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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

Izvešček

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

Provision of central services in rural areas: views of the elderly population in Hrvatsko Zagorje, Croatia

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Abstract

This study explores demographic decline and the contraction of central services in the Zabok area of Hrvatsko Zagorje, Croatia. Using settlement-level analysis, a survey of residents aged 65+, and informal conversations, the relationship between long-term depopulation, ageing, and the spatial distribution of central services is examined. The results reveal spatial variation in the decline of education and retail, as well as differences in respondents' ability to meet their daily needs, by settlement type. Findings highlight uneven development trajectories and the growing vulnerability of elderly populations.

Keywords

small town, central services, depopulation, ageing, elderly, Croatia, Hrvatsko Zagorje

Povzetek

Zagotavljanje centralnih dejavnosti na podeželju: pogledi starejše populacije v Hrvaškem Zagorju, Hrvaška

Ta študija obravnava demografski upad in zmanjševanje centralnih dejavnosti na območju Zaboka v Hrvaškem Zagorju. Na podlagi analize na ravni naselij, ankete med prebivalci, starimi 65 let in več, ter neformalnimi pogovori smo ugotavljali povezavo med dolgoročnim odseljevanjem, staranjem prebivalstva in prostorsko razporeditvijo centralnih dejavnosti. Rezultati kažejo prostorske razlike v upadu izobraževanja in trgovine ter razlike v zmožnosti anketirancev za zadovoljevanje dnevnih potreb po storitvah glede na tip naselja. Ugotovitve poudarjajo neenakomerne razvojne poti in naraščajočo ranljivost starejšega prebivalstva.

Ključne besede

majhno mesto, centralne dejavnosti, prebivalstvo, staranje, starejši, Hrvaška, Hrvaško Zagorje



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1 Introduction

Central services include different public and private sector services located in a settlement, available to both its population and the population of nearby settlements (Lukić, 2012; Malić, 1981; Radeljak Kaufmann, 2015). The importance of the distribution of goods and services, of their tendency to concentrate in specific locations with corresponding gravitational areas, and of the formation of a hierarchy among various services and places was emphasised within the theory of central places, introduced by Walter Christaller in 1933 (Michel, 2016; Šišak, 2023). In spite of a certain lack of conceptual clarity concerning Christaller's depiction of central places and the real-world distribution of cities, as well as the concept of space in general and the way distances should be measured—in time, money or meters (Michel, 2016), Christaller's theory could be seen as corresponding well to the reality in rural areas. This view relies on a traditionally, relatively stable settlement structure in a rural area, in comparison to an urbanised post-industrial area, where the interconnection of services and settlement structures differs (Vaishar & Štastná, 2021).

Also, taking into account the views of some authors that central place theory is an oversimplification of reality and overly static (Vaishar & Štastná, 2021), and the ongoing debate on its relevance in contemporary geographical studies, we can still conclude that the significance of studying a set of services that contribute to the centrality of a settlement stems from the fact that these services are necessary in everyday life for both urban and rural populations (Šišak, 2023).

In the European Union, services such as transport, energy or telecommunications networks were already included in the normative and political context in the 1950s under the term "service of general economic interest" (Humer, 2022; Šišak, 2023). However, it was only in the 2000s and with the emergence of territorial cohesion as one of the EU's policy objectives (Humer, 2022; Neumeier, 2016) that the concept was extended to include social services of general interest (EC, 2004). The aim of territorial cohesion policy, among many other examples of the equal distribution of resources and opportunities, was to ensure sufficient accessibility to public services for all citizens, regardless of where they live. Some Member States, in particular Germany, have closely modelled their spatial planning policy on this example with the concept of *Daseinsvorsorge* (Neumeier, 2016). In 2004, the EU Commission published a Green Paper on services of general interest and defined a wide range of different activities that are considered necessary for the daily lives of citizens, such as health, education and other social services. The Paper also analysed the impact of the spatial scale and type of provision (market and non-market services). The OECD (2010, 2020, 2022) likewise addressed the issue of services of general interest, emphasising the role of private and public actors in the provision of these services and the need for equitable access to them. In addition, the OECD recognised services of exceptional importance to the community, services of moderate importance to the community and routine services that are primarily of private importance to the user. Emergency medical care, and primary education are for example considered as services of exceptional importance while post offices, rural shops or restaurants are of moderate importance.

Although the contemporary normative context in the EU clearly recognises the importance of the provision and accessibility of services of general interest, small towns and surrounding rural areas in Europe are still characterised by a decline in

services of general interest due to various processes of demographic and socio-economic change (Baudet-Michel et al., 2021; Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020; Christiaanse, 2020; Haartsen & Gieling, 2021; Kostanjšek & Marot, 2021; Lechowski & Jasion, 2021; Lehtonen, 2021; Neumeier, 2016; Vaishar & Štastná, 2021; Velaga et al., 2012; Wiśniewski et al., 2021). In many areas, the declining population is leading to a decrease in demand for public services (Steinführer et al., 2014), the dismantling of local services and a thinning out of social networks (Abramsson & Hagberg, 2018). The maintenance of services and facilities (such as public transport, community centres, post offices), therefore becomes financially unsustainable (Noack & Bergmann, 2011). Based on a nationwide study in Poland, Wiśniewski et al. (2021) clearly showed that depopulation and ageing are associated with significant challenges in the accessibility of services. In addition to demographic trends, it has been recognised that changes in public policy have an important impact on the provision of services of general interest. Baudet-Michel et al. (2021) have presented a very interesting analysis of the impact of neoliberalism on the reform of welfare states and public services in France. Using the example of judicial and hospital facilities (2000–2016), the authors showed that the disappearance and reduction of courts and hospital beds mainly affects small towns.

Furthermore, the overall picture has also shifted with other developments over the last decades, including the widespread use of cars, technological advancements in general, and changes in how services are organised and delivered. The trend towards greater personal mobility and a potentially weaker link between residence and services, alongside an important trend towards spatial and organisational concentration of retail businesses, were pointed out by Powe & Hart (2009) as significant influences on the development of small towns, as central places. The demand for public transport decreases with the increasing motorization of the rural population, affecting its economic efficiency and leading to disruption of lines and connections (Vaishar & Štastná, 2021). The high dependency on the personal transportation (cars) is thus both the consequence of an infrequent traditional public transportation, and a hindrance to the development of fully functional public transportation networks (Knierim & Schlüter, 2021). Moreover, the difficulty of access to basic services is not exclusively a matter of proximity to them, but of individual circumstances (Martínez Sánchez-Mateos & Ruiz Pulpón, 2025). People who are not able to use cars and are less mobile (especially the elderly) are at risk of social exclusion and their quality of life tends to decline (Knierim & Schlüter, 2021; Vaishar & Štastná, 2021). In this sense, Christiaanse (2020), in her research on the decline of services in the Netherlands, suggested that spatial planning policies focused on mitigating the closure of facilities should be tailored to people with low mobility in small villages rather than depopulating areas, which are considered too general a category for the provision of measures.

The outmigration from rural areas, usually of younger and better-qualified people, in combination with low birth rates and increased life expectancy rates, has influenced the process of ageing (Abramsson & Hagberg, 2018; Nejašmić & Toskić, 2013; Noack & Bergmann, 2011; Perpiña Castillo et al., 2024; Steinführer et al., 2014). Unfavourable demographic processes have been common for Central and East European countries (Fihel & Okólski, 2019), although not universally characteristic for either urban or rural areas, including small towns (Krisjane et al., 2023; Perpiña Castillo et al., 2024; Vaishar et al., 2020). Due to decreasing birth rates, increasing life expectancy, rural exodus, decades-long emigration, and direct and indirect consequences of the Croatian War of Independence, Croatia finds itself with one of

the oldest populations among European countries. Depopulation and ageing became widespread towards the end of the 20th century, and have been especially pronounced in rural areas (Nejašmić & Toskić, 2013; Nejašmić & Toskić, 2016). Furthermore, one of the main characteristics of Croatia in terms of population geography is the inherited dispersed population distribution with a large number of small settlements and an underdeveloped system of regional and microregional centres (Nejašmić & Toskić, 2016). The aforementioned is the legacy of the political-territorial organisation prior to 1990s, which was based in a system of larger municipalities with municipal seats as centres of polarised development at the local level. In the contemporary urban system in Croatia, small towns are predominant, while there is a lack of mid-sized cities (Toskić & Njegač, 2003). This further highlights the important role of small towns in central services provision and local development.

This paper explores population development and the spatial dynamics of the decline in central services provision in small towns and rural settlements of Hrvatsko Zagorje (Croatia). This research focuses specifically on the Zabok area, consisting of 82 settlements located in the central and southern part of Krapina-Zagorje County. The goal of the research is to examine the unfavourable trends of population development in relation to declining central services in the Zabok area since the 1960s, and compare the present provision of central services from the point of view of the elderly population between urbanised and rural settlements. Given the general context of depopulation, population ageing, and decline in central services on the one hand, and a lack of research focusing specifically on the views of the elderly population in Croatian geographic literature, a face-to-face questionnaire survey (N=42) was conducted among the population aged 65 years and older, including informal conversations for more in-depth knowledge. Research aimed to explore the importance of central services for the elderly population, everyday activities and mobility, and their level of satisfaction with central services.

Following a more detailed description of research methods, we continue with a description of demographic trends and decline of central services in the Zabok area, prior to presenting the survey results. Research results are discussed with regard to corresponding research in the wider Croatian and European context, followed by concluding remarks.

2 Methodology

In order to operationalise the research, it was necessary to conduct a survey among the elderly population. The survey questionnaire consisted of 17 mostly closed-ended questions and was divided into two sections. The first section of the questionnaire collected data on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (including sex, age, education level and settlement of residence), while the second section focused on three thematic areas: 1) central services (their perceived importance and user satisfaction), 2) everyday activities, and 3) mobility (including car ownership, possession of a driver's license, mobility opportunities, satisfaction with and accessibility of public transport, and satisfaction with transport infrastructure). Considering that the respondents were selected according to predetermined criteria (age), the sample was purposive. The survey was conducted between 10 and 14 April, 2023, using the face-to-face method. This method of data collection, although time-consuming and logistically demanding, was necessary. Considering that the elderly population, particularly in rural areas, often lacks internet access, online surveys, while simpler for researchers, would not be suitable in this case. Surveys via

telephone calls or postal forms were rejected due to uncertain outcomes. One of the advantages of face-to-face surveys is the opportunity to notate commentary on the part of the respondents, which contributes to an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, quantitative data will be supported by qualitative findings from the field.

Population data were gathered from the official statistical sources (Croatian Bureau of Statistics), while information on the locations of central services that once existed, but no longer exist, was obtained via informal conversations with residents and retired travelling salesmen who worked in the research area. Central services that are (still) operating were verified in the field.

The researched settlements can be divided into urbanised¹ and rural² settlements. These categories were used in order to provide better understanding of the problems and needs of the elderly population. Processing of the obtained data was carried out in MS Excel and SPSS Statistics. Descriptive (mean, ranks) and inferential statistics (Fisher's exact test, chi-square test and Mann-Whitney U test) were used, as well as the Likert scale. The Likert scale is structured so that lower scores correspond to lower levels of measured construct, while higher scores indicate higher levels. Conversely, the ranking system reflects the level of perceived importance, with rank one denoting the highest level of importance and rank five the lowest. Graphics were visualised using MS Excel, ESRI ArcMap and ArcGIS Pro.

Certain limitations should be mentioned. In one of the studied municipalities, locals were reluctant to participate in the survey. The reason was a lack of trust, caused by general distrust in the local authorities (*You are working closely with the municipality, I would rather not tell you anything;...I'm afraid of you telling my answers to the mayor...³*), as well as defeatism (*what can I tell you, you should ask someone younger, I will soon be gone anyway...⁴*). Therefore, in one of the field trips, only three out of 17 surveys offered were completed in the four-hour period. Also, it was extremely difficult to reach the respondents in more peripheral settlements in order to collect a significant number of completed surveys.

3 Results

Population development in the Zabok area

The research area covers the central and southern part of Krapina-Zagorje County, and includes the settlements of the Town of Zabok and the municipalities of Bedekovčina, Krapinske Toplice, Sveti Križ Začretje and Veliko Trgovišće. The whole area used to be part of the large Zabok Municipality with Zabok as the municipal seat

¹ Urbanised settlements include central services appropriate for centres of local importance (shop/store, primary school, general practitioner/family medicine doctor, post office; Lukić, 2012); urbanised settlements in which respondents reside: Bedekovčina, Krapinske Toplice and Sveti Križ Začretje.

