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Population changes as litmus paper of the socio-economic development level of small towns in Poland

Abstract

The main aim of the author was to analyse the population changes of small towns in Poland between 2002 and 2012. Small towns' reaction to the global and regional demographic trends confirms their position between the rural areas and the urban municipalities. The differences between separate towns are significant, however those located within the metropolitan areas in Poland show a positive population dynamics, natural growth and migration balance net indexes. The image of small towns in terms of demographic changes is for that reason adequate to their socio-economic situation. However the question of the development of small satellite towns is asked as the functions are often leached to the core areas of the metropolis. The emerging problem of the depopulation of the vast majority of towns is also stressed in the paper. The depopulation types (in Webb typology) concern nearly 72% of all Polish small towns.

Key words: small towns; socio-economic development; population changes; Webb typology

Introduction

The present global and regional socio-economic changes influence the situation of small towns very clearly and visibly. Small towns changes reflect on the one hand rural patterns of development and on the other, their situation is adequate to urban municipalities.

The demographic situation of small towns of Poland confirms the one of the historical regions with different demography patterns, the border and peripheral regions and the metropolitan areas (Dzieciuchowicz, Janiszewska, 2014; Kurek, 2008). On the one hand, the diversification is more and more visible due to the situation of small towns developing under the influence of the great cities and on the other, the unfavourable demographic trends could be seen in the growing small towns number. Demography is not only a factor which influences the small towns growth, but it becomes a visible consequence of their development (Konecka-Szydłowska, 2014).

As shrinking becomes the common problem for many cities (Zborowski et al., 2012) there are new questions to be asked. The question of the proper urban policy towards the development of smaller settlements should be asked together with

the problem of the reaction of the local authorities and stakeholders. The distinct reaction for the depopulation of small towns can be seen by the implementation of various new programmes both promoting them as places where “life is good”, in many West European countries. The idea of “Cittaslow” developing quickly can be given here (Mayer, Knox, 2006), as well as the examples of French towns introducing many social programmes to attract and to gain active population (Mainet, Edouard, 2014). It should be asked whether Polish local actors are aware of shrinking and if yes – what action is undertaken. The problem is both of a social and spatial nature. If a fast depopulation is seen as a problem, some action should be done at least to attract potential new inhabitants. The promotion targeted at specific groups could be developed, showing the positive aspects of life in a small town. The green, easy-to-reach countryside, possibility to avoid the big cities’ problems, high quality of life environment or combining the advantages of a city with the opportunities given by the countryside are among the positive characteristics of the small town. In Poland such active promotion can already be seen in small towns with the high level of development, e.g. that of Niepołomice (Jarczewski, Huculak, eds., 2011). On the web page of the town, phrases as “...thanks to the good localisation, infrastructure and local government activity ... Niepołomice is also a place for active rest not only for its’ inhabitants...” could be found. It is difficult to say to what extent it is the promotion of the town responsible for the high values of immigration but it is obvious that the well economic development of the town and commune is a straightforward factor. The spatial aspects are correlated to the urban sprawl issues and the ways it can be stopped.

The paper attempts to show the scale and regional differentiation of the problem of depopulation of small towns in Poland, examines the direct factors (changes in natural growth and migration) influencing the changes and reveals the correlation between the population changes and the socio-economic growth of small towns.

Researches’ attention paid to small towns in Poland does not answer the significance of this group of municipalities in the settlement system. The scope of the investigation on small towns problems can be divided into a few thematic groups (Kwiatek-Sołtys, 2011a). The detailed Polish geography literature of the subject was analysed by few authors in Poland, often as chapters on literature of the subject in books dedicated to small towns (Konecka-Szydłowska 2003, Kwiatek-Sołtys, 2004, Zuzńska-Żyśko, 2006; Jażewicz. 2009) but also as separate papers (Szymańska, Grzelak-Kostulska, 2005, and earlier mentioned Kwiatek-Sołtys, 2011a). Recently, the role of Łódź University in research on small towns was studied by Koboжек and Marszał (2014).

Small towns in the urban settlement system of Poland

Small towns with the population lower than 20 thousand made in 2012 75.4% of all municipalities in Poland and were inhabited by 21.3% of urban population. The statistical role of small towns in the urban settlement system of the country has recently increased. In 2002 they made 74.9% of all and were inhabited by 20.8% of urban population. On the one hand it is caused by the new urban settlements and on the other, the demographic changes in the majority of cases leading to the

population decrease. For these reason the group of small towns in Poland is not stable. Almost every year there are new settlement gaining the city rights. There were 25 small settlement units which gained their city rights between 2002 and 2012. Among the 25 “new towns” there is a group of 19 settlements which regained their city rights lost for different reasons: after the January Insurrection (1863), later due to the administrative reform of 1934 or also after the First and Second World Wars. The small towns group is being enlarged also by medium sized towns loosing population. There were two small towns (Pionki and Strzelce Opolskie), which belonged to the medium sized class in 2002 and are currently in the small towns group. On the contrary, four other small towns (Kobyłka, Reda, Wieliczka and Trzebinia) increased their population to over 20 thousand and became medium in the analyzed period.

