

SMALL TOWNS OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC WITHIN THE TRANSFORMATION STAGE

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Along with important political-social changes, the situation in the settlement structure of the Slovak Republic is being changed too. Small towns here have a special position. We are attempting in the presented contribution to characterize the hitherto development of Slovak small towns and, in particular, to document changes and trends in the contemporary transformation stage. An attention will be paid to a problem of defining towns and small towns, then to the size structure of small towns, growth dynamics, functions (especially administrative one) of small towns, settlement interrelations and settlement process, and changes in planning small towns. In the conclusion of the contribution we will summarize the results of the hitherto research of small towns with participation of the author of this contribution, exemplifying above all the town of Skalica.

1. Defining towns and small towns

Defining towns belongs to the fundamental methodological problems of urban geography. Within the post-war censuses in former Czechoslovakia (1961-1980), a special classification of towns was always prepared being different from the list of statutory towns. In the years 1961-1970, a category of the small towns was especially created in this classification. It contained approximately a half of all Slovak towns (Table 1).

Table 1

Towns in Slovakia by classification in censuses and by statute in 1961-1996

	1961		1970		1980		1991		1996
category	classif.	statute	classif.	statute	classif.	statute	classif.	statute	statute
towns	51	66	70	117	146	121	138	135	136
small towns	58	-	71	-	-	-	-	-	-

Bemerkung der Herausgeber:

V. Slavík beschäftigt sich mit der Siedlungsentwicklung (Struktur, Größe, Funktionen, Planungsprozesse) der slowakischen Kleinstädte im Rahmen des Transformationsprozesses. Zugleich vergleicht er diese Ergebnisse mit den Daten vor der Wende. Als Fallbeispiel der Analyse der Kleinstadt wird Skalica dargestellt. Die festgestellten Entwicklungstrends der Kleinstädte haben auch mit Zeitabstand an Aktualität nicht verloren.

A principal change in defining towns came to pass within the last census in 1991. In contradistinction to the preceding censuses, a statutory criterion was introduced. At present there exist 136 communities - towns, appointed by the Parliament of the Slovak Republic in November 1990. Out of the contemporary towns in Slovakia there are only 2 great cities. If we classify the towns of 20 to 100 000 inhabitants as medium-sized, then we consider all the towns to 20 000 inhabitants as little (in total 95, i.e. 69.9% of all towns). It means that as the disintegrated settlement structure is characteristic of Slovakia (2 878 communities-sept.1998, average size of community 1874 inhabitants), as preponderance of small towns is evident within the urban system of Slovakia. Let us point out an incorrect definition of towns in the Slovak Republic (i.e. obsolete) in the official documents of the UNO (World Urbanization Prospects, 1995).

2. The size structure of small towns

Marked changes in the urban size structure of Slovakia have come into existence in the last decades. The above defined category "small towns" consists at present of 4 standard size categories (- 2 000, 2-5 000, 5-10 000 and 10-20 000 inhabitants). During the entire post-war period we remark a permanent decrease of the category of towns to 5 000 inhabitants. Such towns prevailed in number among Slovak towns till 1961. Since 1970 onwards the most numerous town category has been that of 5-10 000 inhabitants. The number of towns in the category of 10-20 000 inhabitants was doubled in the post-war period (Table 2). Today, the least towns of Slovakia are those of Modrý Kameň and Dudince reaching less than 2 000 inhabitants.

Table 2

Size structure of towns in Slovakia 1950-1997

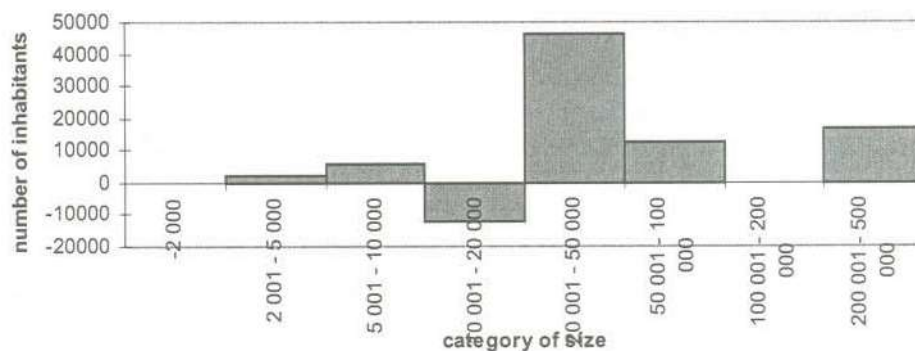
year/category	-5 000	5 001 - 10 000	10 001 - 20 000	20 001 - 50 000	50 001 - 100 000	100 001 - 500 000
1950	74	40	14	5	1	1
1961	56	39	21	9	1	1
1970	45	46	25	16	1	2
1980	26	46	36	19	6	2
1991	20	44	31	29	9	2
1997	21	43	31	30	9	2

