

COBWEBS IN PEWS – RELIGION, IDENTITY AND SPACE IN WESTERN GEMER REGION IN CENTRAL SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes changes of religious identity, religious life in formerly one of the most intellectually and culturally flourishing regions in Slovakia – Gemer. This region has been one of the most prosperous regions in the Hungarian Empire, mostly thanks to mining tradition, but now has become one of the poorest regions in Slovakia. From the cultural point of view, this region with strong Lutheran tradition in its Slovak part has undergone many changes in religious identity in past 50 years. We attempt to analyze changes in religious identity especially in the region of Western part of Gemer between towns Hnúšťa and Revúca with respect to changes in religious structure of the population, number of believers according to church statistics, intensity of religious services in communities and age structure of believers. Generally, the processes in communities are similar: aging of adherents, irregular worship services, poor condition of church building, secular usage of parsonages and former church school buildings, or in worse situations, such buildings are abandoned and devastated.*

Key words: *Gemer, religious landscape, religion, Lutheran, cultural geography, identity, marginality*

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that Slovakia is considered to be religious country, even in comparison with neighboring countries the level of religiousness and share of people declaring themselves to be members of some denomination is still high. Overall, the years of long lasting socialist regime had not destroyed deep and mighty roots of the connection with religion in many parts of human life. Not only in rites of passage, that were more or less conducted and “blessed” not only by state offices, but, especially in rural communities the assistance of local church community was inevitable and in many cases expected. Even church attendance and intensity of communal religious life in rites, services, or in some cases even pilgrimages has remained quite numerous as well.

Such intensity of religious life was much lower in urban areas. Intensive urbanization in socialism period broke up the traditional ties with religiosity and in large urban blocks faith melted and usually became only sentiment. Cities then became points of spreading secularization and abandonment from church and religious life. Complicated cultural map of Slovakia has revealed not only points, but region, where religion lost its stable position in colorful range of cultural identity or identities. This region lies in the center of Slovakia,

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and from various point of views is outstanding. It is Gemer region – unique region on the borders with Hungary with rich and proud history and multicultural content not only from the point of view of religion, but also from the point of ethnicity and social structure. This region is today known to be one of the poorest and is considered marginal (Džupinová, 2008, pp. 149-151) according to several figures and researches. Economical and social marginality is completed by marginality of religion in this region. This presupposition is proved and became more evident in the most recent Census in 2001.

Historically, Gemer region consisted of three main religious groups – Lutherans, Calvinists and Roman Catholics. While Hungarians in this region declared themselves Catholics and Calvinist, Slovaks were mainly Lutherans. In this paper we focus more on changes of the position of the Lutheran Church in central western part of Gemer region combining official data from recent and historical censuses as well as internal church data including number of adherents, and intensity of church services in communities. The choice of our research region is based on researches in published monograph of marginality (Džupinová et al 2008) and peripheral regions of Slovakia to which we have added neighboring communities lying in hilly area of Gemer in Slovak ethnic area. This research region more or less covers the area of western Gemer region (according to Zubriczky et al. 2005 p 21) where mining areas lie, just like it is adjusted to the boundaries of historical Gemer Lutheran Church parishes and deanery according to statistical church directory (so called Schematismus) from 1838. Due to several differences we have excluded urban communities from this analysis, and focused on rural communities exclusively. We also combine two levels of public administration settlement division. For some analyzes we use the level of municipalities, and for some analyzes, especially with historical content we use the level of communities. Most of them belong to Rimavská Sobota district, some municipalities in north-east belong to Revúca district.

Researches in changes of religious landscape are quite rare in Slovak geography of religion. Due to stable and relatively high level of religiosity in this country, there were no strong motivations to analyze that part of religious geography yet. We might see some analogue with researches in Czech Sudetenland (researches in this area see in Havlíček et al. 2007) with historically different evolution, but consequences might have many common aspects with Gemer region in Slovakia, that would emerge in several decades later.

