

## Abstract

Small Towns in North-Eastern Poland. Local Arenas of Population and Functional Change. The study pertains to interrelations between functional and demographic change as experienced by small urban places situated in areas of national periphery type which, at the same time, comprise by and large the outer zone of Warsaw metropolitan region. These are, against Poland's average situation, the less densely settled areas, with a high share of agriculture related economic activities and an important role of touristic *cum* recreational functions attracted by the local rich and variegated environmental assets. As in case of peripheral settings in general, small towns within the study area are strongly affected by globalization and metropolitan development, the impact of which is reflected in functional restructuring and human capital outflow. In this context, two research questions were posed for the purpose of the present study. Whereas the first question concerns the evolving roles as performed by small urban places within settlement systems at local and sub-regional levels, the second is on the mode of functional and demographic interdependence. When interpreting the trends observed, reference is made to the notions of territorial position and territorial capital, as well as of the rural-urban region concept.

Out of the total number of 87 towns in the category below 20 thousand inhabitants within the study area (as of December 31, 2017), 19 were selected for the purpose of fieldwork based analyses. These are small urban places of an intermediate population size of 3 to 10 thousand, ones that typically perform functions of local service centres for the surrounding rural areas. In these towns, in-depth interviews were conducted with local NGO leaders, representatives of local government, school principals and teachers, priests as well as other stakeholders. Also, a questionnaire survey was carried out covering firms with higher than local market range. The materials collected were confronted with and supplemented by official statistical data.

The results reveal a number of traits, including trends prevailing over the last fifteen years or so, common to all, or at least a definite majority of towns included in the subset under study. The most universal are demographic features, notably intense migration outflow of the young, both towards domestic (motivated primarily by education related goals) and foreign (mainly job oriented) destinations, as well as rapidly progressing population ageing. Another trend appearing across the subset and in a way contrasting with the one above, is a general upgrading of the towns' built environment and of local living conditions, as evidenced by the growing housing stock (also under the decline of population numbers which is a prevailing phenomenon), as well as ex-

tension and modernization of technical and social infrastructure, the latter representing effects of public investments supported to varied extent by the EU funds.

With respect to economic activities, the trends observed point to a polarization within the subset of small towns under study according to their functional profile. The following division into three sub-groups can be identified: (a) towns with developed industrial functions oriented to a large extent towards foreign markets; (b) towns, the specialized functions of which, typically clustered in a single manufacturing or service branch, are of regional and national market range; (c) towns, in which there is a sphere of mostly local range service and smaller scale manufacturing activities, but where it is the public sector that constitutes the foundations for economic subsistence and social life. Whereas those urban places in the first as well as the second category have, over the last decades, adjusted their functional profile to open market economy rules, by attracting (some due to foreign investments) or generating new market competitive activities, the small towns of the latter sub-group have not succeeded to transform, or to expand their former economic base.

Concerning future prospects, insofar as small towns in the study area may be expected to continue, despite increasing labour cost, as competitive locations for the locally rooted furniture manufacturing and food processing, this may not necessarily pertain to other industrial branches. Hence, in functional profiles of small urban places the supporting role of public sector institutions is most likely going to grow. At the same time, their place-of residence function will become increasingly important, even if this trend will not evenly apply across the town's subset here under study.

**Keywords:** Demographic change, peripheral regions, small towns, specialized functions.