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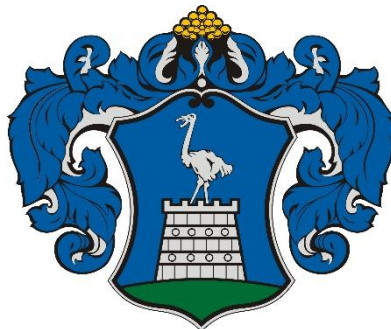
# **Regional Landscape Report**

## **Vas County (Hungary)**

*Silver Up Interreg Europe Project*

PP03 - Vas County Government Office

February 2026



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# 1. Introduction

This Regional Landscape Report presents a comprehensive overview of Vas County, Hungary, within the framework of the Silver Up Interreg Europe project. Vas County, located in the western part of Hungary bordering Austria and Slovenia, represents a significant case study for understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with demographic aging and the development of the silver economy in Central Europe.

The Silver Up project brings together eight European regions to address the challenges of population decline and aging societies through the development and consolidation of the silver economy. As project partner PP03, the Vas County Government Office is committed to exploring innovative approaches to transform demographic challenges into economic opportunities while improving the quality of life for older adults.

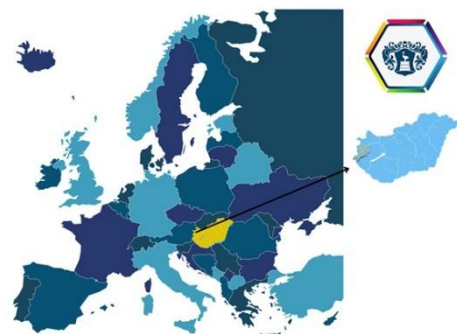
Demographic aging is not merely a statistical trend but a fundamental transformation that affects all aspects of society—from healthcare and social services to economic productivity, urban planning, and community life. In Hungary, as in much of Europe, this demographic transition is occurring rapidly, creating both urgent challenges and significant opportunities. The silver economy—encompassing all economic activities, products, and services arising from the needs and consumption patterns of people aged 50 and above—represents one of the most promising avenues for sustainable economic development in aging regions.

This report examines the territorial context of Vas County, analyzes the current state of the silver economy, identifies key development needs, and showcases best practices that can inform policy improvements and foster sustainable economic growth centered on the needs and potentials of the aging population. Special attention is given to the emerging concept of 'caring communities'—community-based initiatives that seek to address care gaps through local solidarity and civic engagement.

## 2. Territorial Context

### 2.1 General Characterization of the Territory

Vas County is situated in western Hungary at the foot of the Alps and the Little Plain. The county covers an area of 3,336 km<sup>2</sup>, making it the third smallest county in Hungary by territorial size, representing only 3.58% of the national territory. Despite its modest size, Vas County plays a crucial strategic role as Hungary's western gateway to Europe.



1. Figure - Location of Vas County

**Geographic and Strategic Position.** The county shares international borders with Austria (Burgenland) and Slovenia (Mura Statistical Region), positioning it as a crucial bridge between Central and Western Europe. This strategic location has historically facilitated trade, cultural exchange, and economic cooperation. The county also borders the Hungarian counties of Győr-Moson-Sopron to the north, Veszprém to the east, and Zala to the south. The capital of Vas County is Szombathely, which was founded by Roman Emperor Claudius in 43 AD

under the name Savaria, making it one of Hungary's oldest cities with a rich historical and cultural heritage.

**Settlement Structure.** Vas County has a distinctive settlement pattern characterized by a high degree of fragmentation. The county comprises 216 settlements, representing 6.9% of Hungary's total municipalities. A particularly notable feature is the prevalence of small villages: 127 settlements (59% of the total) have fewer than 500 inhabitants. This fragmented structure is reflected in the settlement density of 6.5 settlements per 100 km<sup>2</sup>, nearly twice the national average of 3.4 settlements per 100 km<sup>2</sup>. This fragmentation presents both challenges and opportunities for service provision, community development, and the implementation of age-friendly policies.

The county is organized into seven administrative districts (járás): Celldömölk, Körmend, Kőszeg, Sárvár, Szentgotthárd, Szombathely, and Vasvár. These districts are further divided into nine statistical micro-regions for planning and analytical purposes. The urbanization rate stands at 59.6%, approximately 7 percentage points lower than the national average, indicating a more rural character compared to other Hungarian counties. The major urban centers include Szombathely (the county seat with approximately 75,000 inhabitants), Sárvár, Körmend, Kőszeg and Szentgotthárd.

## 2.2 Demographic Characteristics

**Population Size and Trends.** As of the 2022 census, Vas County had a population of 249,513 inhabitants, representing a 2.8% decline from the 2011 census figure of 256,629. This downward trend has been persistent and accelerating: between 1990 and 2000, the population decreased by approximately 9,500 people, equivalent to losing a town the size of Szentgotthárd. The decline continued between 2000 and 2011, with an additional loss of approximately 12,000 residents. These trends reflect broader national and regional patterns of demographic decline, driven by low birth rates, aging, and out-migration of working-age populations to more economically dynamic regions.

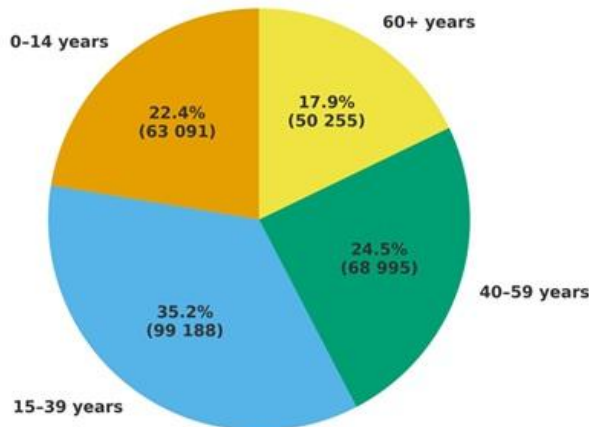
The population density in Vas County is 76 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> (2015 data), considerably lower than the national average of approximately 106 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, reflecting both the county's rural character and ongoing depopulation trends. The density varies significantly across the county, with higher concentrations in and around Szombathely and other urban centers, and much lower densities in rural areas, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of the county.