The group of 685 small towns as per 2012 is analyzed in the paper. For new towns in the dynamic approach including 2002–2012 period the year of achieving city rights became the base.

The reform of collecting the data by Central Statistical Office is an important factor influencing the statistical data in the analyzed period. Until 2009 these data had been collected for people registered for permanent residence and calculated on the 2002 Census base while beginning with 2010 the data include the number of people actually living in a given place and are calculated on the 2011 Population Census base.

Demographic changes observed in small towns of Poland follow the rural-urban pattern. In almost all demographic aspects they are placed in between rural areas and the medium-sized and great cities, which confirms their place on the rural-urban continuum line (Szymańska, 1992).

Population size and dynamics

The small towns make up a very differentiated group of towns. The statistical border of a small town, which is 20 thousand, is not always adequate (Kwiatk-Sołtys, Runge, 2011). The greatest of them reach almost 20 thousand, what makes them similar to medium sized towns. It can be said that the bigger the town, the more important role it plays in its hinterland and the greater the development chances are. Józefów, neighbouring Warszawa is populated by 19947 inhabitants, which makes it the biggest small town in Poland in 2012. This town is promoted in the towns' development strategy as “The town on the Świder river – the town of pine trees, microclimate and three rivers” (Strategia Rozwoju Miasta). This motto emphasizes the good environment for living and attracts new inhabitants.

The population number between 15 and 20 thousand is characteristic for 83 towns (12%). Many of them are independent urban communes and district towns. Furthermore, for 30% of those greatest small towns additional factor of demographical growth is the location within the urban agglomerations. For those reasons the development of those towns seems to be stable.

The smallest town in Poland does not reach one thousand inhabitants. Wyśmierzyce in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship (województwo mazowieckie) is inhabited by only 908 inhabitants. It should be stressed that the population dynamic for this towns was 98% (in the 2002–2012 period), which means that Wyśmierzyce

is losing population constantly. Surprisingly, this town seems to be proud of being the smallest in Poland, which is stressed at the official Internet site of rural-urban commune. The promotion as the town and commune with the lovely nature, forested area and lack of industry is dedicated to tourists rather than to potential inhabitants. Two other towns have the population number around 1000, these are Suraż (pop. 1012) at Narew in Podlaskie Voivodeship and these of Działoszyce (pop. 1009) in Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship, with a permanent depopulation.

The group of smallest towns with the population number lower than 5 thousand consists of 318 towns, what means that almost half of all small towns (46.4%) do not exceed 5 thousand. These smallest towns are usually service centres of the rural character (Rajman, 2006). Apart from few industrial towns (e.g. Alwernia, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, Miłosław) in this category together with towns of specialised functions, like health resorts (e.g. Duszniki-Zdrój, Uniejów, Iwonicz-Zdrój) the smallest towns' role as service and employment centres is limited to their own commune or close surroundings.

