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Teréz Laky:

Challenges of EU Accession for the Hungarian Labour Market

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Challenges of EU Accession for the Hungarian Labour Market

The title of my lecture uses the word “challenges”, meaning challenges to adapt the Hungarian labour market to the principal common aim of the EU: to employment growth. Many EU member states face the same challenging task year by year when they define their employment promotion tasks under the National Action Plan. Every country concerned should transform its existing conditions deeply rooted in its history, value-system, economy, legislation, etc. This is not an easy task anywhere, as shown by the assessments of the annual EU reports condemning certain members for having failed to realise their commitments.

Every kind of alteration inevitably generates conflicts of interest by acting against previous conditions, traditions and established values, familiar rules and methods. Consequently, one witnesses promising, but slow development nearly everywhere in Europe.

Hungary, far from the developed countries in many respects, faces a major challenge, although its labour market is not substantially different from those of the EU countries. There are quite marked differences in the respective social regulation systems of the labour markets of the EU memberstates themselves (suffice it to mention Denmark and Spain, for example), and although the Hungarian labour market, too, has its special national features rooted in the social and economic situation of the country, most of these are not significantly different from those exhibited by the EU members. No doubt, as of now, both the typical similarities and differences are more akin to the corresponding features of the less developed countries of the European Union.

In what follows, I will highlight certain aspects of Hungary’s very complex tasks implying the urgent and inevitable alteration of the status quo – in order to meet the accession criteria, but first and foremost in the country’s own interest.

Hungary has produced good results with respect to many requirements of full membership in the EU. In the last ten years of the transformation period, Hungary has changed considerably, and it is integrated more and more closely every year to the European and the global economy. According to the last Economic Survey of the OECD: "Hungary has entered the new millennium with a booming economy and as a front-runner for EU accession."(OECD, 2000)

However, the results aren't so prominent in the case of employment policy.

The objective of employment policy is to set goals and to establish the conditions for meeting these by interfering in the spontaneous processes of the economy and of society. In the last decade, the Hungarian employment policy mostly let the spontaneous developments assert themselves; and if it did interfere, instead of a realistic survey of the situation ever, its decisions were often based on hypotheses and the adoption of policies and theories applied with success elsewhere. Of course, it was not easy to adjust to the new turns of the ever-changing situation: the appearance of massive unemployment in the wake of the collapse of the economy, the shrinking of the number of the employed and the rise of that of the inactive. Anyway, the regulation of the system of unemployment provision, for example, was characterised by a drifting kind of development, marked by the steady contraction of the circle of those eligible to benefits and of the benefit period and amount.¹

In terms of labour market status, the members of the active-age population ever fall into one of three major categories: the employed, the unemployed or the economically inactive. Obviously, the size of each group is co-determined by that of the other two.

¹ The latest regulations, for example, having taken effect in 2000, started out from the assumption that Hungary suffered from a shortage of labour: only those did not work who did not want to. True, there were some signs of labour shortage especially in the larger towns, in the most developed parts of the country, but definitely not everywhere. A major part of the country was characterised by job shortage, expulsion from the labour market and little opportunity to enter or re-enter it. The group of the inactive, not to be identified with that of the unemployed, as we shall see later on, is actually more numerous than that of the unemployed.

In order to present the Hungarian labour market situation, I will describe the characteristic features of the three groups concerned - the employed, the unemployed, and the group of the economically inactive – one by one.

I use mostly the LFS data for international comparison, available in Hungary since 1992, and measured by the Hungarian Statistical Office in accordance with the methodology recommended by the ILO. However, as many other countries, Hungary uses other systems of data-collection based on its national legislation, different in many respects.

One of the important difference is the Hungarian definition of *working-age and consequently of retirement age* .

In Hungary, the general and compulsory pension system was established after World War II, and the limits of working age were set at 15 and 59 years for men and 15 and 54 years for women.