**Age Structure and Aging.** Like the rest of Hungary, Vas County faces significant demographic aging. According to national statistics, Hungary's median age reached 44.2 years in 2026, with approximately 21% of the population aged 65 or older. These national trends are particularly pronounced in rural areas like Vas County, where out-migration of younger, working-age populations has accelerated the aging process. The dependency ratio—the number of dependents (children and elderly) relative to the working-age population—has been steadily increasing, placing growing pressure on social services, healthcare systems, and public finances.

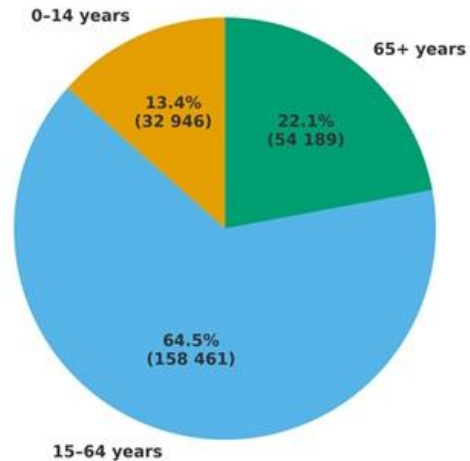
The aging index (the ratio of people aged 65+ to those aged 0-14) provides a stark illustration of this demographic shift. While precise recent data for Vas County are not publicly available, national trends suggest that the aging index has more than doubled over the past three decades, moving from a situation where there were more children than elderly to one where the elderly significantly outnumber children. This demographic transition presents both challenges (increased demand for

healthcare and long-term care, shrinking workforce, fiscal pressures) and opportunities (the silver economy, active aging initiatives, intergenerational solidarity programs).

Vas County Population by Age Group (1980)



Vas County Population by Age Group (2022)



2. Figure - Population of Vas County (Source: vasmegye.hu)

**Ethnic Composition and Cultural Diversity.** The county has a predominantly Hungarian ethnic composition, with notable minorities that contribute to its cultural richness. According to census data, significant minority groups include Croats (approximately 3,000 people), Roma (2,500), Germans (2,000), and Slovenes (1,500). The Slovene minority is concentrated in the area between Szentgotthárd and the Slovenian border, maintaining distinct cultural traditions and language use. The German-speaking population, descended from settlers who arrived in the 18th century, is present in several villages. These diverse communities add cultural vibrancy to the county and present both challenges and opportunities for inclusive policy-making and community development.

## 2.3 Regional Economic Activity

Vas County has positioned itself as one of Hungary's most economically dynamic regions, benefiting from its strategic location and strong industrial base. The county has successfully leveraged its proximity to Austria and Slovenia to attract significant foreign direct investment and integrate into European supply chains. This economic success, however, has not been evenly distributed across the county, with urban-rural disparities and the challenges of an aging workforce becoming increasingly apparent.

**Economic Structure and Performance.** The county's economy is characterized by a strong manufacturing sector, particularly in automotive, mechanical engineering and pharmaceutical. Major international companies with significant operations in Vas County include:

- Stellantis (Opel Hungary, Szentgotthárd) - one of the largest employers in the county, producing engines and transmissions for European markets. In 2024, the company announced

a €103 million investment to expand production of electric drive modules, signaling a strategic shift toward electromobility.

- BPW Hungária Kft. (Szombathely)- producing axle systems and brake components
- Linde Gas Hungary (Répcelak)- industrial gases production
- FALCO (Szombathely)- timber industry and wood processing
- Kronospan (Szombathely) - wood-based panel manufacturing
- Schaeffler Group (Szombathely) - automotive and industrial supplier
- TDK Group (Szombathely) - electronic components
- APTIV (Szombathely) - electrical and electronic architecture
- Schott Hungary (Lukácsháza) – pharmaceutical packaging, special glass and glass-ceramics – expansions in 2025, 2026
- Kromberg & Schubert (Kőszeg) - automotive wiring systems
- Nestlé Purina (Bük) – pet food production, one of the largest pet food manufacturing plants in Europe
- MAM (Vaskeresztes) – Baby care products manufacturing, one of the world’s leading brands, expansion in 2026
- Egis Pharmaceuticals (Körmend) – pharmaceuticals manufacturing

**Business Environment.** As of December 2023, Vas County had approximately 44,800 registered enterprises, representing a modest 2.4% increase from 2022. The predominance of small businesses continues, with the vast majority operating as sole proprietorships or individual enterprises, while partnerships (limited liability companies, joint-stock companies) represent approximately one-fifth of all businesses. This structure reflects both entrepreneurial dynamism and the persistent challenges of scaling up in a competitive environment. The relative stagnation in business numbers compared to earlier growth periods suggests a maturing local economy, though new business formation continues particularly in services and trade sectors.



3. Figure - Number and Ratio of Businesses in Vas (Source: KSH)

Orange: individual enterprises  
Blue: LLC-s, joint-stock companies  
Light blue: Non-profit organizations

**Employment and Labor Market.** As of 2023, Vas County's labor market showed mixed but overall favorable indicators. The employment rate reached 75.6%, significantly above the national average and continuing the upward trend from previous years. However, the unemployment rate increased to 3.6%, up from the historically low 1.8% recorded in 2017, though still below the national average. This increase reflects broader economic challenges rather than local weakness—nationally, unemployment rose more sharply. Notably, both the number of employed and unemployed persons increased in 2023, indicating that economically inactive individuals (retirees, students, homemakers) re-entered the labor market, with the inactive population declining by 9.9%. The tight labor market persists, with companies continuing to struggle to find qualified workers despite higher

unemployment, suggesting skills mismatches. Labor shortages remain a constraint on growth, particularly in manufacturing, healthcare, hospitality, and skilled trades.