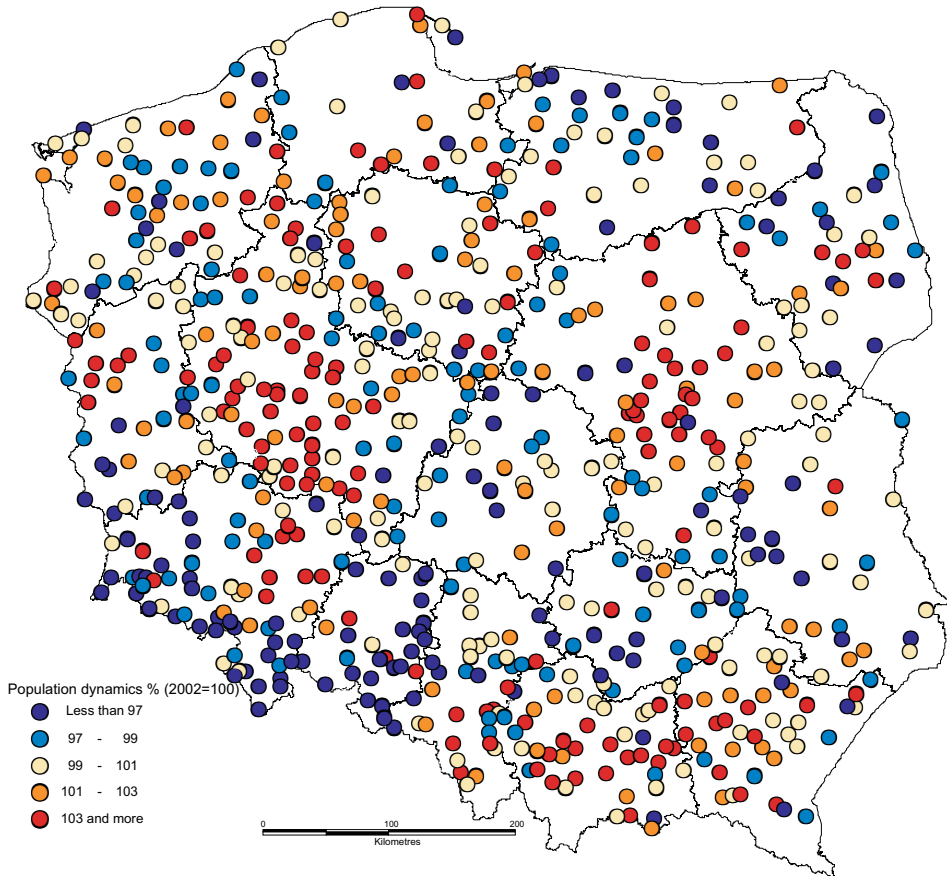


Fig. 1. Population dynamics in small towns in Poland in the 2002–2012 period

Source: own work based on Bank Danych Lokalnych, GUS, Warszawa

The population dynamics is negative in all types of urban municipalities, however for small towns is much slower. The average population dynamics between 2002–2012 is only 100.3, however the differences between towns are significant. For new towns, which gained their city rights after 2002 this dynamics is counted back to the year of establishment and the number of population changed due to administrative corrections was taken into account.

The number of inhabitants was reduced in half of all small towns between 2002–2012. The signal decrease (population dynamics below 97) concerns 20% of all small towns of the country, 46% make the smallest towns with the number of inhabitants below 5000.

In the spatial distribution, the rapid population decrease is observed in the majority of small towns in the Sudety Mts – the Dolnośląskie Voivodeship as well as Opolskie and Śląskie ones. This depopulating belt goes eastward through the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship. The other area of significant decline contains the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship, generally its Lake District (Fig.1). On the contrary, the population increase is registered in small towns located in the Southeastern Poland, in Wielkopolskie Voivodeship and in small towns under the influence of the great urban agglomerations of Wrocław, Kraków, Białystok and the country capital.

Similarly to the decrease group, this demographical growth can be noticed for over 20% of the small towns. The dominance of any size group can be shown, nevertheless the influence of the big agglomerations can be noticed, due to the suburbanization going, confirmed by the commuting. The number of commuters to great cities doubled in the analyzed period. The high values (even 146%) of the population dynamics for towns in the metropolitan zones are the very strong factor influencing any typologies and socio-economical ranks of small towns in the country (Kwiatk-Sołtys, 2014).

Straightforward factors of influence – natural growth index and migration balance net

The image of the spatial distribution of the natural growth ratio in small towns is much similar to the one of the population dynamics while the groups of towns showing both the negative and the positive ratio seem to be even more clear. The average natural growth ratio for small towns in 2002–2012 is 0.19‰ but the highest values reached 7.6‰ (for Bobowa town, which regained its city rights lost in 1934 only in 2009 and performs still more like a rural settlement) and the lowest values are nearly -11‰ (for Działoszyce, a small town located in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship in the area of a very low natural growth ratio). For 44% of all small towns of Poland the average natural growth index in 2002–2012 is negative, but the comparison of three years averages for 2002–2004 and 2010–2012 shows a very slight increase for all small towns (at 0.33 percentage points) observed in 6 of 16 Voivodeships (Tab. 1), which is adequate to the changes in the natural growth in Poland. In 2002–2005, a natural decrease was recorded and since 2006 the natural growth ratio has been positive again (Dzieciuchowicz, Janiszewska, 2014). The highest increase and its highest values are seen for small towns of the Wielkopolskie Voivodeship, what confirms their good demographic and socio-economic situation (Konecka-Szydłowska, 2014).

The traditionally high values are also seen in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship as well as in the Małopolskie and Pomorskie ones (Rajman, 2000–2001).

