

C. 1. Description for the general public

Small towns constitute one of the basic components of national settlement systems and account typically for a majority of urban places. In Poland among the total of 908 urban settlements in 2013 - those with town rights, there were 686 towns of less than 20 thousand inhabitants (the upper boundary for this category used in international comparative studies), with the combined population of nearly 5 million. The role fulfilled by small urban places, however, declines over time (this pertains to Poland as well), due among other factors to the decreasing time and cost of travel, as well as owing to the increasing specialization in the production and marketing of goods and services. In this process the larger urban centres, those at higher levels in urban hierarchy, extend their trade areas at the cost of smaller towns. This tendency undermines the position of the latter places within settlement systems.

In Poland, small towns were exposed to crisis situations more than once in the past, including the years following World War II. In the next decades extensive industrialization policies brought about the location of industrial plants in numerous small places. At the national scale, however, population and economic activity continued to concentrate in the large and medium sized cities, while the share of small urban places, in particular those in the lowest size category, of less than 5 thousand inhabitants) continued to diminish. With the onset of systemic transformation in 1989 prospects for a revival of small towns have appeared, as an effect of administrative reforms, the (re)establishment of local government and the development of entrepreneurship. This has been paralleled, however, by closures of industrial plants and an overall stagnation, as evidenced by outmigration towards larger urban centres and, following Poland's entry to the EU, mainly abroad. In addition to former industrial towns, the so-called local service centres are particularly affected by negative aspects of current metropolization phenomena. Such urban places tend to be overrepresented in regions characterized by relatively low urbanization level, such as the North-Eastern part of Poland. Long-term depopulation trends, together with the on-going social and economic transformation of rural areas, add extra dimensions to the problem of small towns in the case of these regions. One may anticipate, however, that their rich environmental assets may in the future become an important factor in attracting new residents and new economic activities, including those based on knowledge and creativity, the development out of which the small urban places may especially benefit.

This research project aims at identifying the course of functional change that small urban places in North-Eastern Poland have undergone since the beginning of the systemic transformation in Poland in 1989, its factors and consequences, in particular those related to migration and population composition. Studies will also focus on local and regional networks of economic linkages, and the role of endogenous resources in the formation of such networks. The complete set of small towns (86 units) located in the study area will be included in the analysis, while a smaller group of 6-8 towns will be subject to in-depth enquiry. The data used are to be mainly derived from questionnaire surveys and interviews with members of the local communities. Project results are to include projections of small town development over the next 15-25 years. Topics related to the role of small towns and their evolving position within settlement systems are among those which belong to relatively neglected in multidisciplinary urban studies. At the same time, the future of such urban places is of considerable importance from the perspective of territorial cohesion at the national and regional level, as well as of broader social and cultural change.