**Wages and Purchasing Power.** In 2023, full-time employees in Vas County earned an average net monthly wage of 347,000 forints (approximately €900), representing a 14% nominal increase from 2022. However, high inflation (averaging 17.6% in 2023) meant real wages declined slightly. County wages remain approximately 10-15% below Budapest levels but competitive with other Western Hungarian regions, reflecting the strong manufacturing base and relatively low unemployment.

**Investment and Development.** While comprehensive fixed asset investment data for 2023 comparable to the 2017 figures (108 billion forints) are not yet publicly available, industrial production indicators suggest more challenging conditions. Industrial production in Vas County declined by 3.2% in 2023, though this contraction was smaller than the national average of -5.4%, demonstrating relative resilience. This decline reflects reduced automotive sector demand across Europe, supply chain disruptions, and high energy costs. Despite these headwinds, major employers continued strategic investments: Stellantis announced its €103 million electric drive module investment, Nestlé Purina expanded capacity, and various SMEs received support through regional and EU programs. Public infrastructure investments continued to focus on transportation improvements (particularly border crossing upgrades with Austria), industrial park development, and digital infrastructure, though at a more modest pace than during peak EU funding periods.

**Tourism.** Tourism represents an important and growing economic sector with significant potential for silver economy development. The county's rich historical heritage—including extensive Roman ruins in Szombathely (the ancient city of Savaria), medieval castles, baroque churches, and traditional villages—thermal baths (Bük, Sárovar), natural landscapes (Őrség National Park), and proximity to Austria make it an attractive destination for domestic and international visitors. Cultural tourism, health and wellness tourism, and active tourism (hiking, cycling) are all growing segments. The county welcomed approximately 300,000 overnight visitors in 2019 (pre-pandemic figures), with thermal spa tourism being particularly popular among older adults.

### 3. Policy Instrument Characterization

The primary policy instrument being addressed through the Silver Up project in Vas County is the Vas County Territorial Development Program 2021-2030, adopted by the Vas County Assembly in June 2021. This strategic document provides the framework for county-level development priorities and resource allocation for the current decade.

**Strategic Goals.** The Territorial Development Program identifies four main strategic objectives that guide all development activities in the county:

- Improving regional competitiveness through innovation, digitalization, and support for high-value-added economic activities
- Sustainable utilization of natural resources, including renewable energy development, circular economy principles, and environmental protection
- Development of rural areas, particularly improving the viability of small settlements through regional cooperation, infrastructure improvements, and support for local economies
- Strengthening connections within and beyond the county, including transportation infrastructure, cross-border cooperation, and digital connectivity

**Priority Areas.** Within these strategic objectives, the program defines several specific priority areas for intervention:

- Enterprise development for increased added value, with emphasis on R&D, innovation, and digitalization
- Food production to support local food supply chains, short supply chains, and agribusiness development
- Human resource programs for talent retention and attraction, including education, vocational training, and lifelong learning
- Tourism development for higher spending and longer stays, with focus on quality improvement and diversification
- Energy efficiency for sustainable operations in public buildings, enterprises, and residential sector

**Gaps Related to Silver Economy.** While the Territorial Development Program addresses demographic challenges indirectly through human resource development and rural revitalization, it lacks specific, targeted strategies for leveraging the silver economy as a driver of economic growth. The program acknowledges aging as a challenge but does not fully conceptualize it as an opportunity. Specific gaps include:

- Explicit recognition of the silver economy as a strategic priority with dedicated resources and targets
- Concrete action plans for developing age-friendly products and services across multiple sectors
- Integration of silver economy considerations across all priority areas, particularly tourism, enterprise development, and urban planning
- Mechanisms to support innovation and entrepreneurship specifically targeting older adults' needs and preferences
- Cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms to ensure coherence between economic development, health policy, social services, and spatial planning
- Monitoring indicators and evaluation frameworks specifically focused on silver economy outcomes

The Silver Up project provides a timely opportunity to strengthen these aspects of the policy instrument and ensure that the county's development strategy fully capitalizes on the opportunities presented by demographic aging. Lessons learned from other European regions participating in the project can inform concrete improvements to both policy design and implementation practices.

## 4. State of the Art of the Silver Economy

### 4.1 Definition and European Context

The silver economy encompasses all economic activities, products, and services that arise from or are influenced by the needs, capabilities, and consumption patterns of people aged 50 and above. This

definition deliberately focuses on the age of 50+ rather than retirement age, recognizing that consumption patterns and needs begin to shift well before formal retirement, and that many people in this age group remain economically active and represent significant purchasing power.

According to European Commission projections, Europe is expected to have 222 million 'silver-aged' residents (aged 50+) by 2025, representing 43% of the total population and generating approximately €57 trillion in spending, equivalent to 31% of European GDP. The 65+ age group possesses net wealth approximately 75% higher than the average, indicating significant purchasing power concentrated in this demographic segment. This wealth has been accumulated through decades of work, savings, and property appreciation, and its deployment has profound implications for economic dynamism and intergenerational equity.

The silver economy is not a single sector but rather a cross-cutting economic opportunity that spans multiple industries: healthcare and pharmaceuticals, assistive technologies and robotics, housing and smart homes, transportation and mobility services, financial services and insurance, tourism and leisure, education and lifelong learning, retail and e-commerce, and many others. Each of these sectors is being transformed by the needs and preferences of an aging population with higher expectations for quality, convenience, and personalization than previous generations.

