

THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN EMPLOYMENT IN SZEKLERLAND IN THE EARLY 2020'S

Sarolta URSZULY¹, Emőke-Katalin PÉTER², József VARGA^{2,3,4}

¹Pension House of Harghita Country, 530140, Miercurea Ciuc, Kossuth Lajos, 94, Romania

²Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, 530104 Miercurea Ciuc, Piața Libertății 1., Romania

³Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 7400 Kaposvár, Guba Sándor u. 40. Hungary

⁴Corvinus University of Budapest, 1093 Budapest, Fővám tér 8., Hungary

ABSTRACT

In the course of the research, the effects of foreign guest work, both in the narrower and broader sense, in Csíkszentkirály and its surroundings are investigated. The subject is very topical and of great importance today, but despite this, little information is available. This phenomenon has grown into a rapidly developing and important industry with a very significant impact on the population, which is why we believe it is important to record, monitor and analyse data on it. The reasons for going abroad are mostly economic, with the main objective being to earn as much income as possible. However, we suspect (and this is confirmed in the paper) that labour migration abroad has a significant and often surprising economic, emotional and social impact on the daily life of an individual, a family or a community. This impact may be direct or even indirect, but it affects the financial, emotional, social and community situation of an individual or community. It was also essential to examine whether working abroad is, in fact, essential to achieving a decent standard of living. After examining the results, it seems that, although not easy and much more challenging, working at home can help achieve these goals, but going abroad offers a much simpler, shorter and more spectacular result.

Keywords: Szeklerland, employment, foreign employment

INTRODUCTION

Foreign guest work is a very common phenomenon these days. It is not just a matter of word of mouth, but is now a reality in our immediate surroundings. The aim of this research is to analyse the narrow and broader topic of foreign employment in the region of Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc). The chosen subject is very topical nowadays, not only at the level of larger geographical areas but also at the level of smaller regions. However, there is very little research and information available regarding its importance. Based on the experience gained so far, outbound labour transport in Romania is slowly becoming a separate industry, which is developing and expanding very rapidly. As a result, its impact on the population of the region is becoming more and more significant, which is why it is essential to monitor, analyse and present data on it to society. Accurate national data on foreign employment in Romania are not available, so a comparative analysis could not be made. In the absence of a national policy on the

repatriation of young people working abroad, Harghita County has launched its own programme, the results of which will be evaluated in the long term.

Working abroad has important financial implications at the personal, family, municipal or even national level. In addition to its economic effects, undertaking guest work plays a very important role in shaping the general life, everyday experiences and emotions of an individual, a family or even a small community. It also has a major impact on how a person, whether emigrating or staying at home, relates to others and on his or her self-image and worldview; thus, it has a very important psychological impact that is not given enough attention. Based on the above, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

The question examined in this study is the extent to which working abroad is useful for achieving a decent standard of living and achieving the goals set.

Description of migration in Romania and Szeklerland

Nearly 45% of the Romanian population lives in rural areas, but we know that this group has a higher proportion of foreign workers, as it is harder to find decent paying jobs in these areas. There are fewer opportunities and often in remote settlements where living conditions are much lower (*Worldometer*, n.d.). Foreign guest workers and migration have become a phenomenon not only in our own country but also in Europe and the world, with a significant impact on the labour market (*Castles*, 2010). Migrant workers can be broadly divided into two distinct categories: skilled and unskilled workers, whose placement poses a challenge to the labour market of the host countries (*Oso et al.*, 2022).

Migration is a form of population movement, which may result from individual or (small) group decision-making and is mainly economic in nature, driven by wage inequalities between countries, as it is more advantageous to receive a higher income for the same work done (*Marques & Góis*, 2017). In the case of seasonal foreign guest workers, expatriates do not want to integrate into the host society; they behave as strangers, treating it as a temporary situation. They typically maintain a low standard of living with a low budget, as their focus is on making a profit and bringing home as much as possible (*Péter*, 2013).

Society is ageing, the active population is declining, but the proportion of pensioners in need of support is rising, creating a very serious economic problem, to which the permanent or temporary emigration of the active population abroad is a major contributory factor. Romania is primarily a labour-supplier country for the European Union, providing a cheap source of labour for more developed host countries, which is advantageous for them. For Romania, however, this is a disadvantage due to the high costs of educating and training the workforce and the lost benefits of guest workers (*Szabó & Barna*, 2023).