² Rural settlements account for a maximum of three central services (shop/store, branch/primary school, general practitioner/family medicine doctor, post office; Lukić, 2012); rural settlements in which respondents reside: Brezova, Čreč, Donje Vino, Družilovec, Grdenci, Gregurovec, Hršak Breg, Jalšje, Kebel, Klokovec, Oratje and Židovinjak.

³ *Vi radite za općinu, ni bi vam niš povedala; [...] ja se bojim da ne bi vi kaj rekla načelniku...*

⁴ *kaj vam ja morem reći, pitajte nekoga mlađšega, mene tak već skora ne bu...*

until administrative-territorial changes in Croatia took place in 1992, and can therefore be considered as the wider Zabok area (Malić, 1981; Figure 1). After the change of the political system in the 1990s, a new political-territorial organisation of the country was introduced with counties as regional self-government units and municipalities and administrative towns as local self-government units. Local units were now much smaller in terms of population and territory. Together with over one-half of the former municipal seats in Croatia in 1991 and 2001 Zabok fell into the small-town category, i.e. up to 10,000 inhabitants (Toskić & Njegač, 2003).

In 2021, total population of the Zabok area was 30,930. The settlements in the Zabok area are generally categorised as low-population areas, with an average of 377 inhabitants per settlement. The smallest settlements, up to 100 inhabitants, make 15% of the total number of settlements, however, represent only 3% of the population (Table 1). Those with population ranging from 100 to 300 inhabitants account for one-quarter of the population. Approximately one-fifth of all settlements, containing an equivalent proportion of the population, have between 300 and 500 inhabitants each. Settlements with population ranging from 500 to 1,000 inhabitants represent 15% of all settlements, yet they contain over one-quarter (26.17%) of the population. Almost one-third of the population (29.02%) lives in the four largest settlements (5% of all settlements). Therefore, a clear polarisation and dispersion of the population is evident.

Most of the settlements (93.9%) are rural, while the centres of local self-government units are urbanised settlements. Zabok, with a population of 3,408 in 2021, is classified as a small town (Figure 1). Both Zabok and the other urbanised settlements have a more favourable position with regard to important national or regional roads. All centres of local self-government units (except for Krapinske Toplice) are also connected by railway to Zabok.

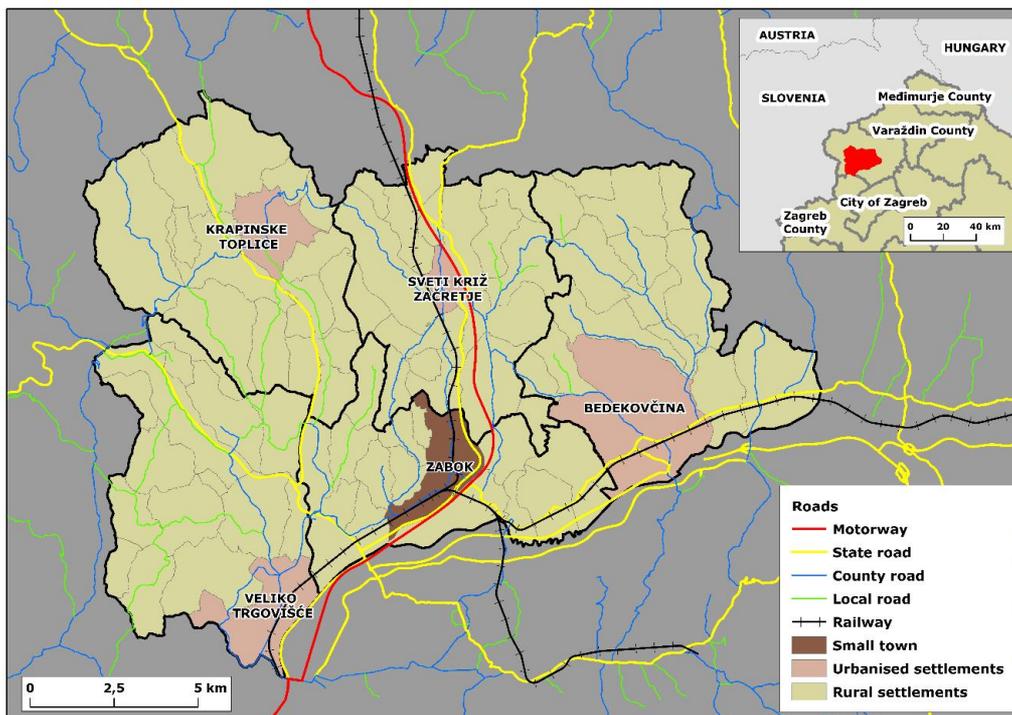


Figure 1: Research area.

Source: Authors according to DGU, 2016.

Settlements according to population size	Settlements			Population		
	Number	%	Cumulative (%)	Number	%	Cumulative (%)
0 - 100	13	15.85	15.85	926	2.99	2.99
100 - 300	36	43.9	59.76	6780	21.92	24.81
300 - 500	17	20.73	80.49	6153	19.89	44.81
500 - 1,000	12	14.63	95.12	8094	26.17	70.98
≥ 1,000	4	4.88	100	8977	29.02	100

Table 1: Settlements in the Zabok area according to population size.

Source: CBS, 2021.

After World War II, the process of significant depopulation of the whole region of Hrvatsko Zagorje began (Toskić, 1993). Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Hrvatsko Zagorje was more agrarian, yet more industrialised than the Croatian average. The processes of deagrarianisation and industrialisation occurred simultaneously (Feletar & Stiperski, 1992). Agrarian overpopulation resulted in large and cheap labour force. The area's favourable geographical position near the capital and the principal market (Zagreb) and good transport connections were an additional

incentive for industrial development. The processes of industrialisation and deagrarianisation of Hrvatsko Zagorje were also influenced by the decentralisation of the industry of Zagreb, which began in the 1950s and intensified during the 1960s and 1970s (Njegač, 1989).

In 1961, the whole Zabok area had a population of 36,531, which slightly decreased by 1991 (-222 inhabitants, or -0.61%). With industry predominantly situated along the railway (Vresk, 2002), or in municipal (and town) centres, rural settlements faced substantial population decline. Thereby, between the 1960s and the 1990s, three-quarters of rural settlements (75.32%) recorded a decline in population (Figure 2). Only one-quarter of rural settlements (24.68%) had a slight increase in population. These were primarily settlements situated near municipal and urban centres that also grew. Conversely, Krapina-Zagorje County recorded a population decline (-20,173; -11.94%), which was the result of an underdeveloped urban network and the absence of a stronger centre that could serve as a growth pole (Nejašmić, 1992). In contrast, at the national level, Croatia experienced population growth during the same period (624,569; 15.01%).

Between 1991 and 2021 the population of the Zabok area as a whole decreased by -14.81% (-5,379 inhabitants), where only 11.69% of rural settlements and a single urban settlement experienced population growth. The demographic comparison between 1961 and 2021 highlights the profound effects of industrialisation on rural areas, with 80.52% of rural settlements recording lower population figures than in 1961. The population in settlements that are significantly more remote from the local centre has been reduced by half. Furthermore, the increase in population is present almost without exception in urbanised settlements, Zabok, and their neighbouring settlements. The share of the population of Zabok in the total population of the Zabok area increased from 5.77% in 1961 to 9.77% in 1991, and 11.02% in 2021, reflecting the processes of centralisation of both population and economic activities in Zabok. At the regional level, the population continued to decline in the 1991–2021 period (-28,077; -18.87%), during which the county experienced a more pronounced demographic weakening (Spevec, 2009). At the national level, the population decreased significantly in the same period (-912,382; -19.07%), falling below the population threshold recorded in 1961, to a total of 3,871,883.

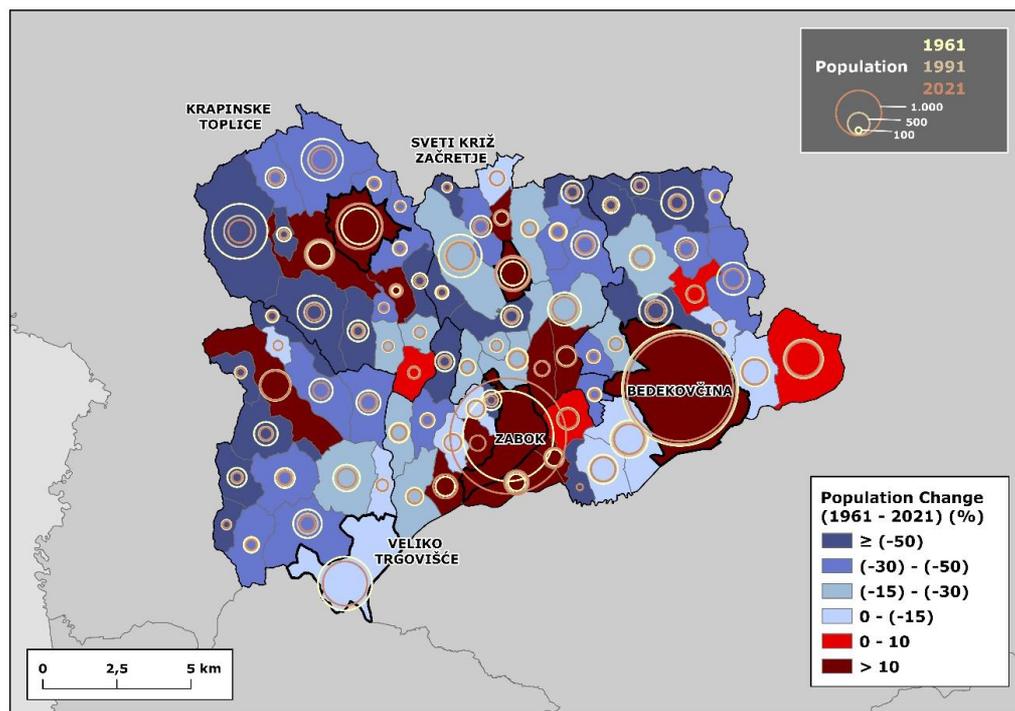


Figure 2: Population change (1961–1991–2021) and population change rate (1961–2021) in Zabok area.

Source: Authors according to CBS, 2005; 2021; DGU, 2016.

According to Wertheimer-Baletić (2001), the process of ageing begins when the average age of the population exceeds 30 years. Although the entire study area is affected by ageing, the average age is still higher in Zabok (44.77) than in urbanised (43.99) and rural settlements (44.44). Likewise, previous research indicated that the population can be considered old when the share of the elderly (population age 60 and over) in population exceeds 12% (Friganović, 1990). In this case, observing the population 65 and over, the share is higher in Zabok (29.49) than in urbanised (25.81) and rural (28.54) settlements. However, if we consider the ageing index, which differs from the previous indicators as it takes into account the proportion of both the elderly and the young population, rural settlements are characterised as the oldest (226.34), while urbanised settlements (211.35) and Zabok (213.83) are in a more favourable position in terms of age composition, showing a higher share of the young population.

Decline of central services and types of settlements in the Zabok area

Since the 1960s, the number of stores in the researched area has almost halved (Figure 3). In all studied local self-government units, at least five stores have closed, and some rural settlements have been left without a single store. At the same time, a concentration of stores is noticeable in Zabok and other urbanised settlements. The general decline of central services is also reflected in the decline in the number of students. For example, between the 2012/2013 school year and the 2022/2023 school year, the number of students who completed the first grade of primary school decreased by almost 15% (CBS, 2014, 2024). The decrease in the number of students is a consequence of long-term negative demographic trends, and has resulted in the

closure of branch schools in rural settlements, as is the case in Mala Erpenja (Krapinske Toplice), Temovac and Kozjak Začretski (Sveti Križ Začretje).