The limits concerned prevailed until the middle of the nineties. Subsequently, the upper limit has been raised gradually. Nowadays, the age limit is 57 years for women, and 61 for men, and the target is 62 years for both sexes.

Today, members of large age-groups leave the labour market three years earlier in the case of men and six years earlier in the case of women than their peers in the most EU countries.

The relevant international comparisons, however, ignore this difference, although it determines the size the groups of both the employed, and the inactive.

In the interest first and foremost of the population concerned – and not, primarily, of Hungary's prospective accession to the European Union - it would be important to extend the working age limit at least to the level of the majority of EU countries, namely to 64 years of age.

This, however, would be a very delicate social-political decision. Governments are usually not so eager to dealing with such unpopular issues. (One of the political parties has been fighting for years to decrease pension age.)

Society has got accustomed to the decades-long situation when persons reaching retirement age automatically retired. In the seventies and the eighties, the majority,

especially those living in the countryside, welcomed this opportunity, allowing them to work in their household economies while being on old-age pension.

In the last ten years, on the other hand, retirement meant a kind of escape from the hopeless labour market, from unemployment, mostly with a modest, but still guaranteed and regular income.

In case of dismissals, employers laid off people near retirement age in the first place. This was common practice all over Europe, having enjoyed the support of the respective governments for a long time.

In Hungary, there is a serious argument against the extension of working age – namely the relatively low life-expectancy, especially in the case of men.

Until the middle of the last century, the sixties essentially, the gap in terms of life expectancy used to be narrower compared to the Western European countries than it is nowadays. On the average, Hungarian men live 9 years less than do Dutch men, for example.²

The upward extension of working-age is one of the challenges faced by the Hungarian economy, and one that will not be easy to cope with. According to the definitions of the Hungarian legislation, the working-age population of the country is 6.2 million; according to the international system, it is 600 thousand more, that is, 6.8 million altogether. Independent of the different calculation systems, however, the Hungarian labour market situation is rather poor.

The employment rate is low (56.6% in 2001, by the LFS data); the unemployment rate is moderate (5.7%), and nearly 40% (35.6% according to the Hungarian system) the working age population is economically inactive.

² According to the calculations of a Dutch/Hungarian comparative demographic survey, at the turn of the 20th century, the expected average life expectancy of the Dutch was 10-11 years higher for both sexes than of the Hungarians (Dutch: men 46.6 years, women 49.5 years). By 1960, the difference reduced to 4 years for both sexes (men: Dutch 71.0, Hungarian 67.5 years, - women: Dutch 76.5, Hungarian 72.5 years). Subsequently, however, the mortality rate of Hungarian men started to deteriorate, and the backlog relative to the corresponding Dutch figures increased to 9 years.

(Hablicsek, 2000)

That is, only a bit more than the half of the working age population is employed. This rate is one of the weakest in Europe. As it is well-known, in the so called socialist era, more than 70% of the working age population was employed, and among the retired persons, 4-500 thousand people had a job. Various parts of the economy suffered from labour shortage for decades. Manpower was cheap, the demand of state-owned firms and of the co-operatives was limitless, because the planned supply and demand existed independently of reality.

Full employment disappeared in the early nineties, and with the collapse of the whole COMECON, 1.5 million jobs, a quarter of the earlier stock, also disappeared.

Memories of the not-so-far past being alive still, no wonder many people remember that time as the “golden ages”.³

Job losses continued for seven years, until 1997. 1998 was the first year when the number of new jobs exceeded that of the lost ones.

Employment

Since 1998, the balance on losses and gains has been positive, in a very modest way, thanks mostly to the investment of international capital.

Between 1998 and 2000, some 200 thousand new jobs were created. Except for a few percentages, most jobs are full-time ones, as so far in Hungary has no incentives for such flexible forms of employment as part-time work, for example, to promote the employment of those with lower qualifications and of the older generations.

LFS data for 2001. indicate the growth of the number of the employed by 0.2%, from 3,849.1 thousand to 3,859.5 thousand, but the calculated growth is smaller than the statistical error margin of the sample (error: ± 36 thousand).