## 4.2 Silver Economy in Vas County

**Current Market Size and Sectors.** While comprehensive data on the silver economy's contribution to Vas County's GDP is not yet systematically collected, several sectors show clear evidence of silver economy activity. The lack of systematic data collection itself represents a gap could be addressed by developing appropriate metrics and monitoring frameworks.

- **Healthcare and Social Services:** County-operated and non-profit residential care institutions as well as church-operated homes provide long-term care across multiple facilities. Total capacity is approximately 800-900 beds across all facilities. These provide long-term residential care for elderly people, dementia patients, psychiatric patients, and people with visual or mobility impairments. The county maintains various daycare facilities (nappali ellátás) and home assistance services (házi segítségnyújtás) for older adults, though capacity constraints and waiting lists indicate unmet demand. Private providers are beginning to enter the market, particularly for higher-quality services, though the sector remains dominated by public and non-profit providers.
- **Thermal and Wellness Tourism:** Vas County has excellent conditions for health and thermal spa tourism, which is particularly attractive to older visitors seeking therapeutic and wellness services. The thermal baths in Bük and Sárvár are among the most visited in Hungary, with Bük's thermal spa attracting over 200,000 visitors annually, a significant proportion of whom are over 50 and seeking health benefits alongside relaxation. The region's climate, natural environment, and cultural attractions also support active and gentle forms of tourism popular with older adults, including hiking, cycling, and cultural tours.
- **Retail and Services:** Age-friendly products and services, though not specifically quantified, include mobility aids, adapted vehicles, specialized nutrition products, assistive technologies (hearing aids, vision aids), accessible transportation services, and home modification services. Most of these are provided by small businesses or specialized retailers rather than large chains, indicating an opportunity for market development and consolidation.

- **Culture and Leisure:** Cultural programs, senior clubs (nyugdíjas klubok), educational activities (third-age universities), and social events tailored to older adults. Szombathely, Sárvár, Kőszeg and other municipalities organize regular cultural events with older audiences in mind. The Vas County Library system provides large-print books and audiobooks. However, systematic age-friendly programming remains limited.
- **Housing and Construction:** While there are no major assisted-living developments in Vas County, there is growing interest from both municipalities and private developers. Home modification services for aging-in-place are provided on a small scale by construction companies and craftspeople, but not as a coordinated service package.

### 4.3 Key Stakeholders in the Silver Economy Ecosystem

The silver economy ecosystem in Vas County involves multiple actors across sectors, though coordination and strategic alignment remain limited:

- **Public Sector:** Vas County Government Office (central government representation), Vas County Local Government Office (county-level governance), municipal governments (216 municipalities), public healthcare institutions (hospitals, clinics, primary care), social service providers (county institution, municipal services)
- **Private Sector:** Healthcare service providers (private clinics, pharmacies), tourism operators (thermal baths, hotels, restaurants), pharmaceutical companies, assistive technology suppliers, food industry (special dietary products), construction and home modification services, transportation companies
- **Third Sector:** NGOs supporting elderly people (foundations, associations), senior citizen clubs and organizations, volunteer organizations, church-based care providers (Caritas, various church-run institutions), advocacy groups
- **Research and Education:** Limited local presence - the ELTE University has a campus in Szombathely and iASK (Institute for Advanced Studies) is based in Kőszeg, but limited focus on gerontology or silver economy research. Vocational training centers provide some caregiver training. Opportunities exist for strengthening research capacity and knowledge exchange with national and European institutions.
- **Business Support Organizations:** Vas County Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Vas Megyei Kereskedelmi és Iparkamara), enterprise development organizations, innovation centers

### 4.4 Innovation and Development Initiatives

Vas County has demonstrated commitment to innovation in addressing aging-related challenges, though efforts remain fragmented:

- Participation in the Silver Up Interreg Europe project represents a strategic effort to learn from European best practices and develop targeted interventions. This is Vas County's first major initiative explicitly focused on the silver economy as a development opportunity.
- Various European funding projects have supported infrastructure development for elderly care facilities (ESF, ERDF projects) and age-friendly public spaces (accessibility improvements in town centers, parks).

- Growing recognition among policymakers of the need to transform demographic challenges into economic opportunities, as evidenced by inclusion in strategic documents and increasing dialogue with stakeholders.
- Pilot projects in some municipalities focusing on age-friendly community development, though these remain isolated examples rather than systematic approaches.

However, systematic support for silver economy entrepreneurship and innovation remains limited, representing a significant opportunity for future development. There are no incubators or accelerators focused on age-tech or silver economy startups, no dedicated funding programs, and limited awareness among entrepreneurs of market opportunities.

## 5. Main Needs and Development Factors

### 5.1 Critical Challenges

**Demographic Sustainability.** The ongoing population decline and accelerating aging pose fundamental challenges to economic vitality and social service provision. Out-migration of young, skilled workers threatens the long-term sustainability of communities, particularly in rural areas. This creates a vicious cycle: fewer young people means fewer births, declining school enrollment, closure of local services, which in turn makes the area less attractive to young families, perpetuating decline. Breaking this cycle requires bold, innovative interventions that make aging regions attractive places to live and work for all age groups.

**Care Infrastructure Gaps.** As documented by Gábríel and Katona (2026), Hungary follows an unsupported familialistic care model where family members bear primary responsibility for elderly care with insufficient financial or organizational support from public authorities. This places enormous burdens on family caregivers, particularly women, who often must reduce working hours or leave employment entirely to provide care. Waiting lists for residential care facilities are growing (in some cases exceeding 2-3 years), and there is a severe shortage of qualified care workers due to emigration to Western Europe where wages are significantly higher and low domestic wages in the social care sector. Home care services are inadequate in coverage and quality, and respite care options are virtually non-existent.