The most popular destinations for Romanian residents have changed over time, with Germany, the CEA, Austria and Hungary being the most popular in the early 1990s, followed by Canada and Italy in the early 2000s, and Spain in 2010. In the 2020s, more developed countries in the West (such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, Spain and Italy), the Scandinavian region (Sweden), Canada and the AEOA overseas have become the most popular destinations for Romanian citizens (*Apostoaie et al.*, 2015).

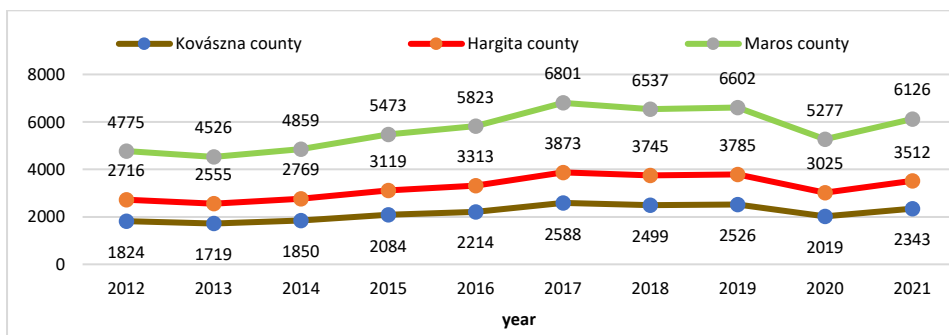
Nowadays, Hungary is not such a popular destination, as its opportunities are not much greater than those of Romania; mostly members of the Hungarian minority prefer to choose this country due to their knowledge of the language. (Szábó & Barna, 2023). According to the researchers, the emigration wave changes its trend, sometimes intensifying and sometimes slackening. Unsurprisingly, young people who are about to start a family always play the biggest role in the increase, as they are the ones who need the large financial resources and experience to start an independent life (Castles et al., 2015). In the absence of a job, parents also take to the road, leaving children behind, which often results in broken families. For the first time, one parent is solely responsible for the financial security of the family. The resulting situation can sometimes become difficult to manage, leading to a broken family. If the money sent home is not sufficient, the spouse left at home may also go abroad to seek work (Sandu, 2010). The children are then left in the care of relatives (Bulgaru, 2020).

Foreign guest work has been present in Szeklerland for more than 150 years, meaning that the Szekler society has been an emitting society for a century and a half (Bálint, 2017, p. 1), but this is not reflected in the change in population numbers, as natural increase is the cause of emigration. „People leave because the area is poor, there are no jobs, there is nothing to do.” This claim is considered by many to be the basis for the migration wave from Szeklerland, which is true but not always verifiable. Nowadays, experimentation also plays a role, pushing our own boundaries and finding the right place for permanent settlement (Bodó, 2008, p. 18).

The migration of Szekler migrants is a „floating migration”, meaning that the guest worker leaves the question open for a long time as to whether they will settle permanently or return home, often changing their place of residence abroad (Bálint, 2017). They constantly weigh up the opportunities offered by the two countries, considering the standard of living and the consequences. Initially, the main objective was not to improve individual and family living standards, but rather to maintain social status and reputation in the community and to acquire the necessary assets. In the last century, families supported themselves through agriculture and had to provide the best conditions for this. However, as time went by, agriculture was replaced by industrialisation, and they had to keep pace with progress in order to make a living. As a result, new goals were formulated, which further increased the amount of guest work in Szeklerland. The region is essentially rural, with most of the population living in the countryside or in small towns, as there are no large cities in Szeklerland. There are many settlements that are isolated from the world and difficult to reach. For the vast majority of those who emigrate from here, the only livelihood is to work abroad as guest workers, as there are no jobs locally.

As shown in *Figure 1*, the number of emigrants (temporary and permanent) in all three counties of Szeklerland has changed in almost the same way over the years. For example, if the number of emigrants increased in Harghita County in a given year, the number of emigrants increased in similar proportions in Covasna and Maros Counties. Fortunately, in all three counties, the number of persons who emigrated only temporarily is much higher than the number of those who settled permanently in the host country.