In the course of the international slowdown, Hungary was involved to a relatively small extent, so that the level of employment at least remained unchanged.

One of the typical features of the Hungarian employment situation is the predominance of persons of prime working age – this was so in 2000, too.

³ Such memories no doubt play an important part in sympathy for the Socialist party, associated most closely with the old value of employment security, and hence in the outcome of the approaching elections, too.

Table 1.**Age and gender distribution of the employed, 2000**

‘000

Age-group	No. of persons	<u>Of which: employed</u>	
		No	%
15-19			
men	325,1	31,7	9,8
women	311,4	24,9	8,0
all	636,5	56,6	8,9
20-24			
men	439,9	264,2	60,1
women	419,8	192,2	45,8
all	859,7	456,4	53,1
25-29			
men	381,3	314,9	82,6
women	364,1	204,0	56,2
all	754,4	519,5	69,7
30-39			
men	640,0	538,5	84,1
women	629,0	418,9	66,6
all	1,269,0	957,4	75,4
40-54			
men	1,065,0	799,5	75,1
women	1,130,8	796,9	70,5
all	2,295,8	1,596,4	72,7
55-64			
men	481,6	160,0	33,2
women	596,4	79,4	13,2
all	1,080,0	238,4	22,1
15-64			
men	3,332,9	2,108,8	63,3
women	3,451,5	1,716,9	49,7
all	6,784,4	3,825,7	56,4
65-74			
men	355,6	13,6	3,8
women	545,9	9,8	1,8
all	901,5	23,4	2,6

Source: LFS, Time series 1992-2000, CSO 2001

Among men, the share of those of prime working age attained 80%.

This seems as a good rate, but according to the relevant statistics, none of the EU member countries produced such a low one: the rate was lowest in Italy, at nearly 85 %, and the highest ones (those of Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal) exceeded 90%.

However, the preponderance of those in their best working age among the employed is not a Hungarian curiosity: many EU member states produce similar results.

Hence, in spite of the common task, Hungary needs special efforts to find solution for the employment of many members of the older generations.

The prospects are not very promising.

The decisive part of the jobs (nearly 60%) is in the services now (the corresponding rates are 33.8% for the industry and 6.5 % in agriculture). As everywhere, great hope is connected to the development of the services in Hungary, too. (It is worth noting, however, that although most jobs were lost in agriculture and in the industry in the nineties, the services still have less job to date than in the late eighties.) According to the main trends of the developed countries, which Hungary follows with a certain backlog, as far as the distribution of employment by broad sectors

is considered, employment will keep declining in agriculture, stagnating in the industry and hopefully grow in the services sector.

However, Hungary will need a long time to attain the level of the developed countries in this respect: as is well known, the development of the services is concurrent with welfare, with the improvement of the conditions of living.

Unemployment

The 6.4% unemployment rate produced by Hungary in 2000 - as opposed to the 8.2 % average of the EU - would put the country among the eight highest-ranking EU countries, between the United Kingdom (7th) and Sweden(8th).

As many EU countries, Hungary, too, has her own definition of unemployment. However, the ILO - recommended measurement (active job seekers) and the Hungarian regulations (registered ones) give nearly similar numerical results if the so-called passive

jobless persons are assigned to the group of the unemployed.⁴⁴ According to both the ILO definitions and the Hungarian ones, the number and consequently the rate, too, of the unemployed has been decreasing steadily since to the 1993 peak.

At the end of 2000, the LFS-based unemployment rate was 6.4%, and the one based on the national legislation was 9.3 %. LFS data suggest the persistence of the declining trend in 2001, to 5.7 %.

No wonder, the government likes to quote the first (LFS) figures to the media, as a sign of success, independent of the state of the entire labour market.