The Hungarian care crisis has distinctive features compared to Western European countries. While Western countries are experiencing increasing marketization and corporatization of care (Farris & Marchetti, 2017), Hungary has seen limited formal market development. Instead, informal care markets have emerged, characterized by unregulated arrangements, cash payments, and precarious working conditions. This informality creates vulnerabilities for both care recipients and care workers while depriving the state of tax revenues.

**Small Settlement Viability.** With 59% of settlements having fewer than 500 inhabitants, many communities struggle to maintain basic services and economic activity. The fragmented settlement structure makes service provision costly and inefficient. Schools close due to lack of students, shops close due to lack of customers, and young people leave due to lack of opportunities. Yet these small villages often have strong community bonds, cultural traditions, and quality of life advantages that could be leveraged for sustainable development if appropriate support mechanisms were in place.

**Limited Awareness and Strategic Focus.** While demographic aging is widely recognized as a challenge, the opportunities associated with the silver economy remain underexploited. There is limited awareness among entrepreneurs, policymakers, and the general public about the potential of age-oriented products and services. Aging is still predominantly framed as a problem rather than an opportunity. This negative framing becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it discourages investment, innovation, and the development of positive narratives about aging.

**Digital Divide and Skills Gap.** Many older adults in Vas County lack digital skills and access to digital technologies, limiting their participation in the digital economy and access to online services. While younger cohorts of retirees are increasingly digitally literate, significant gaps remain, particularly in rural areas and among those with lower education levels. This digital divide risks creating a two-tier system where those with digital access enjoy enhanced quality of life while others are left behind.

## 5.2 Key Development Needs

**Integrated Policy Framework.** There is a need for explicit integration of silver economy considerations into county-level strategic planning, with clear targets, indicators, and accountability mechanisms. This includes mainstreaming age-friendliness across all policy domains—from transportation to housing to economic development—rather than treating it as a marginal social policy issue. An integrated approach would recognize that the silver economy is not just about services for older people but about fundamentally rethinking how we design products, services, spaces, and institutions in an aging society.

**Innovation Ecosystem Development.** Support is needed for:

- Startups and SMEs developing age-friendly products and services - through incubators, accelerators, and seed funding
- Social enterprises addressing gaps in care provision - hybrid models combining social mission with financial sustainability
- Digital solutions for remote health monitoring, telemedicine, and social connectivity - addressing both healthcare access and social isolation
- Assistive technology development and adaptation - including both high-tech solutions (robotics, AI) and simple, affordable aids
- Research and development partnerships - connecting enterprises with research institutions to develop evidence-based innovations

**Workforce Development.** Investment in training programs for:

- Professional caregivers with improved working conditions and compensation to attract and retain talent in the sector
- Healthcare professionals specializing in geriatric care, recognizing the distinct needs of older patients
- Entrepreneurs on silver economy market opportunities, business model innovation, and age-friendly design
- Public sector officials on age-friendly policy-making, participatory planning, and cross-sectoral coordination

**Infrastructure and Service Innovation.** Development of:

- Age-friendly public spaces and transportation - ensuring accessibility, safety, and comfort for people with varying mobility and sensory capabilities
- Community-based care models as alternatives to institutional care - including adult day centers, respite care, and community support networks
- Preventive health and active aging programs - shifting from reactive treatment to proactive health promotion
- Intergenerational spaces and programs - creating opportunities for meaningful interaction across age groups
- Age-friendly housing options - from universal design in new construction to home modification programs for existing housing stock

**Market Development and Promotion.** Efforts to:

- Raise awareness about silver economy opportunities among businesses through workshops, conferences, and demonstration projects
- Connect supply and demand through platforms and marketplaces - both physical (e.g., silver economy trade fairs) and digital
- Promote Vas County as a destination for age-friendly tourism and potentially for retirement migration, leveraging quality of life advantages
- Facilitate cross-border cooperation to access Austrian and Slovenian markets and exchange best practices
- Develop quality standards and certification for age-friendly products and services, building consumer confidence

## 5.3 Opportunities to Leverage

**Geographic Advantages.** Proximity to Austria and Slovenia offers unique opportunities for cross-border cooperation in care services, knowledge exchange, and access to more mature silver economy markets. Austrian and Slovenian consumers represent potential export markets for Hungarian products and services, while Austrian and Slovenian best practices can inform Hungarian developments. The Schengen zone facilitates movement of people and services, enabling innovative cross-border arrangements.

**Natural and Cultural Assets.** The county's thermal resources (proven therapeutic benefits), natural landscapes (Őrség National Park, hiking and biking trails, clean air), Roman heritage (Savaria archaeological site, museums), and cultural traditions (festivals, crafts, gastronomy) provide excellent foundations for developing age-friendly tourism and wellness services. These assets are currently underutilized and could be developed into comprehensive packages targeting active seniors.

**Strong Industrial Base.** The presence of advanced manufacturing companies, particularly in automotive and electronics, creates potential for developing assistive technologies, smart home solutions, and other age-tech innovations. These companies have engineering expertise, precision manufacturing capabilities, and quality systems that could be applied to age-tech products. Partnerships between established manufacturers and age-tech startups could accelerate product development and market access.

**European Funding Access.** As an EU member state, Hungary has access to substantial European funding through various programs. Participation in Interreg projects and access to EU structural funds (ERDF, ESF, Cohesion Fund) provide financial resources for pilot projects and infrastructure development. The challenge is to develop high-quality project proposals and ensure effective implementation and sustainability beyond project funding periods.

**Community Capacity and Social Capital.** Research by Gábrriel and Katona (2026) on caring communities in rural Hungary demonstrates that even resource-constrained communities can develop innovative responses to care needs when there is strong local leadership and civic engagement. This social capital—networks of trust, reciprocity, and cooperation—represents an important asset that can be mobilized for silver economy development.

