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## Small towns in Poland, the present problems and challenges

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### *Absztrakt*

A tanulmány arra vállalkozik, hogy bemutassa a lengyel kisvárosok legfontosabb társadalmi-gazdasági problémáit. Kisvárosoknak ebben a kutatásban a 20 ezer főnél nem népesebb, városi jogállású településeket tekintették, amelyek egyértelműen dominálják Lengyelország városálózatát. Számuk dinamikusan növekszik, azáltal, hogy évről évre jelennek meg „új városok” a térképen. A városi státuszra történő előléptetés nagyon különböző településeket érint, amelyek közül egyaránt találunk gyarapodó, kifejezetten fejlett közösségeket is, városias vonásokkal a társadalom- és településtörténetükben, de a spektrum másik szélén olyan, kifejezetten kis létszámú, lassacskán már–már elnéptelenedő helyeket is, amelyek urbanitása igencsak kérdéses. Ennek kapcsán a tanulmány fontos célnak látta felhívni a figyelmet a „legújabb városok” sajátos lengyelországi problémájára.

*Kulcsszavak:* kisvárosok, „legújabb városok”, urbanizáció, várossá nyilvánítás, restitúció, Lengyelország

### *Abstract*

The main socio-economic problems of small towns in Poland are discussed in the paper. Small towns understood as the settlements with the population number smaller than 20 thousand clearly dominate in the urban settlement structure of Poland. They make more than 78% of all urban units. This number is dynamically growing as the new towns appear every year. The city status is given to different small towns, on one hand a group of well developing settlements can be seen as well as towns with “towns history” but on the other hand the city status is also given to depopulating very small units which

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can be doubtful. For that reason on the background of all small towns in Poland author pays special attention to the newest towns.

*Keywords:* small towns, newest towns, urbanisation, Poland, restitution

## **Introduction**

In an age characterized by globalization and the burgeoning prominence of the world's major metropolises, the issue of small towns' development remains somewhat marginalized in the broader scientific and geographical discourse. Nevertheless, researchers from different European and non-European countries keep working on this set of urban units (Knox, Mayer 2013; Mainet 2011; Vaishar, Zapletalová 2009). In their research authors pay attention to the attractiveness of towns (Kwiatek-Soltys et al. 2014), their role in the metropolitan regions (Szmytkie, Sikorski 2020) the demographic growth or shrinkage (Pirisi, Trócsányi 2014) as well as the quality of life of their inhabitants. Some scholars also underscore impediments to growth, such as peripheral locations. For certain Polish towns, land ownership has proven to be a pivotal issue, notably due to the time-consuming reprivatization process (Kwiatek-Soltys 2017). Small towns have also emerged as a focal point at numerous contemporary international scientific conferences. A special session titled "Future narratives of small towns" was dedicated to small towns during recent AESOP (Association of European Schools of Planning) congress in Łódź. In relation to Poland discussions among authors centred on the necessity for fresh narratives in town development strategies. Shrinkage in small peripheral cities will be a topic of a session during 10<sup>th</sup> CATference (Cities after transition conference) 2023 in Riga. There is also annual conference in Poland dedicated to small towns in Poland.

The primary objective of this paper is to shed light on the principal challenges related to the socio-economic development of small towns in Poland, with particular emphasis on the country's newest towns. The paper is based on author's long-term studies on small towns in the country, supplemented by essential data sourced from the Polish Official Statistics, which serves to illustrate the current demographic landscape of these towns.