SECULARIZATION PROCESS IN GEMER

Although the process of religiosity level decline had emerged after WW II and after coming of the socialist regime, there might be some hints in the past indicating the possibility of future more secular development. There is evidence, that after WWI, there has been quite popular founding of communist party associations in communities (Bolfík, 1971). Long history of Communism in this region including its flourishing 40 year long period is sustained even in today's times. According to election results, the number of votes for Communists in this region is far above the national level. According to data (Fig.1) (Fig 2) there are few communities, where Communist party was the party with highest number of votes in community¹. Such inclination to Communist ideas that were

1 We use the election results from year 2002 due to the fact, that in this year Communist party acquired highest share of votes in post-socialism history of Slovakia (above 6 %, which meant, that this party joined National Council for the following 4 years).

especially after 1948 connected with atheism in more or less intensive forms have strongly influenced Gemer in the range that no other region in Slovakia reached.

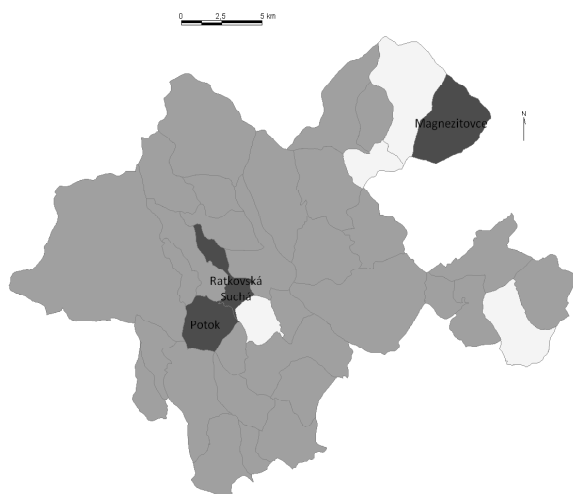


Fig 1. Communist party election share in 2002 (national share 6%)

Source: <http://www.statistics.sk/volby2002/webdata/slov/tab/tab10.xls>



Fig. 2 Established local Communist parties in 1920s

Source: *Bolfík 1977*

Why such strong inclination toward Communism? (Tab1) (Fig. 3) The explanation is not simple, but we can find roots in strong iron or magnesite mining tradition of some parts of Gemer such as Lubeník, Chyžné, Mníšany – Magnezitovce, Jelšava, Rákoš, Sirk, Železník, Červeňany, Turčok, Ploské, Rovné (Zubriczky et al. 2005, pp. 106-133). Mining was the first non-agricultural occupation possibility that was even organized, and that occupation was connected with strong social accent (social apartments, leisure time facilities, as it can be seen in some villages such as Železník). Due to social organization of this industry (trade union) as well as economic crisis in twenties and thirties has produced such political left-winged outlook. The possibility towards accepting such ideas was also caused by relatively liberal environment of Lutheran communities. Such atmosphere then easily caused people to slowly withdraw religion from the cultural identity. We can find salient resource reflecting such changes of cultural content of identity in chronicles of local communities. For example, the chronicle of community Rovné (Kronika obce Rovné) states in 1958 where the writer states that “inhabitants were not extraordinarily devoted to religion; just elderly keenly adhere to religious customs”. Changes after 1948 in religious situation in this community were so intensively accepted, that, as the writer in 1960 states, “thanks to education process no child was enrolled at religious classes.” (Kronika obce Rovné, p. 59)

Tab 1. Population dynamics of western Gemer between 1880-2001

	1880-1930	1930-2001
Lutherans	-9 %	-68 %
Roman Catholics	64 %	11 %
Total population	0 %	-35 %

