

**TRANSFORMING LABOR RELATIONS AT THE
HUNGARIAN POST**

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Abstract

From the 1990s national postal companies have gone through gradual transformations, as the demand for their traditional functions has declined and the future of posts as we knew them got questioned. The Hungarian Post tries to adjust itself to the changing environment as well by diversifying products and restructuring the operation of the company in alignment with market logic. In my thesis I showed how this process is experienced by mail carriers, whose occupation has radically changed along with the transformation of the postal sector. Based on interviews with the workers, I identified the main tensions in the transformation of the Post, during which process public sector functions clash with marketization. Analysing the labor regime of the company, I found that the burdens of this contradictory process are to a large extent pushed to the workers by the management, which tries to squeeze out more and more from them in the name of efficiency. While in the 1990s mail carrying was a secure, well-paid, autonomous, prestigious and not too demanding job, these characteristics have been eroded. Analysing mail carriers' relationships with the clients, I argue that mail carriers' social networks with clients and informal activities provides unexpected emotional rewards and non-alienated work practices contributing to the labor regime of their formal work. The degradation of the occupation is entangled with the erosion of this informal realm.

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Introduction

“The need for postal services has existed for thousands of years and has continually changed, sometimes from one moment to the next.(...) Customer needs are changing and the content of service alters in response.” (CEO of the Hungarian Post in the 2017 Annual Report)

“I think the Post doesn’t have a future. But they are not willing to acknowledge this, because they think it’s still possible to squeeze out more from us.” (Mail carrier working at the Post from the 1980s)

At the Hungarian Post the question of past and future is constantly on the table. One of the oldest companies of the country, it faces radical changes in the need for its services, and its own workers question whether it will survive. Whereas the senior management’s external communication is imbued with optimism and faith in the modernization, the question is still there: what will be the function of the Post in the future? From the 1990s with the spread of telecommunication and banking, we can see a decline in demand for traditional postal services in developed countries, such as the delivery of letter mail, invoices and allowances (e.g., pensions and state benefits) (Pimenta and Amaral 2011). National posts have three typical reactions to the challenges. First, many posts have been partly or fully privatized or outsourced tasks to private actors. Second, most postal markets have been gradually liberalized, eroding the monopoly of national posts (Tochkov 2015). Third, posts diversified their profile to decrease their dependence on traditional services (Pimenta and Amaral 2011), and restructured their organization to increase efficiency. At the same time, in

the 2000s e-commerce emerged and it shows continuous growth generating new demand for postal services (Ansón and Toledano 2011). The Hungarian Post also tries to “modernize” itself on the one hand, and to fulfil its legal tasks as a universal service provider on the other, thus ensuring delivery to every address in the country for a reasonable price¹. As an EU country, Hungary is the member of the common, liberalized European postal market.

As we can see from the quotes above, the way the Post manages the adjustment process is far less smooth from the perspective of the workers than the way the leadership depicts it. Mail carriers face several hardships stemming from the tensions and contradictions of the public company meeting the market. I focus on a job that is going through radical changes, affecting not only the workers, but also people with whom they are in daily interaction with. In my thesis I will explore these changes from the 1990s until now. My research aims to respond to the following questions: How did the work of mail carriers changed along with the postal transformations? Within this research question, I have the following subquestions: How do mail carriers experience frictions of marketization at the Post? How have been labor relations at the Post transformed? What are the social and personal losses in the adjustment process?

My research aims to unfold the management and experience of continuous change in capitalism. The forces transforming the life of workers are partly management strategies on different levels of the Post or politics on state- or EU-level. Another part is technological change, the spread of telecommunication and banking. Both contribute to the experience expressed in many interviews about the continuous adjustment that is expected from people and the losses created on the way. I argue that this experience is often obscured and delegitimized by the dominant discourse of efficiency, development and modernization.

¹ Act no. CLIX of 2012 on postal services.
http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=A1200159.TV

This research also contributes to understanding how labor's vulnerability is created and managed in the post-socialist region. Similarly to other countries in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE), the Hungarian state and state-owned companies are the employers of the majority of the population (Jandó 2020). I aim to explore the specific dynamics of the Hungarian Post, which are not generalizable to other large state companies. However, my analysis shows the complexity of labor relations formed by the interaction of the state as an employer and the market, which might be relevant for other cases as well.

My interest for the Post was sparked by witnessing two close friends working as mail carriers. Seeing their struggle with the extreme workload and constant overtime on the one hand, and seeing them love their job on the other, was one of the caveats that grasped my attention. I also became curious of what people usually mean by saying that “the Post just doesn't work”². My fieldwork was based on the analysis of interviews with eighteen mail carriers from three post offices in Budapest and with one white-collar worker. Twelve of my interviewees were male, six of them were female. I wanted to make interviews with managers as well, but this would require a permission from the company allowing them to have influence on the content of my research, which I wanted to avoid. Thus, I made the research without the consent of the management.

Knowing about cases in which the Hungarian Post fired workers after organizing a strike or took legal actions due to critical articles, the security of my informants is of extreme importance. In order to protect them I do not provide information about their gender, age and I share any other biographical detail only exceptionally, when it is essential for the interpretation. I use “they” pronoun and avoid using pseudo-names which would make quotes from the same person connectable. Similarly, I share very little information about the given

² The website called *Fosta* is a good illustration of this. *Fosta* is a Hungarian pun, made from the merge of the words “shit” (*fos'*) and “post” (*posta'*). It was created by an “angry client” to collect people's complaints about the Post. Unfortunately, it is not available anymore. More about it: <https://444.hu/2019/12/03/egy-kiborult-programozo-ugy-dontott-felveszi-a-harcot-a-magyar-postaval-ebbol-lett-a-fosta>. Accessed: 2020.05.20.

areas and post offices. More specific data about the field would add to the value of the analysis but would decrease the strength of anonymity. I decided to do so despite the several possible differences between certain post offices and their labor politics. My results are applicable only to Budapest and the post offices involved. The analysis, however, aims to connect the experience of my informants to macro-processes affecting the Post as a whole.

I started my research in 2019, during a country-wide labor shortage, and finished in 2020, during a new wave of unemployment. Labor shortage from 2015 hit the Post hard leading to a lot of unfilled positions, high fluctuation and increasing workload on mail carriers. It strengthened the bargaining power of many workers, as keeping the existing labor force became the main priority for the management. This created a new situation, interrupting some processes of the previous period. However, I believe, this context did not reverse the long-term tendencies I analyse from the 1990s until now. Nevertheless, I will reflect on the specificities of the years between 2015 and 2020.

My research has many limitations, some of which I want to highlight. First, it focuses on mail carriers and their perspective. As I did not make interviews either with superiors, or with residents³ (clients), their perspective is absent from the analysis. As for the latter, mail carrier's relationship with the residents is often an asymmetrical power relation, in which abuse of authority or forms of discrimination can emerge. Although I have an impression about these dynamics, I do not have enough material for analyzing them. Due to my personal connection to the topic through my friends I am more close to the perspective of mail carriers, than to that of other actors. My results are relevant for understanding the experience of mail carriers, while many aspects of the complex matrix of the field are waiting for further investigation.

³ I borrow this term from mail carriers who call their clients residents ('*lakók*'). Alternatives (e.g., client, citizen) may hold slightly different, more formal meanings, therefore I keep the wording of my interviewees.

The second important limitation is that I do not have the space for including gender relations of the Post. Based on my observation, this dimension would be highly relevant to study⁴. However, I decided to prioritize those topics that most actively occupy the experience and narration of my informants and are considered most important by them. During the analysis of the interviews, I constantly reflected on possible gender-based issues, to avoid misinterpretations or to prevent missing something essential.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. In the first chapter I present the notions of labor regime and embedded informality, the two key analytical tools of the thesis. In Chapter 2 I introduce the Hungarian Post and its adjustment to the transformation of the postal sector. I describe the labor process and working conditions of mail carriers and how is it linked to the Hungarian labor market and global trends. Chapter 3 is about the main changes in the frameworks of work and labor regime at the company, focusing on regulations, the system of routes and sales tasks of mail carriers. Then, in Chapter 4, I introduce the concept of Outside as the realm of work which is regulated by mail carriers' autonomy and their negotiations with the residents. This chapter shows how the Outside initially complemented the labor regime of the Post but also provided a unutilized space into which the employer intruded only later.

⁴ For example, considering the macho subculture of mail carriers, as well as the emotional/care work aspects of mail carrying, which is rarely discussed in the case of such male-dominated occupations. Further, we can see the feminization of postal work, that would itself deserve a separate study.

1 Chapter 1: Inside and outside the politics of public production

1.1 Labor regime

I analyse the transformation of the job of mail carriers along two main, interconnected dimensions: the labor regime of the Post, as well as workers' networks which are related to their work but are outside of the organization. In this section I will present Michael Burawoy's key concepts which will help me analyze the case of mail carriers. The notion of labor regime has been popularized in sociology by Burawoy's insight that "the process of production contains political and ideological elements as well as a purely economic moment" (Burawoy 1983, 587). Labor regime is an analytical tool to understand the dynamics of a certain workplace and the relations between workers and the employer, including both struggle and cooperation. One of Burawoy's important contributions was showing the way *labor power* is translated into actual *labor*, production of both wages and profit (ibid., 588), and the way it is shaped by forces both internal and external to the workplace. Labor relations and their regulation, or the *politics of production* is formed by the state, the market and the labor process and their interactions (Burawoy 1983); moreover, all of them are entangled with various social processes (Burawoy 2015). In the next chapter I will sketch the broad environment of the Post, meaning the labor history and labor politics of the state in Hungary after the transition. Furthermore, I will describe the Post as an organization and the labor process of mail carriers. The limits of the research does not allow me to give an overarching picture of the labor regime. Therefore I will focus on those aspects that grasp the nature of the transition the best.

Burawoy's most famous concepts, *consent* and *coercion* (Burawoy 1985) refer to the two main modes of managing labor relations, thus two ideal types of labor regimes. The contradiction between capital and labor takes different forms in different historical periods and productive modes (Burawoy 2015), thus employers aim to extract the biggest effort from labor accordingly. Both consent and coercion are always present and intertwined (ibid.), but the management relies more on coercive tools when punishment and discipline are the most effective in the given case. When the labor force is less dependent on the specific workplace or consent works better considering the context, employers rely more on persuading workers to cooperate and making them interested in increasing productivity. The relative proportion of coercion or consent makes a labor regime despotic or hegemonic (Burawoy 1983).

This framework can be easily misinterpreted as a theory of unidirectional transitions from one ideal type to another, by-passing the interruptions, complications and uncertainties of changing labor relations (Li 2019). This is especially relevant regarding the ambivalent process of postal transformations. Taking this into consideration also helps us avoid rendering the employer or the state as an omnipotent actor masterminding the workplace. Keeping this in mind, I focus on the experience of change in the proportion of consent and coercion, rather than creating a new subcategory of labor regimes.

The Post as a public service provider has to be distinguished from private companies. Using Paul Johnston's conceptualization I consider the public sector as a distinct "productive mode" with its own logic of value accumulation. He argues that while in the private sector exchange value dominates use value, public work primarily creates *social use value*, based on the definition of usefulness according to the holders of state power (Johnston 1980). Public sector is interconnected with private production, as public companies often imitate private sector practices, and capitalist development affects the position of public workers too (Johnston 1988). "Only when such an inheritance conflicts directly with the public sector

context will this transplanted characteristic come into question” (ibid., 63). In the marketization of the Post we can see the conflict between use value – universal services – and exchange value – new, competitive services. Furthermore, I will show that the labor struggles are rooted precisely in the clash between imitation of private sector practices and the public sector context.