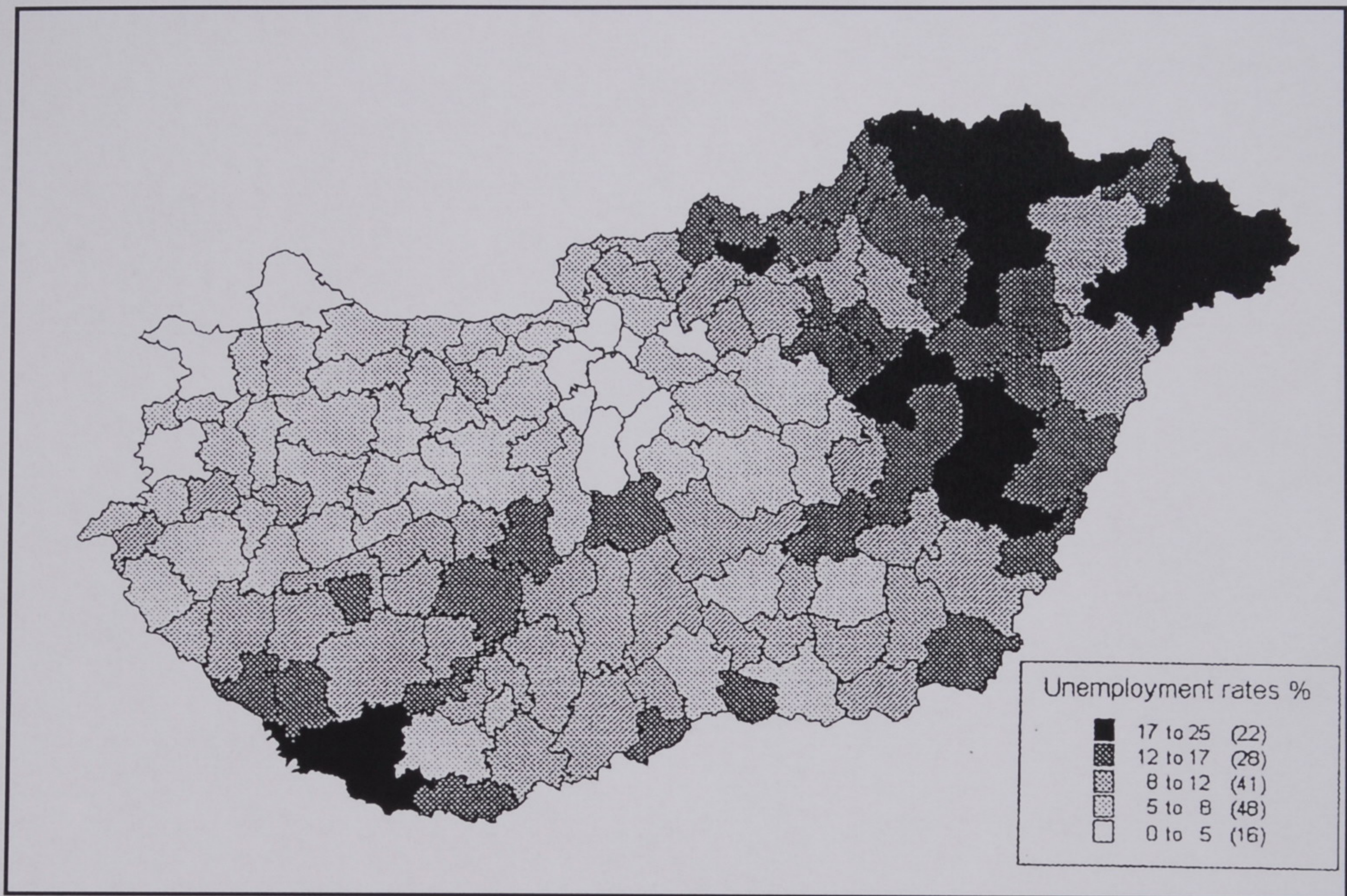
Beside many similarities with the unemployment situation of the EU, Hungary has certain special features connected with the basic rules of the registration system. Some 70-80% of the registered unemployed are re-entrants, testifying to the insufficiency of active employment programs, although Hungary adopted nearly every promising one.