Figure 1: Trends in the number of temporary emigrants from the three Szekler counties over the years



Source: Based on *Institutul Național de Statistică* (n.d.)

The data show that a higher proportion of men from Szeklerland are willing to migrate, while women are more willing to accept and integrate into a foreign environment, often transferring the knowledge and experience they have acquired back to their home country (Bodó, 2008, p. 31).

In terms of the type of work undertaken abroad, the vast majority are engaged in physical labour, agriculture, service provision and construction (Bodó, 2009, p. 131). In Szeklerland, labour migration is moving towards transnationalisation and has become a new way of life. Unfortunately, the rigidity and underdevelopment of the region cannot be solved by labour migration alone, but it does bring about very significant developments at the family level (Biró & Bodó, 2016, p. 52).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was based on an online questionnaire with a total of 46 questions. In the Google Forms survey, there were self-response questions and multiple-choice questions where one or more options could be selected. Additionally, some questions were formulated using Likert scales. The most important criterion for the research was that it be completed by people who were from or had settled in Csíkszentkirály, or possibly from the surrounding area. It was essential to reach all age groups, so the snowball method was used. We began by targeting people who had already participated in foreign work experiences and were from different age groups. For better readability and accuracy of the questionnaires, local currency is used. Since the start of the research, 1 EUR has been approximately 5 RON (1 EUR ≈ 5 RON).

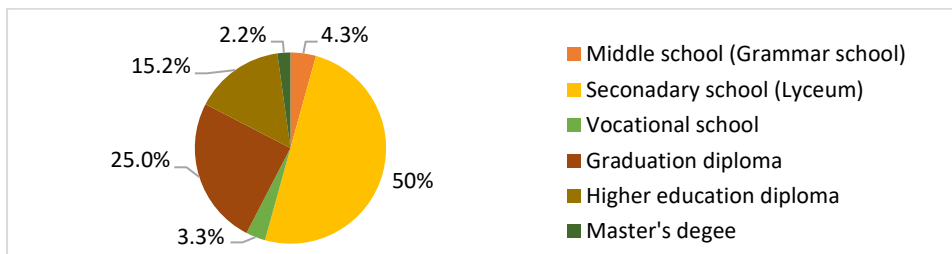
The questionnaire was available between 26 October 2022 and 26 January 2023, during which a total of 92 responses were recorded, forming the basis of the present research. The data sources obtained were processed by using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) program for quantitative data analysis (Lázár, 2022). Correlations, relationships and frequency analyses were carried out using the Frequencies and Crosstabs analysis methods available within the program. The location of the study is Csíkszentkirály, 7 km from Csíkszereda, as described above.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

By illustrating the results of the empirical research, the answers to the demographic questions provide a clearer overview of the sample's composition. Of those who completed the questionnaire, 86 persons, i.e. 93.50% of the respondents, indicated Csíkszentkirály as their current place of residence in Romania, while the remaining individuals, though originally from there, had moved away. Thus, all 92 responses collected could be used in the research. In terms of gender breakdown, 46.70% of the respondents were female, while the majority, 53.30%, identified as male.

Exactly half of the respondents had completed 12 grades, plus exactly 25.00% had a baccalaureate degree, with 3 individuals holding a vocational diploma. Only 17.40% of the survey respondents continued their education by completing some form of higher education, possibly a master's degree. The survey showed that only 4 out of 92 persons had not completed the compulsory 10 classes with the highest level of education being grade 8 (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2: Distribution of the sample by education



When asked why they did not find a job in their home country in the profession they had studied, the most frequent answer was that there were few jobs on the labour market, making it difficult to secure employment. If they did find a job by chance, the salary was so low that they could not support themselves or their families. In addition, they often cited the realisation that the profession they had learnt was not suitable for them, that they did not like it, or that the biggest problem was not necessarily the conditions at home but rather the urgent need for more money, which they could only obtain by temporarily moving away from their native land.

The number of those who emigrated at the age of 19-25 is particularly high, with the vast majority choosing to work abroad immediately after finishing their studies. This is further confirmed by the fact that more than 43.50% of respondents indicated that their pre-emigration activity was studying (school, university).

