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PATH DEPENDENCY IN INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY

**Special session of the 24th Annual Meeting of
the Hungarian Regional Science Association**

21-22 October 2026, Debrecen, Hungary

Path dependency in industrial development and policy explains how past decisions, investments, and institutional setups constrain future development. The chosen economic or technological path can create a self-reinforcing trajectory that becomes costly and difficult to escape, even if the path later proves to be inefficient or suboptimal and a lock-in situation can be created.

In industrial sectors, this lock-in effect is driven by high sunk costs (initial investments in infrastructure or specialized machinery), learning effects (skills, supply chains, and expertise become tailored to the existing paradigm) and network externalities (technology adoption, ecosystem creation, no outsider innovations).

For policymakers, path dependency represents a problem: on one hand, to avoid lock-in, but on the other hand, policy itself is prone to path dependency, because of political inertia and lobbying groups. There are several questions in this respect: How can policymakers identify a "lock-in" in before a country or a region commits to a trap? How can nations or regions leave path-dependent developmental phases? What are the tipping points where the cost of maintaining an old system finally outweighs the cost of switching to a new one? Major crises, geopolitical conflicts can change the status quo, can disrupt existing supply chains and force actors to change existing models.

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