Another useful concept is the management strategy of *responsible autonomy* (Burawoy 1983; Sallaz 2015). Without direct supervision, workers have control over the labor process, but they are also responsible for its results, e.g. meeting daily quotas. As we will see in the next chapter, the labor process of mail carriers makes supervision difficult, however, they have several incentives to make effort. The way responsibility is created and managed by the employer is not constant, it is changing together with the changing labor regime. In Chapter 3 and 4 I will show what forces form responsible autonomy in this case and how the emphasis from autonomy shifts to responsibility.

Jeffrey J. Sallaz (2015) contributed to the notion of responsible autonomy by pointing at the process of *normative outsourcing*. Labor regimes often rely on normative systems operating outside of the workplace independently from the employer, such as the “order of everyday talk” or masculine honor (Sallaz 2015, 29-30). The strategy of responsible autonomy is thus underpinned by a normative order, which regulate or motivate workers without the employer’s active contribution either with punishment or positive incentives. Normative outsourcing is a useful concept for me, as it highlights a passive employer, who does not always actively manages the workforce, rather, relies on external mechanisms. I argue that the labor regime of the Post is to a large extent helped by the realm constituted by the networks of mail carriers in their area. Tipping residents “subsidise” the low wages at the Post, moreover, there is also appreciation and personal responsibility created outside that motivate workers or make them stay at the Post even if they consider leaving because of the

exploitation by the employer. However, I modify Sallaz's idea by emphasizing the autonomy of the external normative system more. In Chapter 4 I will present the realm that underpins the labor regime from many aspects, but it also has an autonomous logic. Following the wording of my interviewees, I will call it the "Outside". The next section frames this realm through the concept of embedded informality.

1.2 Embedded informality

Mail carriers' social networks and activities in the area they work in what I call the Outside, is a realm with its own logic. It does not coincide with market logic (e.g., service worker-client (Grandey 2000) nor bureaucratic logic (state official-citizen), although it is in an interplay with both. In Chapter 4 the dynamics of the Outside will be discussed in detail. In the following I will present the notion of *embedded informality* (Rekhviashvili 2015), arguing that it describes well this segment of mail carriers' work and their experience. Nevertheless, I do not focus on contrasting formal and informal activities in general. Informality is present everywhere and what is worth to study is its diverse forms and various connections to formality (Böröcz 2000). I show how a specific set of informal relations and work activities play out and interact with the labor regime of the Post.

I conceptualize embedded informality building on Lela Rekhviashvili's application of a Polanyian framework on the post-socialist context. As Rekhviashvili stresses, embeddedness is best understood in contrast to the dis-embedding tendency of market economy (2015, 51). Polányi used the notion of embeddedness for interpreting the relationship of society and markets through history.⁵ (Polanyi 1957). According to Rekhviashvili, Polányi's notion of embeddedness grasps the non-commodified nature of the

⁵ Although the countermovement is an important part of Polányi's theory, my research does not place a huge emphasis on this aspect. I focus on the clash of embeddedness and market logic and other frictions of marketization. My empirical material led me to explore the "costs" and experience of this process, not to questions of resistance or social protection.

informal economic practices she analyzes (Rekhviashvili 2015). She emphasizes the multiplicity of motivations behind and functions of certain informal economic practices that are often “important for non-economic reasons, primarily for providing continuity for culturally specific ways of social integration, for asserting pre-existing (versus instrumental) social bonds and mutuality” (ibid., 19-20). These practices are regulated not by the supply-demand principle, but “by informal (social and cultural) institutions (norms, rules, values)” (ibid., 58). As I will show in Chapter 4, mail carriers’ informal work practices outside of the Post are embedded in this sense, since they are driven not by market-logic, but by personal ties, trust, continuity of social networks, and reciprocity⁶. The way favors, tips, gifts, informal loans are entangled with intimacy, prestige and other non-market features provides the autonomous, embedded logic of the Outside realm.

Rekhviashvili (2017) argues that the Polanyian framework of embeddedness and dis-embedding is especially useful for analysing marketization in post-socialist societies in many ways. First, it provides an alternative to the reductionist view of informality, which identifies it with shadiness, corruption or underdevelopment, leading to the “othering” of socialist and post-socialist societies (Thelen 2011). The rigid formal-informal distinction can imply a West-East hierarchization, based on a modernization teleology (Morris and Polese 2014, 6). Second, the Polanyian approach “emphasises tangible and specific social and economic costs of establishing a market economy, by illustrating that deepening marketisation is only possible at the cost of subverting and undermining pre-existing social norms and regulations” (Rekhviashvili 2017, 22). Finally, exploring the contemporary diversity of not market-based economic practices and their meanings “contests the ultimate supremacy of the capitalist economy” (Reviashvili 2015, 49).

⁶ I concentrate on embedded informal practices within the diversity of “outside” activities. I will show in Chapter 4 that embedded informality was more dominant in the 1990s than today, and I will address other outside activities that are more driven by market logic.

I find this approach useful for counterpointing the dominant discourse around the Post, centered around modernization, and the need for increasing efficiency and competitiveness (see e.g., Pandurics 2016; Kiss 2015; Cseres 2019; or any of the Annual Reports of the Post after 2005). Liberalization and subsuming the Post to the market logic is often framed as part of an inevitable, natural development process. For this approach everything Outside other than delivery – personal relationships, sense of community, feeling of stability and belonging, care, financial support, knowledge sharing – is invisible and, thus, not valuable. Although most of my interviewees reflected on the losses of “modernization”, the teleological approach emerges even in their narrations, accompanied by the internalization of the West-East hierarchy in comparisons with “normal” or “more developed” (meaning Western-European) countries (Gagyí 2014). Furthermore, I will analyze how the adjustment to marketization is managed, with “tangible and specific costs” created on the way. The conflict between the embeddedness of the Outside realm and the changing labor regime is one dimension of this. My aim is to make these tensions, the process of dis-embedding and the losses of marketization visible.

It is important to note that I do not consider anything inherent to informality as such. In capitalism informality is often related to vulnerability and precarity, thus we should avoid essentializing or romanticizing it (Rekhviashvili 2015, 51). Many informal practices are present at the Post connected to processes or phenomena which are far from or even antithetical to what I describe with the term of embedded informality. Individual negotiations with the employer, unpaid overwork or involving family members to help in delivery are certainly informal practices coinciding the interest of the employer and underpinning exploitation. However, the case of the Post is an example of how formality (in a highly bureaucratic company) and informality are entangled (Böröcz 2000; Rekhviashvili 2015) or even symbiotic (Morris and Polese 2014).

2 Chapter 2: Weak labor and the Hungarian Post

2.1 Transformation of the postal sector in Hungary

2.1.1 Products

As it was summarized in the Introduction, the transformation of the postal sector⁷ can be described through two main dimensions: changing products and services, and regulatory environment. As for the former, the spread of telecommunication and banking and changing consumer habits decreased the demand for traditional services: letter mail and financial transactions (Pandurics 2016). In Hungary business-type correspondence (business to consumer) dominates the letter segment since the 2000s⁸ with bills and advertisements. It seems that these products counterbalanced the electronic substitution of personal letters, so the letter segment started to fall only after 2013. Since then there is a few percentage drop every year⁹. Parallel with global trends, e-commerce shows a steady growth in Hungary¹⁰. Whereas traditional mail letter declines, the turnover of parcels officially counting as letters (called “amorphous” letters) increases¹¹ and is estimated to double in the next 10 years

⁷ When talking about the postal sector, I use the broad definition, that goes beyond the traditional postal services (delivery of letters, money and packages), and places the postal sector in the cross-section of industries that national posts compete in. According to Pandurics (2016), the most important of these are the financial services market and the CEP (courier, express and parcel) and logistics market.

⁸ See: Annual Reports of Magyar Posta Zrt. https://www.posta.hu/a_magyar_postarol/alapadatok/eves_jelentesek. It is available from 2005. Accessed: 2020.05.20.

⁹ See: Annual Reports of Magyar Posta Zrt. https://www.posta.hu/a_magyar_postarol/alapadatok/eves_jelentesek. Accessed: 2020.05.20.

¹⁰ Domestic e-commerce grew by 27% between 2015 and 2018 (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2019, p9).

¹¹ Between 2017 and 2018, the number of international ordinary letters grew by 18%, registered letters by 58%, and both are mostly in fact amorphous packages or “letter containing goods” (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2019, p16). These products up to 2kg belong to mail carriers, whereas bigger parcels are handled by different group of workers. Mail carriers have to deliver those amorphous letters that fit into the mailbox. What is bigger (but under 2 kg) remain at the Post and the addressee receives only a reminder slip to pick it up.

(Magyar Posta Zrt. 2019). Amorphous letters are called “Chinese” by the workers, as they come to a large extent from China (ibid., 16). Another important trend is the growing proportion of registered and official mails since 2002 (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2006), compounded with the requirement of personal delivery of most registered mails since 2010 (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2011). Money transfer, the other main traditional product is also declining. According to my informants, there is a continuous drop starting around the late 1990s, as new generations of consumers prefer banking to receiving allowances in cash (Meschi et al. 2011).

These trends has three main implications for mail carriers. First, amorphous letters are typically bigger, heavier and/or harder to handle than ordinary mails; second, registered and official mails require much more time to deliver; finally, with the drop in money transfer delivered in cash, tips continuously decrease. In this light, the decline in letter number did not coincide with smaller workload, especially when the management cut the labor force at the same time. According to the Annual Reports of the company, the management promoted registered mails and other “extra services” to senders, giving the products bigger added value and increasing the income of the company to compensate the decline in traditional products. However, this added value is mainly produced by the mail carriers, constituting much bigger workload, while raises of wages did compensate the constant decline of their informal income.

As a reaction to the decline in demand for traditional services, national posts started to diversify their profile and put a bigger emphasis on the newly emergent products (Pimenta and Amaral 2011). Regarding this research, the most important thread of diversification is selling different goods and financial services to clients. As it will be discussed in length in the next chapter, from the mid-2000s the Post started to assign retail tasks for mail carriers, such as selling and promoting games of chances, newspaper subscriptions or insurances.

2.1.2 Regulatory environment

National posts in the EU are universal service providers (USP) and companies in a partly liberalized market at the same time. As opposed to their Western European counterparts, national posts in Central-Eastern Europe have mainly remained in state ownership, but they face harsh competition in the most profitable segments (Tochkov 2015). On the Hungarian postal market the first competitors appeared in the 1990s, mainly on the Courier, Express and Parcel (CEP) market (István 2019). The adjustment to the EU requirements and preparation for the gradual liberalization process also started soon after¹². Since 2013, the Post has a monopoly only over registered mail containing official documents (Cseres 2019). In the delivery of newspapers and printed matter without individual addresses, as well as in the logistics, parcel and express market, we can see an intense competition both nationally and globally (Pandurics 2016, 100). However, Hungarian regulations protect the Post by providing exemption from the 27% VAT and in some cases by the refusal of new actors' entry to the market (Kiss 2015). The Post is the USP until the end of 2020, meaning that it is obliged to provide universal services for an affordable or regulated¹³ price to every citizen (ibid.). It has to maintain a country-wide network to be able to reach every address, which can be highly costly considering the small returns and constant labor costs in villages.

State subsidization is regulated by the state aid rules of the European Commission. There is a 15 M Euro threshold within which each state can support its USP (European Commission n.d.). This year the Hungarian government asked the European Commission to raise the subsidy threshold for the Post, due to the raises between 2017-2019 (MTI n.d.).