## 6. Best Practices and Successful Initiatives

### 6.1 Caring Communities: A Promising Approach

The concept of 'caring communities' has emerged as a significant response to care gaps in various European contexts. As defined by Wegleitner and Schuchter (2018), a caring community can be understood as a 'mutual care philosophy, which has to be translated into concrete, localized practices in collaboration with the community.' Recent research by Fröhlich, Gábrriel, and Pimminger (2025) comparing caring communities in Austria, Hungary, and the Netherlands provides valuable insights into how this concept can be adapted to different national and local contexts.

Caring communities are characterized by:

- Community-based initiative and leadership - mobilizing local actors and resources
- Focus on solidarity and mutual support - moving beyond individualized care toward collective responsibility
- Emphasis on prevention and social participation - not just responding to crisis but promoting wellbeing
- Integration of formal and informal care - connecting professional services with family and community support
- Attention to physical space and social infrastructure - creating accessible, welcoming environments for social interaction

### 6.2 Community-Based Care Initiatives in Rural Hungary

Research by Gábrriel and Katona (2026) on caring communities in rural Hungary highlights several innovative approaches that are relevant to Vas County (partially well-known and/or implemented, or implementation is ongoing):

- Village Caretaker Services (Falugondnoki szolgálat): Municipal initiatives providing transportation, home assistance, and coordination of support for elderly residents. The village caretaker drives a minibus to take older adults to the supermarket in the neighbouring town once a week, helps with the delivery of medicines and daily lunch, provides domestic help for people in need, and assists in solidarity actions within the village. In one village studied, the village caretaker is also the deputy mayor, demonstrating the integration of care into local governance. This service is particularly effective in small settlements where formal services

are not economically viable but where personal relationships and local knowledge can be leveraged.

- 'Adopt a Granny' Programs: Volunteer initiatives connecting local residents with isolated elderly people to provide companionship and practical support. These programs address social isolation, which research shows is a significant risk factor for health decline and premature mortality. Volunteers visit isolated elderly people regularly, help with shopping, accompany them to medical appointments, and provide emotional support. In care homes, volunteers adopt individual residents who have no family visitors, ensuring everyone has someone to talk to and celebrate birthdays with.
- Granny Groups (Nagymama csoportok): Self-organized senior women's associations providing mutual support, cultural activities, and community service. These groups demonstrate the active potential of older adults as contributors rather than just recipients of care. Members organize regular senior joy dance sessions, yoga classes, and excursions both inside and outside Hungary. They attend cultural events and contribute to the community life of the village by organizing local events. Besides mutual aid, they are also engaged in helping poorer locals and new mothers with food deliveries through the traditional 'komatál' practice, demonstrating intergenerational solidarity.
- Integrated Daycare Services: Combining multiple services (meals, social activities, health monitoring) in accessible community facilities. These facilities, required by law only in municipalities with over 3,000 residents, are voluntarily maintained by some smaller municipalities, demonstrating local commitment to elderly care. The most successful examples overcome stigma through creative programming - for instance, one daycare center in Baranya County attracted broader participation by organizing a choir that gave public concerts, transforming perception from 'a place for damaged people' to a vibrant community hub.
- Alternative Therapies in Care Homes: Some care homes introduce non-traditional, alternative therapies such as orgone rooms, Tibetan sound bowls, or Hungarian 'Hungrá! life space harmonizing equipment. While evidence for efficacy varies, residents report appreciation for these innovations, which add variety and personalization to care. This openness to innovation, even where evidence is limited, reflects a person-centered approach that values resident preferences.

These initiatives demonstrate that even resource-constrained municipalities can develop effective, community-based responses to aging when there is strong local leadership and civic engagement. However, they also reveal challenges:

- Sustainability concerns - many initiatives depend on volunteers who may experience burnout
- Quality assurance issues - informal care may lack professional standards
- Inclusivity gaps - participants tend to be educated, middle-class women, while men, Roma, and less educated elderly are underrepresented
- Limited scalability - what works in a small village may not transfer to larger settings

## 6.3 Urban Caring Communities: Hungarian Case Study

Fröhlich, Gábel, and Pimminger (2025) document a fascinating case of urban caring community in a town in southwestern Hungary (Baranya County): the Parkinson's Disease Association (PDA). This case illustrates how vulnerable groups can appropriate urban space and create cultures of care.

The PDA was founded in the early 2000s to unite patients suffering from Parkinson's disease, promote their rehabilitation, represent their interests, and provide information about the disease. Membership is open to anyone interested: patients, relatives, professionals, and supporters. The annual membership fee is symbolic (only about €5). Members meet weekly for joy dance classes, music therapy, physiotherapy exercises, lectures, and excursions.

What makes this case particularly interesting is how the PDA has appropriated urban space:

- A pub in a popular pedestrian walkway has gradually become 'Parkinson's-friendly' as members started holding informal meetings there. This has reduced stigma as people with visible movement disorders now enter the pub without shame or fear of judgment.
- The PDA planted a memorial tree in the city park, known as the 'Parkinson's Tree,' providing a place for remembrance beyond cemeteries.
- Members take over public spaces (parks, squares, walkways) for commemorations and dance performances, raising awareness of their disease in local society.

The case demonstrates both the potential and limitations of caring communities in the Hungarian context. While the PDA performs important social functions and creates meaningful support for members, it receives no financial support from the municipality despite requests. The head of the PDA leads the community for free while suffering from the disease herself, illustrating the exploitation of volunteer labor that van Dyk (2018) warns against.

