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Exploring the different ways of small-town development in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Small town research represents a dominant part in urban geography. Being a transitional settlement type between urban and rural landscapes, it is important to define the roles of small towns regarding economy, services and infrastructure, recreation, or simply by their representations and identity. In this article, we aim to provide an insight into small town research in Central Eastern Europe and beyond, based on a 2024 summer school, focusing on the changing development paths of small towns.

Keywords

Small Towns; Central Eastern Europe; Development

Izvleček

Raziskovanje različnih oblik razvoja majhnih mest v srednji in vzhodni Evropi

Raziskovanje malih mest predstavlja pomemben del urbane geografije. Ker gre za prehodni tip naselja med mestnimi in podeželskimi krajinami, je pomembno opredeliti vloge malih mest glede na gospodarstvo, storitve in infrastrukturo, rekreacijo ter njihovo reprezentacijo in identiteto. V tem članku podajamo vpogled v raziskovanje malih mest v srednji in vzhodni Evropi ter širše na podlagi poletne šole iz leta 2024 in s poudarkom na spreminjajočih se razvojnih poteh malih mest.

Ključne besede

majhna mesta; srednja in vzhodna Evropa; razvoj



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1 Introduction

Last year, the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences at the Faculty of Sciences, University of Pécs, was excited to host the annual summer school of the Georegnet network within the CEEPUS international mobility cooperation. Preparing the program, we aimed for a topic relevant to the network's partner institutions and the Central and Eastern European region. We chose the various directions and specificities of small-town transformation, which proved an excellent key theme. The summer school was extremely popular among students and lecturers. The theme engaged many colleagues both within and outside the network, allowing us to implement a remarkably diverse and complex program in the summer of 2024.

One scientific outcome of the summer school is the current special issue of the journal *Revija za Geografijo*. This joint issue primarily contains research results from the summer school presenters, alongside studies received in response to the thematic call for papers. It is no exaggeration that this issue perfectly reflects the research trends and characteristic scopes of small-town studies in our region. The diversity is marked not only by the international collaboration but also by the varied competencies of the authors, with numerous scientific fields represented alongside geography.

This issue also serves as a call to all researchers engaged in small-town research. The significance of our initiative lies primarily in the fact that small towns, although often neglected in urban geography research, are nevertheless extremely important. Their importance stems from their essential role as centres of rural areas in organising public services, creating jobs, and providing institutional supply. They also have an important mission: our summer school and this issue primarily seek to answer how our small towns are responding in a world full of challenges, characterised by the crisis of environmental systems, the restructuring of the economic spatial structure, or demographic imbalance in everyday life.

2 What is a small town?

The most essential question in small-town research is how to properly define what constitutes a small town. The interpretation begins with defining the size category. Certain approaches set the upper limit at 10-15,000 inhabitants (Dövényi, 2005; Horeczki, 2014), while others express the upper limit at 30,000 inhabitants (Pirisi & Trócsányi, 2015). Besides diverse size classifications, other criteria also emerge. For example, a small town cannot be part of a large metropolitan agglomeration, or it is subject to debate whether we define the urban character of a settlement based on a functional or a formal conceptualisation.

According to a more classical, geographical approach, small towns are an intermediate settlement category where basic settlement functions are fully present, and secondary (intermediate level) functions are typically found, albeit in varying compositions. This implies the regional role of the small town, meaning the formation of a medium-sized catchment area (Filipović et al., 2016). This catchment area, however, can possess diverse characteristics. For a small town, the directions of educational and labour commuting are not necessarily the same. Its regional significance is often underpinned by a single dominant function, well-illustrated by, for example, spa towns or healthcare centres (Horvat, 2010). Another group includes settlements with a complex catchment area, typically serving the surrounding region in terms of labour commuting, institutional provision, and services (Maier et al.,

2006). Regardless, geography traditionally classifies settlements that are not too populous but do possess some kind of catchment area into the small-town category.