¹² The first available Annual Report is from 2005; there are mentions of the adjustment to the European postal sector and regulations since then (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2006). The EU regulates not only the conditions of competition, but also the postal services itself; for instance, between 2007 and 2009 the Post exchanged a huge number of mailboxes to correspond to EU standards (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2010).

¹³ Governmental price regulation applies to letters under 50 grams and official documents.

2.1.3 About the Hungarian Post

2.1.3.1 Ownership and organization

Until 2013 the Post was in 100% state ownership (Székely 2013), now the Hungarian state owns 75%+1 of the shares. The rest belongs to two financial organizations, the Integration Organization of Cooperative Credit Institutions (*Szövetkezeti Hitelintézetek Integrációs Szervezete*) and the MTB Bank of Hungarian Savings Cooperatives Co. Ltd. (*Magyar Takarékszövetkezeti Bank Zrt.*) (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2019). Both are connected to the economic circles of Fidesz, signalled with businessman Lőrinc Mészáros¹⁴. I do not have the space here to unfold the subtle and undoubtedly exciting political history of the Post. However, the company as the main shareholder of the Postabank and former interest of Zoltán Spéder, the now outcast ex-oligarch, was close to some corruption scandals since the transition¹⁵. The Post produces profit in most years (Pandurics 2016), and until 2010 it also paid dividend to the owners¹⁶, that is, practically to the state budget.

The case of the Post constitutes a specific version of what Burawoy called the “fusion of state politics and production politics” (Burawoy 1985, 267) both in state socialism and public sectors in capitalism. The political nature of its management might influence the

¹⁴ Integration Organization of Cooperative Credit Institutions belongs to József Vida, who has common businesses with Lőrinc Mészáros. MTB Bank of Hungarian Savings Cooperatives Co. Ltd. belongs to Mészáros and he is about to build a new megabank from his financial companies. See: <https://hungarytoday.hu/oligarch-orban-ally-lorinc-meszaros-reportedly-set-to-create-new-megabank-in-hungary/>. Accessed: 2020.05.20.

¹⁵ About the scandal of the Postabank, see: https://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/02/28/postabank_panic_20_evfordulo_princz_gabor/. Accessed: 2020.05.20.

MTB Bank - the Bank which previously belonged to Zoltán Spéder, before it became Mészáros's interest bought the share of the Magyar Posta Zrt. so that Spéder get influence in the lead of the company after his expulsion from the government party's economic circles. This could not have happened according to the Hungarian laws, according to which the Hungarian state should own the amount of shares that ensures that other owners cannot overwrite the will of the state. See: https://nepszava.hu/1100347_nyomozas-indulhat-a-posta-ugyeben. Accessed: 2020.05.20.

However, together with the MTB Bank, Spéder lost his influence in the Hungarian Post. Now the private shareholders are practically in the same sphere of interest as the government, therefore the significance of shares and formal decision-making is limited. Still, the private shares can play a role in the future, if the megabank of Mészáros (see previous footnote) had plans with the Post.

¹⁶ See: Annual Financial Reports available from 2001. Accessed from the website of the Hungarian Ministry of Justice (<https://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/>) on 2020.05.10.

financial background and strategies of the company, but also its daily operation. The Hungarian government regularly assigns the Post with the delivery of political campaign material and various vouchers, which are of high priority for the Post and a burdensome duty for mail carriers due to the high numbers and short deadlines.

Regarding my research, there are three main levels under the senior management. The next important level of management is the leaders of each post office, who are not directly involved in the work of mail carriers, but who are physically there among them in the office and who communicate with them. The managers of delivery are the direct superiors of mail carriers. There are also rank differences among the managers of delivery, as they might include superiors with smaller authority, with whom mail carriers work together more directly and who even deliver when needed. In Budapest every post office is responsible for one or two districts. Differences between the districts can be large in terms of the conditions of delivery, amount of tips or labor relations.

Every district is divided into several similarly populated areas, providing the base for the division of labor among mail carriers. An area is called a pair of routes (*'járatpárok'*), containing two routes (e.g., two streets). In theory, two mail carriers work in a pair of routes, and they switch the two parts of the area in every month. This guarantees that both of them know both routes and if one of them has their days off, the other one can replace them, covering the whole area. These days, they take the whole pair of routes alone, or with an extra worker (assistant) whose task is to help in replacement. As I will elaborate in Chapter 3, this system has significantly eroded with the decline in number of employees. With approximately 28 500 full-time employees (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2019), the Magyar Posta Zrt. is

among the biggest employers in the country (Jandó 2020)¹⁷, although there has been a steady fall from 44 000 in 2001 until 2015 (see Figure 1 in Appendix).

2.1.3.2 The labor process and conditions of work

Mail carriers usually start between 6 and 7 AM at the post office, most of them earlier before their official, paid working time. Though mail carrying is considered a blue-collar job, it contains many white-collar elements. They start the day with organizing and administering the material they receive on the given day¹⁸. They select what to deliver on that day and what can wait, according to the type of the material (e.g., priority), incoming amounts and their plans for the day. The bulk of the work is connected to their own routes, but there are also collective tasks, such as distribution of letters that arrive to the office unorganized from the previous level¹⁹. The division of the collective tasks usually happens informally or voluntarily. In the morning direct superiors are present and make short announcements and “trainings”²⁰. Also this is the time in which the management approaches the workers with client complaints or mistakes.

The mail carriers go out to their route between 8:30-10:00 AM, and after finishing with delivery, they return to the post office to do the final administration for the day, which takes around 20-40 minutes. The end of working time is thus flexible, depends on the amount of daily material and the decision of the worker about how they want to distribute the work among the next few days. Since 2019, mail carriers use a new electronic device called PDA and a printer for delivery. It decreases the amount of handwriting and tracks the location of

¹⁷ The drop is partly due to outsourcing to labor force in subsidiaries, but mail carriers are not affected by it.

¹⁸ E.g., redirecting letters to another address, returning to the sender, POB, registered mails, international mails etc.

¹⁹ Officially it should be done by other units previously, but practically only a part of the material arrives ordered according to routes, another part of it arrives bulked, without differentiation.

²⁰ Meaning 3-10 minute talks about new regulations or devices.

workers and the delivery process. Based on my experience, tracking is used only occasionally for supervision, mainly by the central management to control the printing of the delivery reminder slips²¹. PDA is also supposed to contain information that helps delivery, such as door entry codes and authorizations, but these functions do not work well yet.

Even with the PDA, the labor process makes direct supervision very difficult. As I will elaborate in Chapter 3, mail carriers' knowledge of their routes is of high importance and application of the formal regulations outside needs a lot of personal consideration from the given worker. The regulation of labor on the level of the post office can be characterized by responsible autonomy (Burawoy 1983; Sallaz 2015) described in the previous chapter. Mail carriers have a free hand in the specific execution of their job; they make many autonomous decisions. What limits their autonomy is that they have to bear the responsibility if there is a client complaint, a central supervision or in case the work is piled up and the deadlines are not kept. However, as I will show it later, in the politics of responsible autonomy we can see a shift in emphasis from autonomy to responsibility.

At the time of my fieldwork, there was a huge variation in working time between workers. Some people go home around noon, whereas some work occasionally until 8 PM or even later. As it will be discussed in length in Chapter 3, knowledge of and routine in your own route is a game changer in this occupation. Thus, working days are typically much longer for a newcomer, until one becomes familiar with one's route. Also, working time depends on many factors, such as how much one sticks to the regulations or how much one talks with clients. In some cases, people finish their remaining work at weekends or on their

²¹ The delivery reminder slip is the notice about attempted delivery of a registered mail, in case the addressee is not home. This is the biggest issue that the management tries to control by tracking. The policy says that these slips can be printed only outside, at the address. By this, they want to ensure that no mail carrier prints the notices in advance at the post office and drops it in the mailboxes without even attempting the delivery. On the other hand, mail carriers argue that they know about a lot of addressees in their route who have died, moved out or always refuse to take the letters (because it is about debt execution for example), therefore it does not make sense to attempt delivery in these cases and it makes the work faster to print the slips at the beginning of the day. Also, when it is very cold outside, printing in advance, inside the office makes sense even if later the delivery is attempted.

official days off. Many people do a lot of overwork, sometimes more than what would be legal. In some cases the management “solved” this problem by finding some other form of employment that covered all hours worked, while in other cases the illegally worked hours simply remained unpaid. The Overtime Act in 2018 (Előd 2018) legalizing overwork up to 400 hours a year from the previous 250. Although the Act worsened workers’ situation in general, it ironically improved the situation of many of these mail carrier workers, who are neither pressured to avoid overwork nor to work for free any more.

At the time of my fieldwork new entrants received the minimum wage, training, overtime hours, replacement and taking a bigger area could increase the salary²². After the emergence of labor shortage, there were wage raises at the Post, though lower than the increase of the minimum wage or average private wages (Privátbankár.hu 2019). I do not have data about its distribution between different groups of workers, but after the raises the gap between white-collar and blue-collar wages seems to be lessened (see Figure 2 in Appendix). Tips can be a significant part of mail carriers’ income, although the amount varies a lot; my estimation for the range is 20 000-140 000 HUF/month. The uncertainty partly comes from the fact that my informants typically do not keep count of it or collect it separately, so they also guessed when I asked them. That said, in the 1990s, tip immensely exceeded their official salary, it could reach 80% of their total income. Even in the 2000s it could be the majority of their income, as one of my informant said, he “did not even touch his salary”. By now tips have radically dropped, making the financial situation of mail carriers much worse than 30 years ago²³.

²² The minimum wage is 195 000 HUF gross, around 140 000 HUF net, raised by 5000 HUF upon finishing an official training. Those who work without a partner in a pair of routes get plus 50 000 HUF/month. There is a so-called “incentive money” in case the given worker fulfills the quotas of sales.

²³ It was complemented by the erosion of the inner welfare provisions of the Post, such as postal kindergarten or subsidized holiday opportunities.

2.2 Weak labor in the post-socialist regions and global labor trends

“Since the ‘90s nothing happened here, only that some people became rich, others became poor. For the working class, it’s only the work that has remained – indeed, more and more of that.” (Mail carrier)

In the following chapters, I will show how the above described marketization of the Post and the company’s management increased mail carriers’ vulnerability and exploitation. Although this process is parallel to the global trends of neoliberalization and precarization, I argue that the case of the Hungarian Post illustrates the differences between the Western European-centered descriptions and the post-socialist experience. Following critics of the conceptualization of neoliberalism and precarity as built on the historical exception of the Western-European welfare states after the Second World War (e.g. Breman and van der Linden 2014), I illustrate the diversity of these processes with this specific case. In the next chapters I show dynamics and losses that are not visible in the numbers about non-standard employment, wage cuts or union membership.

While weakening labor is often signalled by declining union membership and activity, according to Crowley and Ost state socialism in itself created a different point of departure compared to the strong and active unions in Western-Europe (as cited in Greskovits 2015, 277). By the fragmentation and depoliticization of labor, state socialist regimes (Bartha 2013) sowed the seeds of weak labor which characterizes the region after the transition. As trade unions were co-opted by the socialist leadership, informal and individual bargaining were more typical. After the transition, a fragmented trade union structure emerged (Lux 2008) in which there is a highly competitive relationship between different unions and alliances of unions (Traub-Merz et al. 2018), resulting in a very ineffective union movement in most CEE

countries (Kaminska and Kahancová 2011, 194). Postal unions in Hungary are also fragmented and ineffective. Based on my fieldwork, lack of trust in and/or interest for unions is widespread among workers, even if they are formally members. I did not hear anyone talking about unions enthusiastically, not even the members or office-holders I met. The big postal unions have not participated in strikes after the transition. Three strikes have been organized in three decades, but they were not successful and led to harsh sanctions for the organizers and participants²⁴. While some Western European authors describe neoliberalization in the postal sector with the diminishing of public sector characteristics, such as strong unions and high formal wages (e.g., Haidinger 2016), in the Hungarian case the situation is different, as neither strong unions nor high formal wages are typical to the Post.