Tab. 1. Natural increase/decrease of population in small towns in the 2002–2012 period

Voivodeship (capital)	Natural increase/decrease per 1000 inhabitants	
	2002–2004	2010–2012
Dolnośląskie (Wrocław)	−1.65	−1.17
Kujawsko-pomorskie (Bydgoszcz, Toruń)	−0.05	0.09
Lubelskie (Lublin)	0.16	0.07
Lubuskie (Gorzów Wlkp., Zielona Góra)	0.82	0.89
łódzkie (Łódź)	−1.59	−0.77
Małopolskie (Kraków)	0.98	1.48
Mazowieckie (Warszawa)	0.77	1.35
Opolskie (Opole)	−0.36	−0.63
Podkarpackie (Rzeszów)	1.77	2.12
Podlaskie (Białystok)	0.00	0.05
Pomorskie (Gdańsk)	2.29	1.96
Śląskie (Katowice)	−0.78	−0.19
Świętokrzyskie (Kielce)	−0.49	−0.93
Warmińsko-mazurskie (Olsztyn)	0.62	0.35
Wielkopolskie (Poznań)	0.57	2.12
Zachodniopomorskie (Szczecin)	0.22	−0.54
Total	0.18	0.51

Source: own work based on Bank Danych Lokalnych, GUS, Warszawa

Migration balance ratio is an important element, showing not only the demographic situation of towns but also reflecting often the socio-economic position and growth. The vast majority of towns are losing population. The migration balance net in 2002–2012 is negative in every urban group, however small towns behave somewhere in the middle between urban municipalities and rural areas (Fig. 2).

The positive migration balance net is characteristic for small towns in metropolitan areas. The positive situation is seen in small towns developing in the metropolitan areas, especially in the suburban zones of Warszawa, Krakow, Wrocław, Poznań and Three Cities Agglomeration (Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot). The lower indices are seen for small towns in the metropolitan areas but located farther from their core areas. The average migration balance net for all small towns in 2002–2012 is -2.34% , however the differences between the voivodeships average and separate towns are significant (Tab. 2).

The only voivodeship with the positive migration balance rate is the Mazowieckie Voivodeship, with the visible influence of Warszawa and relatively high share of towns with the positive migration balance net. For 14 towns with the highest rates, while the 11 years average was taken into consideration, seven exceeding 10% are located in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship. Apart from Warszawa satellites an interesting case is the town of Borne Sulinowo located in Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship. This town was established and “opened” in 1993, because formerly it

had been a Wehrmacht's garrison Gross Born and after the Second World War – the military base of the Red Army Soviet troops for 25 thousand soldiers – the biggest in Poland and secret to public. The army left Borne Sulinowo in October 1992 and the empty town was given its city rights a year later. The settlement process started. In the years 1997–1999 the average migration balance net for this “new” town was still very high (111‰) and in 2002–2012 it amounted 26.8‰.

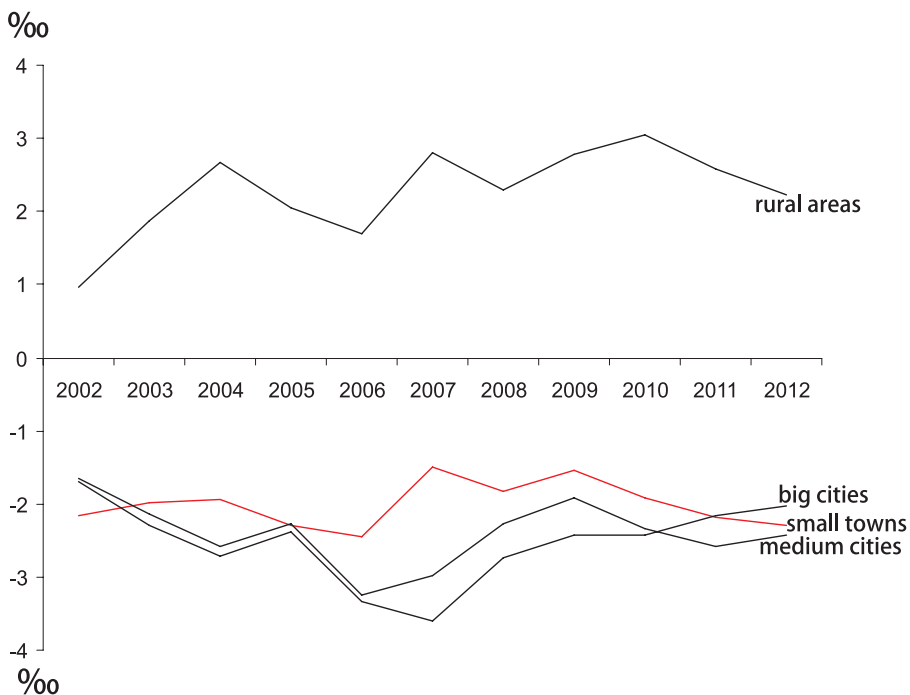


Fig. 2. Migration balance net in Polish municipalities in the 2002–2012 period

Source: own work based on Bank Danych Lokalnych, GUS, Warszawa

Tab. 2. Migration balance net of population in small towns in the 2002–2012 period