It is time to re-examine these and to look for some that are better suited to the nature of Hungarian unemployment.

Suffice it to mention here the growth of unemployment in the small regions.

⁴⁴ The 'jobless' and the 'unemployed' are distinguished by definitions for specific purposes only. Cf. e.g. Stiele, (1998).

**Development of the unemployment rate in the small regions
(March 2001)**



Source: K. Fazekas, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Economy

There are, especially in the less developed parts of the country, small and nearly closed villages, without proper transportation, (Köllő, 1995.) where unemployment has been growing despite its generally decreasing tendency. Big group of the Romas live in such regions, too. The inhabitants of such regions can only find temporary jobs or not even that. The situation is special and demands special programs, because – as in most countries of Europe -- unemployment there is a permanent phenomenon. Around half of the unemployed population belongs to the category of the long-term unemployed. There are many explanations for their stubbornly high rate, from low education to improper qualifications, etc.

One reason that can be excluded without second thought is the excessive generosity of the unemployment provision system.

In Hungary, assistance to the jobless has never been over-generous. Experts have criticised the relevant Hungarian practice for years (see e.g. Nagy Gy.-Micklewright, 1995, Galasi 1995, Kertesi-Köllő 1999, Micklewright-Gy.Nagy 1998, 1999, Gy. Nagy 2000, M.Frey, 2001, etc.) .

The foundations of the current unemployment benefit system were laid down by the Employment Act of 1991. In the meantime, all of the eligibility criteria have been tightened and the amount of the benefits was reduced several times.

In the last few years, only about 30% of the registered unemployed were eligible to benefits of an average amount of less than one third of the average earnings of employees. In 1993, with the appearance of unemployed people whose eligibility to unemployment benefits had been exhausted, the Social Act introduced a new form of aid, the income supplement, to those who were unable to find a job, even with the help of the employment service. Until last year, more people received such regular aid than unemployment benefits. The amount of the income supplement was less than half of the average unemployment benefits. It was common practice that thousands of unemployed people left the register once they were no longer entitled to benefits or to income supplement.

Those only remained registered who needed the assistance of the employment service for job search or employment with subsidy under one of the supported forms such as public work for example.

The majority of those having left the register without a job offer became passive unemployed, or dependent of their families, or tried to look for a job in the undeclared economy.

Consequently, the rate of the registered unemployed dropped significantly year by year. This, in turn, served as a pretext for tightening the rules applying to unemployment beneficiaries, for the introduction of stricter terms of eligibility and the reduction of the amount of the benefits with only one exception: participants of training courses could preserve their eligibility for a year more.

The income support was cancelled totally. People needing help can get social aid, on a very low level, and the local governments have to offer them at least one month of

(mostly) communal work. Acceptance is a kind of test: those who refuse the offer are excluded from the social aid scheme.

We do not know the effects of the new rules exactly yet. The first research findings suggested that the restriction of eligibility to the allowances concerned was not concurrent with the improvement of the employment opportunities. (Munkaerőpiaci tükör, 2001).

Although the number of the unemployed continued to decrease, the employment rate did not grow significantly. It is necessary to know that according to the data of the LFS, from 1993 to 2000, the number of the unemployed decreased by 250 thousand, but the employment level grew by less than 60 thousand. Until 2001, nearly 200 thousand people disappeared from the labour market, becoming mostly economically inactive. There is the reason why we speak about inactivity separately.

The economically inactive

The rate of inactivity seems to be a special and important problem in the East European countries, Hungary included.

Let me note in advance that both the unemployment regulations, and the labour service assistance – including many of the existing active programs – are in need of significant changes. For example, the current registration rules should be replaced by the relevant recommendations of the ILO; the labour service should transform into an employment agency, etc.

This is a major task requiring the whole-hearted participation of the social partners, not just their typical indifference to employment policy matters.