Similarly, one of the common indicators of precarization and neoliberalization in the Western-European context is the informalization of labor and the spread of atypical employment. Although they are present in the post-socialist region as well, my case highlights a different aspect. The job of mail carriers has gone through a big transformation despite the fact that they still have been registered with a permanent, full-time contract and stable formal wage all along. What makes the difference is mostly not contractual conditions or the formal organization of work, but the way the employer intruded into the space that previously belonged to the workers' autonomy. In Chapter 4 I will show the dynamics of workers' autonomous managing of their working time outside in the route. With the change in the labor regime, the decrease in employees and the increasing workload, the working time

²⁴ The *Kézbesítők Szakszervezete* (Union of Mail Carriers) organized a “partial strike” in 2008 with denying sales activity. See: <https://index.hu/gazdasag/magyar/psztr080630/>. Accessed: 2020.06.01.

Another strike took place in 2009 with about 150 participants, after which the Post fired 29 people and another 120 got a written warning for participation in the strike. See: https://mfor.hu/cikkek/vallalatok/Birosaghoz_fordulnak_az_elbocsatott_postasok.html. Accessed: 2020.06.01.

The third postal strike took place in 2015 at JNT Security Ltd., a subsidiary of the Hungarian Post. It was also followed by the removal of the main organizer from his job. See: <https://24.hu/fn/gazdasag/2015/04/23/munkastanacsok-kirugtak-a-postas-sztrajk-miatt-a-szakszervezeti-vezetot/>. Accessed: 2020.06.01.

spent outside the office, in the route, has been “utilized” more by the management. New tasks, disciplining and worse conditions gave a different character to the job with little changes on the formal level. Another crucial aspect is the drop of income of mail carriers, which is caused not by a new wage policy on the employer’s side. On the contrary, it happened because the previous wage policy *persisted*, but its informal foundation, i.e., tips, has eroded.

Nevertheless, the vulnerability created at and by the Post is not independent from the precarious (in the classical sense) and more informal Hungarian labor market. Almost all of my informants mentioned spontaneously that you can be sure that your salary arrives at the fifth in every month and the company “will not go away with your money”, as a huge advantage of postal work. This illustrates well the relation between the Post and other segments of the labor market; that is, the former relies on the precariousness of the latter by being considered relatively safer and more stable.

Linda Cook argues that the 2004 EU accession brought more rights to workers of the region on paper, but less power in practice (Cook 2010). In 2012, the Hungarian government implemented the New Labour Code which worsened the situation by further broadening the range of opportunities of employers and making the workers more vulnerable and subordinated (Bence 2018). Between 2012 and 2018, other modifications strengthened this tendency such as the above mentioned Overwork Act. Although in the legal domain, the New Labour Code means a huge change, it is not obvious whether this means a breaking point regarding the everyday practices of labour relations. Beyond the above mentioned aspect, some say that negotiations between the government and the unions were only symbolic even under the rule of previous governments (Stubnya and Fábíán 2018). Currently the government works on the further flexibilization of the Labor Code (Csurgó 2020).

3 Chapter 3: Tensions in the adjustment of the hungarian post to marketization and the subversion of the work of mail carriers

As I described in the previous chapter, the transformation of the postal sector began to intensify in the late-2000s and created a new situation for the Post and its workers. I argue that the labor regime of the 1990s was based largely on consent, as it provided autonomy and stability for mail carriers, underpinned with high income from tips. Since then, the attempts of the company to adjust its operation to the new situation bear with a lot of tensions and contradictions. In this chapter I will show how these affect the labor regime of the Post, resulting in more coercive management methods, changing the dynamics of responsible autonomy of workers and creating new vulnerabilities. I will focus on three main factors causing the most hardship for mail carriers²⁵. These are the contradictions of regulations and other responsibilities; the erosion of the system of routes; and the pressure on mail carriers to perform sales tasks.

²⁵ The country-wide labour shortage between 2015 and 2020 slowed down some of the below analysed processes and increased the significance of other problems, such as large workload. The management struggled even to ensure the basic services and many mail carriers successfully resisted the changes knowing that their superiors will not risk losing more workers. Thus the Post lost its ability to control the workers and its capacity to implement big reforms to a great extent. My research was conducted in and is influenced by this context, but I will focus on the long-term process of marketization and the Post's adjustment, starting from the mid-2000s. In the past 2 months, the labor shortage practically disappeared due to the COVID-driven unemployment (Cseresnyés 2020). We can only speculate about the labor market situation after the recovery from the pandemic; whether a new wave labor shortage will emerge or not. However, my informants reported immediate changes in their workplaces as a result of increased number of newcomers who became unemployed due to the pandemic, which shows the instability of the conditions at the Post in the past few years. Also, there is a constant drop in the number of physical workers from 2002 (see Figure 1 in Appendix), so we can assume that the Post's intention to restructure itself with less mail carriers is constant, but this strategy 'backfired' when the country-wide labor shortage kicked in in 2015-16.

3.1 Contradictions of regulations and other responsibilities

One of the tensions mail carriers face is the clash between the overly bureaucratized postal system regulated by the law on the one hand, and the adjustment process on the other, entangled with the Post's intention to keep wage expenses low. Being the universal service provider in the country, the operation of the Post is strictly regulated by the Post Law and inner policies (Kertész 2012). However, the fulfillment of these regulations has serious obstacles, partly due to their rigidity, partly due to limited capacity of workers, and partly because of the diversity of products. The complexity of delivery regulations is mainly due to the nature of traditional services (e.g., secrecy of letter, safety of money transfer). As the Post has broadened its profile, the process has become more and more complicated²⁶. At the same time, we can see the growing proportion of parcels and letter-packages (e-commerce), the receivers of which typically prefer flexibility over secrecy or safety. For instance, handing over a pension to anybody whom one finds at the address bears a huge risk, whereas handing over an online ordered phone case to the receiver's flatmate is appropriate. At this point, the Post still has both types of tasks and its regulations are written for the traditional postal services²⁷, the proportion of which is constantly dropping in favour of packages and e-commerce.

“There are a lot of rules. It is impossible to follow them.” The very first sentence a colleague told my friend on his first day at work illustrates well the informal consensus around regulations. For a newcomer it is not easy to find out upon what basis people prioritize some regulations and ignore others. There are significant variations between workers' personal strategies; direct superiors in most cases are aware of many irregularities and do not sanction them. Also, there is an inconsistency between the different levels of the Post, that is, between direct superiors, the leader of the post office, and the senior management of the Company. Some

²⁶ For example, the requirement of personal delivery of registered mails instead of in the mailbox; introducing priority mail; emergence of different types of international mails.

²⁷ Supposedly, the complexity of the regulations has several reasons. A part of them might be connected more to the logic of huge, bureaucratic public organizations as the unavoidable necessity of safety and secrecy requirements. However, not having the space to unfold this distinction and its implications, I rely on the latter.

practices are allowed or known by one of them, but should be hidden from a higher level. Also, there are written regulations, which apparently nobody wants to enforce due to their absurdity. As one of my informants put it ironically, “the biggest strike would be if we worked according to the regulations”, meaning that keeping the formal regulations would paralyze the daily operation.

Mail carrying is characterized by a constant tension between regulations and the interests or requests of different actors. First, in some cases enforcement of regulations is based on client complaints, which are taken seriously by the mid-level management. It can affect the salary of mail carriers if a mistake is revealed. Second, as the above-mentioned remark implies, there is a constant trade-off between efficiency of delivery and the written rules. If you ask for all the required personal data from all recipients, it makes your work much slower. If you send back every mail that is addressed incorrectly instead of trying to find the addressee, then one third of mails could be automatically sent back. Part of these dilemmas are solved by the personal knowledge of the given mail carrier, who already knows the people and the addresses. Further, experienced mail carriers get used to the feeling that they cannot work according to the regulations and they have got the routine to navigate in the system considering their informal “agreements” with their superiors.

Although with time stress is eased, the tension between the various requests of tenants and postal regulations remains. For instance, many recipients wish to receive their money transfer in the street, to get it as soon as possible. This is not only against the regulations, but it also makes it easier to miscalculate the amount. Still, it is a common practice, as the logic of the Outside - detailed in the next chapter - is stronger in this case than the power of regulations. Mail carriers have to balance between residents’ requests, postal regulations and other considerations, such as their own working time. Whatever they choose, they have to take the responsibility for their decision. A relatively new mail carrier described an everyday dilemma like this:

“I can insist to follow the rules, but is it worth it? So that they hate me in the whole street? It’s not good. It’s much better, when (...) I can hand her her mail, even if in the street, which is not regular. But if she’s in a hurry, then should I say, >no, [delivery] only at the given address, let’s go back in there, I don’t care about your train, you will go with the next one<?”

Albeit regulations and practice differ in every workplace, in the case of the Post this gap is huge. As I mentioned earlier, mail carrying is organized by the logic of responsible autonomy, since direct supervision and micromanaging is hardly doable in the streets. I argue that we can see a shift in emphasis from autonomy to responsibility since the 1990s. Talking about the 1990s, many mail carriers emphasized to me that they were not afraid of sanctions and enjoyed great autonomy in their work. In many post offices around the end of the 2000s, the management strengthened the enforcement of regulations and/or used it arbitrarily as a discipline method. Currently the main pattern is that direct superiors typically do not monitor whether mail carriers work according to the regulations, but in case of supervision from the upper level or of a client complaint, they will not defend the worker either. Together with the diversification of supply, regulations have become more complicated as well. Though mail carriers are still not directly controlled, they experience increasing pressure of responsibility overshadowing their former autonomy.

The unrealistic nature of many regulations is in fact a perfect disciplinary tool in the hand of the management, because they can find malpractice in anyone’s work. Although labor shortage seems to have brought relief to workers to some extent, irregularity still can be a base for blackmailing and disciplining. Talking about a worker with whom he had a conflict, a superior told me explicitly that he “warned” the mail carrier, “they can find mistakes in everybody’s work”. At the same time, there is a pressure on many workers by superiors to work more efficiently, not to make too much overtime and so on, which practically means pressure to break

the regulations. In addition, labor shortage further increased the workload for a lot of workers, which further enhances the tension between regularity and other responsibilities.

On the central training for new mail carriers, the senior management does not address the problem of unrealistic regulations. Indeed, they constantly emphasize the importance of following the rules without almost any reference on how it might work in practice. In public communication, the leadership of the Post always puts emphasis on “modernization” and “competitiveness” (see e.g., Magyar Posta Zrt. 2019). However, it seems that they do not wish to ease the tension between these intentions and the regulatory system of the company. Also, the proportion of “competitive” products (parcel, e-commerce) is on the rise, and they are even more incompatible with the strict and formalized system of traditional postal products. One of my informants pointed out this tension, highlighting the contradictory goals of economizing on labor force, fulfilling client demands and maintaining the overly complicated system.

“I think regulations should be simplified and made to fit the existing labor power and the demands created by the 21. century.(...) They only create unnecessary burdens and rules that will be broken by everyone anyway.(...) Either let it be professional or if they [the management] don't want professionalism, and they always say they don't, then we have to simplify the service and have to say no to the >holy client<. You cannot save the world with five people. We have to decide: either the money or the client.”