Functional, catchment-area-based delimitations contrast somewhat with the use of formal urban concepts and the formal urbanisation experienced in recent decades, which has significantly increased the pool of small towns in Central and Eastern European countries (Konecka-Szydłowska et al., 2018). Formal urbanisation can be interpreted as a political process through which suitable settlements attain town rank via applications, within a system of criteria that varies by country. As a regional specificity, soft factors also play a significant role, such as historical processes, political interest articulation, the settlement's role in regional strategies, or even a specific special interest (Trócsányi et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the urbanised nature of these "newest towns" (Konecka-Szydłowska et al., 2018), the habitus of their societies, and in some cases, even whether they possess any added significance in the settlement network, are debatable (Pirisi & Trócsányi, 2009). Thus, the sets of functional and formal towns do not fully overlap, and the question is primarily what means can help the newest towns' transition from being formally to functionally urban.

Another approach to delimiting small towns integrates sociological interpretations, where theories primarily focus on the extent to which the composition and operation of the society exhibit urban or, conversely, rural, traditional traits. Based on this, a small town is a settlement category where a high level of social capital defines the town's operation, including the social, economic, institutional structures (Besser, 2009; Konecka-Szydłowska & Maćkiewicz, 2015). In other words, the small town is a close, informal system of relationships with high trust capital.

3 Demographic challenges of small towns

The demographic trends of small towns, true to their conceptual variability, present a highly varied picture. The problem generally lies in the fact that small-town societies in our region have also embarked on a demographic decline, a phenomenon increasingly pronounced since the late 1980s (Burdack & Knappe, 2007; Troeger-Weiß & Domhardt, 2009). This process fundamentally transforms the daily life and regional roles of small towns experiencing shrinkage.

Despite these trends, the number of small-town residents significantly increased at the national level during the first two decades following the transition of 1990. This was a consequence of formal urbanisation, which allowed dynamic villages to become small towns in countries including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland. Political decisions were generally justified by the presence of numerous under-urbanised, underdeveloped regions, seemingly offering a way to narrow the urbanisation gap between East and West.

This demographic growth, however, is almost always confined to agglomeration areas and settlements that have strengthened their presence in new functions (e.g., tourism), the vast majority of traditional small towns face shrinkage. An extensive literature covers the widespread symptoms of this crisis (Burholt & Dobbs, 2012). Research reveals that the demographic crisis is fundamentally determined by emigration and its selective nature (Pelc, 2012). This impacts economic potential and the sustainability of institutions and services. The service needs of the ageing small town society are also different, placing a serious burden primarily on the social care

system (Vaishar et al., 2016). These demographic challenges demand entirely new approaches in the strategic and planning dimensions of small towns and impose significant tasks on settlement marketing.

Practices aimed at managing shrinkage can provide solutions that might long-term guarantee a small town's renewal and its preparation for a new demographic situation (Pallagst, 2010). Among international urban development practices, the green city development concept seeks to strengthen sustainable urban planning and green renewal. Smart cities not only envision a greener future but also place more efficient operation and planning on a digital foundation (Berkecz & Trócsányi, 2023). The resilient city focuses on sustainable development, extending to developing social and economic resilience as well (Pirisi, 2019).

Both of these concepts are brought to the forefront in the current issue. One author (Ljubenović, 2025) focuses on the planning strategies of Serbian small towns, seeking to answer the extent to which regulation concerning a town's physical structure can be an effective tool for managing contemporary challenges, especially those caused by demographic shrinkage. Our special issue also includes a study (Komar et al., 2025) that examines the central services and functions of small towns in the border region between Croatia and Slovenia in the context of demographic shrinkage.

4 Sustainable small towns

The emergence and spread of sustainability principles represent one of the most spectacular elements of small-town transformation. Sustainability is a complex, multi-sphere paradigm, traditionally focusing primarily on environmental sustainability. However, recent years and decades have also explored the problems of social and economic sustainability in relation to various settlement types, including small towns (Knox & Mayer, 2009; Vaishar & Zapletalová, 2010).

Historically, the small-town economy was built upon agricultural production and trade, but this has now significantly transformed. Today, only rarely does the share of agriculture in GDP production exceed 10%. Currently, one of the most important economic questions is how our small towns can integrate into the system of the global economy, and which ones have been negatively affected by the competition among settlements (Enyedi, 2000). This largely depends on whether the settlement's new spatial position makes it an ideal location for significant investment (Nagy et al., 2021).

After the decline of small-town agriculture and industry, the local economy strengthened in the tertiary sector. Services are already of paramount importance, as small towns have traditionally functioned as commercial and public service centres. The former is more significant in economic value creation, while the latter is primarily important in employment (Argent et al., 2009; Konecka-Szydłowska et al., 2010).