Source: Censuses 1880, 1930, and 2001

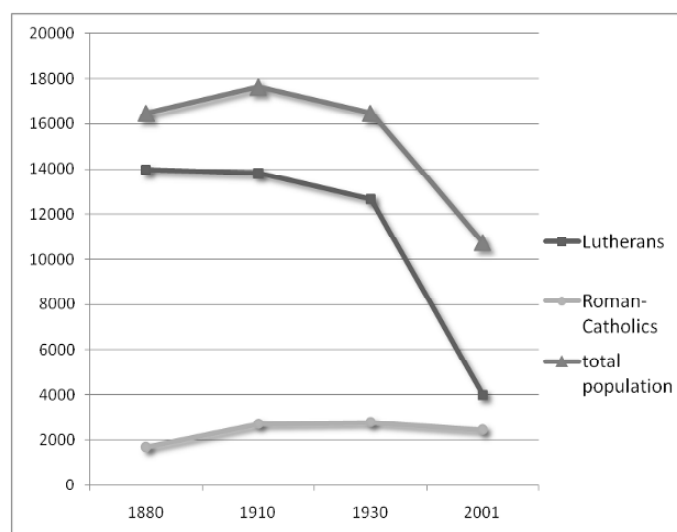


Fig. 3 Population dynamics of western Gemer between 1880-2001

Source: Censuses 1880, 1930, and 2001

Although religion seems not to be the most important factor in culture of this region anymore, in the past Lutheranism had played an important role in forming the intellectual and educational face not only in local communities, but many times had national importance. Many intellectual leaders of nation worked here as ministers or at least teachers (Dobšínský, Bartholomaeides, etc.), in local town Revúca was founded the first Slovak grammar school in 1862, where many future leaders of the nation studied, although it had to be closed very soon, in 1874. Beside churches, almost every community had teacher and school building, churches and parsonages were usually the most honored buildings in village. This started to change in the second half of 20th century. Some of the mines ended up their work, and due to more difficult accessibility, depopulation process slowly progressed. As communities were shrinking, there were less people to sustain the grand church buildings and many started to decay. This process continues until now and creates specific outlook not only of religious landscape, but communal, and social landscape as well.

The most expressible mean of proving the intensity of secularization process in western Gemer region are data from censuses, especially from the recent census, that was performed more than 10 years after fall of socialism showing more or less stable situation in religious life reflecting previous year of freedom deficiency that lasted for few decades. If we consider numbers showing quantitative changes in this field, there can be seen slow decrease of Lutherans starting already between years 1880 – 1910, although the number of total population was increasing, just like the numbers of Roman Catholics. This increase can be explained either by growing number of migrating miners or growing number of Romas, even though its religiosity is usually different in its essence (see for example Podolinská 2007) and has different way of expression. Highest decrease is evident in the second half of century. Number of Lutherans dropped almost to the level of $\frac{3}{4}$ of size in 1930. This is not only the context of depopulation (as it is seen in decrease of total population number), but as well as aging process due to less intensive transmission of religious identity upon new coming generations.

The most interesting are data of the share of non affiliated people in communities. The share of non church affiliated of the region is, as expected, higher than average. Almost $\frac{1}{3}$ of (Tab2) the population belongs to that group, while national share is 13 %.

Tab 2. Non – church affiliated population in 2001

	Total population	Share of non-church affiliated (%)
Bratislava	428 672	29,3
Košice	236 093	19,4
Železník – Šrobárka	233	65,2
Turčok	244	54,5

Source: Census 2001

But within the region there are spatial differences; some communities, even of Lutheran origin have share of non affiliated below average, even below 5 %, on the other hand, there are communes with share above 40 %. The highest concentration of that non-religious

group is in mine (Fig 4) (Fig 5) communities that were founded for monofunctional purpose. One of such community has the share over 65 % (Železník-Šrobárka). Among the autochthonous communities such share of non-affiliated has Turčok (54 %). The last mentioned community has even church, yet with irregular services there, since the figures of the share of not affiliated is very high here, exceeding the share in the largest cities in Slovakia.