The conflicting requirements are seen by a relatively new worker similarly but with sensible concern about her performance:

“(...) I want to be good at it. But obviously being good is not that simple, because if you want to do it according to the regulations then you're not good. So you have to balance somehow

between regularity and successfulness. Because on the other hand there is a pressure on you to be successful, but you can't do it if you follow all the rules."

To sum up, the operation of the highly bureaucratized Post, trying to catch up with market demands while at the same time not providing the necessary labor force, is full of contradictions. The burden and responsibility of the contradictory dynamics is to a large extent borne by mail carriers. Similarly to workload and other features of the job, these hardships are also highly unevenly distributed. Those who have better informal position inside the organization or whose background makes them less vulnerable, are less exposed to stress, financial or other losses. However, this tension is present in the job of every mail carrier to some extent.

3.2 System of routes

Another important condition that changed in the past decades is the system of routes and replacement, which earlier constituted an important part of the labor regime of the Post. Pairs of routes guarantee that two workers know the given area and if one of them has their days off, then the other one can replace them. To understand the importance of this system, it is necessary to see the extent to which knowledge of the given routes is an essential part of the job of mail carriers. It takes 6-12 months for them to get familiar with the area; after this time the job is much easier there than somewhere else. Although routine is important for the technical details of delivery too, working in an unfamiliar area can drive crazy even the most experienced workers. It takes much more time, and results in fewer successful deliveries and less tip.

Following from the contradictory expectations mapped out in the previous section, the complexity and uniqueness of each area stems from the nature of the tasks at the Post: numerous different types of products; regulations for safety; work with people; necessary

adjustment between the imagined ideal operation and reality (e.g., you cannot force everybody in the country to write their names on the mailbox); and the way informality influences the process of delivery. A few examples for the significance of knowledge of the place: who is authorized to take the delivery if the recipient is not there; who is usually at home and who is not; which resident is problematic. Furthermore, most of the houses have mailboxes displayed in a mixed order and they are not very informative of whom they belong to with missing names or signals of the floor and door number; but even if they are, it makes your work much faster if you know them, just as with doors.

Due to these factors, it is important that the replacement is made not by any coworker, but your partner who knows both routes. In the '90s this system was complemented with additional workers who helped in the replacement so that the remaining mail carrier do not have to do double the amount of work. Theoretically, this system is still in use, but there are so many unfilled positions that in practice, it always depends on the number of available mail carriers. This result in many people working alone in a pair of routes or in one route. Those without a partner cannot rely on proper replacement on their days off, meaning that they have to face with the work piled up when they go back from holiday or sick leave. Those who work with a partner in a pair of routes are exposed to more requests from the managers to replace in an unfamiliar route, since they are less overwhelmed than those who work without a partner. Consequently, some workers rather undertake a pair of routes alone in order to avoid replacement in an unfamiliar area. The fear of constant and erratic replacement is a source of huge stress and insecurity for a lot of workers. The current situation is highly exacerbated by the labor shortage, but the system of pair of routes started to erode earlier, with cutbacks. The number of employees has been constantly dropping, and what mail carriers experience is a constant growth in workload. The workload does not only increase

depending on the amount and composition²⁸ of delivery material, but also if the management merges routes to counterbalance the unfilled positions.

The organization structure of the pairs of routes is built on stable and continuous connection between mail carriers and their given area, and workers' personal investment in location-specific knowledge, trust and relationships. Also, this system can only operate with adequate room for manoeuvre, meaning a comfortable amount of workers instead of the lowest number of workers possible. This logic is different from the logic of financial efficiency, i.e., that the number of letters per employee or the sales revenue per employee should be as high as possible (see e.g. Pandurics, 88). The feelings of an interviewee about the changes in the Post illustrates the conflict between the two logics:

“(...) people still trust the postmen, who are there for a long time. So the quasi-political leadership doesn't care about this, the numbers obviously show something else, when the accounts need to be done at the end of the year, they don't care about this. They only care about the paper, the files. These people, who actually gain a good reputation for the Post, they don't matter for them; what matters is only their own interest.”

Another mail carrier expressed his feeling that the management tries to replace the old system and mail carriers' knowledge and personal relationships, with the PDA, the currently introduced electronic device used for delivery.

“Back then there were also assistants, who helped us [in replacement]. I told them what they should know about this and that, >she lives on the 3rd floor; you can give this to X; you can give that to Y<, because I have the knowledge of the place. (...) This gadget is here... They told us

²⁸ E.g., the increasing proportion of registered mails within the letter-segment (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2006), which require personal delivery.

that you can find everything in the PDA, what you can give to whom and whatnot. But that type of professional knowledge that the Post is built upon, which is inside the head of the mail carriers who work in their given area, that does not matter [to them] anymore. They don't want to accept that this is how it still works. (...) They believe, if you get this machine, with the addresses and the GPS, then everything is solved and all you have to do is to look at the gadget. But it's not how it works. It does matter whether people let you in or not. "

Although at this point PDAs practically do not contain the data he referred to and are not capable of replacing the knowledge of mail carriers, this worker feels that the management wants to force its own vision on the Post, regardless of the realities of how mail-carrying actually works – built on workers' personal knowledge and relationships. Due to the fact that the management does not ensure a structure of work based on stability and continuity, both informants quoted above experience the devaluation of their knowledge, trust and skills that they have piled up over decades in their routes.

Furthermore, my informant rightly claims that workers' specific knowledge and networks are not replaceable by a device – not even from the aspect of successful delivery, not to mention the value of personal relationships. As I elaborated at the beginning of the chapter, every area is full of tiny details and information that are impossible to include in a uniform electronic system. The problem is not that the self-esteem of the workers or their need for stability is in conflict with the “efficiency” of delivery. The conflict is between the nature of the postal service and the erodation of the system of routes. In the first period of their work, mail carriers gather the experience that is necessary to adjust the regulations and official tasks to the realities of the given area and people. This might be not that important in the case of a logistics company or food delivery, where tasks and regulations are much simpler and the stakes of the delivery are smaller. Postal delivery at this point cannot be organized on the basis of the same principles as the flexible, technology-supported delivery process of most private companies.

In the 1990s the labor regime of the Post was to a great extent built on the stability and continuity provided by the system of routes. Currently, we can see an odd situation where the previous system of work is not secured by the company, which leads to efficiency problems on the one hand, and growing pressure, stress and feeling of devaluation in the workers, on the other. However, in the past 20 years, we could not see a new structure emerging instead of the initial system of routes. The management have not solved the problem that there is not enough workers to fill all the routes, but they rather pushed the burdens of missing workforce on mail carriers, who are at the end point of the process. The fact that it is qualitatively different to work in an unfamiliar route can be used by the direct superiors as punishment or discipline, because they have the freedom to put any worker in any route. A great number of my informants were exposed to that threat after the second half of the 2000s, when the Post started to concentrate on retail and added sales to the tasks of mail carriers. One of them were threatened with being put in another route if he cannot sell enough games of chances, to set an example for the others showing that it can happen to anybody. In another case, all of the mail carriers of one post office had to work in different routes almost every day, except those who accomplished to sell the required amount of retail products. This leads us to the next topic, that of sales requirements.

3.3 Sales

As described at length in Chapter 2, the diversification of products and services is a very common reaction to the decline in demand for traditional postal services across the globe (Pimenta and Amaral 2011). The following quote illustrates the overly optimistic communication of the Hungarian Post about its attempt to modernize itself by making sales a core activity:

“(...) we are happy to present another serious accomplishment: we continued our modernization program that prepares the Hungarian Post – the Company with a 140-year-old past – for the arrival of the full open of the market. 2006 as “The Year of Sales” was an

outstanding milestone in the long process of the preparation for the liberalization. We could fill all this with real meaning in 2006 with the help of the professional knowledge and commitment of our employees. We aimed to implement the competition approach in our Company, the biggest employer in Hungary, alongside with the maintenance of our existing values, by creating harmony between the two. On our path to the modern operation, the remaking and renewing of sales activity is of great importance.” (Magyar Posta Zrt. 2007)

In the narration of mail carriers, the “remaking and renewing of sales activity” was a far less glorious process. Indeed, it was full of conflicts, such as those mentioned above. Further, based on my informants, a lot of mail carriers quitted as a consequence of the changes. Sales sparked some of the few organized collective actions of workers at the Post²⁹. The management started to assign sales tasks to mail carriers; in the interviews games of chances, financial products and newspaper subscriptions were the most common products that they had to sell to residents. Although it varied from post office to post office, many informants said that they considered the prescribed amounts to sell unrealistic, and the sanctions for underperformance unfair. But what made the enforcement of sales so outstanding among other problems? First, it was intertwined with many other problems that started to erode the nature of the job they were used to and loved.

“It started with them nagging us. At the beginning they put this [sales] on us, you tried to do it next to your job, but at that time you still could make a living, you managed it somehow. You decided what to deliver when, you could finish earlier when you wanted to, etc. In the beginning, you tried to comply, because it was worth it. Then compliance was no longer possible, because of all the central plans and expectations... That’s why people started to leave. The money started to decrease, people started to transfer online, pensioners died, new ones had their money on bank

²⁹ For instance the “partial strike” mentioned in Chapter 2. See: <https://index.hu/gazdasag/magyar/psztr080630/>. Accessed: 2020.06.01.

*account*³⁰. *These processes have met.(...) Everything strengthened the other. The world has changed.*”

We can note the sense of loss as so many parts of his work environment started to collapse at the same time, connected with a general feeling of changes in the world. Others also stressed that the pushing of sales coincided with the decline in income and with the growing workload connected to layoffs. Also, more workers quit due to the enforcement of sales, and the decrease in traditional services pushed the management further towards diversification, which made it a vicious circle.

Another central theme in the narration of this informant is the problem of “nagging”. By nagging he means direct superiors’ attempt to enforce harder work or certain results on mail carriers, starting typically with the enforcement of sales. From other points of the interview it turns out that he finds nagging opposed to the essence of mail carrying, which contains – or contained – an inherent autonomy. He contrasts the Post with other workplaces where the boss is always there to supervise you, whereas as a mail carrier you work outside, you can decide when you smoke a cigarette, with whom you talk, how you organize your work. Other informants also stressed “freedom” as a big advantage of the job. The fact that feeling of freedom was created by the scheme of responsible autonomy in the 1990s provides the context of the withdrawn of autonomy and the shift to responsibility.

Freedom here should be understood as relational and contextual in the sense that it has “develop[ed] against a local experience of unfreedom” (Sopranzetti 2019, 71). As Sopranzetti highlights, the meaning and significance of freedom in a specific situation is rooted in the given context, which is in this case the collective experience of “other workplaces” available for these workers, where “nagging” is widespread, meaning the lack of autonomy and symbolic gestures of hierarchy. The notion of freedom and its relational nature illustrate well the stake of the sales

³⁰ He refers here to reasons of the decline in tips.

conflicts, as well as the significance of the context of the labor market outside the Post. Many mail carriers appreciated their occupation because of the threat of more controlling and degrading working environments available at their education level.

Most informants connected the notion of freedom to “being left alone” by the bosses and also to working outside. Beyond the lack of nagging, mail carriers’ accounts imply the freedom to spend their working time in the embedded networks outside, detailed in the next chapter. My informants experience the disturbance of the previous system they worked in, which they described with freedom. It was to a large extent characterized by the dynamics of embedded networks, high income and the fact that the employer left them alone. The amount of overall workload in itself seems to be not constitutive of their work experience, but together with other changes it added to the fact that they experienced a radical change in their workplace. One of my informants, employed from 2008 until 2012, used to work 10-12 hours per day from the very beginning, but he would have persuaded himself to accommodate to the workload if the overall experience had not changed.