Voivodeship	number of small towns	Migration balance net per 1000 inhabitants			External migration balance net**	Emigrants number (person)
		2002–2012	2002*	2012*		
Dolnośląskie	71	-2.35	-2.41	-1.93	-6.73	6,005
Kujawsko-pomorskie	44	-2.08	-1.68	-3.01	-2.66	1,636
Lubelskie	30	-5.15	-4.21	-5.24	-1.52	865
Lubuskie	36	-3.45	-3.44	-3.38	-5.52	3,057
Łódzkie	28	-2.15	-1.84	-2.59	-0.67	545
Małopolskie	47	-1.65	-1.97	-1.54	-2.04	2,242
Mazowieckie	61	1.10	1.50	0.68	0.28	903
Opolskie	29	-5.91	-7.96	-4.27	-32.93	9,894
Podkarpackie	40	-2.39	-2.47	-2.36	-2.59	1,942

Podlaskie	32	-2.18	-2.10	-2.53	-2.47	985
Pomorskie	27	-4.39	-3.80	-4.51	-5.06	2,071
Śląskie	35	-0.51	-1.41	0.20	-11.77	5,283
Świętokrzyskie	25	-5.46	-5.30	-6.05	-1.80	650
Warmińsko-mazurskie	38	-3.96	-3.33	-4.28	-4.52	2,513
Wielkopolskie	89	-1.29	-0.39	-2.12	-2.58	2,614
Zachodniopomorskie	53	-3.14	-4.04	-2.96	-0.74	1,427
Total	685	-2.34	-2.30	-2.42	-4.72	42,632

*three years averages 2002–2004, 2010–2012, **per 10,000 inhabitants

Source: own work based on Bank Danych Lokalnych, GUS, Warszawa

On the contrary, the lowest migration balance nets are characteristic for small towns of the Opolskie Voivodeship. There are towns of Zawadzkie, Baborów or Praszka, with this rate oscillating around -10% . While in the whole country the role of external migration is not so important the high numbers of emigrants leaving small towns of the Opolskie Voivodeship can still be seen (Rajman, 1990). During the last decades emigration to Germany was permanent and had a mass character. This emigration commenced during the early fifties, called the “reunification of families” or later “breaking up of families”. The process of broadening family and non-family relations with inhabitants of Germany was strengthened in the eighties as a result of mass emigration (Heffner, Solga, 2004). The network of permanent links was established that way. Between 2002 and 2012, 42,632 inhabitants left small towns in Poland for the permanent emigration and nearly one fourth of that only from 29 small towns of the Opole Voivodeship (Fig. 3)

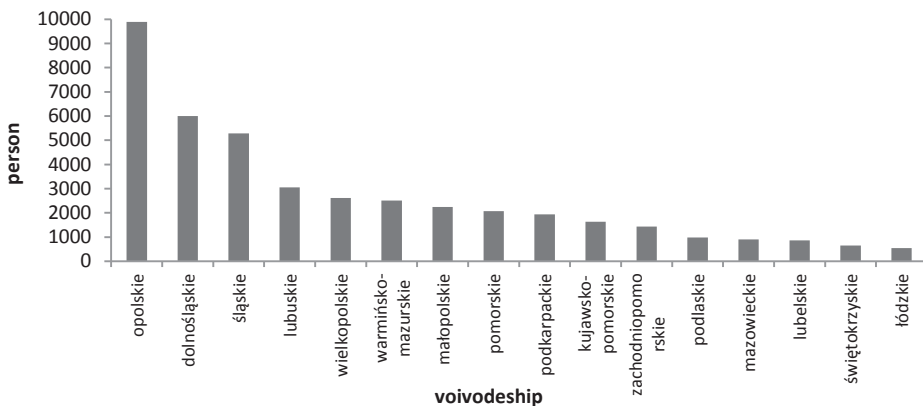


Fig. 3. External emigrants from small towns in Poland by voivodeship in the 2002–2012 period

Source: own work based on Bank Danych Lokalnych, GUS, Warszawa

As the emigration, especially to Germany, is in this region of a long origin, it is worth to stress that some similar links emerged in other areas of intensive, mainly economic, emigration between Podlaskie and Belgium or southern part of the Małopolska one and Austria. Furthermore, the 2005–2007 period was characterized by

the extremely high emigration to western European countries, because of an accession of Poland to the European Union (Grabowska-Lusińska, Okólski, 2009).