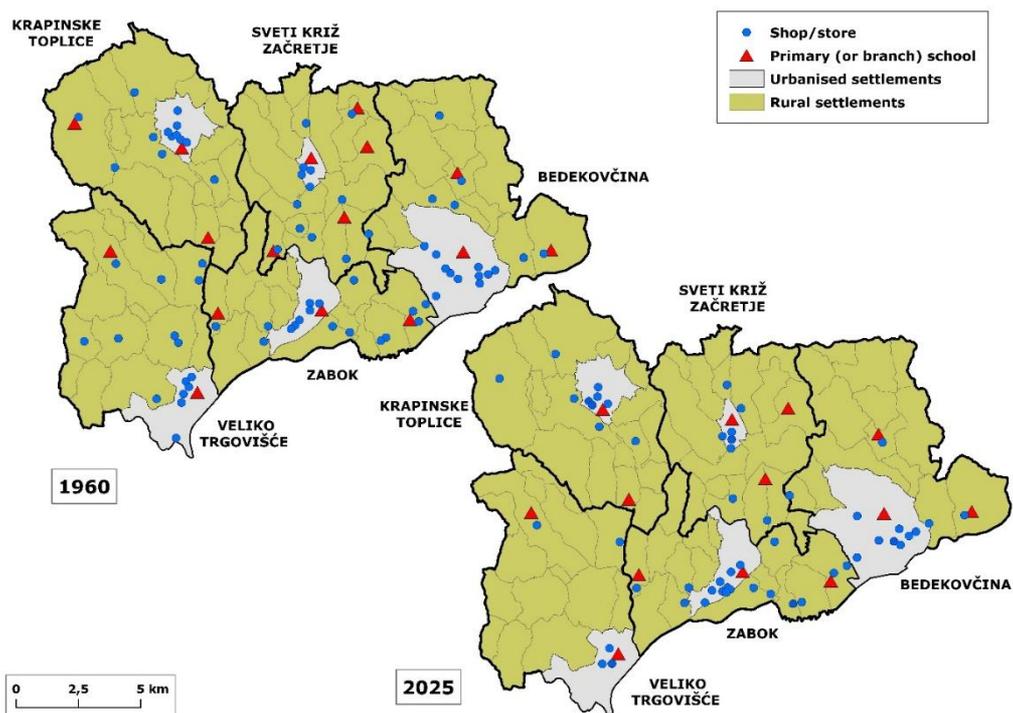


Figure 3: Active elementary (or branch) schools and retail stores in the Zabok area between the 1960s and 2025.

Source: Authors according to DGU, 2016.

With regard to the national development index, Krapina-Zagorje County is considered one of the more developed counties in Croatia. It is classified within the third group of regional self-government units, corresponding to the upper half of above-average developed counties. At the level of local self-government units (LAU2), the observed municipalities fall into different quartiles of above-average development: Zabok is positioned in the first quartile; Krapinske Toplice in the second; and Bedekovčina, Sveti Križ Začretje, and Veliko Trgovišće in the third (Decision on the Classification of Local and Regional Self-Government Units According to the Level of Development, 2025).

However, the LAU2 level tends to overly generalise the actual conditions, making it necessary to provide a more detailed analysis at the settlement level. According to the typology of urban and rural settlements in Croatia, the settlement of Zabok falls into the type of *dynamic, structurally stronger settlements*, characterised by a high proportion of daily commuters, indicating a well-developed labour function (Lukić, 2012). The labour function in these settlements is almost evenly distributed between the secondary and tertiary sectors, while the proportion of agricultural workers within the total population is significantly lower compared to other settlement types. Although the average rate of population change is negative, it is still more favourable than in other settlement types, particularly in the *rural periphery*. Therefore, it can be concluded that these settlements exhibit distinctly urbanised characteristics (Lukić,

2012; Lukić et al., 2022). In contrast, all other settlements observed in this research belong to the type of *more accessible, commute-dependent settlements*. The remaining seats of local self-government units meet the basic needs of the local population—offering essential services such as grocery stores, primary schools, healthcare centres, and post offices. However, more complex services, such as banking and secondary education, are lacking, clearly indicating that residents are compelled to commute to more functionally-developed settlements. Accordingly, these settlements record the highest share of daily commuters. Demographic trends in these settlements are less favourable compared to the aforementioned *dynamic settlements*, yet still more positive than those observed in the *rural periphery* (Lukić, 2012).

Within a recent typology based on the provision and accessibility of services in the wider Zagreb region, including the City of Zagreb, Zagreb County, and Krapina-Zagorje County (Šišak & Lukić, 2025), Zabok is part of a type characterised by a high number of well-developed higher-level services and excellent accessibility, while the remaining seats of local self-government units belong to a type in which basic services meet local needs, but access to higher-order centres is significantly limited. Compared to the previously discussed typology (Lukić, 2012), a notable difference lies in the identification of a group of settlements which, for the purposes of this study, are referred to as *rural settlements* where various issues affecting the elderly population are particularly evident. Given the diverse spatial distribution of these settlements, it is important to highlight certain characteristics. Those located along major transport routes and near the administrative centres of local self-government units generally benefit from better accessibility to more-developed settlements, supported by relatively adequate public transport. In contrast, more remote settlements fall into three types characterised by the lowest level of service provision. Since they represent most of the observed settlements, it is important to note that services, if present, are limited to the most essential—such as a local grocery store. Public transport, if accessible at all, is infrequent and limited in coverage (Šišak & Lukić, 2025).

Survey results

The survey was completed by 42 respondents from 15 settlements in all five local self-government units covered in the study. Most of the respondents live in rural settlements (66.67%; 28), while a third of respondents live in urbanised settlements (33.33%; 14) (Table 2). This corresponds with the general population distribution. Unusually, especially since the gender composition of the elderly population is usually skewed in favour of women, more men (57.14%; 24) than women (42.86%; 18; Porter & Whitcomb, 2005) participated in the study. Most respondents belong to the category of younger, 65–75 years old (40.48%; 17) and middle-aged, 75–85 years old (28.1%; 16) elderly population, while one-fifth of respondents (21.43%; 9) fall into the category of very old population, age 85 and over, which predominantly (88.89%; 8) resides in rural settlements. The largest proportion of respondents (40.48%; 17) reported completing vocational school as their highest level of education, followed by elementary school (33.33%; 14). At the lower end, only one-tenth (11.9%; 5) of respondents had completed post-secondary education, while 14.29% (6) had attained higher education. Urbanised settlements have a more favourable educational structure compared to rural—most respondents from rural settlements (85.71%; 24) lack formal academic education, they have only completed elementary (35.71%; 10) or vocational (50%; 14) school.

		SETTLEMENT TYPE		TOTAL
		URBANISED	RURAL	
Sex	Male	8 19.05%	16 38.09%	24 57.14%
	Female	6 14.29%	12 28.57%	18 42.86%
Age	65–75	7 16.67%	10 23.81%	17 40.48%
	75–85	6 14.29%	10 23.81%	16 38.1%
	≥85	1 2.38%	8 19.05%	9 21.43%
Level of education	Primary school	4 9.52%	10 23.81%	14 33.33%
	Vocational school	3 7.14%	14 33.33%	17 40.48%
	Post-secondary non-tertiary education	4 9.52%	1 2.38%	5 11.9%
	University degree/Master's programme	3 7.14%	3 7.14%	6 14.29%
TOTAL		14 33.33%	28 66.67%	42 100%

Table 2: Age, sex and educational structure of survey respondents.
Source: Survey research, 2023.

Importance of central services

According to age, as many as two thirds of respondents (69.05%; 29) highlight healthcare as the most important central service ($\chi^2 = 25.80$; $df = 2$; $p < 0.05$). In addition to healthcare, significantly fewer respondents (14.29%; 6) emphasise supply and education as the most important services. Although the number of stores is falling, supply is a service that the elderly population considers very important. Banks and post offices are less important for meeting everyday needs, while educational institutions are of least importance (Figure 4). Results of the in-depth conversations indicate that the importance of educational institutions is closely linked to their role in ensuring the adequate quality of life for future generations (*I spend my free time helping my granddaughter with her homework, today I'm taking her to a dance, and tomorrow to an English class...on Friday we will go to the theatre in Zagreb*⁵; respondent No. 8). Also, there is no difference in responses between the rural and urbanised respondents. In addition to basic central services (Lukić, 2012),

⁵ *Slobodno vrijeme provodim pomažući unučici u pisanju zadaće, danas ju vodim na ples, a sutra na engleski [...] u petak ćemo ići u kazalište u Zagreb* (ispitanica br. 8)

respondents mentioned typical services (local bar; respondent No. 30) and other segments of life that they consider necessary for everyday function: associations, farm, socialising, a quality communication network (respondent No. 8), workplace (respondent No. 18) and gardening (respondent No. 23).

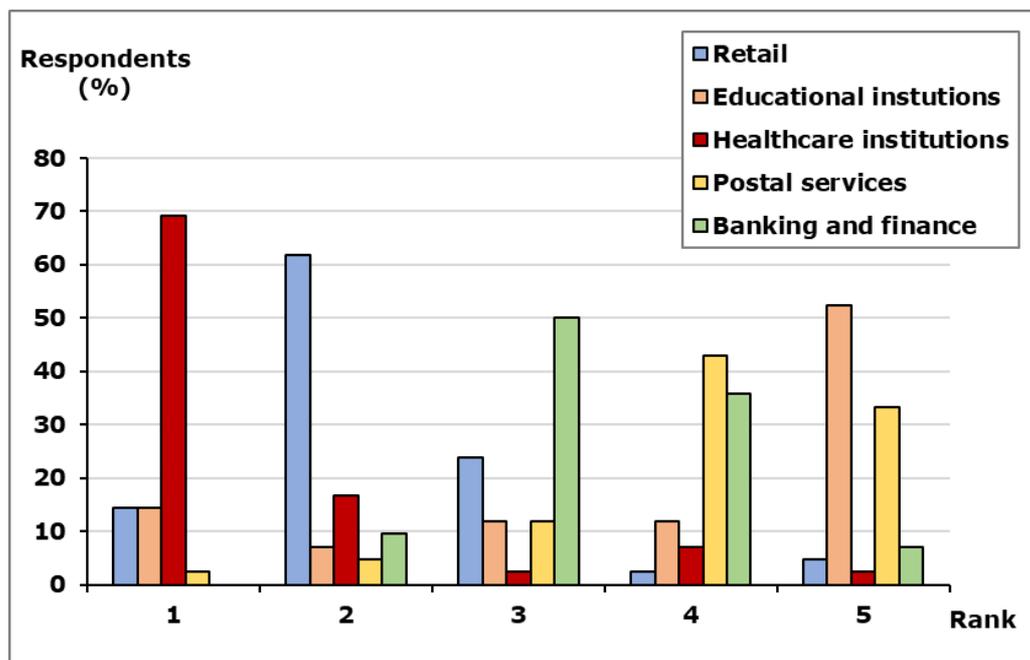


Figure 4: Importance of central services.
Source: Survey research, 2023.

Everyday activities and mobility

As the studied area is specific because it encompasses both urbanised and rural settlements with varying levels of infrastructure development and service availability, which is particularly relevant for the elderly (less mobile population), it was necessary to determine how respondents source the necessities for life (Figure 5) and perform daily activities (Figure 6). In urbanised areas, most respondents (71.43%; 10) go to a store to purchase necessities. However, despite the urbanised character of these areas, as many as two-thirds of respondents (64.29%; 9) produce at least a portion of their own food. On the other hand, almost all respondents from rural settlements (96.43%; 27) produce some proportion of their food themselves. Almost without exception, they also go to stores (89.29%; 25). Unlike residents of urbanised settlements, they buy produce from family farms (7.14; 2), but also informally exchange produce with neighbours and fellow villagers (3.57; 1). Residents of urbanised settlements are likewise members of solidarity exchange groups by which they obtain essential food items.