“If you go to the same area every day, you meet the same people, you’re at the same neighborhood, people start to get to know you, then you start to see the good part of it. It’s cool, you’re outside under the sun, you have no boss, you’re chilling, and you also make money, more or less. I came to love it very-very much. I would still be a postman, till today, but then something happened after which I quit. Otherwise I would do it till today.”

The thing that happened was the enforcement of sales and the following subversion of the workplace, including the degradation of the system of routes.

“[They said] >Get the fuck out and collect the newspaper subscriptions!< I said, when? When should I collect them? Before 6 AM or after 7 PM? (...) You cannot expect people to fill two

or three positions for one salary, while at the same time you have to do the replacements, and the overtime is not paid but shifted.³¹”

These excerpts illustrate how the diversification strategy of the Post arrived entangled with the collapse of the previous system of work. Contrary to the enthusiastic claim of the Yearly Report quoted above, the “harmonization of the existing values” and the “modernization” process was not successful. A part of these values – income and freedom – were based upon what I call the Outside, i.e., the dynamics and networks in the route of the given worker. Meanwhile, the Post’s main contribution was letting their workers some freedom. Mail carriers feel that the lack of “nagging” has been replaced by unrealistic requirements, while the preconditions – sufficient training, time and capacity – has not been provided. Here we can see how the labor regime of the Post and its responsible autonomy (or “freedom”) is entangled with the embedded informal logic of the Outside.

Beyond being left alone or not being nagged, working at the Post provided a certain prestige, sense of having an important function, representing a state office and providing a public service. What also made the enforcement of sales outstanding among other problems is the fact that it is not a traditional postal activity. Several informants made a distinction between “true” postal activities and new ones, such as sales, describing the latter as something that is degrading, cannot be taken seriously and do not fit in postal services. They felt forced to learn new things and acquire skills they did not want to, skills that did not belong to their profession. Furthermore, they expressed disapproval not only of the compulsion of sales on mail carriers, but also of the fact that the Post started to change its profile and sell various products in post offices. I interpret their disapproval of diversification as a sign of feeling that their professional identity gets under attack.

³¹ According to allocated cumulative working time, it means that on days when he finishes earlier, the remaining hours are subtracted from the overtime he had previously piled up, so this is the way to get the two balanced.

Combined with harsh sanctions and the threatening atmosphere of layoffs and unemployment of the late 2000s, sales became a central element of mail carriers narration about the painful process of the postal transformation. Although at that time it sparked resistance, what I saw in 2019 during the interviews was mainly the wounds left in the aftermath of the disturbance. The main form of resistance was quitting, either right after the management assigned them new tasks, or a few years later, when the tension intensified and they could not stand the compound effects of the above described processes. After conflicts around the enforcement of tasks not included in the labor contract, sales became part of the contract for new entrants. Those who stayed chose different strategies, such as selling products to friends and relatives, buying them themselves, or engaging in individual negotiations with their bosses.

Due to the labor shortage, we can see the settling of the sales conflicts – at least temporarily. The effects of future fluctuations in labor supply are hard to guess. One possible outcome is that on the long-term, the adjustment process will spark new clashes, as the diversification strategy of the Post conflicts both with workers' vision of their job and their limited exploitable capacity. In any case, the conflicts following the mid-2000s left a mark not only on the lives of those who left the Post at that time, but also on the lives of those who stayed, with the experience of vulnerability and instability of their profession and working conditions.

3.4 Conclusion

“Other [products] will decrease, the Chinese³² will only grow, it’s unstoppable. (...) We will get to the point where we are not the country of paper anymore. Somebody will notice that it makes no sense to send out those letters. What for? Then maybe we will be Chinese item-moving workers [laughs]. Anything can happen.”

The quote illustrates the anxiety related to the transforming postal sector and the uncertain future of the Post transparent in many interviews. The ambiguous adjustment process and the changing profile of the Post make workers question basic features of their job. Although jokingly, this informant expresses his apprehension about his profession going towards something essentially different. With referring to pointless bureaucracy, he renders the disappearance of traditional postal products inevitable and good. Still, the distinction between postal work and “Chinese item-moving” represents the latter as something degrading, it lets us associate to simple and monotonous logistics work. This ambiguity shows that he accepts the discourse of “modernization”, while at the same time watches his profession collapse around him due to “unstoppable” changes.

Postal sector changes and the reactions of different management levels to it have subverted the previous labor regime. It manifests in various forms: in workload, working time, working conditions, stress level. There are big differences between post offices, each operating its own system of labor politics. That said, I argue that the overall labor regime of the 1990s has been mouldering. Back then, the tension between postal regulations and other requirements was less pressing, the system of responsible autonomy was more about autonomy and less about risk and sanctions. The system of routes provided stability, continuity and recognition of location-specific knowledge of workers. In the next chapter I will present the realm of the Outside, which had contributed to the labor regime with subsidizing wages and providing appreciation and

³² E-commerce products, typically from China, posted formally as mails

freedom. From the 2000s these foundations of consent have weakened and coercive methods became more prevalent, such as threats, punishment, or direct disciplining. With the enforcement of sales, the management interfered the labor process, further fuelling the discontent of workers, who already experienced decreasing income, growing workload and stress. I argue that these changes are primarily due to the way marketization has been managed, pushing a large part of the costs and burdens of the adjustment on mail carriers.

4 Chapter 4: “We are not only postmen” - From embedded informality towards alienation

“How do you handle the residents when there is a lot of work and you have to hurry?”

“You can’t really hurry here. Maybe you leave sooner, but you still have to chat at least a little. Some people can’t talk to anyone else, because they don’t even go out anywhere anymore. (...) So we are not only postmen, but also psychologists and conversation partners.”

As we have seen in the previous chapter, mail carriers’ work is led by bureaucratic regulations of the Post. In the contractual employment relation with the company, they are parts of the hierarchical structure, inside which they have a relatively low position as blue-collar workers. The Post is often described as a semi-military organization by workers and superiors. However, as mentioned previously, the realization of this bureaucratic operation is complicated and ambiguous, as many factors can influence how and to what extent formal requirements are applied in practice. Furthermore, delivery includes a lot of, almost daily, interactions with residents. Residents and mail carriers can be present in each other's lives for decades and they can be strongly interdependent from many aspects. The fact that tips constitute a significant proportion of the income of mail carriers has a great influence on their

work. During their work, mail carriers perform various tasks and activities beyond their official duties. They often feel they function as psychologists or quasi social workers for people who need company, support or advice. They can have strong personal connections with residents. They do small favors (for a tip or for free) either in connection with mail delivery or independently from it. Mail carriers' competency has to go much beyond the technical details of delivery, as they can work effectively if they become knowledgeable about the given small neighborhood, having much information about the buildings and people. They have to handle conflicts and balance in ambiguous situations. They have to navigate in a space bounded partly by formal regulations and the employer's requirements, but also by the requests and needs of residents, as well as by their own interests.

4.1 Outside activities as embedded informal work

Mail carriers' social networks and various activities outside of the post office can be considered an autonomous realm of work, that I call the "Outside"³³. Since the logic of the "semi-military organization" and the logic of the Outside are totally different, mail carriers' job has a peculiar dual nature. Unpacking this duality helps us understand the experiences of workers and the ongoing transformation of their job. I consider activities of the Outside as embedded informal work practices, relying on Lela Rekhviashvili's Polanyian understanding of embedded informality (2015) detailed in Chapter 1. They are economic practices because they are linked to employment and because they have a direct money earning aspect through tips. Rekhviashvili (2017) describes embeddedness of certain informal economic practices based on the following aspects. First, the motivation of participation, which is not or not dominantly market-centered rationality; second, its regulation, which is based not on the

³³ I use this expression because the distinction between the post office as inside and the streets and buildings in the route as *outside* was a recurring theme in the interviews. As mentioned previously, many of my informants described the freedom they experience with working outside. One of them referred to the residents as "my families outside".

supply-demand principle, but on social norms, reciprocity, existing hierarchies etc.; third, its social function, for instance sustaining communities or ensuring continuity. Embeddedness also implies that the way it operates contradicts the market logic and if the two meet, some kind of tension emerges. I argue that mail carriers' typical Outside activities (talk, emotional work, lending money, etc.) bear these characteristics of embedded informality. In this chapter I present how mail carriers experience their presence and relationships with the residents and how "work" aspects are inseparable from non-market dimensions such as personal ties, prestige, trust or community³⁴.

The concept of embeddedness does not imply the idealization of relationships. Mail carriers have a lot of conflicts with residents that can have serious consequences on both sides. Some residents are simply rude, some are aggressive, some have unrealistic claims related to the delivery, some want to make use of the fact that mail carriers have money with them. The clash between official regulations and residents' requests also sparks a lot of conflicts. Furthermore, some mail carriers tend to behave inappropriately with residents in general or with residents who do not give the expected amount of tips.

Due to flexible working time and lack of direct supervision, mail carriers outside have some autonomy over the organization of their work. Beyond the details of delivery, they decide how much time they spend with residents, what other activities they include next to (or instead of) their formal duties. As an example, the end of working time varies a lot between 12 pm and 6 pm even among experienced workers. Some of them go home early at the expense of not only the accuracy of their work, but also that of their relationship with the

³⁴ The changes that impacted the informal realm are much broader than the labor relations of the Post or the transformation of the postal sector. Based on my current knowledge, it was also affected by various changes on the housing market, such as growing proportion of renting, especially short-term renting for foreign students or tourists; or the higher fluctuation in the ownership of apartments (See e.g.: Büttl and Szabó 2020). The general level of interpersonal trust and openness to having interaction with strangers could also have an impact on people's attitude towards mail carriers. These dimensions are out of the scope of my research, but supposedly the tendencies I describe are in an interplay with a larger change in the operation of neighborhoods and communities. I see the different dimensions of this change intertwined in the narratives of my informants about changes in their work, making it hard to separate them.

residents; some take the regulations similarly easy but spend the spare time with talking. Some finish late because they do not say no to anyone who wants to talk to them and at the same time they choose to keep as much regulations as possible. Similarly, there are multiple variations regarding the favors they do residents or the extra services they provide for tip. These outcomes partly depend on the personal preferences and background of workers, for instance whether they prefer to be home early or not, what kind of relationship they want to build with the residents, what their strategy regarding tips is, how they perceive the job itself, and what kind of values and work ethics drive them.

However, these decisions are made in an interplay both with the employer's side and the Outside. As for the former, they are influenced by the overall workload, which was generally significantly smaller in the 1990s and it also decreases with the time spent in the same route and with routine. Based on the accounts of my informants, in the '90s, they had more time for residents, since delivery tasks were doable within 8 hours even if they did not hurry. Also, mail carriers' decisions are influenced by the bargaining power of the given worker and the disciplining strategy of their managers. Somebody in a good position can have a bigger space to navigate in, while in some cases the management sees that they can put bigger burden on a worker without risking that they will quit, so the management can set stricter boundaries. In the following, I will focus on the dynamics of the Outside that also form the space workers' have. I will show how they navigate in it and how they experience their relationship with the residents. Then I will present how the transformation of the postal sector and the labour regime of the Hungarian Post affected the realm of the Outside and how it changed the experience of workers.