Webb types of small towns

The effect of natural changes and migration growth of towns can be shown when the Webb types of towns are analysed (Webb, 1963, 1964). Types A, B, C and D contain the groups of towns with the population growth; in types a and B mainly by the natural increase and for types C and D – by high positive migration balance net. Types E, F, G and H are the depopulating ones, in type E the depopulation is caused by natural loss and for types G and H – mainly by high outflow. Additionally for types F and G both the natural increase index and that of migration balance net are negative, while in B and C both values are positive.

In the paper two three-years periods averages were analysed: the first one 2002–2004 and the second one for 2010–2012 period. Using of the three-years averages eliminated one-year incidental cases (Fig. 4, 5).

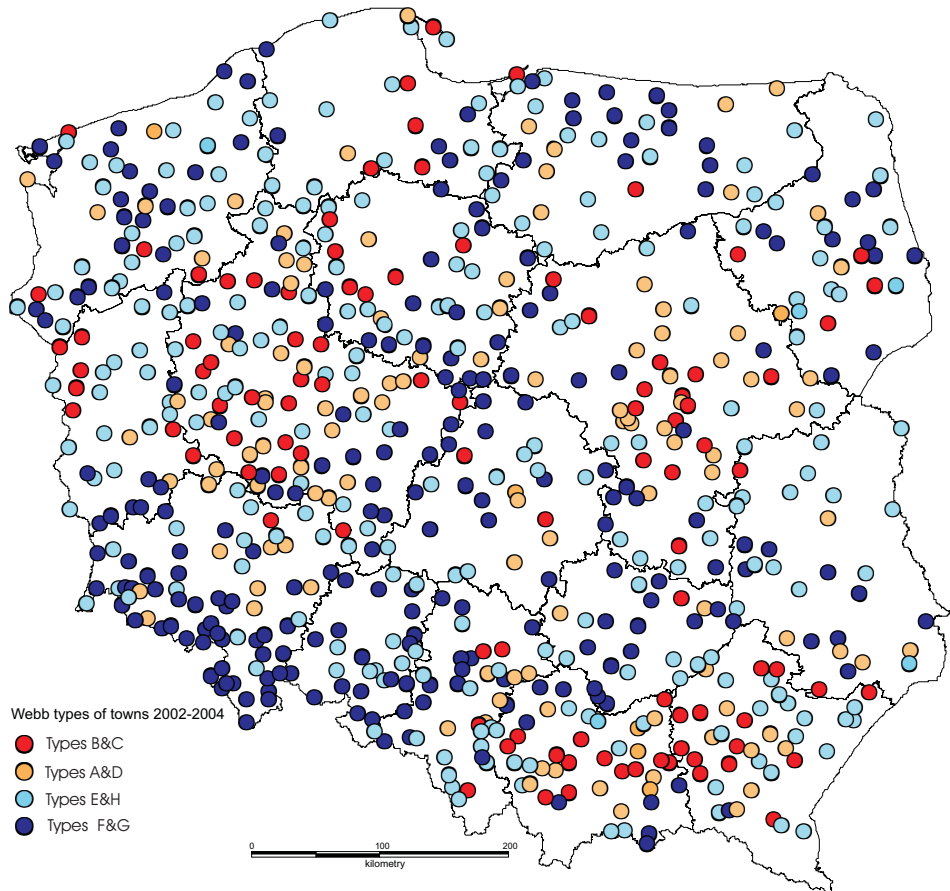


Fig. 4. Webb types of small towns in the 2002–2004 period

Source: own work based on Bank Danych Lokalnych, GUS, Warszawa

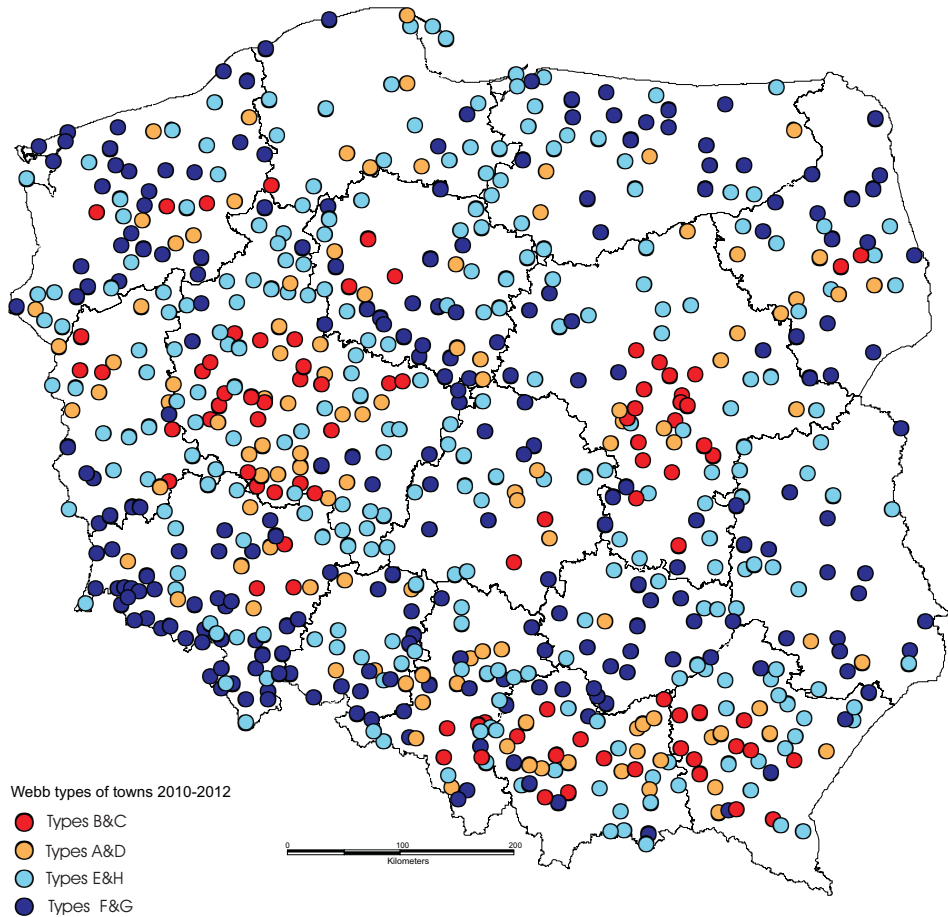


Fig. 5. Webb types of small towns in the 2010–2012 period

Source: own work based on Bank Danych Lokalnych, GUS, Warszawa

The depopulation type is represented by 71.7% of small towns (Tab. 3).

Tab. 3. Changes of the Webb types of small towns in Poland over the 2002–04 and 2010–12 period

Webb types	Small towns			
	number	%	number	%
	2002–2004		2010–2012	
A	52	7.8	66	9.6
B	41	6.1	33	4.8
C	50	7.5	51	7.4
D	59	9.1	44	6.5
Total A–D	202	30.5	194	28.3

E	44	6.6	41	6.0
F	64	9.7	59	8.6
G	165	24.9	176	25.7
H	188	28.3	215	31.9
Total E–H	461	69.5	491	71.7
Grand total	663	100	685	100.0