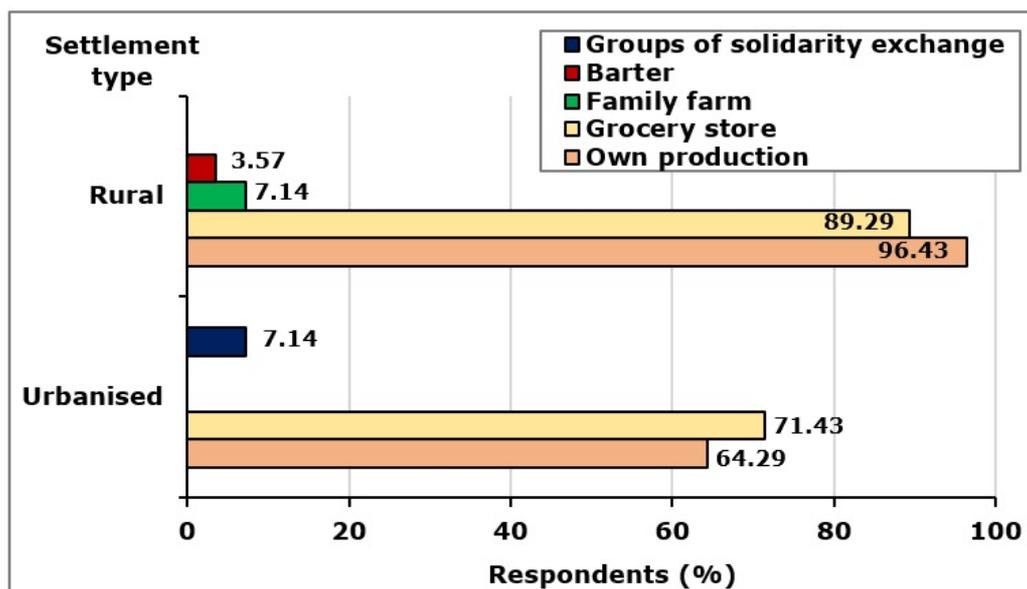


Figure 5: Ways to obtain necessities for life.
Source: Survey research, 2023.

Given that most respondents (83.33%; 35) go to the store to meet personal needs, it is intuitive to ask how the elderly population approaches the store (and other important institutions such as health centres, pharmacies, banks, post offices), due to their reduced mobility, and also the often poorly-equipped state of rural settlements generally. A statistically significant difference was found in the performance of daily activities in the observed settlement types (Figure 6; $p < 0.05$). The largest number of respondents (45.24%; 19) use a car to reach their destination. There is a noticeable difference in the number of respondents who have to use a car in rural (57.14%; 16) and urbanised areas (21.43%; 3). Namely, in urbanised areas, the elderly population most often walks (35.71%; 5), while one respondent from rural areas uses a bicycle (We don't have a bus connection, I don't have a car...I came by bicycle⁶; respondent No. 9). On the other hand, a significant part (42.86%; 11) of respondents from rural areas is dependent on others, most often family, neighbours or friends. At the same time, in urbanised areas, only five respondents are necessarily dependent on others (35.71%), and only one uses public transport, for the purpose of going to Zagreb or Zaprrešić (I travel to Zagreb or Zaprrešić by train, I just take a ride, run some errands and come back home. Now [that I'm retired] I have time for that⁷; respondent No. 8).

An intriguing fact is that more than one-third of respondents (38.1%; 16) necessarily depend on others (most often family and friends) to carry out their daily activities. Therefore, the question arises whether this is because they are not mobile, that is, they do not have a driver's license, a car, or are unable to use one? Similarly, we can ask ourselves whether there is adequate public transport that allows them to meet their daily needs. Since as many as one-third of respondents (32.14%; 16) do not

⁶ *Nemamo busa, ja nemam auto. [...] došla sam z bicikom (ispitanica br. 9)*

⁷ *Idem vlakom, sjednem, obavim što trebam i vratima se. Sad [kad sam u mirovini] imam vremena za to (ispitanica br. 8)*

have a public transport stop in their residential area, owning or having access to a car is an imperative in rural areas. However, there are no significant differences in mobility possibilities between respondents (Table 3). The majority of respondents in urbanised (71.42%; 78.57%; 71.42%) and rural (67.86%; 85.71%; 82.14%) areas have a driver's license, a car or have the ability to use one. When the gender dimension of mobility is examined, however, the situation shows a significant shift. There is a statistically significant difference in the number of female and male respondents who have a driver's license ($p < 0.05$). Namely, only five female respondents (27.78%) have a driver's license (*How could I not [hold a driver's license]? I have a wheelbarrow haha, but now, not even that....The other day I went to rake the grass, but I stumbled over and fell*⁸; respondent No. 25), while all male respondents have one (100%). Two-thirds of female respondents own a car (66.67%), but almost all male respondents own one (95.83%; $p < 0.05$). The same number of female respondents can use a personal car, which would mean that only two-thirds of them are mobile, while almost all male respondents (87.5%) are mobile.

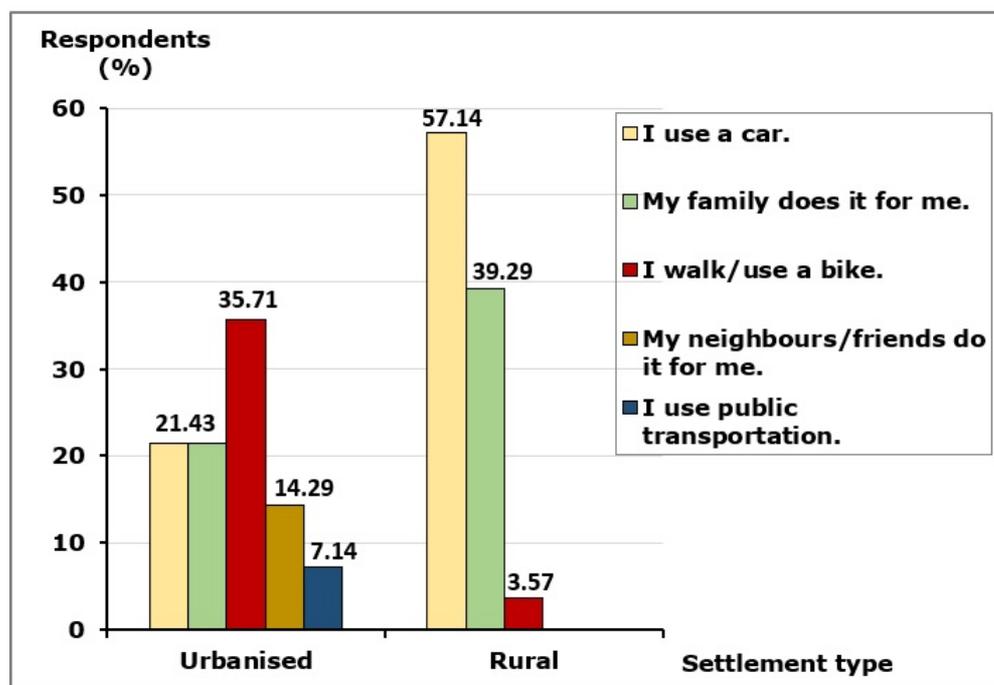


Figure 6: Ways to perform daily activities.

Source: Survey research, 2023.

⁸ *Kak ne [bih imala vozačku], tačke haha, a sad već ni tačke ne. [...] Išla sam pozubljati travu neki dan h tačke i onda sam se popičila i opala (ispitanica br. 25)*

	Urbanised (N=14)	Rural (N=28)	Male (N=24)	Female (N=18)	TOTAL (N=42)
Driver's license	10	19	24	5	29
	71.42%	67.86%	100%	27.78%	69.05%
Car	11	24	23	12	35
	78.57%	85.71%	95.83%	66.67%	83.33%
Access to a car	10	23	21	12	33
	71.42%	82.14%	87.5%	66.67%	78.57%

Table 3: The percentage of respondents who have a driver's license, own a car, or have access to a car.

Source: Survey research, 2023.

Satisfaction with central services

As healthcare and retail services have emerged as the most important in addressing the everyday needs of the elderly population in both urbanised and rural settlements, particular analytical attention has been devoted to them. At the same time, since the aforementioned often depend on the mobility of the population, satisfaction with transport infrastructure and public transport services is also observed (Figure 7; Figure 8). Both urbanised (4.43) and rural (4.54) respondents report a high degree of satisfaction with the supply of food. Among all services, this one received the highest satisfaction ratings from respondents. The respondents also express high satisfaction with the most important service—healthcare. There are slight differences in satisfaction between the urbanised (4.43) and rural (4.46) respondents. However, they express dissatisfaction with the behaviour of healthcare workers and the digitalisation of the service (*The doctor would prescribe you your regular pills, the same ones that you have been using for 10 years...There's not a chance you could make an appointment [with the doctor]. Back in the days, I used to call, and a nurse would answer, I could tell her what [medicines] I need. But now she's retired... And other doctor has an automated voice system for prescribing medication... I guess that's not that hard [to learn], but I know nothing. Sooner or later, I will not even know what my name is*⁹; respondent No. 25). On the other hand, respondents show strong dissatisfaction with transport infrastructure in both urbanised (2.78; *The roads are always being worked on...they are never open*¹⁰; respondent No. 6) and rural (3.25; *The roads are full of potholes, when they are repairing them, they make another hole and then you wait for another year for them to patch that hole*¹¹; respondent No. 25) settlements. Just as with transport infrastructure, respondents express dissatisfaction with public transport. Although not reflected in the average

⁹ *Napiše ti obične tablete već 10 ljet furt jedne te iste, zde te već neće ni pogledati, ma kakvi, nejdeš [doktorici]. Prije sam zvala i onda se hjavila sestra i povedala sam kaj očem. Sad je sestra prešla h penziju... I doktorica druga ima govorni automat... Nije to tak teško gdoj zna, ali ja već niš ne znam. Još malo nem znala kak se zovem (ispitanica br. 25)*

¹⁰ *Furt nekaj popravljaju [...] im pa te ceste nisu nigdar nisu skroz otprte...* (ispitanik br. 6)

¹¹ *Ceste su zropane, kad krpaju, napraviju jamu i onda čakas ljete dan da ju zakrpaju (ispitanica br. 25)*

satisfaction value, the difference between urbanised (2.93) and rural (2.93) settlements is statistically significant ($U = 84, p < 0.05$). Namely, more respondents from rural areas (28.57%) are completely dissatisfied with public transport (*The train looks the same as the one that use to operate 70 years ago...*¹²; respondent No. 29) than those from urbanised areas (14.29%). This is also supported by the low satisfaction with the frequency of public transport, which is lower in rural areas (2.8; [*N]ow, a bus operates three or four times a day, back in the days it used to operate whenever, it had been taking us to the church and wherever. Now, I don't go anywhere, but the bus takes the children to school, that I can see*¹³; respondent No. 25) than in urbanised areas (3.5).

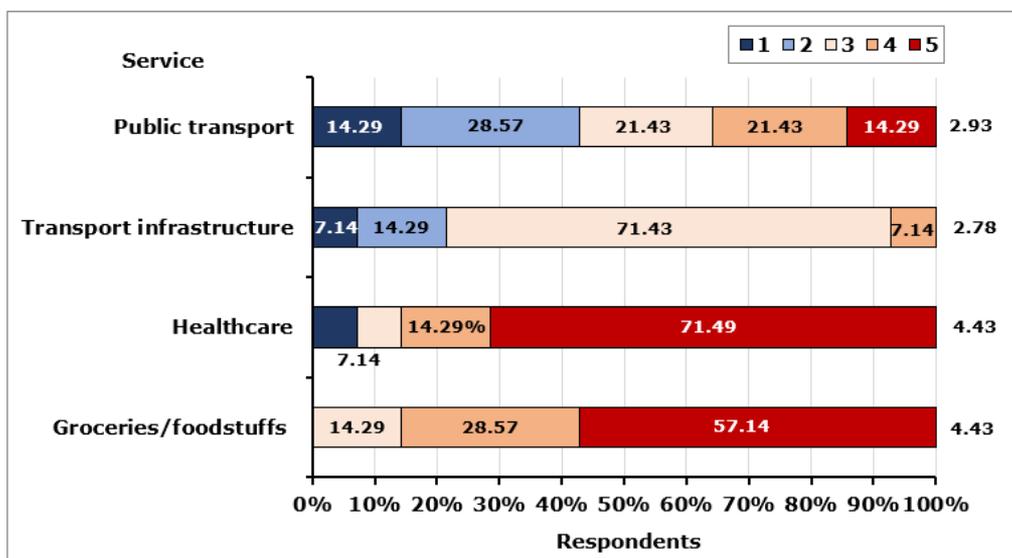


Figure 7: Satisfaction with central services (urbanised settlements).
Source: Survey research, 2023.