## **Study area**

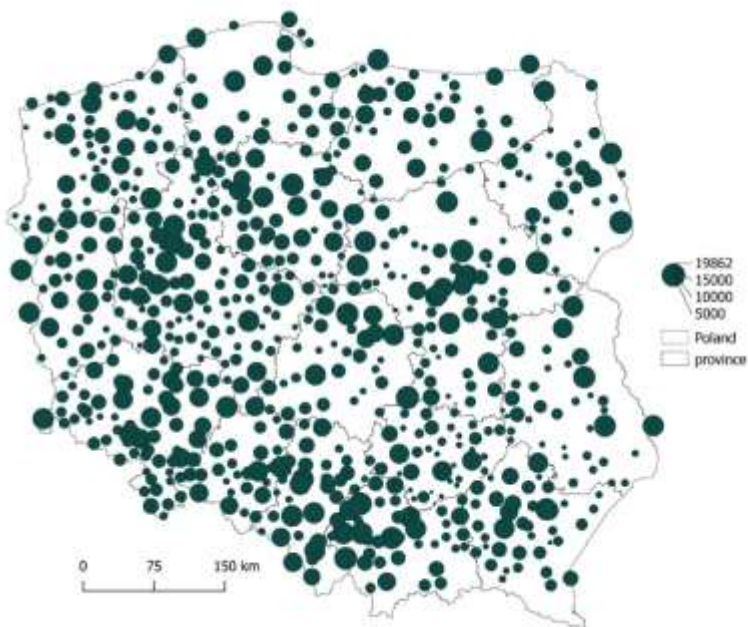
Polish urban settlement network in 2023 consists of 979 towns and cities. The definition of a city in Poland is based on legal and administrative criteria (Szymańska 2013; Słodczyk 2001). In the past decades, so-called city rights have been given, however, a reasonably large number of towns lost them later as the result of wars, political

decisions, natural disasters, and other reasons including the incorporation into bigger cities (Krzysztofik, Dymirov 2015). Beginning in the second part of the 20th century the process of the restitution of city rights has been started (Konecka 2011). Consequently, the urban landscape in Poland now includes both newly established cities and those that have had their city status reinstated, as many small towns have been granted city status, affirmed by the Ordinance of the Council of Ministers.

Small towns in Poland clearly dominate the structure of the urban system, constituting more than 78% of all urban entities. Small towns are understood as towns with the population of fewer than 20 thousand residents (Édouard 2012; Kwiatek-Soltys 2011). It's important to note that this category of towns exhibits substantial variation in terms of population size, as illustrated in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1.

#### Small towns in Poland in 2023



Source: Author's edition based on Local Data Base, Statistics Poland, Warszawa.

The average small town in Poland is inhabited by around 6.5 thousand though this figure exhibits a wide range, varying from as few as 300 to nearly 20 thousand. 17 small towns have not exceeded one thousand inhabitants while the next 387 are populated by less than 5 thousand. In the case of this small group of towns, the problem is their population decline in some cases even shrinkage. Another point of concern is the fact that many of them are new towns as they have received or regained the city rights lately. The opposite group of small towns is those with a population number of over 15 thousand. It must be said that this is also not a stable group. There are 74 towns in this group which makes less than 10% of all. The group is constantly changing as on the one hand some small towns experience dynamic growth and evolve into medium-sized cities. For example, Wieliczka, located in the Krakow vicinity, was a small town until 2009 and now boasts a population of over 26 thousand. On the other hand, medium-sized cities experience depopulation and subsequently become small towns. (ex. Koło, Lubań, Prudnik, Opoczno, Hajnówka). Notably, these towns, among the largest among small towns, have transitioned to their current status in recent years, with Koło as recently as June 2022, Lubań in 2021, and Prudnik, Opoczno, and Hajnówka in 2020. This suggests that factors such as the pandemic and a high death rate have significantly influenced these changes. These shifts present some methodological challenges, as long-term comparisons become increasingly complex in light of these fluctuations.