In most cases, family members or friends helped them to emigrate, but nearly 23% asked for the help of an intermediary agency and 11 people said that they did not have any help in finding a job and managed everything on their own. *Figure 3* shows the most frequent periods spent abroad for each age group. The longer the time spent abroad, the lower the proportion of younger age groups.

When examining the differences between the two genders, we found that both the expectations regarding salary and the amount earned were lower for women, i.e.

the proportion of women was higher at lower income levels, but as we moved towards higher amounts, the proportion of men increased in both cases (Figure 4 and Figure 5).

Figure 3: Distribution of different age groups in the sample by time spent abroad

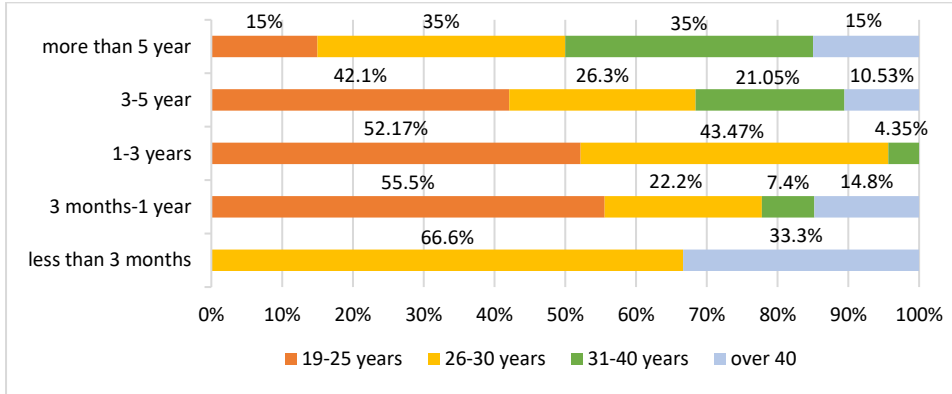


Figure 4: Gender distribution of respondents by desired monthly salary (in RON) before departure (1 EUR ≈ 5 RON)

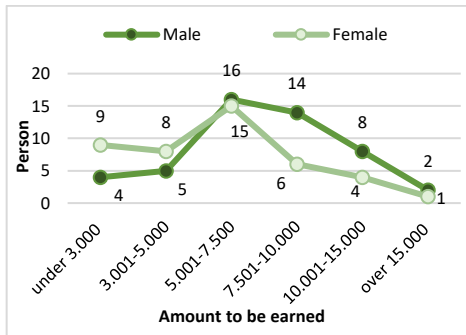
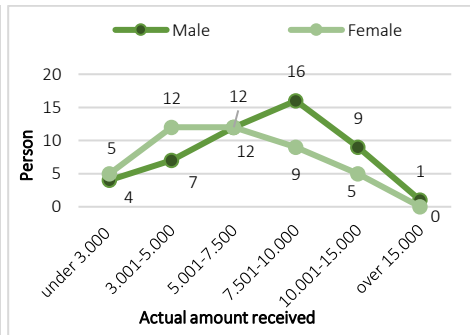


Figure 5: Gender distribution of respondents by the actual monthly salary (in RON) received after the trip (1 EUR ≈ 5 RON)

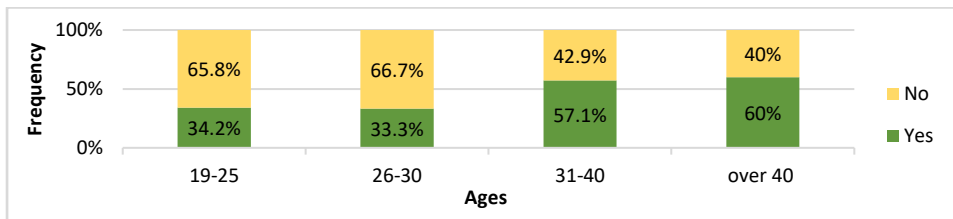


In most cases, the income expected when emigrating abroad was between 5 000 and 7 500 RON in 31 cases, but a large number of respondents also indicated a range of 7 500 to 10 000 RON. Surprisingly, 13 persons would have been satisfied with an amount between 1 000 and 3 000 RON, but there were also 3 persons who had high expectations and wanted to receive an average amount of over 15 000 RON per month. In contrast, only 1 person managed to achieve this amount and 9 persons actually received an average monthly salary of less than 3 000 RON. Most of them received between 5 000 and 7 500 (24 persons) and between 7 500 and 10 000 (25 persons) on average.