¹² Cug zglada isto kak i prije 70 ljet... (ispitanik br. 29)

¹³ [A]li imaš tri četiri put liniju na dan, prije je išel gda god, i k meše nas je vozil i sikak. Sad nejdem nikam pa ne znam, ali da decu vozi u školu, te vidim (ispitanica br. 25)

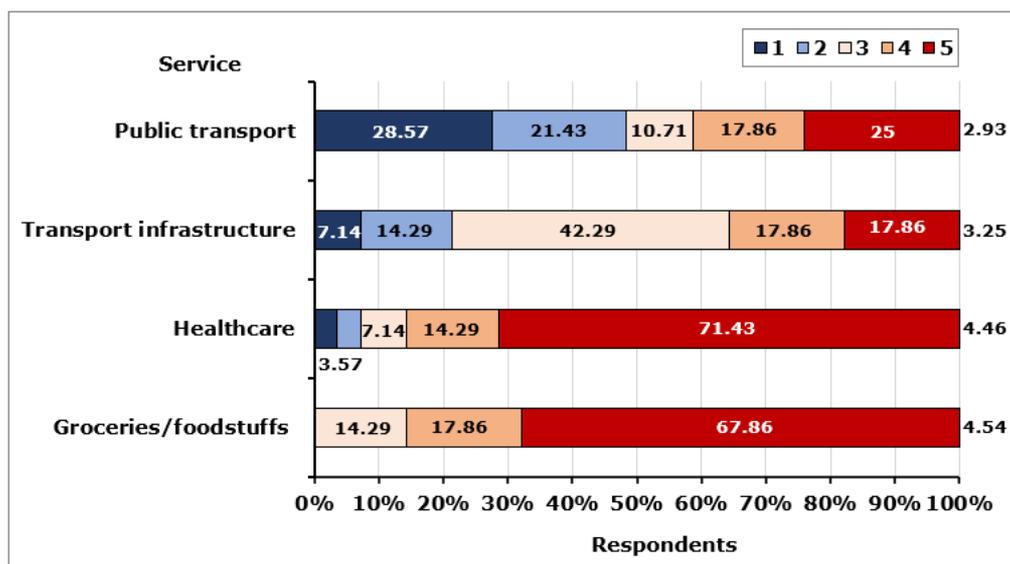


Figure 8: Satisfaction with central services (rural settlements).
Source: Survey research, 2023.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The research results show that Hrvatsko Zagorje, and the Zabok area more specifically, has been characterised by depopulation in the examined periods: 1961–1991 and 1991–2021, predominantly in rural settlements. The increase in population has been present almost without exception in Zabok itself, urbanised settlements, and their neighbouring settlements. Depopulation inevitably affected the ageing of the population of Hrvatsko Zagorje, as previously stated also by Toskić (1993); a process that is discernible in many rural areas of the European Union (Perpiña Castillo et al., 2024). Although the entire Zabok area is affected by ageing, different indicators of ageing (the average age, the share of the elderly in total population, and the ageing index) show slight differences in the order of values depending on the type of settlement, with the most favourable situation in urbanised settlements. Taken together, however, these three indicators point to a level of homogenisation; as stressed by Nejašmić & Toskić (2016), rural, as well as urban population in Croatia is characterised by an equally high degree of ageing, placing Croatia in line with countries of Central and Eastern Europe with very unfavourable trends of population development. In our research, this level of homogenisation is likewise visible with regard to different development types of settlements (See: Lukić, 2012; Šišak & Lukić, 2025), even in the context of a fairly developed county in Croatia.

A varied spatial distribution of the decline in central services was found in the Zabok area, which resulted in their concentration in Zabok and other urbanised settlements, corresponding to the legacy and long-term effects of the polarisation and concentration of population and economic activities at the local level, from the previous communal system. Decline in central services was shown in the case of stores, whose number almost halved since the 1960s, and some rural settlements have been left without a single store. Retail, as the most frequent central service

(Njegač, 1999), subject to the laws of supply and demand, is slowly fading from rural areas. Apart from shifts in population size and structure, this should be seen in light of increased population mobility (Woods, 2005) and changes in the labour function alongside the characteristic diversity of services in cities (Vresk, 2002) affecting consumer habits, where residents of rural areas started to shop in cities and shopping centres, further away from their place of residence (Woods, 2005). Changes such as the construction of hypermarkets at highway junctions or the digitalisation of some services (Vaishar & Štastná, 2021) should be stressed as well. Retail provision has thus become more concentrated in large centres, accessible to many rural residents, who are likewise becoming more demanding (Powe & Hart, 2009). The weakening of the supply function in rural settlements of Hrvatsko Zagorje is further influenced by low profits, competition from larger stores, and higher wholesale prices for local businesses than for large retail chains (Mak & Knežević, 2017).

Stores are not the only services closing. Schools in rural areas have also closed and the number of students has declined as a consequence of long-term negative demographic trends. Closure of schools especially affects the long-term development perspective due to its significance for younger people and families, as was found by Woods (2005) and Kuzmić et al. (2021). In general, the economic and demographic restructuring of rural areas has had significant effects for the remaining population in rural areas, and the rural way of life (Cifrić, 2018).

With regard to the point of view of the elderly inhabitants of the Zabok area specifically, the survey results show that the majority of respondents highlight healthcare as the most important central service. Trips to health facilities (such as doctors, clinics, and hospitals) were also reported as the most important trips for older people in the research by Ahern & Hine (2015). Not surprising, given that with advancing age, people seek medical treatment significantly more often than at a young age (Noack & Bergmann, 2011) and that demand for medical care in an ageing population rises (Noack & Bergmann, 2011; Steinführer et al., 2014). Furthermore, as noted by Martínez Sánchez-Mateos & Ruiz Pulpón (2025), limited access to healthcare services in rural areas can result in disparities in the health and well-being of rural communities.

Supply is a service that the elderly population considers important, while education received varying degrees of importance. These views can be explained by the smaller personal significance of education given that respondents have completed their educational journey, but some are also positioning education as very high on the scale of meeting life's needs, and are oriented towards the future and younger generations, as supported by the in-depth conversations.

It was found that the ways in which respondents meet their own needs differ depending on the type of settlement where they live. The majority of the inhabitants of central settlements buy their food supplies in stores. In addition, they most often walk to get to a store, clinic or pharmacy, which can be linked to availability of a larger number of central services provided in their settlement (as pointed out also by Steinführer et al., 2014). Respondents from rural areas largely shop in stores as well. A large number of respondents from both urban and rural settlements, however, produce their own food to some extent. This is connected to the rural character of the area and the possibility for agricultural production on their own land. The tradition of combining agriculture with other sources of income (usually work in industry) that was common during socialism (Bičanić, 1996) should also be mentioned. Respondents

further commented that their own production was a strategy to respond to rising food prices in stores, or, as was often the case, that working in their garden was a way to spend their abundance of free time. The importance of working in a garden for the elderly, as a way to spend their free time was confirmed by Slavuj Borčić et al. (2016) in their research on urban gardens in Zagreb, where the respondents often originally came from rural areas and identified strongly with rural identity.

The mobility of the population, be it physical or virtual, is a precondition for accessing services (Šišak, 2023). The largest number of respondents (45.24%) use a car to reach their destination, with a noticeable difference between urbanised (21.43%) and rural (57.14%) settlements. Since as many as one-third of respondents do not have a public transport stop in their residential area, owning a car is an imperative in rural areas. Apart from issues related to the poor public transport service (Noack & Bergmann, 2011), other researchers mention the value of independence that a car brings (Abramsson & Hagberg, 2018). As pointed out by Ahern & Hine (2015), maintaining good quality of life is connected to being able to participate in different activities and services, and access to a car allows older people to partake in more activities and services.

The majority of respondents in both types of settlements have a driver's license, a car, or have the ability to use one. In line with other research (Ahern & Hine, 2015), significantly more men have a driver's license, i.e. all male respondents have one, in comparison to slightly more than one-quarter of female respondents. Likewise, less women than men own a car, or have access to one.

Creation of a car-dependent society in rural areas can imply neglect of the needs and the mobility of those without cars; in the case of older people, no longer being able to drive can likewise lead to transport deprivation (Ahern & Hine, 2015), which should, nevertheless be considered in terms of resources and infrastructure available in a settlement but also in terms of the needs and habits of rural residents (Ranković Plazinić & Jović, 2014). Ranković Plazinić & Jović (2014) further stress that although the issue of transport deprivation for rural women is closely related to the issue of social exclusion, it remains unclear whether the transport deprivation necessarily causes social exclusion, possibly depending on how well people are integrated into the local community.

More than one-third of respondents necessarily depend on others (most often family, neighbours, and friends) to carry out their daily activities; even more in rural settlements (42.86%). The significance of relying on family and friends for shopping, access to medical care, and participation in various activities has been highlighted by other researchers (Abramsson & Hagberg, 2018; Noack & Bergmann, 2011). In a way, from the point of view of the local population, dealing with changed public services (coping) can be stressed as part of the model of living and residing in rural areas; it can, however, be exacerbated by old age and decreasing mobility, as well as shrinking social networks in depopulating areas (Steinführer et al., 2014).

Among all services, respondents reported a high degree of satisfaction with the supply of food, linked to well-equipped stores in the wider area, and the alternative forms of stores that exist in some areas, such as the so-called "van stores" (Mak & Knežević, 2017). Respondents also express a high level of satisfaction with the fairly well-accessible healthcare. Low levels of satisfaction were expressed with transport infrastructure and public transport, due to the lack of availability, low frequency of

connections, and maintenance issues. Limitations of public transport are a frequently-mentioned issue among contemporary rural problems, generally caused by decreasing passenger numbers and the motorization of rural people (Vaishar & Štátná, 2021). The high costs of a traditional transport network and low level of demand make investments in public transport more difficult and ineffective (Sitanyiova & Misso, 2019). Thereby new public transport services (Sitanyiova & Misso, 2019) and alternative forms of transport come to the fore as a possible solution to extend the range of public transport in rural areas and ensure accessibility of services, as indicated by Knierim & Schlüter (2021) in case of demand responsive transport systems, which can be especially beneficial for less mobile population.

Abramsson & Hagberg (2018) describe two pictures presented in research on ageing and of being old in the countryside. The first picture depicts depopulating countryside, where the old population that remains has to travel further to obtain services, for whom contacts with the younger generations are decreasing, and the traditional type of life is disappearing. In the small towns it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain what makes a place a society—jobs, shops, culture, associations, and means of communication. The second, contrasting picture shows the strength of the countryside, based on a mix of seminal trades as well as the maintenance of old trades and industries; social networks are created and maintained, creating security for old people.

The research results point to a difference in the possibility of research respondents to meet their daily needs depending on the settlement type. Therefore, in line with the latter picture, the role of accessible small towns and urbanised settlements that are well-equipped with various central services is highlighted as of central importance for local development and the quality of life in rural areas.

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Povzetek

Ta članek se posveča razvoju prebivalstva in prostorski dinamiki upadanja zagotavljanja osrednjih storitev v manjših mestih in podeželskih naseljih Hrvaškega Zagorja (Hrvaška). Osrednje storitve vključujejo različne javne in zasebne storitve, ki se nahajajo v naselju in so dostopne tako prebivalcem naselja kot prebivalcem naselij v bližini (npr. izobraževanje, zdravstvene storitve, trgovina, pošta, bančništvo ipd.). V Evropi so majhna mesta in okoliška podeželska območja pogosto zaznamovana z upadanjem osrednjih storitev, kar je posledica različnih procesov demografskih in družbeno-ekonomskih sprememb. Dva procesa, ki sta bila na Hrvaškem močno prisotna proti koncu 20. stoletja, sta bila depopulacija in staranje prebivalstva, pri čemer je bilo to še posebej izrazito na podeželju. To je veljalo tudi za Hrvaško Zagorje, regijo v severozahodni Hrvaški, zaradi neenakomernega razvoja industrije in storitev, ki so bile večinoma skoncentrirane v mestnih središčih, ter zaradi upada kmetijstva. Raziskava se je osredotočila predvsem na območje Zaboka, ki ga sestavlja 82 naselij v osrednjem in južnem delu Krapinsko-Zagorske županije. Cilj raziskave je bil preučiti neugodne trende razvoja prebivalstva v povezavi z upadanjem osrednjih storitev na območju Zaboka od šestdesetih let 20. stoletja naprej ter primerjati trenutno zagotavljanje osrednjih storitev z vidika starejšega prebivalstva med urbaniziranimi in podeželskimi naselji. Med prebivalci, starimi 65 let in več, je bila izvedena anketa (N=42), vključeni pa so bili tudi neformalni pogovori za poglobljeno razumevanje. Rezultati raziskave kažejo na raznoliko prostorsko porazdelitev upadanja osrednjih storitev na območju Zaboka ter na razlike v zmožnosti anketiranih prebivalcev, da zadovoljijo svoje vsakodnevne potrebe po storitvah glede na tip naselja.