## 6.4 Economic Development Projects

- Cross-Border Silver Economy Initiatives: Previous Interreg Slovakia-Hungary projects organized exhibitions and fairs showcasing products and services for the 50+ demographic, helping to raise awareness and create market connections. These events brought together manufacturers, service providers, and potential customers, facilitating business-to-business and business-to-consumer networking.
- Thermal Spa Development: Thermal spa facilities in Bük and Sárvár have successfully marketed to senior tourists, offering specialized health and wellness packages combining therapeutic treatments with leisure activities. These facilities demonstrate that age-friendly tourism can be economically viable while serving important health promotion functions. They employ hundreds of people and generate significant revenue for their municipalities.
- Social Cooperatives: Some municipalities (documented in Baranya County case studies) have established social cooperatives that employ local residents, including active seniors, to provide services, keeping economic resources within the community. Members use a local currency that supports local economic activities and livelihoods. This model creates employment while strengthening community bonds and local economic circulation.
- Age-Friendly Business Certification: While not yet systematically implemented in Hungary, other European countries have developed certification programs recognizing businesses that

meet age-friendly standards in accessibility, service quality, and employment practices. This could be adapted to the Hungarian context.

## 6.5 Policy Innovation

- **Age-Friendly Municipality Designation:** Several villages in Hungary have explicitly branded themselves as age-friendly, using this as a strategy for attracting new residents (including return migration of former residents who retired elsewhere) and European funding. This branding is backed up by concrete policies: accessible public buildings, age-friendly events, and social services that exceed legal requirements.
- **Participatory Planning:** Inclusion of senior citizens in community planning processes through citizens' forums, consultations, and representation on advisory boards, ensuring that their needs and perspectives shape local development priorities. In one town studied by Fröhlich et al. (2025), a City Council for Older People proposed and achieved the development of a Policy Concept on Ageing—a rare example of explicit elderly policy at the municipal level in Hungary.
- **Intergenerational Programs:** Some schools and care homes organize regular intergenerational activities where children visit elderly residents and vice versa. These programs combat ageism, provide cognitive stimulation and joy for older adults, and teach children empathy and respect. They demonstrate that care is not just one-directional but involves mutual enrichment.

## 6.6 Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

Successful initiatives typically demonstrate strong cooperation between:

- Municipal governments providing infrastructure, coordination, and some funding
- Civil society organizations mobilizing volunteers, organizing activities, and providing local knowledge
- Local businesses providing employment, services, and sponsorship
- Healthcare and social service providers ensuring professional standards and medical oversight
- Religious organizations, particularly churches, which play significant roles in care provision in Hungary

This collaborative approach helps overcome resource limitations and creates more sustainable, comprehensive solutions. However, it also raises questions about accountability, quality assurance, and the potential for overburdening volunteers and community resources.

The research by Gábrriel and Katona (2026) reveals an important paradox: while the Hungarian state's withdrawal from care provision creates growing need for civic activity and caring communities, these same communities often envision market-based care solutions as part of their future development. Mayors of age-friendly villages speak of establishing market-based care homes or assisted-living facilities, hoping to serve affluent retirees while using profits to cross-subsidize services for less wealthy residents. Whether this hybrid model can be successfully implemented without compromising the community-oriented values that define these initiatives remains an open question.

## 6.7 Interreg Europe Good Practices: Digital Innovation in Silver Economy

As part of Silver Up project learning, we reviewed relevant good practices from Interreg Europe database focusing on Smart topics (Digitisation, SME competitiveness, Digital connectivity). Given Vas County's location along Austrian border, we examined Hungarian and Austrian practices demonstrating innovative approaches to aging challenges through digital solutions.

### 6.7.1 SILVER CLUB SZOMBATHELY

**Location:** Szombathely, Vas County | **Owner:** Pannon Business Network

Silver Club is physical infrastructure (@.home space) designed to inform seniors, relatives, and care providers about modern technologies enabling independent living. Offers attitude-shaping presentations, training sessions, and test environment where seniors try health/home care devices, providing feedback to businesses.

#### Key Features:

- Demonstrations of smart home solutions, health monitoring tools, assistive devices
- Test environment for hands-on experience before purchase
- Feedback loop connecting seniors with product developers
- Promotes acceptance and ease of use through education

**Transferability:** Demonstrates how physical centers overcome technology adoption barriers. Could replicate through municipality-business-technology partnerships.

### 6.7.2 GONDOSÓRA PROGRAM (CAREFUL WATCH PROGRAMME)

**Scope:** National, Hungary | **Funding:** €283m from Recovery and Resilience Facility | **Project:** RRF-8.4.1-21-2022-00001

Nationwide signalling system enabling older people to contact 24/7 Dispatch Centre using simple devices. Trained staff provide emergency response, psychological support, general assistance.

#### Scale and Impact:

- 89,247 devices deployed in 3 months (65+ age group)
- 2,890 municipalities covered (including Vas County)
- 1,333 emergency calls daily
- Average participant age: 76 years
- Services: emergency, psychological support, administrative help

**Innovation:** Offers rapid response for urgent situations AND wide range of everyday needs (loneliness, confusion, questions). User-friendly devices ensure accessibility for those with limited technical skills. Scalable to different population densities and geographies.

**Relevance:** Demonstrates how large-scale public investment rapidly improves safety/independence. High adoption validates demand for technology-enabled aging in place. Local implementation could integrate with caring communities, volunteer networks, municipal emergency systems.

### 6.7.3 HoCARE2.0: CO-CREATION FOR HOME CARE INNOVATION

**Programme:** Interreg Central Europe 2014-2020 | **Partners:** 11 partners, 6 countries | **Duration:** 2019-2022

**Mission:** Foster innovative home-care solutions through co-creation, engaging Quadruple Helix (SMEs, public institutions, research, citizens) in development from earliest stages. Addresses problem that many digital solutions developed without end-user input result in low acceptance.