Source: own work based on Bank Danych Lokalnych, GUS, Warszawa

In addition, the dominance of types H and G can be seen. The worst situation is observed in the Świętokrzyskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships, where over 90% of small towns are depopulating, similarly also in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Dolnośląskie, Opolskie and Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeships shares of depopulating towns are over 80% (Tab. 4).

Tab. 4. Webb types of small towns in Poland by voivodeship

Voivodeship (capital)	small towns	Types A, B, C, D		Types E, F, G, H	
	number	number	%	number	%
Dolnośląskie (Wrocław)	71	10	14.1	61	85.9
Kujawsko-pomorskie (Bydgoszcz, Toruń)	44	9	20.5	35	79.5
Lubelskie (Lublin)	30	2	6.7	28	93.3
Lubuskie (Gorzów Wlkp., Zielona Góra)	36	13	36.1	23	63.9
Łódzkie (Łódź)	28	6	21.4	22	78.6
Małopolskie (Kraków)	47	21	44.7	26	55.3
Mazowieckie (Warszawa)	61	27	44.3	34	55.7
Opolskie (Opole)	29	5	17.2	24	82.8
Podkarpackie (Rzeszów)	40	18	45.0	22	55.0
Podlaskie (Białystok)	32	8	25.0	24	75.0
Pomorskie (Gdańsk)	27	6	22.2	21	77.8
Śląskie (Katowice)	35	13	37.1	22	62.9
Świętokrzyskie (Kielce)	25	1	4.0	24	96.0
Warmińsko-mazurskie (Olsztyn)	38	4	10.5	34	89.5
Wielkopolskie (Poznań)	89	41	46.1	48	53.9
Zachodniopomorskie (Szczecin)	53	10	18.9	43	81.1
Total	685	194	28.3	491	71.7

Source: own work based on Bank Danych Lokalnych, GUS, Warszawa

Furthermore, the depopulation process started in the nineties deepens in all small towns with the only exception of towns remaining under the influence of the urban agglomerations, mainly those of Warszawa, Kraków and Poznań (Lisowski, 2007).