4.2 Informal payments and multilayered meanings

For a long time, tip had been the main source of income for mail carriers and it still has an important role in the dynamics of the Outside. Presenting the system of tips in this thesis is based upon the perspective and narration of mail carriers, since, as I mentioned earlier, I did not study residents' view of tips³⁵. Nevertheless, as Zelizer (1996) reminds us, monetary payments are never merely instrumental in the sense that they always correspond to various social relations and systems of meanings. I share the approach of Morris and Polese (2016), who aim to rescue informal payments given to state bureaucrats from the simplistic and pejorative notions of bribe or corruption. They argue that “while money-payments for services that a citizen should expect for free may look like ‘graft’, (...) reciprocity does have a place in understanding such payments” (ibid., 483), emphasizing the relevance of personality or even affection in state-citizen relationship.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the amount of tips has radically declined since the 1990s. At that time it could be several times more than the official salary, now it is equal to it in the best scenario, but usually varies between the 10-50% of it. However, it still contributes to the salary significantly. The main source of tips are financial transfers, most importantly pensions and state benefits. Some people do not tip, but the majority of clients give back something from a few hundred forints to a few thousand. Another source of tips is delivery of letters and amorphous letters (parcels). Many mail carriers make special deals with residents, mostly with lawyers or businessmen, for instance they call and meet the client in an agreed time and place to deliver. Some people pay occasionally when they wait for an urgent letter and do not want to risk that they miss the delivery. Some pay for the delivery of parcels that are too big

³⁵ Current studies that try to unfold the motivations behind the norm of tipping list various reasons such as social esteem/sense of duty, instrumental (future service), reciprocity and altruism (Lynn 2015). While there are extensively explored types of tipping (e.g., in the service sector), tips given to postal workers still wait for investigation.

and hence the mail carrier officially could only deliver the reminder slip ³⁶. Finally, some residents pay even for the simple delivery of a registered mail, so that the mail carrier prioritize them in the future in the case of being busy or reluctant to go upstairs. Supposedly, the significance of the second source of tip, which is independent from money delivery, was gradually growing in the past decades together with the proportion of registered mails and parcels. Furthermore, I assume that the last type of tip is partly a reaction to the lack of reliable delivery and has emerged in the past 5-10 years.

My informants unanimously said that poor people give more tip than the better off. Unfolding this phenomena would deserve an independent study. However, it is important to note that mail carriers' wages are to a large extent "subsidized" by the poorest members of society, who are living on their already low pensions or state benefits. In some post offices in the 1990s, mail carriers were informally expected to share their tips with their bosses. Later, supposedly with the decline in tips this practice evaporated, but the employer still enjoys the subsidies by residents, by counting on tips when setting the low wages.

Mail carriers also receive various gifts from residents: coffee, food, alcohol, clothes, toys for the workers' children among others. Sometimes a gift comes as an invitation for lunch or a drink, which is like a favor from the mail carrier's perspective who has to decide whether they have the time for it or not. In other cases it serves rather as a payment in return for a favor. From the mail carriers' perspective, tips and gifts has a multilayered meaning. In some cases, they see it as a sign of prestige of or respect for their job. In this layer of meaning, the appreciation of (hard) manual work and of their status as state officials are interconnected, as mail carrying has the characteristics of both. Sometimes tipping is understood in terms of affection or solidarity and is linked to some kind of sense of

³⁶ They are practically parcels, but officially amorphous letters, the so-called "Chinese".

belonging³⁷. One of my interviewees connected the drop in the amount of tip to the fall of the prestige of the job:

“The profession of the postman had a prestige, which is constantly going down. While previously, I think, a postman was considered to be an important person, now he is somebody to be pitied. I think that with time, tip similarly has dropped ... Of course they deliver less payment orders, but they also have less honor.”

Other interviewees also considered tip a sign of respect and appreciation, but with a special emphasis on the respect towards manual job. They expressed nostalgia for the old times when they earned more money, but not only from a material aspect, but also from the aspect of their manual job within the social hierarchy.

“[Now at the Post] the normal salaries are restricted to the administrative positions. Physical job is not appreciated in any sense. Back then it wasn't either, because they [the management] said, oh, there you will get yours, your tip. And it was true for a long time, but not anymore.”

Another interviewee tells a story about how in the 1980s the CEO of the Post told them how much he earns, which was less than how much they as a mail carrier earn with tips. They added that now the CEO earns 35 times more than them. They comment on it

³⁷ What is usually not included in the interviews is power positions and the potential vulnerability of residents. Mail carriers definitely have power over the residents, especially over low-income people, the Roma, or who are vulnerable for some specific reason (debt, housing problems, etc.). There are serious ethical dilemmas about accepting tips from people living in a homeless shelter, or discriminating against those with whom a worker has a conflict of any kind. My experience is that some mail carriers are very reflexive to these inequalities but others make use of them when they feel like it.

saying, “manual work is not honored; back then because of the party system, now because everybody stole everything that they could”.

An interesting ambiguity emerges here, illustrating the duality of mail carriers’ work. Within the postal organization, they are blue-collar workers near to the bottom of the hierarchy. From the last two quotes we can see that the lack of appreciation from the employer is there and matters indeed. Notwithstanding, Outside each of the mail carriers is seen as “the postman”, a representative of the state, a prestigious figure. Their position is underpinned partly by the uniform and the delivery of important postal matter, but also supported by high income from tips. When tips immensely exceeded the salary, the “subsidy” from residents compensated mail carriers for their lower position as manual workers both within the hierarchy of the company and the social hierarchy as well. Thus tips constituted not only a “wage subsidy” to the employer, but a “symbolic subsidy” in the form of appreciation.

Although tips and gifts can express respect and honor to a person of prestige, they can also represent affection or solidarity. These interlocking aspects of appreciation and emotional reward are not something that a formal employment relation could ever provide. In this sense, the Outside not only counterbalances workers’ position at the workplace but provides something qualitatively different. Let me illustrate it with a few quotes. In the account of a mail carrier who has very close relationship with the residents, we can see how the different layers of tips and gifts can be intertwined. It is hard to separate the very intimate aspects of these relationships from financial dependence of mail carriers on tip on the one hand, and vulnerability of poor residents on the other.

“It’s not so hard to convince me [to accept food or drink from the residents]. Because I am for the residents, and if it makes them happy... I can sacrifice myself [laughs]. (...) Because they are not like >here comes the stupid postman again<, but they tell me >sit

down, the food is ready<. Then you have to eat. The problem comes when you don't like that food. But it's worth more than the tip. Because I would buy it from the tip anyway, a little bit later. Basically it's worth much more."

They ironically frame accepting the invitation of the resident as a favor from their side. However, later they make a remark from which it turns out that sometimes it is actually a "duty" to be polite and accept it. At the same time, they express how much they appreciate it, even more than tip, because of the symbolic value. But as they also add, the lunch has financial value as well.

"[Poor people give more tip] maybe because they understand that you need it. And this is how they express their gratitude. (...) What I experience is that they appreciate me. It happened that she wanted to give me too much and I said no. (...) I asked [whether she is sure], because it can be a mistake too. I don't want this to be awkward, I don't want to lose her trust. My interest is that she waits for me in a good mood next month too. A lot of small [tips] is worth more than one big."

This excerpt hints at a kind of solidarity between poor residents and workers and connects it to the concepts of gratitude and appreciation. This feeling of closeness has a very pragmatic side as well, that the worker invests into the trust of the residents by being trustworthy. In spending time with residents we can note the emotional labor mail carriers perform as conceptualized by Hochschild (1983), but the context is different from service work, in which regulation of feelings are commercialized to make profit for the employer. Not only that here emotional labor is part of a male-dominated occupation, but, as the next section shows, emotional effort is not necessarily alienated.

4.3 “You don’t expect that people will love you”

In some cases workers contrast the financial reward of tips with the emotional reward of other gestures, such as an invitation or a gift. To avoid generalizations, I note that some mail carriers mentioned with resentment that they were expecting tips but were offered only an invitation for a coffee. The value and meaning of a certain gesture depend on many contextual factors. However, the following quote illustrates the blurry boundary between the affective and “work” aspects.

“Is mail carrying similar to what you expected or not?”

No, no, it’s much better than I expected. Of course. You don’t expect that people will love you. So first you think of it as a job that just needs to be done. And meanwhile... it is positive and negative as well, for example when the old lady (‘mami’) tells you that she buried her son or whatnot. You know, there are very moving things as well. But there you already have the trust, when you get to this point. And when she invites you in, like >sit down, I’ll quickly make a coffee for you<. Or she already waits for you with the coffee, because she knows that you will come and then she brings the coffee. It’s already on the table. It’s not something you expect if you didn’t do it earlier. (...) And actually your opinion about the world also changes a bit. (...) So there are not only bad people in this country. It’s just the situation and the circumstances that makes them bad. And for me, for example, that coffee... when the old lady told me that, by the way, she has 4000 Ft left for food after paying all the bills. For the whole month. Four thousand. But she can invite you for a coffee. It’s like as if a millionaire gave 5000 Ft tip, isn’t it? (...) Sometimes I even cry a tiny bit over these stuff.”

Here the worker let us look into the most intimate parts of these relationships that they also connect to gifts and also to tips by making a comparison. They emphasize the emotional

aspect: sharing intimate moments of grief is within the same category as the invitation for a coffee, both expressing love and trust. Also, the interviewee contrasts mail carrying with a simple job “that just needs to be done”, hinting at the unexpected emotional aspects. Elderly residents telling about the death of their loved ones to the mail carrier was a recurring theme in the interviews; one informant even found a resident dead in the apartment. Although most of my informants did not express this level of closeness and emotional involvement as the informant above, the blurriness of the boundary between work and private life was visible in many interviews.

When describing their relationships with the residents, the theme of being like a family member was common. The various ways my interviewees used this tangible illustration for the merge of work and private sphere is telling. In extreme cases, an informant invited one of the residents for her daughter’s wedding, another celebrates Christmas together with a “resident”. However, several informants put the emphasis on the simple fact that they see each other regularly for years or decades, they saw “children grow up, people retire”. One of them, someone who started working in the 1980s, said that despite the fact that they are not very extroverted and are considered as “too reserved” for a postman, during this time some intimacy emerged “anyway”. It shows the power of the simple presence of continuity and regularity in these relationships. Another aspects of being “like a family member” is that people share their problems with you and ask for advice, and you can count on them as well. Further, in some interviews it meant that “you cannot fall down”, meaning that they trust you and your appreciation will not change if you make a mistake as a worker. Another interviewee made the distinction that residents trust them not because of the uniform, but because of personal reasons.

My goal here is not to idealize these relationships, nor to pretend that there are strong personal ties in every case. The importance of merge between formal work and private

life lies in understanding the logic of the Outside and the embedded nature of work practices here. As mentioned above, embeddedness is connected to the non-marketized regulations, functions and motivations. I argue that despite the fact that mail carriers financially benefit from these relationships, and that these are framed by the formal work, the above described complexity of meanings of tips and gifts and the multilayered relationships give mail carriers' work a strong embedded nature. Given that the same person has worked in the same route for decades, the Outside is built on continuity and regulated by reciprocity, not by the supply-demand principle. Ledeneva (1998, 142-155) calls our attention to the different layers of reciprocity. In the case of the Post's Outside, we can recognize the three regimes of reciprocity introduced by her: affection, equivalence and status. In the analysis above the regime of affection is the most dominant, especially in the case of decade-long, deep relationships. Nevertheless, equivalence or "mutual usefulness" also plays out in several cases, in which favors are in the centre of the interaction, not personal attachment. Finally, many situations are mainly driven by the status of "the postman", especially when the given resident has a lower social status than the mail carrier.