Provision of central services in rural areas: views of the elderly population in Hrvatsko Zagorje,
Croatia

From Philosophy to Practice: Città Slow and Green Space Planning in Small Urban Communities

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophy and principles of the Città Slow (Slow City) movement, which promotes a mindful and measured lifestyle in small urban environments. It explores how towns worldwide adopt these principles to strengthen community identity, preserve local traditions, and support environmental awareness. The study focuses on the Supra-Local Revitalization Program in selected towns in the Warmia and Mazury region of Poland, highlighting public space projects aligned with the movement's values. Special attention is given to the role of greenery in urban planning, showing how green infrastructure improves aesthetics, fosters social cohesion, and enhances environmental resilience. The paper offers insights into the practical benefits of applying Città Slow principles for sustainable urban revitalization.

Keywords

Città Slow, sustainable urbanism, public space revitalization, green infrastructure, community identity, Supra-Local Revitalization Programme

Izvleček

Od filozofije k praksi: Città Slow in načrtovanje zelenih površin v majhnih urbanih skupnostih

Ta članek preučuje filozofijo in načela gibanja Città Slow (počasno mesto), ki spodbuja premišljen in uravnotežen življenjski slog v manjših urbanih okoljih. Raziskuje, kako mesta po svetu sprejemajo ta načela za krepitev identitete skupnosti, ohranjanje lokalnih tradicij in spodbujanje okoljske ozaveščenosti. Študija se osredotoča na nadlokalni program revitalizacije v izbranih mestih v regiji Warmia in Mazury na Poljskem ter izpostavlja projekte javnih prostorov, ki sledijo vrednotam gibanja. Posebna pozornost je namenjena vlogi zelenih površin v urbanističnem načrtovanju, saj zelena infrastruktura izboljšuje estetiko, krepi družbeno povezanost in povečuje okoljsko odpornost. Članek ponuja vpogled v praktične koristi uporabe načel gibanja Città Slow pri trajnostni urbani revitalizaciji.

Ključne besede

Città Slow, trajnostni urbanizem, revitalizacija javnega prostora, zelena infrastruktura, identiteta skupnosti, nadlokalni program revitalizacije



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1 Introduction

In an era marked by rapid urbanization and globalization, small cities around the world are facing mounting challenges in maintaining a balance between economic growth and the preservation of local identity, cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability. These pressures often result in development strategies that prioritize modernization at the expense of social cohesion and ecological integrity. In response to these dynamics, the Città Slow (Slow City) movement has emerged as a counter-model, promoting an alternative, more deliberate, and community-focused approach to urban development. Originating in Italy in 1999, the movement has evolved into a global network of towns committed to improving the quality of life for their residents through locally tailored, sustainable, and participatory practices.

The Città Slow philosophy is rooted in the values of "slow living", an ethos that encourages cities to resist homogenization, value local traditions, support small-scale economies, and prioritize environmental stewardship. Rather than rejecting progress, Città Slow redefines it through the lens of human well-being, environmental balance, and place-based identity. These ideas are particularly relevant for small cities, which often possess unique cultural and spatial assets but lack the resources or political visibility of larger urban centers.

Despite a growing body of literature on sustainable urbanism and alternative urban models (see for example Kerbler, 2011; Kušar, 2012), there is still a lack of empirical studies that explore how Città Slow principles are translated into specific planning practices, particularly in Central and Eastern European contexts. This paper seeks to address that gap by examining the practical implementation of Città Slow ideas in selected small towns within the Warmia and Mazury region of Poland. The analysis focuses on the Supra-Local Revitalization Program (2015), which aimed to revitalize urban spaces in alignment with values such as social inclusion, ecological awareness, and local distinctiveness.

A central focus of the study is the role of greenery and green infrastructure in public space design, which is examined not only as a visual or ecological asset but as a strategic tool for reinforcing social cohesion and resilience in small urban communities. The paper thus aims to demonstrate how specific spatial interventions inspired by the Città Slow movement can become catalysts for broader cultural, social, and environmental transformations.

The main research objective of this paper is to analyze how the principles of the Città Slow movement are operationalized through urban revitalization initiatives in small Polish towns, with a particular emphasis on the planning and integration of green public spaces. Through this lens, the study contributes new insights into the adaptive application of global sustainability frameworks at the local level and highlights the potential of small cities to serve as laboratories for innovative, people-centered urbanism.

2 Literature review

The Città Slow (Slow City) movement emerged in Italy in 1999 as a grassroots response to the socio-spatial consequences of accelerated globalization, standardization of urban environments, and the loss of local distinctiveness. Rooted in the values of the Slow Food movement, it promotes a slower, more sustainable

lifestyle, emphasizing quality of life, environmental stewardship, participatory governance, and the preservation of local culture and traditions. The movement's holistic approach encourages towns to foster long-term resilience by balancing modernization with local identity and environmental responsibility (Farelnik et al., 2020; Zawadzka, 2017 Zielinska-Szczepkowska et al., 2021).

To be officially recognized as a *Città Slow*, a city must join the international network and meet a comprehensive set of criteria encompassing areas such as land use planning, energy policy, mobility, environmental protection, infrastructure, and social cohesion. According to Kaczmarek and Kaczmarek (2024), motivations for joining the network vary by region and context, but often include a desire to distinguish small towns from larger urban centers and to articulate a strategic development path based on sustainability and heritage.

Città Slow has been interpreted through various theoretical lenses, ranging from urban resilience and place-based development to critiques of consumerism and growth-driven planning. For instance, Amrhein and Hospers (2025) analyze whether the movement should be seen as part of a "degrowth" paradigm or as a tool for place marketing. Their case study of Artà (Mallorca) shows that while some implementations align with anti-growth values, others instrumentalize *Città Slow* as a branding mechanism for tourism and economic repositioning.

The social dimension of *Città Slow* is particularly significant. As shown by Küçükergin et al. (2024), local support for the movement is often contingent on perceived social changes, including shifts in demographics, political priorities, or cultural values. Public acceptance may be encouraged by a sense of place and community identity, but discouraged if the movement is seen as elitist or disconnected from local needs.

In parallel, the movement's influence on tourism has become a topic of increasing academic interest. In their recent study, Ozer et al. (2025) demonstrate how strategic promotion of *Città Slow* values via social media can shape tourists' perceptions and behavioral responses, contributing to increased visitation and local economic benefits in smaller destinations. This suggests that the movement can be leveraged not only as a planning philosophy but also as a branding strategy, although tensions may arise between authenticity and commodification.

In the Polish context, researchers have explored both the motivations for joining the network and the practical implications for urban policy. Kaczmarek and Kaczmarek (2024) highlight that Polish towns often treat *Città Slow* membership as a strategic opportunity to enhance their development profiles, especially in regions with limited economic potential. Similarly, Jaszczak et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of integrating *Città Slow* values into regional and local planning frameworks to strengthen spatial cohesion and community resilience.

Revitalization efforts in *Città Slow* towns typically involve multi-dimensional strategies aimed at increasing both livability and sustainability. These may include:

- Enhancing public spaces - well-designed parks, plazas, and pedestrian zones that foster social interaction and inclusivity;
- Supporting local economies - promotion of local products, crafts, and services through business support and community initiatives;
- Promoting sustainable mobility - encouragement of walking, cycling, and public transport to reduce environmental impact and improve accessibility;

- Preserving cultural heritage - protection and promotion of local architecture, festivals, cuisine, and traditions;
- Encouraging participatory governance - citizen involvement in planning processes via consultations, workshops, and community forums.

As Zielinska-Szczepkowska et al. (2021) and Farelnek et al. (2020) note, the success of such initiatives depends not only on institutional capacity but also on deep civic engagement and long-term political commitment. Moreover, revitalization within the Città Slow framework is not merely about infrastructure renewal—it is about reinforcing the social fabric and environmental integrity of small urban communities.

Furthermore, comparative international research (e.g., from Italy, Germany, Spain, Turkey, and the Netherlands) confirms the global adaptability of the Città Slow model. Studies from Amrhein and Hospers (2025) and Ozer et al. (2025) underline how different socio-political and cultural contexts shape the implementation of slow principles, highlighting the importance of local interpretation of global sustainability narratives.

The growing body of academic literature points to the Città Slow movement as both a symbolic framework and a practical tool for sustainable urban transformation. However, critical perspectives remind us that implementation is highly context-dependent and may oscillate between meaningful reform and superficial branding.

3 Methods and study area

The study focuses on fourteen towns located in north-eastern Poland within the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship (Figure 1). These towns were selected for analysis due to their membership in the Association of Cittaslow Towns in the region. Their shared geographical location, along with similar spatial, economic, and social characteristics, makes them a relevant case for study. Additionally, all these towns participated in a joint Supra-Local Revitalization Program (SRLP) launched in 2014 (Stowarzyszenie „Polskie Miasta Cittaslow”, 2015), which enabled them to apply collectively for project funding in their respective municipalities.

The analyzed towns include: Barczewo, Biskupiec, Bisztynek, Dobre Miasto, Gołdap, Górowo Iławeckie, Lidzbark Warmiński, Lubawa, Nidzica, Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, Olsztyn, Pasym, Reszel, and Ryn (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Location of fourteen selected Cittaslow Towns in Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, Poland
Author: Jaszczak, 2025

This study employs a monographic analysis to examine the application of Città Slow principles in the revitalization of small urban environments. The research focuses on the Supra-Local Revitalization Program and local strategies in selected towns within the Warmia and Mazury region of Poland, assessing how public space projects align with the movement's core values.

The monographic approach involves an in-depth qualitative examination of selected towns participating in the Supra-Local Revitalization Program. This includes a review of municipal documents, planning strategies, and policy frameworks that guide urban renewal efforts. Special attention is given to:

1. The integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans,
2. The role of public space projects in fostering community identity and sustainability,
3. Strategies for enhancing green infrastructure and its impact on social and environmental resilience.

Data sources include official reports, urban planning documents, local policy guidelines, and municipal revitalization strategies, supplemented by literature on sustainable urbanism and slow city development. By combining these analytical approaches, the study provides a comprehensive evaluation of how small cities implement Città Slow values in urban planning and development. The findings offer insights into the effectiveness of the Supra-Local Revitalization Program and its contributions to sustainable urban revitalization in the Warmia and Mazury region.

4 Results

4.1 The integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans

The research on the integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans, based on the SRLP, focused on the towns listed above. The majority of the towns involved in the revitalization process demonstrated a high level of awareness of Città Slow principles, particularly in terms of promoting local heritage, sustainability, and community-centered development. Several municipalities incorporated these principles into their urban and rural planning documents, though the degree of integration varied across the towns. Towns like Lidzbark Warmiński, Reszel, and Olsztynek were the most active in adapting the Città Slow ideals into their urban development policies. Six key issues regarding the connections between Città Slow principles and local development plans were identified during the research, including: heritage preservation and local identity, sustainable mobility, sustainable environmental practices, community involvement, economic and social revitalization, impact on regional cohesion.

The towns under analysis showed strong efforts towards preserving local cultural and architectural heritage, a key tenet of the Città Slow movement. Historical buildings, town squares, and local landmarks were central to revitalization plans. Barczewo, Lidzbark Warmiński and Górowo Iławeckie, for example, included heritage preservation as a primary focus of their development plans, with specific projects aimed at restoring and maintaining historical landmarks to enhance local identity. Many of the towns included plans for improving sustainable mobility, an essential aspect of Città Slow. This included prioritizing pedestrian zones, bike paths, and improving public transportation options to reduce reliance on private cars. Biskupiec, Goldap, Lidzbark Warmiński focused on improving green transportation networks, making it easier for residents and visitors to move around in an eco-friendly manner. Several towns adopted environmental initiatives aimed at sustainability. For instance, the integration of green spaces, the promotion of local agriculture, and energy-efficient infrastructure were common in the revitalization strategies. Olsztynek and Lubawa stood out for implementing green energy projects and ensuring sustainable waste management systems were a key part of their local development.

