

AGNIESZKA KWIATEK-SOŁTYS

PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY OF CRACOW

THE ROLE OF SMALL DISTRICT TOWNS IN THE URBAN AGGLOMERATION SYSTEM IN POLAND

ABSTRACT. The administrative reform of the country from 1999 established and reactivated districts (powiaty) with seats in various towns and cities. Those with the population of less than 20,000 people, called small towns, are investigated in the paper. They account for 40% of all district seats. The article presents the rank of socio-economic development of such towns. The special attention has been paid to those which are located within the influence zone of large urban agglomerations.

KEY WORDS: small towns, district towns, agglomerations, rank of towns

The period of the first few years of functioning of the new administrative system in Poland allows preliminary comparisons of towns placed on the same administrative level. The evaluation could include the cities located not only on the same administrative level (district seats), but also uniform in the size group, due to the large variability of these towns. Despite the same tasks, which are imposed by the act of the district authorities, a different influence is exercised by middle and large cities and an absolutely different, and usually smaller, is exerted by small towns. Among all of the district centres there is a large group of 125 small towns with the number of inhabitants lower than 20,000, which makes 40% of all district seats. It may be said that their preparation to the new administrative function is much more difficult when compared to larger cities. This role can also be more difficult due to specific conditions, i.e. they are placed in an urban agglomeration zone (Suliborski, 2000).

The contribution of small district towns is the most important in Świętokrzyskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Podkarpackie Voivodeship where they constitute

more than 50% of all district seats. However, it is not important in Śląskie Voivodeship where the system of large and middle-sized cities is well developed. There is only one small district town there that is located in the Częstochowa region.

It is also characteristic that many of the district towns are influenced by a large city (Fig. 1). In the paper the special attention is paid to these of the small district towns, which are in the influence zone of the urban agglomeration of the central city larger than 300 thousand inhabitants (Stasiak, 1973). The identification of these towns was conducted according to the location of the district that had its seat in a small town near the urban or rural districts around substantial agglomerations of Szczecin, Gdańsk, Bydgosz-Toruń, Poznań, Wrocław, Łódź, Warszawa, Lublin and Kraków. Katowice agglomeration can practically be omitted here since there are almost no small district towns in this part of the country.