#### **Project Activities:**

- Established co-creation labs in partner regions
- 6 pilots with public service providers, 12 with SMEs
- Created 2 tools: SME Tool (business methodology) + Policy Tool (public services)
- Trained 285 employees in co-creation
- Built transnational knowledge-sharing network

#### **Example Innovations:**

- Life Lines app (Poland): Social connection + memory training for seniors
- Video consultations with assistance (Germany): Virtual medical care with helper present
- Various health monitoring devices tested with real users

**Key Lesson:** Involving seniors from early design produces surprising insights developers miss. Co-creation reduces market failure risk by ensuring products meet actual needs.

**Transferability:** Methodology directly applicable to Vas County. Establishing local co-creation lab (linked to Silver Club/Pannon Business Network) could support SMEs and service providers. Structured frameworks in project tools provide implementation guides.

### 6.7.4 WEBNURSE (WEBNŐVÉR)

**Programme:** HELPS, Interreg Central Europe 2007-2013 | **Developer:** Hungarian Charity Service, Order of Malta

**Platform:** www.webnover.hu (Hungarian), www.webnurse.eu (7 languages) | **Target:** Informal caregivers

Digital platform supporting informal caregivers (family, friends, neighbors) caring for elderly/ill persons at home. Problem: Caregivers lack training and support for complex tasks, experiencing stress, burnout, isolation.

**Key Features:**

- Tutorial videos demonstrating care techniques (moving patients, bathing, medication)
- Help-desk answering caregiving questions
- Directory of services (healthcare, support groups, financial assistance)
- Information on assistive devices and procurement
- Legal/administrative guidance (power of attorney, benefits, insurance)
- Self-care tips for caregivers to prevent burnout

Innovation: Among first digital platforms specifically for informal caregivers in Hungary. Provides accessible, free, 24/7 online training and support, filling gap in system relying heavily on family care without adequate support structures.

Relevance: Given Hungary's unsupported familialistic care model (Gábrriel & Katona, 2026), informal caregivers in Vas County face similar challenges. Low-cost digital solution provides high-value support to large numbers. County could: promote awareness, develop localized content, integrate into municipal websites and caring communities, explore partnerships with Order of Malta.

**STRATEGIC SYNTHESIS: COMMON PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS**

These four good practices reveal important patterns for silver economy development:

**Common Success Factors:**

- Digital as Enabler (not Replacement): Technology complements human care, enhancing independence and safety while preserving dignity and relationships
- User-Centered Design: Co-creation with seniors/caregivers ensures solutions meet real needs and achieve acceptance
- Scalability Through Standardization: Solutions can be rapidly deployed (Gondosóra 89K devices in 3 months) or reach unlimited users (WEBNURSE)
- Cross-Sector Partnerships: Success requires collaboration across business, government, non-profits, research
- Support for Informal Care: Recognition that family caregivers need resources, training, and backup systems

**Gaps Identified:**

- Sustained Funding: Most rely on project funding (Interreg, RRF). Long-term financial sustainability unclear
- Digital Divide: All require some digital literacy/infrastructure. Ensuring accessibility for least connected seniors remains challenge

- System Integration: Practices often operate parallel to rather than integrated with healthcare/social services
- Rural Adaptation: Most implemented in cities or nationally. Very small villages need tailored approaches

## 7. Conclusions

Vas County stands at a critical juncture in its demographic and economic development. While facing significant challenges related to population aging and decline, particularly in rural areas, the county also possesses substantial assets and opportunities that can be leveraged to transform these challenges into sources of sustainable growth and improved quality of life for all residents.

### 7.1 Key Findings

- Demographic pressure is real and accelerating: Population decline and aging will continue to reshape the county's social and economic landscape over the coming decades. Projections suggest that by 2050, more than one-third of the population could be over 65, with implications for every sector of society. Proactive rather than reactive responses are essential.
- The silver economy represents untapped potential: Current economic activities targeting older adults are fragmented and lack strategic coordination, missing significant opportunities for job creation, innovation, and export. The silver economy could become a major economic driver if properly supported and developed.
- Community-based solutions show promise: Research on caring communities in rural Hungary demonstrates that local creativity and engagement can address care needs in cost-effective, dignity-preserving ways. However, these initiatives require adequate support and must not be exploited as cheap substitutes for proper public services.
- Policy integration is lacking: Silver economy considerations need to be mainstreamed across all relevant policy domains—economic development, spatial planning, transportation, health, education—not treated as a marginal social issue confined to elderly care services.
- Cross-border cooperation offers advantages: Geographic proximity to Austria and Slovenia provides unique opportunities for knowledge exchange, market access, and joint service development. These opportunities are currently underutilized.
- Innovation capacity needs strengthening: The county lacks dedicated support structures for silver economy entrepreneurship and innovation. No incubators, accelerators, or dedicated funding programs exist to support age-tech startups or social enterprises in the care sector.

### 7.2 Final Thoughts

The silver economy is not simply about serving an aging population—it is about recognizing older adults as valuable contributors to economic and social life, with needs, preferences, and capabilities that are often overlooked or underestimated. An aging society is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be embraced and leveraged for sustainable development.

With the right policies, investments, and innovations, Vas County can transform demographic aging from a perceived burden into a genuine asset, creating a model for sustainable, inclusive development that benefits all generations. This transformation requires:

- Shifting narratives from deficit-focused to asset-focused conceptions of aging
- Investing in prevention and active aging rather than just reactive care
- Creating opportunities for meaningful social participation across the life course
- Designing age-friendly environments that benefit everyone, not just older adults
- Fostering intergenerational solidarity and combating ageism

The Silver Up project provides a timely and valuable opportunity to accelerate this transformation through interregional cooperation, policy learning, and concrete action. By embracing the silver economy, Vas County can secure its future prosperity while enhancing the dignity, health, and happiness of its residents. The journey will not be easy, but the destination—an age-friendly county where all residents can thrive regardless of age—is worth the effort.

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*End of Report*