The research also highlighted the importance of community involvement in the planning and decision-making processes. Città Slow emphasizes the need for local participation in the development of the urban environment. In towns like Biskupiec, Reszel, Dobre Miasto and Bisztynek, there were notable efforts to involve local residents through public consultations, workshops, and initiatives aimed at fostering social inclusion and cohesion. Economic revitalization was a central focus for many of the towns, aligning with the Città Slow principle of fostering a high quality of life. The towns have increasingly focused on supporting local businesses, especially those that

align with sustainable practices. Additionally, there were efforts to diversify the local economy by promoting tourism and leveraging the region's natural and cultural resources. For example, Nidzica, Reszel, Lidzbark Warmiński, Barczewo and Nowe Miasto Lubawskie are focusing on cultural tourism, Biskupiec, Gołdap and Ryn on leisure tourism and Bisztynek, Dobre Miasto and Górowo Iławeckie on rural tourism as a key driver of local development.

Despite the positive integration of Città Slow principles, challenges remain. The degree of implementation was uneven, with some towns facing difficulties in fully adopting the principles due to limited financial resources or resistance to change from local authorities or residents. Additionally, the lack of coordinated efforts across the towns sometimes led to fragmented development plans that lacked consistency. Issues with bureaucracy and slow decision-making processes were identified as barriers in some areas.

The overall impact on regional cohesion was positive. While each town had its own development strategies, the integration of Città Slow principles within the broader framework of the Supralocal Revitalisation Programme contributed to a more unified regional identity. Efforts to promote sustainable tourism, protect cultural heritage, and prioritize environmental sustainability have laid the groundwork for long-term regional development.

The integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans for the Warmia and Mazury Voivodship has been successful to varying degrees across the towns analyzed. While some towns have made significant strides in implementing sustainable development, heritage preservation, and community-centered initiatives, challenges such as financial constraints, inconsistent implementation, and coordination issues remain. Moving forward, a more cohesive and regionally coordinated approach, supported by adequate funding and greater community engagement, is crucial for the continued success of these efforts (Figure 2).

4.2 The role of public space projects in fostering community identity and sustainability

Public space projects in the Città Slow towns of Warmia and Mazury played a significant role in fostering community identity and sustainability. These initiatives enhanced social inclusion, improved environmental sustainability, and contributed to local economic development. However, challenges such as financial limitations and the need for better coordination between stakeholders need to be addressed to ensure the continued success of these projects. Going forward, a more integrated approach to urban planning and greater community involvement will be key to achieving the long-term goals of fostering vibrant, sustainable communities in these towns.

The integration of public spaces in the revitalization plans of these towns has played a crucial role in fostering a sense of community identity. Many towns focused on preserving and enhancing their historical and cultural heritage through the renovation of public squares, parks, and cultural centers. For example, in Barczewo, Lidzbark Warmiński, Biskupiec and Reszel, public space projects incorporated local traditions, architecture, and materials, emphasizing the towns' historical character. These initiatives helped residents reconnect with their local heritage and take pride in their town's identity, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging. Public space projects in Città Slow towns were designed to encourage social interaction and participation from all

segments of the community. In several towns, public spaces were transformed into multi-functional areas that serve as venues for events, markets, and community activities. In Biskupiec and Pasym, for instance, new public squares and parks became hubs for social gatherings, fostering stronger community ties and promoting a sense of collective ownership. These spaces also offered a platform for local artists, artisans, and businesses to showcase their work, further enhancing the social fabric of these towns.

A key feature of public space projects in Città Slow towns was their emphasis on sustainability. Efforts to create environmentally friendly and energy-efficient spaces were evident in many of the towns. For instance, in Gołdap and Olsztynek, public spaces were designed with green infrastructure elements such as rain gardens and sustainable materials. These eco-friendly initiatives not only improved the environmental quality of public spaces but also raised awareness among residents about the importance of sustainable urban design.

Public space projects aimed to improve accessibility and connectivity within the towns, making it easier for residents to navigate and interact with their environment. The development of pedestrian zones, cycling paths, and public transport hubs was a priority in several towns, such as Lidzbark Warmiński and Lubawa. These improvements encouraged sustainable mobility and helped create a more connected, cohesive urban fabric, enhancing residents' overall quality of life.

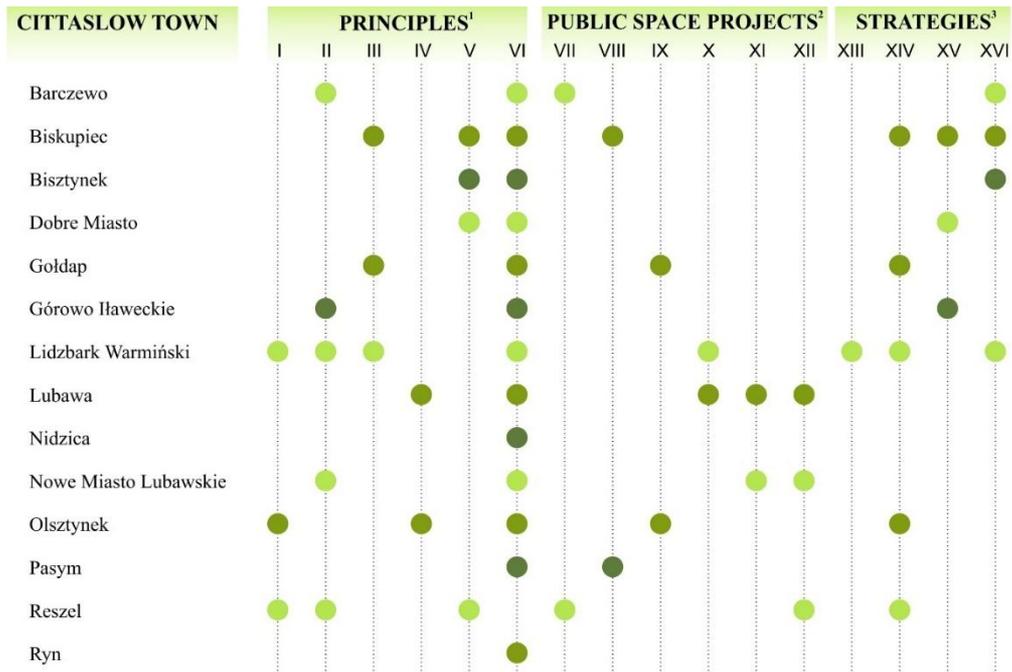
Public space projects were also instrumental in the revitalization of underutilized or neglected areas. In towns like Nidzica and Lidzbark Warmiński, Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, previously neglected spaces, such as industrial zones or abandoned lots, were transformed into vibrant parks, plazas, and recreational areas. These revitalized spaces not only provided recreational opportunities for residents but also contributed to the aesthetic and environmental improvement of the towns, positively affecting residents' well-being and attracting visitors.

A central theme in the public space projects across the Città Slow towns was the integration of nature with urban design. Parks, green spaces, and tree-lined streets were designed to provide residents with access to nature, promote environmental sustainability, and improve mental and physical well-being. In towns such as Górowo Iławeckie and Dobrze Miasto, the careful planning of green spaces allowed residents to enjoy nature without leaving the urban environment, helping to balance urban development with the preservation of natural beauty (Figure 2).

4.3 Strategies for enhancing green infrastructure and its impact on social and environmental resilience

The integration of green infrastructure strategies in Città Slow towns has significantly contributed to enhancing social and environmental resilience. These initiatives have improved public health, supported biodiversity, and strengthened climate adaptation efforts. However, continued investment, community engagement, and policy support are needed to ensure the long-term success of green infrastructure projects. Future strategies should focus on expanding green networks, fostering public-private partnerships, and integrating green solutions into broader urban development policies. Major strategy implemented in the towns was the expansion and improvement of urban green spaces, including parks, tree-lined streets, and green corridors. These initiatives aimed to increase biodiversity, improve air quality, and

provide spaces for recreation and relaxation. For instance, in Lidzbark Warmiński and Reszel, revitalization projects focused on restoring historic parks and integrating new green areas into the urban landscape, strengthening both ecological value and cultural identity. Many towns prioritized tree planting campaigns to enhance urban forests and mitigate the effects of climate change. Increasing tree cover helps reduce urban heat islands, improve air quality, and provide habitat for wildlife. In few cities, extensive tree planting programs focused on both native and resilient tree species to enhance long-term ecosystem stability and contribute to a healthier urban environment. Green infrastructure was integrated into public spaces to create multifunctional areas that promote social well-being while supporting ecological sustainability. Projects in Biskupiec, Lidzbark Warmiński, Gołdap and Olsztynek involved the transformation of city squares and pedestrian zones by incorporating green areas and shaded seating areas. These enhancements provided aesthetic value, encouraged social interaction, and improved urban microclimates. Efforts to protect local biodiversity and enhance habitat connectivity were observed in towns such as Górowo Iławeckie, Biskupiec, Reszel and Dobrze Miasto. Green infrastructure strategies included the creation of pollinator-friendly gardens, wetland restoration, and the preservation of natural buffer zones around urban areas. These initiatives aimed to maintain ecological balance while fostering environmental stewardship among residents. A key aspect of green infrastructure development was the active involvement of local communities. Many towns launched educational campaigns and citizen participation programs to promote green practices. In Biskupiec, Lidzbark Warmiński, Barczewo and Bisztynek, residents were engaged in urban gardening projects, tree planting events, and ecological workshops to raise awareness about the benefits of green infrastructure (Figure 2).



¹ The integration of Città Slow principles in local development plans.
² The role of public space projects in fostering community identity and sustainability, for the analysed Cittaslow Towns
³ Strategies for enhancing green infrastructure and its impact on social and environmental resilience
 I. Awareness and Commitment to Città Slow Principles
 II. Promoting Social Inclusion and Participation
 III. Sustainable Mobility
 IV. Sustainable Environmental Practices
 V. Community Involvement
 VI. Economic and Social Revitalization
 VII. Strengthening Community Identity through Public Space
 VIII. Promoting Social Inclusion and Participation
 IX. Sustainability in Public Space Design
 X. Enhancing Accessibility and Connectivity
 XI. Fostering Local Economic Growth
 XII. Integration of Nature and Urban Design
 XIII. Expansion and Enhancement of Urban Green Spaces
 XIV. Integration of Green Infrastructure with Public Spaces
 XV. Biodiversity Conservation and Habitat Protection
 XVI. Community Engagement and Green Awareness Programs

Figure 2: Matrix of Key Analyzed Assumptions in Relation to Cittaslow Town Plans, Strategies, and the Supra-local Revitalization Program.
 Author: Jaszczak, 2025

4 Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the transformative impact of the Città Slow movement on small city revitalization and public space design. By integrating sustainability, cultural preservation, and community engagement, cities aligned with the movement foster environments that are not only aesthetically appealing but also socially and environmentally resilient. The analysis of the Supra-Local Revitalization Program and local strategies in the Warmia and Mazury region highlights how strategic green infrastructure planning reinforces these principles, promoting inclusivity and ecological sustainability.

The implementation of Città Slow principles in Warmia and Mazury aligns with similar efforts worldwide. For instance, in Orvieto, Italy, one of the pioneering Città Slow

cities, urban planners have prioritized pedestrian-friendly spaces and the promotion of local artisanal industries to maintain cultural heritage while fostering economic resilience (Knox & Mayer 2009). Similarly, towns in South Korea, such as Changpyeong, have leveraged traditional architecture and slow food initiatives to boost tourism and local engagement (Lee, C. 2011). These cases illustrate how the movement's tenets-prioritizing quality of life over rapid development-can be effectively applied in diverse sociocultural contexts.

A notable parallel can be drawn with the revitalization efforts in Aylsham, UK, where the town council implemented slow mobility strategies, including expanded cycling networks and pedestrian-friendly zones. This approach not only reduced vehicular congestion but also enhanced social interactions among residents, reinforcing the significance of urban design in fostering a sense of community (Heitmann et al. 2011). These examples illustrate that while each city tailors *Città Slow* strategies to its unique characteristics, the overarching emphasis remains on sustainable growth and place-based identity.

The global application of *Città Slow* principles offers crucial insights for urban policymakers. The integration of green infrastructure, as demonstrated in Warmia and Mazury, is a replicable strategy that enhances environmental sustainability while creating attractive communal spaces. Similarly, prioritizing local craftsmanship and cultural heritage, as seen in Orvieto, can bolster local economies and reinforce distinctive urban identities.