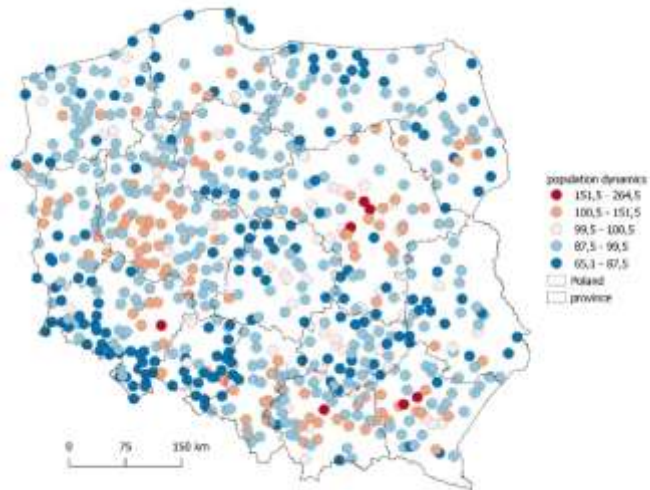
### **Socio-economic development problems of small towns in Poland**

The studies on the population dynamics of the whole group of small towns show the importance of geographical location (*Figure 2*).

On one hand the small towns located within the influence of a big city have a strong factor to attract the future population as dormitory towns. The possibility of online work and avoiding traffic while commuting has made them even stronger. It's worth noting that even in the absence of these factors, the proximity to a major city alone makes small towns inherently attractive. Moreover, the development of public transportation systems that connect these towns to the nearby metropolises further contributes to their status as comfortable and desirable places to reside.

Figure 2.

Population dynamics of small towns in Poland in 2000–2022\*



\*For new towns the population dynamic refers to the year the town's status was given

Source: Author's edition based on Local Data Base, Statistics Poland, Warszawa.

Photo 1.

The parking area at the railway station in a small town Krzeszowice.



Photo: Author's

The example of towns located in the metropolitan area of Kraków such as Krzeszowice can be given here (*Photo 1*). This town is experiencing dynamic development, positioning itself as an attractive location within a half-hour distance from Kraków. The present number of inhabitants is nearly 10 thousand. Krzeszowice used to be a spa town in history and there are ongoing efforts to revive that role. What is reasonable is there is no tendency to achieve a limitless growth, with the goal of remaining a small town with a population not exceeding 15 thousand. Nevertheless, the town faces some problems typical for such centres like urban sprawl for example. The growth of new residential buildings overtakes the creation of the proper infrastructure (*Photo 2*).

Photo 2.

New housing in the suburbs of a small town Krzeszowice



Photo: Author's

For many small towns another problem is the lack of bypass routes and therefore, the excessive burden of traffic in the downtowns. In Krzeszowice, this problem is particularly acute, as it involves the transportation of materials from the limestone mine, necessitating the passage through the town.

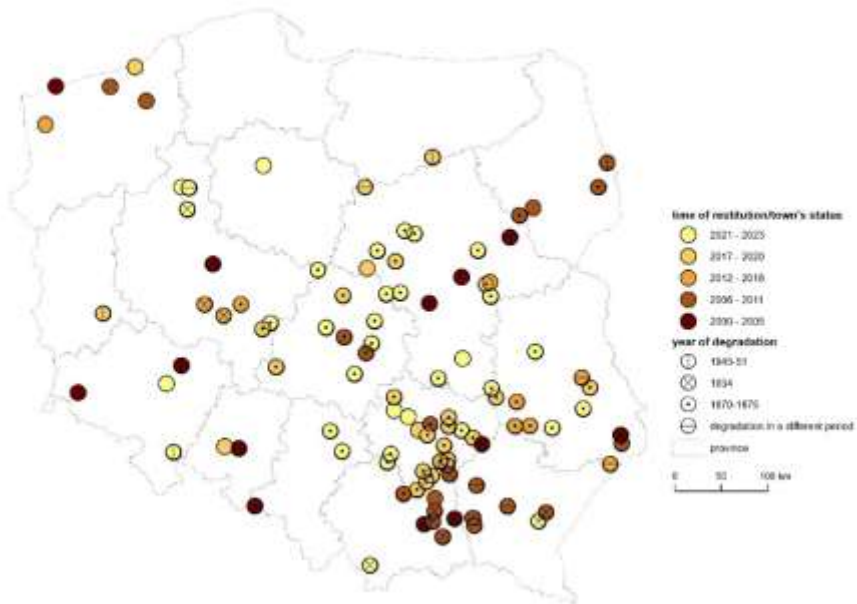
For the vast majority of small towns, the predominant problem is depopulation. In a relatively long period of 2000–2022, 73% of towns experienced depopulation. For 45% of them, the population dynamic is below 90, which means a serious decrease. Several factors contribute to this decline. Firstly, small towns tend to mirror common trends related to the second demographic transition (Kurek 2011), such as the number of divorces, family model and household structure, fertility, natural growth, and population aging. The second significant factor is the emigration driven by economic reasons. That is clearly seen in the southwestern part of the country, the Sudety mountains region where the emigration to Germany has a historical background. The research conducted by B. Bartosiewicz, S. Kurek and A. Kwiatek-Sołtys (2019) showed that in the case of small towns in Poland, it is not possible to talk about the shrinkage understood as the complex process of depopulation and economic collapse. Only a few towns were pointed out as shrinking towns then. Some characteristics could however be given such as the peripheral location, the small size (often below 5 thousand) and local functions not exceeding the urban-rural commune.

