondents by educational attainment (%)

	2002–2006	2008–2010	2012–2014	2016–2018
Primary education	3	2	2	1
Lower secondary education	23	18	16	14
Upper and post-secondary education	59	61	59	60
Tertiary education	16	19	24	25
Total	100	100	100	100
N	3206	2036	2388	2080

Source: Authors' calculation based on ESS

Table A3 Educational level of respondents by educational level of parents (%)

	Primary education	Lower secondary education	Upper and post-secondary education	Tertiary education	Total	N
2002–2006						
Primary education	9	51	36	4	100	553
Lower secondary education	2	30	59	9	100	739
Upper and post-secondary education	0	13	73	14	100	1399

Table A3 (Continued)

	Primary education	**Lower secondary education**	**Upper and post-secondary education**	**Tertiary education**	**Total**	**N**
Tertiary education	0	3	46	51	100	454
Total	2	22	59	16	100	3145
2008–2010						
Primary education	9	46	40	5	100	265
Lower secondary education	2	31	62	6	100	494
Upper and post-secondary education	1	8	72	19	100	955
Tertiary education	0	4	43	53	100	304
Total	2	18	61	19	100	2018
2012–2014						
Primary education	12	55	29	4	100	129
Lower secondary education	1	33	59	7	100	317
Upper and post-secondary education	0	6	70	23	100	659
Tertiary education	0	1	40	59	100	179
Total	1	17	59	22	100	1284
2016–2018						
Primary education	15	59	23	2	100	111
Lower secondary education	2	40	51	6	100	367
Upper and post-secondary education	0	5	74	21	100	1197
Tertiary education	0	2	32	66	100	322
Total	1	14	60	24	100	1997

Source: Authors' calculation based on ESS