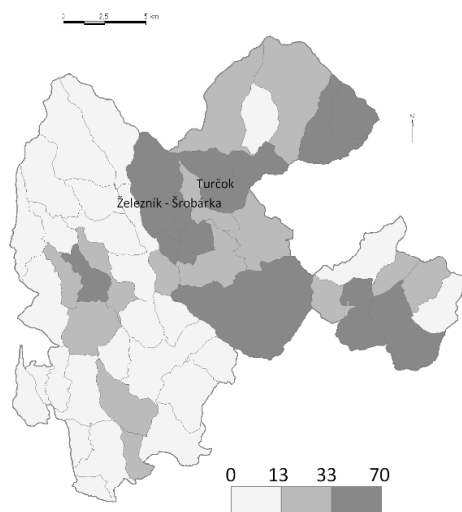


Fig 4. Share of non church affiliated in 2001
Source: Census 2001

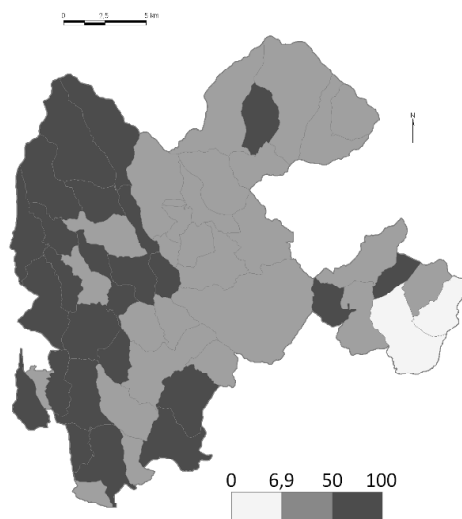


Fig 5. Share of Lutherans in 2001
Source: Census 2001

AGING OF THE ADHERENTS

Besides progressing process of secularization, there is evident aging of the Lutherans in this region. Overall, Lutherans in Slovakia are the church with the highest share of old adherents (Hluchá 2006). Believers in this region are even older than average. (Tab 3) Oldest Lutheran communities have mean age of its believers over 60 years, but those communes are older generally and have very few inhabitants, such as Poproč with 27 inhabitants, or Budikovany with 25 inhabitants. More expressive figure about aging is the difference between average age of Lutherans in community and average age of the whole community. The highest difference is 20 years older Lutheran community than total population. Such examples are evident in Turčok (community with one of the highest share of church-non affiliated) or Šivetice. Almost no differences demonstrate communities with high share of Lutheran or those with not that intensive process of secularization (Ratkovské Bystré, Španie Pole, Lipovec).

Tab 3. Comparison of mean age in 2001

	Lutherans	Total population
Western Gemer	45,9	38,4
Slovakia	42,0	36,1

Source: Census 2001

RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE IN GEMER

According to discussed processes of secularization that this region has undergone, there is evident that religious landscape must somehow reflect the status of religion for individuals and for community as well. Places such as churches, sometimes adjacent ecclesiastical buildings such as parsonages, schools and other buildings played role in constructing and maintaining the boundaries that sustained religious identities and communities. Mostly in the past even people not belonging to the religious community paid respect towards such places and recognized them as being the important site of the whole community as well. Churches, parsonages and schools were one of the most, if not the only, cultural sites in village and their status was usually confirmed by their central position in communities. In most of the communities in this part of Gemer region we find churches and schools on central squares of villages. It seems that this central status of church is only spatial, cultural and transcendental centrality of church and religion in nowadays society is doubtful. Nevertheless, there must be stated, that the status of church building does not always mean that religious community disappeared, but due to depopulation processes became villages much smaller as a whole. So, there could be identified two “strokes” to religious identity of western Gemer and its religious landscape. First is secularization that is strengthened by depopulation process. Therefore, not only church buildings, but also other secular buildings in communes together with private houses show signs of decay and progressing vacancy or aging of facades.

We can portray few pattern examples of the outlook of religious landscape in this researched region. Not only churches, but moreover subsidiary church buildings show more intensive signs of decay and the status of community. Mostly due to depopulation,

and secularization, many parishes became too small to be able to sustain own ministers. Again, the most crucial years emerged during socialism. The last church directory and statistics from 1955 show no changes in this area so far, but statistics that was published 50 years later show vast changes. The only decline of church parish before years of socialism is Kyjatice. This community has undergone the most rapid change in religious structure, where the share of Catholics grew from 10.5 % in 1921 to 55.5 % in 1930 (Tišliar 2008) and therefore shrinking Lutheran parish had to perish. According to directory in 1955, it was already attached to neighboring parish. In that time another parishes remained intact, just like it had been for more than 100 years. In 50 years the situation changed a lot and from 14 parishes and 14 ministers inhabiting this area, only 2 parsonages were able to sustain its ministers in 2008. We describe physical status of some of them.

Kyjatice – (Fig 6) first declining parish with unused parsonage in this region, already before year 1950. Historical gothic church is in good state, but parsonage is unused and ruined. Buildings adjacent to church (probably former church school) are converted to secular use and inhabited.

Fig 6. First uninhabited parsonage in western Gemer – Kyjatice (status in 2009)



Brádno – (Fig 7) parsonage remained in church property, it is in well state, and rented as an apartment. On the other hand, only ruins remained from the church school, that has been later on used as state elementary school too (see picture). Church is in state of renovation (new roof in 2009) but requires more investments due to its position on marshy soil.