Among the jobs abroad, the most popular were jobs in agriculture, industry, services, construction and trade. Some people did intellectual work and worked in the transport industry, but no one engaged in the arts or volunteering during their time abroad. Unfortunately, starting their own business was not often mentioned as a main goal, or perhaps a more important goal, which is not due to a lack of entrepreneurial inclination, ideas or aptitude, but to the Romanian legislation, tax system and regulations. New businesses would be beneficial for the municipality because the taxes paid would increase the municipal budget. Working as a guest worker abroad has a huge impact on the life of a family, whether it involves one or more family members, such as a parent, grandparent, spouse or child. In addition to the emotional life of the family, the financial situation is also greatly affected.

Figure 6 shows that nearly 60.00% of respondents over 40 years old regularly send financial support to their family or close friends back home.

Figure 6: Percentage of different age groups who regularly support their family and close friends financially

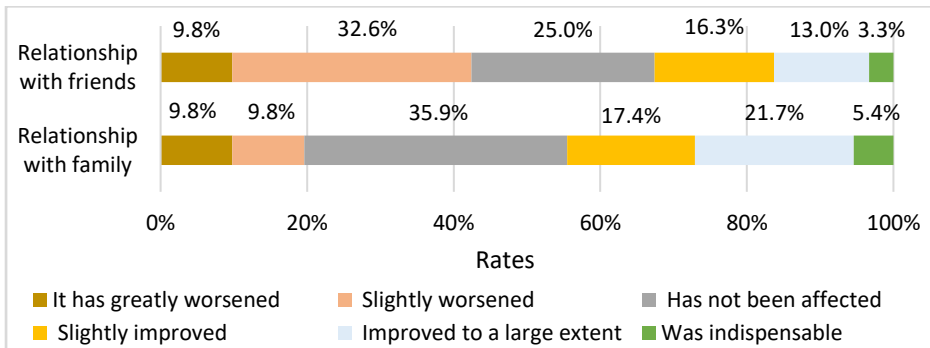


However, when broken down by age group, the higher the average age, the greater the proportion of respondents who regularly send financial support home.

It is not only family life that is affected by working abroad, but also social life. Often, this result is becoming isolated from their circle of friends, weakening their relationship with friends and family, missing out on many events and changing their social role at home. Yet, there are often attempts to reverse or at least slow down this process, and unfortunately, in many cases people use the opportunities offered by material wealth to do so. Some individuals also try to maintain or even elevate their 'position' within the municipality by offering various forms of support. In the present research, 35.90% of foreign migrant worker respondents support and 64.10% do not support their place of residence or religious denomination.

The negative effect rate for contact with family members is lower, but still close to 20%, which is quite high for the item in question (Figure 7). Unfortunately, the impact on the relationship with loved ones was not very positive, as it was found that for more than 40% of respondents, their relationship with friends had deteriorated to some extent. A quarter of the respondents felt that working as a foreign guest worker had not improved their relationships, and only in a third of cases did they see an improvement. However, in almost 40% of cases the relationship with the environment did not change, which is considered fortunate, and in over 27% of the sample, working abroad helped to improve the relationships with family members.

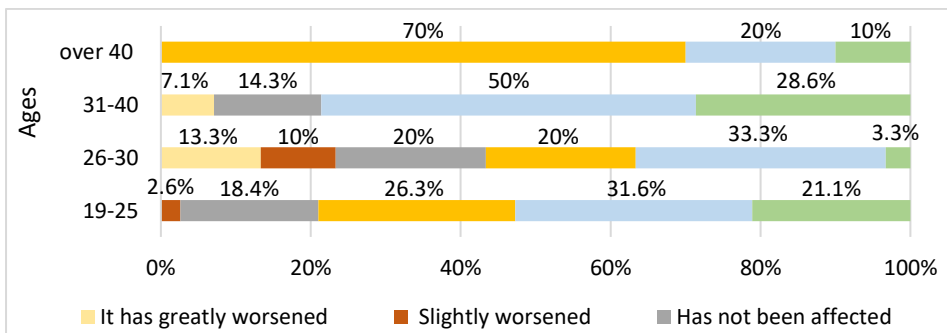
Figure 7: The impact of foreign guest work on the items listed