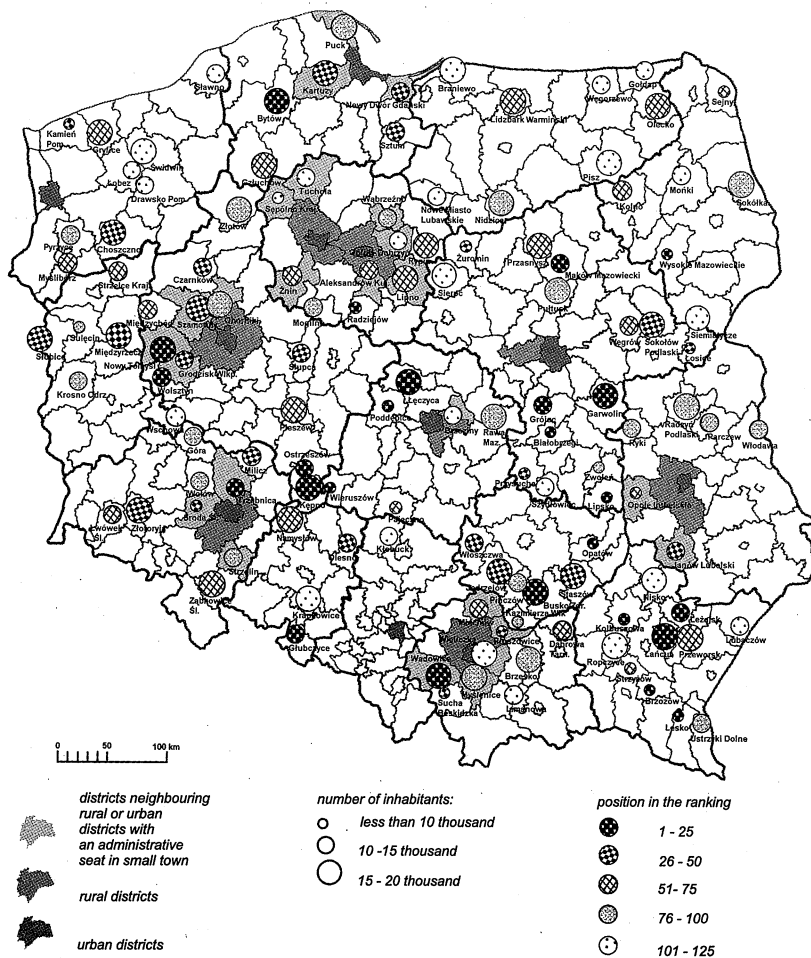


Fig. 1. Small district towns in Poland

It is worth stressing that there is a large group of small towns influenced by urban agglomerations, among which only some have become the seats of districts. Around some agglomerations this function is played by middle-sized cities (the agglomerations of Warszawa and Szczecin) despite a well developed network of small towns (Kuciński, 2002). For example, there are many small towns functioning in the area of Kraków district, such as Słomniki, Skąta, Krzeszowice or Świątyni Górne and there are 13 small towns in the neighbouring districts, among which only Proszowice, Miechów, Wadowice, Myślenice and Wieliczka have the administrative function of district seats (Rajman, 2000). In some districts their role is particularly important because they are the only towns in the area of the district.

The biggest number of small district towns (7 towns) appears in the influence zone of Bydgoszcz - Toruń agglomeration, among which 5 are in a group between 10-15 thousand inhabitants.

The need of small district towns functioning so close to a sizeable city can be problematic. The big city services a large area due to its rank coming from its size and the role in the settlement system, in other words historically developed zones of influence. Among the towns mentioned above these are Proszowice in Małopolskie Voivodeship with the number of inhabitants of only 6.6 thousand, and also Środa Śląska (8.7 thousand) in Dolnośląskie Voivodeship, Sępólno Krajeńskie (9.2 thousand) in Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship and Opole Lubelskie (9.4 thousand). These are towns in which the number of inhabitants is smaller than 10 thousand, so even less than it was stated in the Act.³

The ranking of all 125 district towns has been created in order to show the real place of small district towns in the urban agglomeration system in Poland. Towns under consideration show a big differentiation of the level of socio-economic development. Some of them confirm their high position; many, however, still have a low position in the group in the span of the researched period. Adequate statistical proceedings were carried out to display differences in the level of development, using two methods: the Perkal's index and the average of ranks (Szymła, 1972). They were based on the published statistical materials dealing with variable social and economic data. To a large degree, the choice of indexes was influenced by their comparability and by the given data. These were: population density, population dynamics between 1997 and 2001, employees per 1,000 inhabitants, employees per 1,000 inhabitants in productive age, dynamics of employees, percentage of employees in services, companies per 1,000 inhabitants, dynamics of companies, users of sewage system per 1,000 inhabitants, shops per 1,000 inhabitants, hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants, newly built flats per 1,000 inhabitants, and secondary school students per 1000 inhabitants. Both methods gave a similar picture, so the stress was placed mainly on the Perkal's method and the average of ranks was used only marginally.

It can be assumed that the level of socio-economic development does not depend directly on the geographical position and the place in the agglomeration under consideration, however, many of them stay in a functional shadow of the large city.

The best situation has been observed irrespectively to the geographical position, size and functions (ranks 1-25). First ten towns include: Grójec, Brzozów, Radziejów, Poddębice, Wolsztyn, Opatów, Garwolin, Kępno, Wieruszów and Leżajsk. It is worth mentioning that in the group of the top 25 towns there are 10 with the number of inhabitants smaller than 10 thousand, which can suggest that the function of district towns helped in economic progress. Moreover, the share of smallest towns in the ranking decreases, and in the last group (101-125) there is only one such town – Sępólno Krajeńskie in Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship. A good situation is observed in towns of Łódzkie Voivodeship, where from 6 small district towns a half is in the first group. The towns of Podkarpackie and Mazowieckie Voivodeships follow these. However, in the first group there are no small district towns of Lubelskie, Lubuskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship (Table 1).