Fig. 7. Parsonage in Brádno with ruins of former church schol in the middle (status in 2009)



Rybník – (Fig 8) community intensively inhabited by Romas and according to statistics, there is only 13 Lutherans in 2001. Parsonage is used for secular purposes (private apartment), but the physical status of the church is the worst in region. Gothic church is located out of village on hill in cemetery. It has not been used for years and altar was removed to museum in Kosice other parts of interior were preserved, although organ is completely destroyed. There have been attempts to save that unique church by organizing workcamp in 2008 with the help of local authorities (<http://www.evanjelic.sk/node/3742>). Volunteers including ministers performed some minor but helpful renovation works.

Fig. 8 Unused and abandoned church in Rybník (status in 2007)



Ratková – (Fig 9) former town is also inhabited mostly by Romas. Gothic church in the centre of square is used monthly, and is in quite good condition. Evidently monumental parsonage is abandoned and devastated probably since 1970. The local authorities planned to use the abandoned parsonage as retirement home, but evidently they had not succeeded. In the vicinity of church and parsonage, there is old two storey church school with Latin sign saying it was built thanks to the diligence of Ratková citizens. The majesty of the school building proves the position of education in this community in the past. Just like in the case of Rybník, there are NGO activities of people who have roots in this town. This association bought the old parsonage here, and with the help of national collection have plans to renovate it (www.nasaratkova.estranky.cz)

Fig. 9 Parsonage in Ratková (status in 2007)



Šivetice – another community with Roma majority, church needs renovation, parsonage located on central square is abandoned and partly destroyed (no windows, doors). Village is interesting from another point of view. There is located Roman-Catholic Romanesque rotunda. Since there is no established Catholic community (although according to last census there are 178 Catholics), it is more-less devastated. Thank to state investments renovation started this year. Similar rotunda and its circumstances can be found in neighboring commune Prihradzaný (Fig 10). No catholic community and just like partly abandoned appearance can be found here as well. Those two examples in Šivetice and Prihradzaný are the most remarkable examples of contribution of Roman Catholic church and its sacred places to the religious landscape of western Gemer.

Fig. 10 Roman Catholic rotunda in Šivetice (status in 2008 before renovation has started) Intensity of religious life in western Gemer



There is no doubt that poor condition of churches, decreasing numbers of believers might have consequences in lower intensity of church life. The most evident figure in this case is the intensity of Sunday church services. Since there are only few ministers that have to serve many communities that are even low in participants, the church life has been reduced. Therefore, services are held only once a month in most of the congregations. Larger and less remote communities have services even twice a month, more remote and with smaller number of adherents have rather irregular services few times a year. (Fig 11) (Fig 12) (Fig 13) What can such intensity of religious services indicate? According to L. Kong there is no doubt that as long as people pray in the same place, there is the feeling of belonging together as a community, although the same worship place does not always entail a feeling of integration and community of worshippers (Kong 2005, p. 372). This can be partially true considering especially rural communities. On the other hand, worship services are the only more or less regular expression of common belonging or at least indicate gathering for one common purpose or goal.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly this part of Slovakia has interesting position on cultural map of this part of Central Europe. Its marginal position from the social and economical point of view is the matter of serious discussion about poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and Roma policy issues. Cultural content of this region is therefore put a little bit aside. Usually it is