One of the most important tools for the tertiary-based economic transformation at the small-town level can be tourism. In the years following the system change, the post-socialist bloc saw spectacular growth in tourism-related services. The most marked growth was produced by spa and resort towns, which were able to strengthen these functions either with the help of European Union funding or due to their existing reputation (Buzsik et al., 2015). This required, besides existing assets, appropriate communication, brand building, and place marketing. However, the basis for economic

growth in these cases is also primarily provided by external resources and actors (guests), rather than local ones.

The sustainability of small-town economies, therefore, largely depends on external actors, and geographical position is also a determining factor. The question is thus rightly raised as to how locally planned and how sustainable this strategy is, and what other tools can be mobilised for a more sustainable economy (Kumer et al., 2023).

Urban development concepts created under the scope of sustainable development offer numerous opportunities for strategic planning, including handling demographic issues. Alongside these, we have now arrived at resilient urban development strategies, the digital city development concept, and we know of green cities, blue cities, smart cities, and even slow ones (*città slow*) (Zielinska-Szczepkowska, 2021). The diversity of contemporary challenges has thus created numerous development directions and opportunities, yet it is far from clear how successful adaptation to these can be at the small-town level (Kumer et al., 2022).

The varied development directions of small towns pose a serious dilemma for researchers, as it is difficult to develop a strategy that simultaneously addresses population decline, economic restructuring, or deficiencies in institutional provision. A. Jaszczak's research in the settlements of Poland's Warmia-Masuria region draws attention to the fact that the *città slow* movement can provide a gentle development path for our declining small towns, offering long-term sustainable responses to the challenges of climate change (Jaszczak, 2025).

Another team of authors focuses on a more general approach to the transformation and differentiation of small towns, exploring the issue of small-town resilience. The small town necessarily represents the centre of rural areas, while also serving as a kind of link between major urban centres and the village network. This role demands that they react flexibly to all challenges and changes, given their outstanding regional significance. Pirisi and co-authors examine the resilient modes of small-town transformation using Hungarian case studies, covering the economic, social, and political aspects of resilience (Pirisi et al., 2025).

A potential key to the development of small towns is the appropriate use of place marketing and the definition of the town's reputation and brand (Lambe, 2008). In this approach, the small town can be interpreted as a kind of product, where various services, sights, and hospitality venues all increase the settlement's visibility and, thus, its strength. However, it is difficult to develop a complex marketing strategy that aims to increase a small town's competitiveness and visibility using tools that also adhere to the principles of sustainability. In a study related to this in our special issue, Miszewski uses a SWOT analysis to explore the development opportunities of Chojnice, a small town in Northern Poland, by evaluating its social, economic, and environmental factors (Miszewski, 2025).

5 Small towns outside Europe

In addition to the invited European speakers at our Summer School, our call for papers reached other regions, and we are pleased to include two studies with an African focus in our special issue. The paper is closely related to the arguably classic direction of small-town research, with only the location of the study being unusual. In their analysis, Saidi and Saidi research the central role of small towns in Algeria and seek

to answer what function they have in regional development, what functions they concentrate on, and what role they play in regional planning (Saidi & Saidi, 2025).

Our other African study (El Aoud) offers an evaluative summary of the built-up characteristics of rural settlements in Morocco. The central question is the specificities observed in architecture and their changes, comparing traditional architectural solutions with modern elements in the central regions of the country, specifically the Doukkala region. Although her research focuses less on the specificities of urban settlements, her more general approach allows for a broad insight into the settlement network characteristics of a North African region (El aoud, 2025).

4 Conclusion

The focus of our special issue is therefore the small town as a geographical unit. Reviewing our authors' works, one of the most important conclusions is that although this settlement type is difficult to define precisely, the phenomenon is universally known, yet it forms a diverse and varied repertoire. At the same time, the global and regional challenges facing small towns are quite specific. These, combined with the diverse composition, raise unique questions but also reveal common conclusions.

In light of all this, we highly recommend these studies to everyone, as they offer valuable insights into the interpretation of small towns in post-socialist countries and certain regions in Africa. Additionally, this issue effectively highlights the many intriguing and relevant research topics that this type of settlement presents. It was a great honour for us to edit these studies, and now we present them to you!

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