The value produced Outside is also not corresponding to the market logic. As mentioned in Chapter 1, being a public service, postal work creates primarily use value. Indeed, in this case this use value and public service is understood in a broader sense than how Johnston (1980) meant it. Due to the embedded nature of the work, a lot of mail carriers perform significant emotional work by talking to lonely or grieving old people; others give financial advices or lend money to poor residents.

4.4 Erosion of the old Outside

Based on the my informants' accounts, the above described operation of the Outside was more dominant in the 1990s and it has been eroding since. Due to the processes

described in the previous chapter, workers have smaller autonomy over their working time, which weakens the independence of the Outside as well. Because of the unfilled positions, replacements and fluctuation, it is more and more uncommon that the same mail carrier works in a route for decades. The lack of continuity qualitatively changes the dynamics of Outside and thus, mail carrying in general. Bigger workload leads to tighter working time and higher stress level, making the former informal activities costlier, and in the case of overwhelmed newcomers, even impossible. In addition, the radical drop in the workers' income affected the overall experience of working Outside. Today the ways workers do their job in their routes vary a lot. My impression is that those workers, who have been at the Post for decades mostly follow the embedded logic of the Outside I presented in this chapter. New entrants in the beginning are too overwhelmed and stressed, but some of them starts to build his or her personal network and informal activities in the route later, which can entail a lot of overtime and stress. However, some do not intend to do so even later, not considering delivery anything more than "just a job that needs to be done". In my view, this would not be possible with tips constituting the 80% of the income, as it was the case in the 1990s. Their relationship with the residents does not go beyond superficial politeness, they do favors rarely or only for direct compensation. This kind of tipping is based more on market-logic than reciprocity.

4.5 Conclusions

Mail carriers' autonomy over their job, their continuous presence in the route, the system of tipping and gifts, and their personal relationships all contributed to what I called the Outside. It is the realm of embedded informality, where it is impossible to separate work from intimacy and various forms of reciprocity. Based on the conceptualization of Sallaz (2015), I argue that the Outside constitutes an autonomous normative system, allowing

the Post to rely on the strategy of normative outsourcing. Beyond subsidizing wages and recognition, social networks also create the sense of personal responsibility in workers that makes them strongly attached to the job and generates effort. Although the Outside underpins the labor regime of the Post, it is still a space where the employer is not present, and which is mainly regulated by the negotiations of workers and residents. Through the past 30 years this autonomous space has been shrinking, as the employer has made claims to it by increasing control over the labor process and working time. The emotional work, network of favors, sense of stability and continuity that is created outside cannot be converted to exchange value, thus, these are invisible for the employer who wants to restructure the workplace to be more effective in the narrow sense. Also, the transformation of the postal sector and the decline of cash transfers also weaken this realm. Workers have lost a lot of money, appreciation and emotional reward in this process. Also, they face the conflicting responsibilities of the Outside and the employer's requirements, as the latter try to utilize more of the previously "unutilized" space. I argue that with the Outside losing strength, mail carriers' job becomes more alienated. Their work belongs more and more to the employer, and less and less to embedded informal activities. The value they create is increasingly appropriated in the form of surplus (exchange) value, instead of being used in favor of their own social networks and purposes.

5 Conclusion: Wounds of continuous change in capitalism

„The money started to decrease, people started to transfer online, pensioners died, new ones had their money on bank account.(...) Everything strengthened the other. The world has changed.”

Throughout this thesis, I have shown the main driving forces behind the transformation of the Hungarian Post and the response of the management to that. I showed that since the 1990s, mail carrying as an occupation has essentially changed. Despite having the same registered, permanent, full-time position with stable formal salary all along, mail carriers experienced the degradation of their job. What made the difference, I argued, is mostly not contractual conditions nor the formal organization of work, which was typical in many Western-European cases (Haidinger 2016), but the way the employer intruded into the space that previously belonged to the workers' autonomy. In the 1990s the Post as an employer followed the public sector logic (Johnston 1988), in which production is centered not around exchange value but *social use value*. From the second half of the 2000s, we can see a marketization process at the Post, undermining the previous labor regime in which workers' consent was provided by relative autonomy of mail carriers. For, the labor regime of the Post was entangled with and underpinned by the Outside, encompassing all the interactions in the workers' route, outside the post office, which I described as a realm of embedded informality. The problems of the workers stem partly from the very fact that the Post as an employer passively relied on the wage subsidies in the form of tips from the residents (as mail carriers call the clients) and also the "symbolic subsidies", such as appreciation and meaningfulness of the embedded informal work practices.

In practice, mail carrying in the '90s was a secure, well-paid, prestigious and not too demanding job containing unexpected emotional rewards and non-alienated work practices. It required autonomy and specific, local knowledge contributing to the workers' feeling of recognition. The foundations of this system, however, turned out to be unstable and workers' hidden vulnerabilities came to the surface in the late 2000s. The spread of telecommunication and banking met the marketization and liberalization of the postal sector. Traditional postal services started to decline, while new ones, such as e-commerce or financial services, became more important. As the employer started to restructure the Post according to the plans of modernization

and alignment with the market logic, “built-in” instabilities became utilized by the management. Without strong unions and political support of labor rights, the fundamental changes in mail carriers’ work could not be stopped. By not ensuring the previous system of routes; using new, coercive measures and enforcing sales, the employer undermined the previous labor regime and transformed the main character of the work. At the same time, the *de facto* income of mail carriers radically dropped, without the Post actively cutting the wages.

While the management tried to squeeze out more and more from the mail carriers in the name of efficiency, they ignored what is happening on the ground. Although the Outside was always entangled with the labor regime of the Post, it contained more than just the elongation of the postal labor process. Mail carriers’ embedded informal work practices and personal relationships, from small talks with lonely pensioners to exchanging favors, have been producing value independently from the employer’s intention and interest. The significance of emotional support, knowledge sharing, sense of continuity and community is invisible for the employer, just as it is invisible in the discourse of modernization and development, as they are not directly convertible to exchange value. I argued that with the shrinkage of the Outside, we can see the dis-embedding and increasing alienation of mail carriers’ work, as market logic and the employer’s interest takes over.

I argue that this case helps us understand not only the transformation of an occupation, but also people’s nostalgia for the “good old times” and discontent about our modern, ever-changing world. My interviewees often expressed anxiety or frustration through similar tropes, connecting the transformation of the Post to other overarching changes in relationships and society during capitalist transformation. My research aimed to unfold the specific experience of mail carriers, and the ways it is linked to continuous change in capitalism and the losses created on the way. I believe that the dis-embedding of the Outside illustrates the damages of marketization, which remain unnoticed in the public discourse, while being significant in many people’s lives. Transformation of public services and

marketization in general are often framed either by the technocratic narrative of capitalist development, or by the discourse of precarization, which tells us more about the changing conditions than the subjective experience of change itself.

Therefore this study contributes to our understanding of the material consequences of marketization as well as the emotional implications of change in itself and the burdens of adjustment to the market logic. In the thesis I did not have the room to explore some specific aspects, like workers' visions about public employment and its changes as such, or the role mail carriers play in residents' lives. My impression is that mail carriers provide a sense of continuity and permanency, especially for elderly, residents, but I did not have the opportunity to study this aspect. These can be the topic of further research with a more direct focus on the subjective dimension of continuous change in capitalism. My research also contributes to grasp the entangled specificities of the post-socialist and sectoral context. Exploring the diverse and subtle ways in which workers' autonomy, working conditions, income and recognition are undermined by the market logic can help us understand global labor trends in their complexity.

Appendix

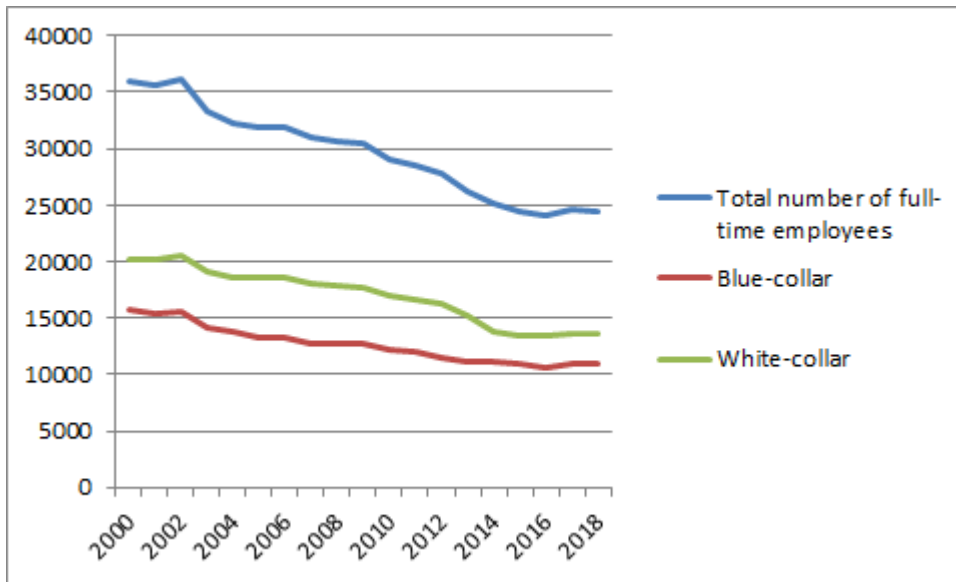


Figure 1. Total number of full-time employees (2000-2018). Source: own chart based on data from the Annual Financial Reports of the Magyar Posta Zrt. Accessed from the website of the Hungarian Ministry of Justice (<https://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/>) on 2020.05.10.

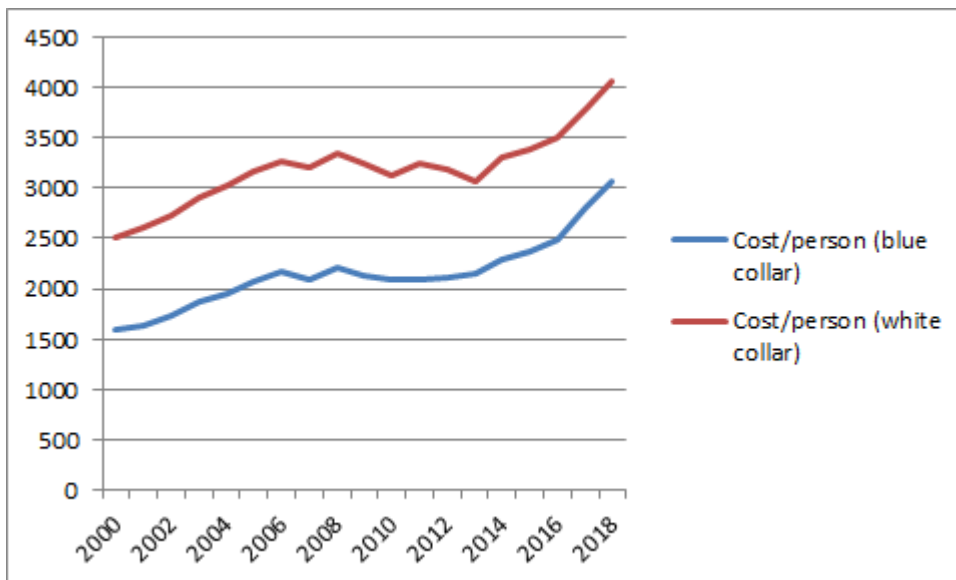


Figure 2.: Total expenditure on full-time employees divided with the number of full-time employees (2000-2018). Source: own chart based on data from the Annual Financial

Reports of the Magyar Posta Zrt. Accessed from the website of the Hungarian Ministry of Justice (<https://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/>) on 2020.05.10.

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