3. Growth dynamics of small towns

After the dynamic growth of towns in Slovakia in the years 1970-1980 without precedent in their past and after gradual decelerating the dynamics in the next decade, the process of stagnation is taking place in the contemporary stage. It concerns the small towns as well. The main causes are stagnation in the house building and unfavourable demographic situation. The category of little towns with 10-20 000 inhabitants as sole of the urban size categories has even undergone the population decrease (Graph 1) brought about - to a large extent - by disintegration of rural communities from these towns.

Graph 1

INCREASE (DECREASE) OF TOWN CATEGORY OF SIZE IN SLOVAKIA 1991-1996



4. Functions of small towns

It is possible to divide the little towns into 2 groups from the viewpoint of their original functions. The first group involves the former historical towns - so called free royal towns, especially mining or market ones, and townlets once belonging to aristocracy. The second group is made up of former rural communities that were, thanks to localization of new functions in the course of this century, transformed into towns - like new industrial centers, traffic nodes, spa resorts, etc.

The greatest changes in the hitherto urban development after 1989 have occurred in their administrative function. Within the period of 1990-1996, the administrative arrangement of Slovakia was transformed twice thus markedly changing the position of towns as administrative centers. In the transient stage of 1991-1996 it was the absence of the regional level which was then symptomatic. The 2nd level of the state administration was constituted by the system of the "large districts"

(38) taken in an unchanged form from the former regime (with only 6 towns lesser than 20 000 inhabitants among the district seats). The 1st level of the state administration was then created by the new entities - areas (121), seats of them became for the first time in history also untraditional centers (like small towns and 3 rural communities). Since 1996 when the new system of 8 regions and 79 districts was adopted as the new territorial and administrative arrangement of the Slovak Republic, a large number of small towns became the district seats. Thus Slovakia returned after over 35 years towards the system of "small districts" that was used during the entire historical development of the public administration in the country. Often the struggle for the district seats was taking place between neighbouring towns, finally in several cases it was a political decision that outweighed objective criteria (Map 1).

Since 1990 we have registered the restoration of self-administration in communities. The communities are independent administrative territorial wholes managing own possessions and own incomes. The most of little towns as well as that of all communities are members of the Association of the towns and communities in the Slovak Republic (that represents more than 90% of the Slovak communities) and of regional associations (50 in the country) that substitute the current absence of the regional level of self-administration. Despite many problems the hitherto development of self-administration in little towns may be evaluated positively. The reconstruction of the cores of several historical towns, improvement of their service facilities, promotion of entrepreneurial activities by self-administrative authorities, education of employees in the form of foreign stays, examples of partner-like collaboration, etc. etc. may be evaluated as successful.

The housing function is often dominant in small towns. In contradistinction to the dynamic house building in the preceding regime in selected settlement centers (above all district seats) to the detriment of small towns, the house building in the contemporary transformation stage stagnated. It was related to unpreparedness of planning documents, lack of finances to building, absence of the state housing policy etc. Only during the last two years the situation has started to improve and more housing projects have been launched with the state subsidy in small towns too.

Very dynamic transformations came about in the sphere of industry and services as a basis for labour opportunities creation. Most of industrial subjects as well as almost all services in small towns were privatized but their successfulness is rather different. There exist positive examples of small towns with the progressive development of industrial subjects, often with foreign participation and low unemployment rate. On the other hand, there are also small towns where we can find high joblessness due to bankruptcy or stagnation of industrial plants.

An important potential of our towns and communities into the future is that of tourism and recreation. Out of small towns, it relates in particular to the historical and spa ones. However, realization is running slowly for the moment. Towns strive



TERRITORIAL ORGANIZATION
OF STATE ADMINISTRATION
IN SLOVAK REPUBLIC (1996 -)

border of province
border of district
capital
centre of province
centre of district
towns without admin

- thanks to various projects (international too) - to realize the improvement of amenities, propagation at tourism fairs, publishing documents, etc. Issuing both monographs and picture books has extraordinarily been intensified, above all in prosperous towns. Despite that, the acquaintance with tourism centers in Slovakia has still big reserves.