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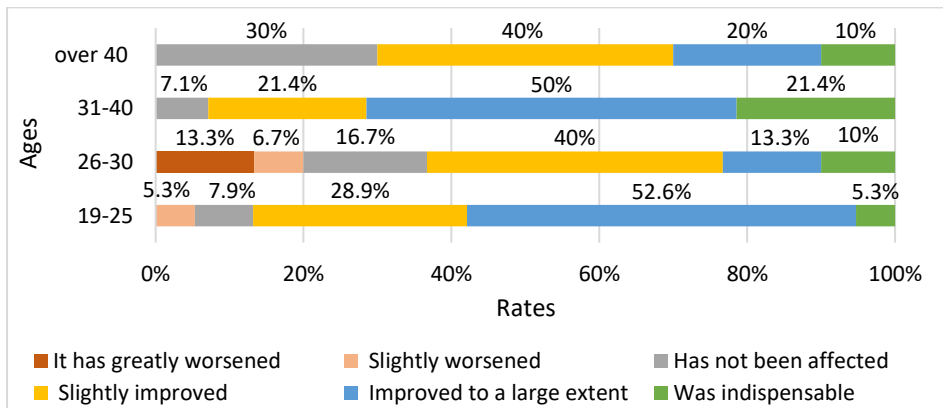
Two thirds of men say that their time abroad has had no or only a negative impact on their outlook on life, but for women, it is a completely different story, with nearly 90.00% saying that working abroad has had a positive impact on their outlook. Only a small proportion of 25-30 year olds were left with negative experiences in this area, while members of the other groups were left with positive memories to a lesser or greater extent and believe that working abroad helped shape their personalities by increasing their self-esteem (Figure 8).

Figure 8: To what extent and in what direction did working abroad influence attitudes towards life for different age groups



Looking at the change in wealth as a result of working abroad for different age groups (Figure 9), it can be seen that some of the youngest respondents had a decrease in wealth. However, in most cases, wealth increased, especially for those aged 30 and over.

Figure 9: To what extent and in what direction did working abroad affect the size of wealth for different age groups.



We conclude the presentation of the survey results with a description of the positive feedback from respondents. In the context of working abroad, the most frequent response centred on the material aspect, i.e. 'money', the increase in the standard of living achieved, and the creation of financial security. For many, the opportunity to learn a language, gain professional experience and achieve self-development was also a positive factor. However, many respondents simply noted that working abroad made it easier to achieve their goals.

CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, today we see that the population of the region has become quite impoverished due to various economic and political factors. Prices have risen but incomes have either remained the same or increased only slightly. As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult or even impossible to achieve anything new, and even those who are able to maintain their current standard of living under these circumstances are fortunate to do so. However, it is fair to conclude from the responses received that, despite the many disadvantages of working abroad, it is a fruitful option. More than 80% of people achieved their pre-departure goals and almost three quarters (73.9%) experienced an increase in their standard of living. While it may not be the best option, it is the only option for most people and families. It is particularly important to underline that this option is still mostly chosen by the younger generation. In most cases, the reason given is still economic, specifically to generate the income needed to start and maintain a family and to provide a decent

standard of living. Many people take a job abroad immediately after completing their studies, as this is the example they see from society.

Although the jobs abroad are often physically demanding, they still offer much better financial and working conditions than those in Romania.

The research showed that very few people spend the money they earn for purposes other than their personal and family needs. Only a small number of people extend their financial support to other causes, such as religious denominations or local communities. Another negative factor worth highlighting is the fact that working abroad often weakens or even breaks family and friendship bonds due to the distance. Even technological progress has not been able to eliminate this effect. Despite this, it is gratifying to see that all the hard work and sacrifices are paying off, as in most cases, the goals have been achieved or are closer to being achieved through working abroad.

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Corresponding author:

József VARGA

Institute for Rural Development and Sustainable Economy

Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences

7400 Kaposvár, Guba Sándor u. 40. Hungary.

e-mail: varga.jozsef@uni-mate.hu

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