### **Newest towns**

The situation of the newest towns is indeed a crucial aspect to consider (Konecka-Szydłowska, Trócsányi, Pirisi (2018). These towns somehow reflect the situation in others. Only between 2000–2023 105 towns in Poland received city status (*Figure 3*). Remarkably, that for only 18% of them is it the “first time” by gaining the city rights, while for the majority, it is the restitution of a status they have had before. 56% of these towns lost their towns status in the 19th century due to the tsarist deprivation of the city status in the Kingdom of Poland (Krzysztofik, Dymitrov 2015), which explains the concentration of these reconstituted towns in eastern Poland.

Figure 3.

Small newest towns, which received city status in years 2000–2023



Source: Author's edition

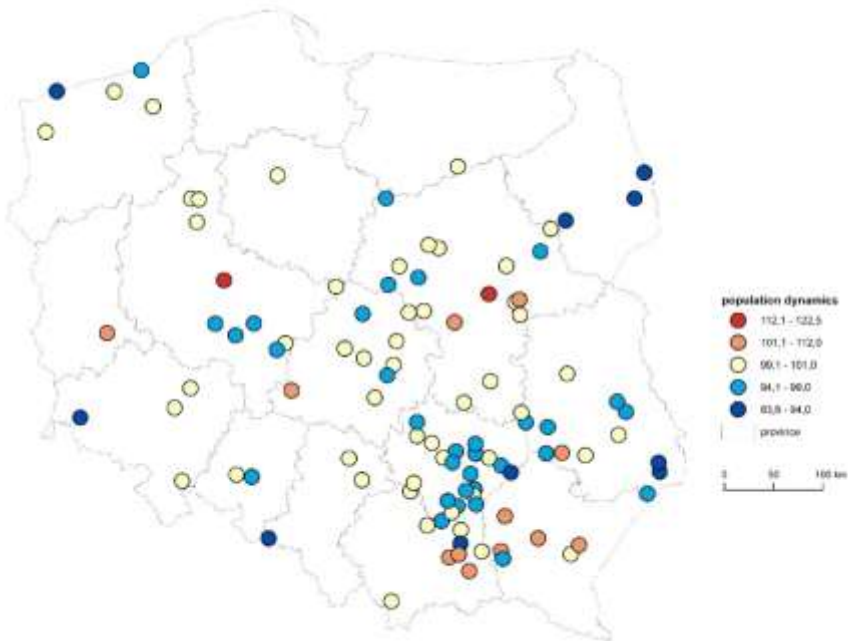
Currently the smallest town in Poland is the good example of those degradation and restitution of rights. The town Opatowiec is inhabited by hardly 300 people. Its urbanity can be questioned. The bachelor dissertation by P. Niedźwiedź (2021) on the restituted town Opatowiec proved that it is not possible to classify Opatowiec functionally as a town. Following the administrative reforms in Poland its rural status remained unchanged. Nowadays the possibility of restitution of city rights of the settlements which lost them due to mentioned tsarists deprivation makes the rules unclear with the impression of exception which is difficult to understand (Niedźwiedź 2021). The research proved that this new town can be regarded as such only from the formal point of view.