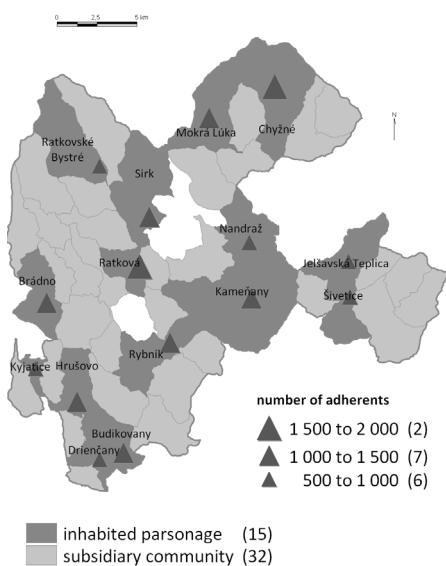


Fig. 11 Lutheran parishes in western Gemer in 1838
Source: Kollár 1838

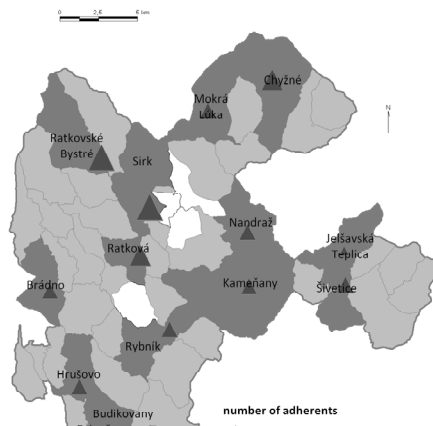


Fig. 12 Lutheran parishes in western Gemer in 1955
Source: Schematizmus 1955

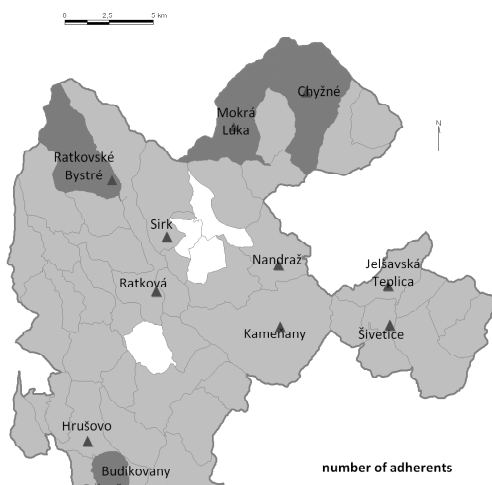


Fig. 13 Lutheran parishes in western Gemer in 2008
Source: Klátik 2008

generally known that this region has only proud and relatively successful past, but now the future seems uncertain. The situation in religious identity maintenance here at least seems so. There is probably no other region in Slovakia that has undergone that range of changes in all aspects of religious situation. Firstly, quantitative changes indicate gigantic shrinking of locally major Lutheran church with its vast consequences on religious landscape, not exactly residing in changing function of sacred buildings and space, but rather in its continuous devastation and its deserted status. Firstly, associated buildings in ecclesiastical property got devastated (only minority of them has new function) such as schools and parsonages. Here in this region only 4 parsonages are permanently inhabited by a minister, while 60 year ago there were 14 parsonages with permanent minister. The less intensity of common identity session is indicated in the number of worship services per month in each community. Most of the communities have now possibility to gather only once in a month.

Due to social and economical crash that this region is struck, there has been more or less intensive process of depopulation of mostly productive age groups. The average age of the communities is more than 2 years higher than the national mean age. One might think that due to aging of the population, this region would be more religious than average, but here we see totally different processes. This region is old but irreligious at once. This combination makes this region even more interesting and worth to be hereafter researched.

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SUMMARY

Map of cultural identity of Slovakia is full of contrasting areas. Not only from the point of view of ethnicity, but from the point of view of religious identity as well. One of the specific regions is Gemer region in central Slovakia. There is probably no other region with such rapid decline from the economical point of view, but besides large cities (Bratislava and Košice), there is probably no region in Slovakia with such structural changes in the usually stable structure such as religion. The analysis in this paper was focused on western part of this region where mostly mining industry was concentrated, and where the religious structure has probably changed the most. In the mining communities (some of them were populated by incoming miners, usually of different cultural background) there was stronger adherence to communist or at least socio-democratic ideas probably for longer time than anywhere else. This was important factor that activated such cultural and structural changes in religious identity. We have analyzed the impacts of those changes according to the last census in 2001 as well as according to Lutheran church statistical data (as the dominant or mostly only established church in many communities here) about religious services and intensity of the usage of church buildings, especially parsonages.

The changes in religious structure, combined with depopulation (due to economical collapse), has its impact in religious countryside of this region. Firstly, the subsidiary ecclesiastical buildings, such as former church schools and abandoned parsonages started to decay. In most communities and parishes also churches started to decay demonstrating its need to renovate, but mostly from non-church resources (state subsidies) emerged in last decays.