Depopulation is characteristic for all size categories of towns, what is confirmed by the depopulation seen also in many great and medium sized cities (Runge, 2013). However among the small towns' group the lower share of growing ones can be

seen in the middle size classes (for towns between 5 and 15 thousand inhabitants). In this category the share of depopulating towns in the highest (78%), while for the smallest towns (below 5000 inhabitants) it amounts for 66%. The values confirm the rural model of demographic development for this category of small towns. The biggest towns with the population number between 15 and 20 thousand are diversified as there are towns developing under the big cities influence on the one hand and the district towns on the other as well as small towns with the peripheral location, these located in the depopulation zones of the country and the former small industrial towns.

The types of small towns showing the population growth are represented by only 28% of small towns, mostly those of a type. The positive situation appears also in the C type, for which both indices are positive, with the predominance of migration balance net as the number of towns representing this type is almost equal in the analysed period. These are not only the towns developing in the vicinity of a big city but also the local service centres or those of “modern” industry, often connected with the special economic zones (e.g. that of Niepołomice).

Discussion

The question asked in the title refers to the research on the development level of small towns. The authors’ former works were descriptions of the socio-economic situation and the rank of the small towns in Poland (Kwiatek-Sołtys, 2011b, 2014). It has turned out that migration factor together with the population dynamics one are the main elements influencing the image of small towns. The strength of these factors allowed for treating them as the stimulants of the development. They also make the small towns so differentiated. The image presenting the rank of small towns, including different set of indicators (social, labour market, social and technical infrastructure, elements of budgets, etc.) is generally similar to the one according to the population dynamics and migrations. The small towns developing in the suburban zones are not in cohesion.

The question whether the positive demographic changes really reflect the higher level of development has a crucial importance. Can the positive values of the population dynamics and migrations be treated as stimulants and good symptoms of small towns development and growth? Are these small towns attractive to new inhabitants or do the new inhabitants not care? Many small towns lying in the suburban zones lost their functions as centres of the rural micro-regions, industrial centres or even the local service and trade zones, but they record fast population growth. They have become the great cities’ satellites. What is the life quality of “old” inhabitants? Do they have to fulfil their basic needs in the great city? What are the chances for the small towns in the metropolitan areas to keep their identity and functions, and what should be the new paths for their development?

On the contrary, the peripheral location of towns, which within the emigration regions and the population loss seems not to be a problem for local authorities, as they do not look for new inhabitants. Does it mean that the unfavourable demographic trends don’t affect the economic situation of small towns or maybe the duration of changes is not long enough to realise the threat of depopulation? Even in

well-developed countries, where aging can be regarded as high there is a lot of attention paid to attract new inhabitants (Niedomyśl, 2007; Mainet, Edouard, 2014).

Another aspect of the discussion on shrinkage is the question whether it should be perceived as the problem and what sort of problem? The low natural increase (or even decrease) and the outflow of economically active population leads to the aging of small towns societies. Aging is still perceived as a difficult issue as there are questions of less taxes income, and greater the need of social care development, rather the profits from the “silver economy”. Many Polish small towns are facing difficult problems associated with the poor technical and transport infrastructure, underdeveloped health system or the lack of houses for the elderly, etc. – not to mention the low income of pensioners. Local small towns communities will not benefit from aging or shrinkage very soon. This problem is observed not only in Poland – small towns of Slovenia and Moravia also face depopulation. This is especially the case of former industrial small towns with actually high unemployment rate, poverty and social exclusion, and also with a poor services equipment (Lampič, Rebernik, Vaisnar, 2007).

The examples of separate towns where the high population dynamic is accompanied by the high level of economic growth, could become the clue for building the new and proper development strategies for small towns. The lesson from those good examples shows that the sustainable development, based on both endogenous and exogenous factors, caused, thanks to the active stable local policy, building the good air for enterprises, without forgetting about the local cultural assets and the solicitude of the high quality of life results in the high position in towns socio-economic ratings.

Conclusion

Small towns in Poland make a very differentiated set. They differ in their geographical location, history of their regions, and different demographic and economic situation. They differ in their origin, former and present functions, including that of district towns and size (population number). There are small towns with the population number below 5,000 inhabitants, which makes them similar to rural municipalities, and also towns nearly reaching 20,000 inhabitants. All those factors strongly influence the present demographic situation, shaping population growth, stagnation or decrease. The general image of population dynamic, migration balance net and Webb types shows the group of small towns developing under the influence of the big cities Warszawa, Kraków, Poznań as well as Wrocław, Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot and Rzeszów, where the better demographic situation and positive demographic net are observed. The question to what extent the population growth in those towns is adequate to their economic situation remains open. The attention should be paid there to keep the living standards on a high level and not to allow them to lose their identity.

However, for the majority of cases the strengthening of the unfavourable demographic trends started in 1990s can be clearly seen. The action implementing a proper policy towards the development of small towns should be started on both national and regional levels and the local one as well.

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