This is not only a question of the mentioned smallest town in Poland. A reasonably large number of the new towns are the depopulating ones which makes the sense of the given city rights questionable (*Figure 4*).

Figure 4.

Population dynamics of newest towns, which received city status between 2000–2023\*



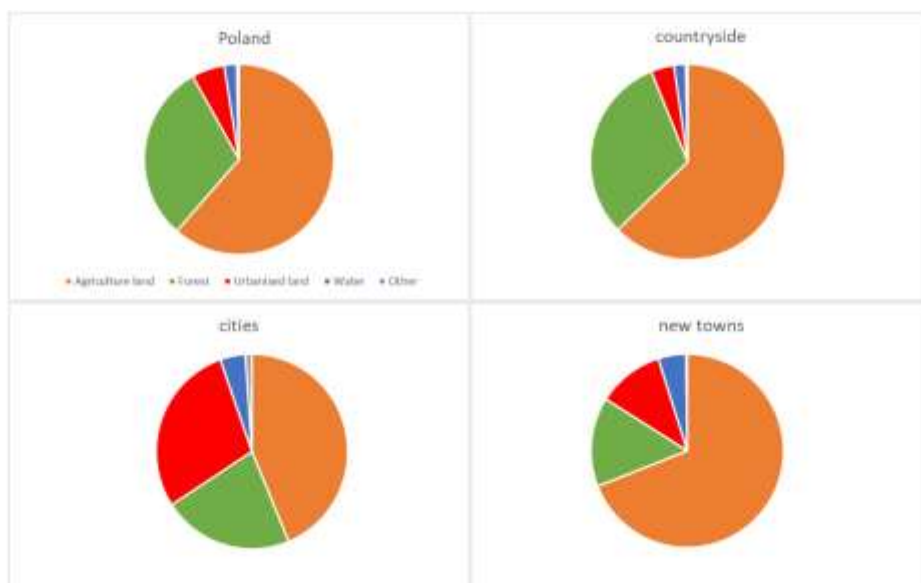
\*Population dynamic refers to the year the town's status has been given

Source: Author's edition based on Local Data Base, Statistics Poland, Warszawa.

From the spatial perspective it's important to note that the restituted towns usually may be perceived as towns because they usually have historically developed market squares or definite centres. However, when it comes to the land use structure of small towns, it often falls somewhere in between that of rural and urban areas (*Figure 5*).

Figure 5.

## Land use structure in Poland in 2000

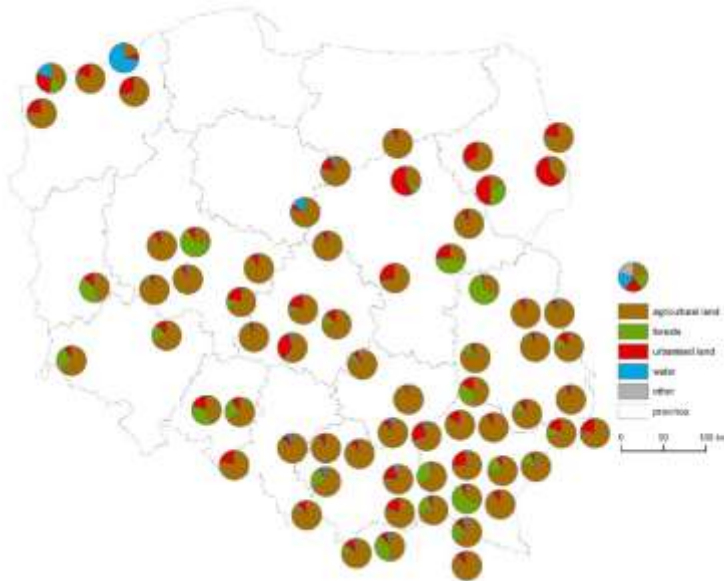


Source: Author's edition based on data of Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography

The newest towns do not differ much from the rest of small towns (*Figure 6*).