Returning to the third group of the working-age population, namely the inactive, it is of a remarkable size, corresponding to around 40% of the population concerned: 2.2 million people qualify as inactive. By definition, the economically inactive are members of the working-age adult population staying away, voluntary or involuntary, from the labour market, that is, they are neither employed, nor unemployed. In Hungary, the high rate of absence from the labour market is partly due to low retirement age. (And, as we

experienced, it is typical in most European countries, too, that masses of the employed leave the labour market when they reach retirement age and become pensioners/inactive.) In the European Union, this population, representing 31 % of the total population on average, is the great reserve pool of the targeted 70% employment rate. Beside the active job seekers, they are the most likely candidates for employment.

In Hungary, as elsewhere in Europe, the population of those staying away from the labour market includes several groups in different life situations.

In the case of the majority, temporary or permanent inactivity is due to some rather obvious, socially accepted and supported reason.

More than three-quarter of the inactive population belongs to three main groups, i.e. they are students, remaining in education after the age of 15; or parents – mainly women – on parental leave; or persons having retired at working age, partly due to disability or accident, partly due to employment policy reasons.

Table 2.

Composition of the working-age economically inactive population, 2000

	Total		Women	
	'000	%	'000	%
Economically inactive•	2,216,5		1,260,7	
% rate to the working-age population of which	35,4	100	41,3	100
student	710,2	32,0	357,7	28,4
On parental leave	283,7	12,8	279,6	22,2
pensioner	714,1	32,2	329,5	26,1
Inactive for other reason	508,5	23,0	293,9	23,3

- According to the Hungarian rules.

Source: *LFS, Time-series, 1992-2000, CSO, 2001*

However, nearly a quarter of inactive persons of working age - more than half a million people – had no obvious reason similar to the above to withdraw from the labour market.

Absence from the labour market for no specific, socially justifiable reason is a natural phenomenon in every society. In Hungary, even at the time of the highest rate of

employment, there were always two or three hundred thousand men and women who would or could not engage in work due to their personal circumstances (sick relatives, remote workplace, lack of qualification, well-earning spouse, etc.) Those, without no regular (visible) income are present in every age-group now. They are - presumably - dependent of their family, and at the same time, or they earn in the unorganised economy, working occasionally mostly for other households, small farms, small enterprises.

Hidden unemployment is pointed out by the high rate of those who would like to work, but do not look for a job actively, considering job search a hopeless effort.

Table 3.

Inactive persons waiting for work opportunity, 2000

Would like to work, but	Men	Women '000	Total %	Rate to the inactive aged 15-64
is discouraged from active job search (passive unemployed)	64,0	42,9	106,9	4,0
- did not look for a job	204,4	240,0	444,8	16,5
- did not look for a job actively was not available	3,6	5,1	87,	0,3
Total	272,0	288,4	560,4	20,8

Source: *LFS, Time-series 1992-2000*, CSO, 2001

All in all, 20 % of the inactive people would like to work, whatever the reason for their inactivity.

Hidden employment is suggested by the high rate of persons of prime working age among the inactive.

Table 4.

**Age-group distribution of those absent from the labour market
for no known reason, 2000**

Age-group	Inactive		Of which: without known reason					
	'000	%	'000	In % of the inactive	Men '000	%	Women '000	%
15-19	562,3	88,3	66,0	11,7	34,7	12,3	31,3	11,2
20-24	350,2	40,7	81,0	23,1	43,5	30,7	37,5	18,0
25-29	185,1	24,8	56,6	30,6	25,7	63,0	30,9	21,4
30-34	141,0	21,2	55,3	39,2	20,7	66,8	34,6	31,5
35-39	110,8	18,4	55,4	50,0	19,9	57,6	35,5	46,9
40-44	131,7	18,1	61,9	47,0	21,7	40,4	40,2	51,5
45-49	176,7	22,1	59,9	33,9	21,0	27,3	38,9	39,0
50-54	207,8	31,0	49,4	23,8	14,9	17,2	34,5	28,5
55-59+	275,9	58,6	21,9	7,9	11,3	8,6	10,6	7,3
60-61	75,0	83,3	1,2	1,6	1,2	1,6	-	-
Total	2,216,5	35,4	508,6	22,9	214,6	22,5	294,0	19,0