Table 1. The ranking of small district towns in Poland

VOIVODESHIP	ALL SMALL DISTRICT TOWNS	POSITION IN THE RANKING									
		1-25		26-50		51-75		76-100		101-125	
		NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
Dolnośląskie	9	1	11.1	3	33.3	2	22.2	3	33.3	0	0.0
Kujawsko-pomorskie	10	1	10.0	0	0.0	4	40.0	2	20.0	3	30.0
Lubelskie	6	0	0.0	1	16.7	1	16.7	4	66.7	0	0.0
Lubuskie	6	0	0.0	2	33.3	1	16.7	2	33.3	1	16.7
Łódzkie	6	3	50.0	0	0.0	1	16.7	1	16.7	1	16.7
Małopolskie	9	1	11.1	2	22.2	2	22.2	2	22.2	2	22.2
Mazowieckie	15	5	33.3	4	26.7	2	13.3	2	13.3	2	13.3
Opolskie	4	1	25.0	1	25.0	1	25.0	0	0.0	1	25.0
Podkarpackie	11	5	45.5	0	0.0	2	18.2	1	9.1	3	27.3
Podlaskie	6	1	16.7	0	0.0	2	33.3	1	16.7	2	33.3
Pomorskie	6	1	16.7	3	50.0	1	16.7	1	16.7	0	0.0
Śląskie	1	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
Świętokrzyskie	7	2	28.6	3	42.9	0	0.0	2	28.6	0	0.0
Warmińsko-mazurskie	8	1	12.5	0	0.0	1	12.5	1	12.5	5	62.5
Wielkopolskie	12	3	25.0	4	33.3	3	25.0	2	16.7	0	0.0
Zachodniopomorskie	9	0	0.0	2	22.2	2	22.2	1	11.1	4	44.4

Source: author's based on: Regional Data Bank of Central Statistical Office, Warsaw and Central Statistical Office Statistical Yearbooks, various years

Among the top towns on the list, there are only three district towns that are in the influence zone of an urban agglomeration; these include Nowy Tomyśl in the zone of Poznań in the 12th position, Trzebnica in the zone of Wrocław in the 15th position and Wadowice in the 23rd position. This relatively good rank of Wadowice was also confirmed in a different ranking, in which only towns of Małopolskie Voivodeship were taken under consideration, where it gained the top position (Kwiaterek-Sołtys, 2000).

In following groups of towns there are many more towns placed within the influence of an urban agglomeration. Their position differs extendably from the 38th (Grodzisk Wielkopolski) to the 122nd (Wieliczka). The attention should be paid to towns which are low in the whole ranking of towns (101-125). Next to Śląskie Voivodeship where the only small district town, Kłobuck, is placed in the 109th position; the small towns' share is large in Warmińsko-Mazurskie (5 per 8 towns), as well as Zachodniopomorskie and Podlaskie. Among small district towns that are placed in the lowest group of towns, there are no small centres below 10 thousand of inhabitants. Therefore, it seems problematic that in the group there are 5 towns per 7 new ones, which received their district seat status only in 2002. The exception is Lesko in the high 14th position and Sztum in the 26th, which may confirm the establishment of the districts with the seats in those towns. In other cities the administrative function has not changed their socio-demographic position. Another problem are bad demographic conditions of those towns, which reveals their weak economic situation. This problem concerns most of the district towns in Poland, not only those newly established (Kwiaterek-Sołtys, 2002).

Among small district towns remaining in the area of influence of an agglomeration in the last and worst group, there are 5 towns: Tuchola at the 102nd place, Golub-Dobrzyń at 105th, Sepólno Krajeńskie at 114th, Brzeziny at 116th and Wieliczka at 122th place. The place of Wieliczka – the town inhabited by 18 thousand citizens, is puzzling since it services the seventh largest district with 100 thousand inhabitants. Additionally, it is not only in the zone of the influence of an urban agglomeration, but it is the only district town placed within the agglomeration of Krakow. It may appear that this geographical location in the shadow of a large city and a completely new administrative function causes a low position in the ranking of all district towns in Poland; although, Wieliczka has been located within the area of influence of Kraków since the second world war.

The analysis shows that the place of small district towns in the urban agglomeration in Poland cannot be easily defined. On one hand, the positive influence of a large city can be noticed, which is observed in a greater number of economic units, and which follows, the higher number of employees per inhabitants. In a close vicinity of a city there are different companies that could not find their place inside a city. This positive influence can also mean a better development of technical infrastructure. On the other hand, a well developed

agglomeration causes small towns, including district towns, to stay in a functional shadow of a large city. The existence of the situation can be recognised in the underdevelopment of services, e.g. education, healthcare etc. The given ranking shows that this influence is clearly visible via a bad position of many small district towns.

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CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Agnieszka Kwiatek-Sołtys
Pedagogical University of Cracow
Geography Institute
ul. Podchorążych 2, 30-084 Kraków, Poland
[e-mail: akwiatek@ap.krakow.pl]