Figure 6.

## Land use structure of new small towns

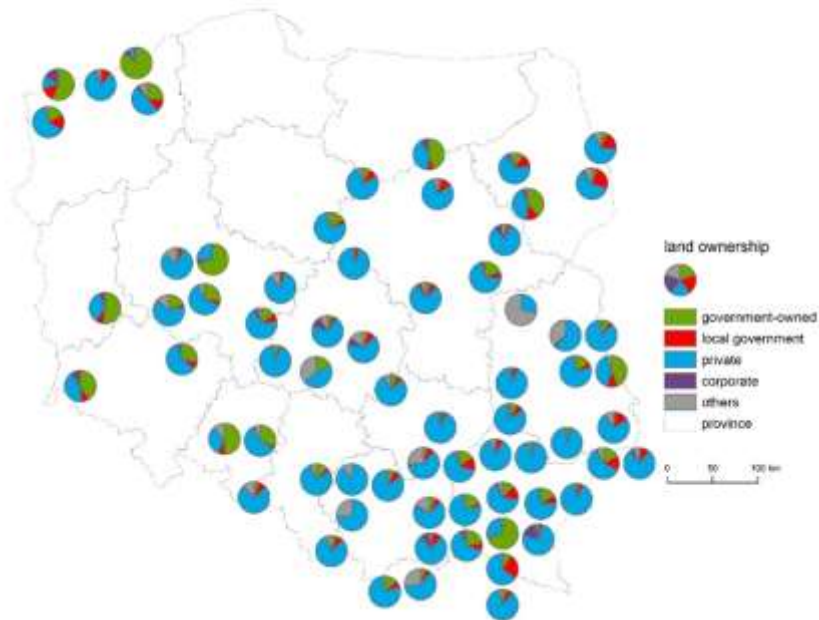


Source: Author's edition.

The agriculture land makes 69% of all towns' area, forest cover 15% while the urbanised land makes only 11%. The land use structure changes slowly, author's former research showed that for the whole set of small towns the agriculture land makes nearly 50% (Kwiatk-Soltys, 2017) while for all cities in the country it is still around 43%. Agricultural land is closely related to the land owned by private individual owners. Private individual landownership clearly dominates in the vast majority of small towns (Figure 7). Forests are generally state-owned in Poland. The question of urbanity in small towns is also tied to the presence of public spaces, typically owned by local authorities. The creation of well-planned public spaces and revitalisation is often highlighted in the literature (Marszał, Masierek 2021). While much effort has been dedicated to enhancing small towns in recent years, the effectiveness of these changes varies. In many small towns, there are concerns related to what is referred to as "concreteosis" (Jaszczak, Pochodyła, Płoszaj-Witkowska 2022).

Figure 7.

Landownership structure of newest towns in Poland in 2000



Source: Author's edition.

The presence of commune land in towns allows for the active land policy. It seems to be a huge challenge in Polish small towns. It is necessary to consider the vital role of ownership of land in the development of small towns in the context of the increasing role of land prices. On the other hand, the presence of large agricultural areas and woodland areas in small towns underscores the feeling of ruralness and constitutes a message in the marketing of small towns. The message is that small towns provide a lifestyle that does strongly contrast with the noise and chaos of big city life.

## Conclusions

Small towns in Poland indeed occupy a unique and somewhat intermediary position. In many aspects of socio-economic life, they can be perceived between medium-sized and big cities and rural areas. That means the demographic changes, economic growth, and spatial patterns are neither typically urban nor rural. There are many barriers to the stable growth of many small towns such as the peripherality, long-term emigration, ongoing reprivatisation, unfavourable landownership structure as well as the current problems strengthened by COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. The question of what lessons have been learned recently and to what extent the present situation will affect future growth remains open. Small towns are often described as good places to live, offering all the city can offer and a peaceful green neighbourhood at the same time. Will residential-based development be seen as an alternative to productive development? Will small towns be able to attract new inhabitants including refugees? Those questions remain unanswered.

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