5. Settlement interrelations and settlement processes

In the current, transient stage one may observe a tendency of diminishing the intensity of some settlement interrelations, especially to greater distances. Economic transformation is reflected, above all, in reducing the intensity of commuting and stagnation of the house building in towns caused the marked decrease of migratory flows.

The process of communities disintegration as a reaction to the most flagrant cases of ungrounded integration of communities within the former regime was the first settlement process in the transformation stage. It brought about substantial changes in some small towns too. Disintegration of 2-4 communities in such towns resulted in the obvious cadaster reduction as well as population number decrease.

The change of the developmental trajectory of our society also changes the next trends of the urbanization process in the Slovak Republic. The population concentration process in towns has been stopped recently. An inception of the suburbanization process is expected (it has already begun in hinterlands of the biggest towns). Little towns will be also its part. The counterurbanization process is awaited as well. Settlement renewal and modernization will be enforced rather than prevailing construction during the hitherto urbanization development.

6. Planning and managing small towns

The creation of new masterplans of small towns mostly stagnated in the first years of transformation in the society (also owing to a certain aversion to plans). More urgent objectives were solved being connected with restoration of self-administration. This delay resulted in unpreparedness of projects to the new house building. The concentration on restructurization of historical cores in small towns was a positive factor in the current stage of planning small towns. It enabled the restoration of self-administration and independent managing. A new trend of drawing up the urban development strategies has been so far not put across for the small towns of Slovakia. The new conception of the settlement system in the country (Conception of the territorial development of Slovakia, 2nd proposal, 1997) is primarily based on joining to the European settlement network and on forming conditions for harmonic progression of all societal activities. Most of small towns are within this conception a part of fundamental settlement structures: settlement centers and developmental axes.

7. Research of small towns in Slovakia - example of the town of Skalica

No special research directed towards the entire group of small towns in the present transformation stage in the Slovak Republic was conducted up to now. However, single small towns were parts of several research programmes done by geographers, sociologists, town-planners, ecologists. The systematic and detailed research of the selected small towns of Slovakia is a part of a research programme carried out by the Department of human geography and demography at the Faculty of Natural Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava in the last years (projects, expertises, dissertations, etc.). A settlement analysis of several small towns - mostly historical (like Banská Štiavnica, Modra, Kežmarok, Púchov, Skalica, Zlaté Moravce) - enables even in the current stage to formulate the general tendencies of towns' transformation. The highest attention was hitherto, out of the group of small towns, paid to the town of Skalica.

The town of Skalica lies on the frontier of Slovakia with the Czech Republic, in the northern part of the "Záhorie" region. It is the seat of a county having 15 000 inhabitants at present. The town belonged to the most important towns of Slovakia (being in the 5th-8th position among towns during 1720-1850). It was also one of 24 free royal towns in the country. Later it moved from this high position to the 54th place among Slovak towns as a consequence of stagnation in its next development. Despite that, Skalica retained up to now within the Záhorie region a dominant standing as a centre of health services, culture, education, historical monuments as well as that of viticulture. After 1990, the town of Skalica is a good example of the progress in the entrepreneurial sphere and in the proportion of foreign investors involvement (especially in engineering). This results, among other things, in the low unemployment rate - about 6%. Skalica has a potential for tourism and recreation development too. It significantly activates itself in regional (seat of the regional association of the towns and communities "Záhorie"), transboundary (association "Pomoravie") as well as partner-like collaboration (Schwechatt - since 1992, Freyburg - renewed in 1997).

The results of a multiyear settlement research in this town and its hinterland are as follows:

- expert analysis (Slavík, V. a kol., 1994) that served as a groundwork for preparation of the town's masterplan (Územný plán..., 1995) and helped in taking a decision on the county seat;
- dissertations solving the topic of tourism progress, settlement development and transboundary relations of the Skalica region;
- presentations of the research results in conferences and in journals
- international project ECOS/OUVERTURE Inward II dealing with joining Skalica to the Bata canal and the Morava river (water tourism development) (Slavík, V. a kol., in print);

- prepared settlement-geography monograph on the town of Skalica (Slavík, V. a kol., 1998).

Conclusion

The little towns are an urban category with the specific problems that is why it is necessary to pay them a due attention. We plan to continue in detailed examining little towns with a special direction to historical towns. The hitherto as well as planned researches will enable a more perfect knowledge of the settlement development of the given town group. This will be utilizable in creating the planning documents, the developmental projects of perspective functions and, finally, in formulating the general postulates.

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