+ 55-57 years for women

Source: *LFS, Time-series, 1992-2000, CSO, 2001*

Men and women in their best ages presumably work somewhere, when and where they can find a gainful employment of some sort, mostly of a temporary nature. Such work, however, frequently remains unregistered, and the employment is subject to the agreement between the employer and employee governed by social consensus applicable in the given area and social stratum instead of wage agreements. At this point we have reached one of the most important features of the Hungarian labour market. The demarcation line between the legal, declared, consequently tax-paying activities and the non-tax paying ones is not easy to identify anywhere, especially in the case of paid work of a few hours or so. It is common experience that, in the well-to-do countries where the weight of agriculture is small and the economy is well-organised and social protection is strong, relatively few chose the unorganised form of work.

Hungary belongs to the less well-to-do countries. According to the figures of the World Bank released for 2000, in Hungary, the per capita GDP was USD4,740, as opposed to USD20-25 thousand in the leading countries of the EU. Although the difference is

World Bank experts (Riboud, Sánchez-Paramo, Silva-Jáuregui, 2001) analysing the labour market situation of the East and Central European countries demonstrated that, within the region, Hungary has one of the highest labour-cost taxation rates: the payroll tax rate exceeds 40% (in many European countries, it is around 20%, but in Norway, Japan, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Canada it is even lower than that, and it is actually less than 10% in Ireland, Australia, Denmark and New Zealand), and the total tax rate is actually the highest among the countries taken into account, at more than 80 %.

Currently, the high cost of labour is probably the main reason of hidden employment. The social provision system, although trying to support those in need in many ways, punishes employment in the sense that even the lowest labour income is subject to taxation and even the most modest (declared) amount reduces the social allowances.

labour temporarily only, and mostly on a part-time basis at least.

ten staff – actually 1-3 mostly. Similarly to the households, most of them need extra registered business entities, but 96-97 % among them are micro enterprises with less than activity performed in the organised economy. The country has around one million household dependents etc., considering as “employment” regular, full-time earning concerned do not regard themselves as employed – officially, they are pensioners, assign a significant part of those among them to the category of the employed, those hours a day for this purpose (CSO,2001). Although the definition of the ILO would third of those on child-care leave and also around half of the unemployed worked 2.5-3 subsistence mainly, and two-third of pensioners living in small villages, more than one thousand households were involved in agricultural activities for the purpose of especially to the inactive. According to the chronological survey of 1999-2000, some 392 To date, in Hungary, agriculture still provides a considerable income supplement

three decades.

Hungary will need a few decades to catch up with the best – the Hungarian prognosis is somewhat smaller calculated at purchasing power parity, obviously, even the less developed EU members are better off than Hungary. According to the relevant calculations,

The European Union advised all the member states years ago to cut labour costs, the main barrier to employment, drastically. The advice proved to be completely ineffective till now: the costs of labour have been growing in nearly every EU country. The question of the ideal aims and role of the modern Western European state is too deep to deal with here, but it will be one of the main issues of the future. States need a growing income - and Hungary is no exception.

However, in the opinion of the experts, the growth of the employment level is inconceivable without the cutting of labour costs.

Moreover, whatever the results of the new labour market programs, tax-relief may be a more effective method to boost employment. Especially in the case of certain groups of society, i.e. people living on social aid, on small pension, the Romas, etc., to be protected from poverty by such work opportunities.

Maybe the accession to EU -- and the challenges of the EU expectations- will force Hungary to adapt its employment policy to the requirements of employment expansion. Efforts to meet the EU expectations --as I have emphasised already -- are principally in the interest of Hungary itself.

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