Moreover, fostering public participation in urban planning processes is essential. Studies have shown that community-led initiatives in *Città Slow* cities lead to higher levels of civic engagement and social cohesion (Mayer & Knox, 2006). As seen in Aylsham, providing opportunities for active mobility strengthens both environmental sustainability and social interaction, reinforcing the broader ethos of slow urbanism. The *Città Slow* movement presents a viable model for sustainable urban revitalization, particularly in small cities seeking to preserve their unique character while adapting to contemporary challenges. The case studies discussed illustrate the universal applicability of these principles, demonstrating how the movement transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. By prioritizing ecological sustainability, cultural authenticity, and inclusive public spaces, *Città Slow* cities serve as exemplars of mindful urban development. Future research should explore the long-term socioeconomic impacts of these initiatives, assessing their scalability and integration into broader urban policies. Ultimately, embracing *Città Slow* principles offers a pathway toward more livable, sustainable, and resilient urban environments.

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Povzetek

Ta študija analizira izvajanje načel gibanja Città Slow v štirinajstih mestih v vojvodstvu Varminsko-mazursko na severovzhodu Poljske, ki sodelujejo v nadlokalnem programu revitalizacije (SRLP), ki se je začel leta 2014. Teoetični pristop vključuje pregled občinskih dokumentov, razvojnih strategij in lokalnih politik, s poudarkom na vključevanju načel Città Slow, vlogi javnih prostorov in zeleni infrastrukturi v urbanem razvoju, pa tudi preučitev dejanskih projektov, izvedenih v okviru SRLP, ter njihovega vpliva na večsmerni razvoj teh mest.

Rezultati kažejo, da večina mest izkazuje visoko raven zavedanja načel Città Slow, zlasti glede ohranjanja kulturne dediščine, trajnostne mobilnosti, udeležbe lokalne skupnosti in podpore lokalnemu gospodarstvu. Javni prostori, kot so trgi, parki in rekreacijska območja, spodbujajo družbeno povezanost, utrjujejo lokalno identiteto in spodbujajo okoljsko izobraževanje. Vpeljevanje zelene infrastrukture, vključno s parki, zelenimi površinami in rekreacijskimi prostori, krepi ekološko in družbeno ozaveščenost. Kljub pozitivnim rezultatom so se nekatera mesta soočala z izzivi, povezanimi z omejenimi finančnimi viri, usklajevanjem ukrepov in odporom lokalnih deležnikov. Na splošno vključevanje načel Città Slow prispeva k boljši regionalni povezanosti, trajnostnemu razvoju in višji kakovosti življenja. To poudarja potrebo po nadaljnji krepitvi regionalnega sodelovanja in vključevanju lokalnih skupnosti.

The Central-European small town: interpretations, challenges and resilience in Hungary

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Abstract

Small towns are long-term stable elements of the urban network with established residential and service roles. Geographical research has often neglected them, and accordingly, certain conceptual issues require clarification. However, particularly in countries with low urbanisation, small towns play a significant role in the transformation and modernisation of rural areas. Nevertheless, the increasingly global scale of economic and social processes poses a considerable challenge to their traditional functions, reshaping their development framework. In this evolving context, the flexible adaptive capacity of small towns – defined as resilience – becomes crucial. Alongside addressing globalisation challenges, this study outlines a cognitive resilience model that could also serve as the basis for a new planning practice.

Keywords

small towns, globalisation, reindustrialisation, resilience, Hungary

Izveleček

Srednjeevropsko majhno mesto: interpretacije, izzivi in odpornost na Madžarskem

Majhna mesta so dolgoročno stabilni elementi urbane mreže z uveljavljenimi bivanjskimi in storitvenimi funkcijami. Geografske raziskave so jih pogosto zanemarjale, zato določena konceptualna vprašanja zahtevajo pojasnitev. Zlasti v državah z nizko stopnjo urbanizacije imajo majhna mesta pomembno vlogo pri preobrazbi in modernizaciji podeželskih območij. Vendar pa vse bolj globalni obseg gospodarskih in družbenih procesov predstavlja velik izziv za njihove tradicionalne funkcije in vpliva na njihov razvojni okvir. V tem spreminjajočem se kontekstu postaja ključna sposobnost prožnosti majhnih mest – opredeljena kot odpornost. Poleg izzivov globalizacije prispevek obravnava tudi model kognitivne odpornosti, ki bi lahko služil tudi kot osnova za novo prakso pri prostorskem načrtovanju.

Ključne besede

majhna mesta, globalizacija, reindustrializacija, odpornost, Madžarska



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1 Introduction

Why is it important to discuss small towns in 2025? Ostensibly, this is a question that may not seem particularly novel. Small towns are not hubs of global space, they do not represent concentrations of power, nor are they typically characterised by a significant proportion of the spatial conflicts that define contemporary social processes, nor are they affected by extreme social polarisation. However, they are home to a significant proportion of the population, typically between 20-30%, they provide employment and services for those living in rural areas, and they embody a unique model of sustainable urban development.

Moreover, small towns are far from as unchanging as their traditional roles might suggest. The changing scale of territorial processes and the emergence of global impacts have fundamentally transformed the conditions that previously determined the development opportunities for small towns. The national-level markets and redistribution mechanisms that were the primary sources of modernisation have weakened and become hollowed out. Consequently, small towns are compelled to hold their own in an intensifying competition within a transformed, and in many respects, truly global space. In this situation, the concept of resilience, which emphasises the autonomous adaptation of communities to external challenges, can provide an appropriate framework for interpreting the development of small towns.

This study focuses on Hungarian small towns, highlighting their Central European character. It aims to present partially complementary and partially overlapping interpretations of small towns, thereby endeavouring to dispel some of the conceptual uncertainties or, at least, indeterminacies concerning them. Subsequently, it will outline some of the global challenges facing small towns and, reflecting on these, sketch the contours of resilient small town communities.

2 Methodology

2.1 The Small Town as an Interpretative and Research Problem

Research into small towns has been a part of the spectrum of urban geography from the outset, though it has never played a central role. Small towns emerge as specific functional-hinterland problems (Grötzbach, 1963), as key players in the development of rural areas (Vaishar & Zapletalová, 2009), as social communities with unique structural features (Drozg, 2016), or as prototypical representatives of sustainable settlements (Kumer et al., 2023; Mayer & Knox, 2010). However, they primarily appear as problem areas, sites of demographic, economic, and social crises (Bartosiewicz et al., 2019; Besser et al., 2008; Hannemann, 2003; Ljubenović et al., 2025; Lovell et al., 2018).

Despite the prevalence of small town research in European, particularly Central European, and concurrently in Anglo-Saxon (very significantly Canadian, Australian, South African, and New Zealand alongside British and American) geographical studies, *there is a certain uncertainty regarding how to interpret the small town itself*. Our experience indicates that small town research follows four main directions concerning interpretations and definitions of the small town:

- a) *Acceptance of an internationally or nationally established, statistical or semi-official classification*, for example, for development policy purposes. These

usually link the interpretation of a small town to lower and upper population thresholds (e.g., but by no means exclusively, 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants) – see, for example (Besser, 2009; Kwiatek-Sołtys, 2011; Majewska et al., 2022; Stoica et al., 2020; Wirth et al., 2016). A frequently cited work in this context is the *SMESTO project* and its final report (Schneidewind et al., 2006). These approaches very often include the existence of formal urban status or classification (Filipovic et al., 2016; Trócsányi et al., 2024), and even where its significance is not specifically highlighted, small towns are generally selected from settlements classified as towns. This means that a small town is typically not only a matter of size but also a historically developed formal category.

- b) *Researchers using their own, unique delimitation and approach* for various reasons, based on population or other easily applicable statistical criteria (Kenyon et al., 2001; Novotný et al., 2016; O'Toole & Burdess, 2004), adapting to the specific aspects of their investigation.
- c) *Attempts at a definition not solely based on population size*. In this, we can most often observe a reflection of the traditional European geographical understanding based on *centrality and central functions* (Jousseume & Talandier, 2016; Wolff et al., 2021), or research focusing on the presence of an *independent urban identity* (Bartosiewicz et al., 2019), or perhaps *urban social characteristics* (Horeczki, 2013).
- d) *Small town research without an explicit definition*. The majority of writings definitively dealing with small towns take the concept of a small town as given and well-known, a kind of *axiom that requires no detailed explanation*. This approach is generally adopted by research not inspired by geography but touching upon various aspects of small-town existence (e.g., public health, social psychology, education, etc.), as well as in case studies where one or a few specific settlements have been selected, thus delimitation is not an explicit goal (Cudny, 2012; Donaldson, 2009; Lazzeroni, 2020).

Through a non-representative and by no means comprehensive rapid review, we examined the findings of 50 small town studies published between 2000 and 2022¹⁴. We aimed to observe how authors approached the small town(s) that were the subject of their research, whether they established an explicit definition or delimitation, and what the actual population size was of the settlements included in the studies. *We found that 40% of the publications surveyed provided no substantive definition for small towns* (thus taking the concept as given), while the vast majority of the remainder linked small town status to a population threshold (supplemented by the presence of formal urban status). The smallest town in the examined cases had a population of 90, while the largest was approximately 50,000. If we calculate the average and median separately for the smallest, average, and largest population figures included in each publication, we get 8,700 / 4,400 (average/median) for the smallest, 12,035 (7,300) for the average, and 17,070 (13,400) for the maximum value¹⁵. This suggests that the most typical small town, according to researchers, is to be sought around the 7,000 population mark. It's also an important observation that while small towns around 1,500-2,000 inhabitants are still numerous in the

¹⁴ The collection was created by online research based on Google Scholar, using keywords "small town" and similar. Search results have been evaluated individually by relevance.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, the calculation cannot be performed for the entire sample, as there were several publications in the sample examining a significant number of settlements where the population figures for all settlements individually were not available.

sample, those around 1,000 inhabitants or smaller are very few. At the same time, according to this emphatically very casual review, small town researchers do not feel bound by the previously mentioned population threshold of 5,000.

Even the relatively significant variation in size indicates that, despite many studies taking the concept of a small town as an axiom, *different authors – not to mention different researchers – do not think of the same thing*. At this juncture, it can also be argued that this conceptual heterogeneity has a linguistic layer. The English language (and, among others, Spanish or Portuguese) uses different terms for a large urban area (city) and a smaller one (town). In other languages, there is no such distinction, and settlements considered urban are described by a single noun, with the local equivalent of the word 'city' only used as a modified version with an adjective or diminutive suffix – the most well-known and consistently used example being the German "*Kleinstadt*", but this also applies to Swedish, Hungarian, Russian, and essentially most Central European Slavic languages. Although this is merely a suggestion requiring further investigations, two approaches can also influence the substantive elements of the concept. If the designation follows Anglo-Saxon logic (the "small town approach"), *there is a qualitative difference between the concepts of 'city' and 'town'; they are fundamentally distinct*. According to German, and as we have seen, *Central European logic, the difference between 'city' and 'town' (Stadt and Kleinstadt) is only quantitative; the latter is a smaller, less complex version of the former, but in essence, the two concepts are identical*. Thus, it might even be ventured that two parallel perspectives can exist: one that views the small town predominantly and fundamentally as rural, an embodiment of rurality, and another that sees small urban islands within the same rural spaces.

After this, it is perhaps not so surprising that when we try to find the substantive characteristics of the concept of a small town in relevant studies, we find, on the one hand, very few explicit attempts to provide a definition, and on the other hand, these characteristics are more or less clearly distinguishable according to a *urban network approach and a social approach*.

Viewed from the perspective of the *urban network* – and this is the traditional approach of European geography – the small town is not difficult to define by formal characteristics. These definitions essentially go back to Walter Christaller's central place theory (Christaller, 1933) and *highlight a specific level of services*. A small town should possess, among other things, a secondary school, a facility providing hospital care, a shopping centre, and a sufficient number of jobs (Jousseau & Talandier, 2016), or, in more general terms, be capable of satisfying daily needs (Wolff et al., 2021). This approach – that is, that a small town can be defined by a certain level of services and jobs available locally and serving the surrounding countryside – is also applied in Hungary's National Atlas (Kovács et al., 2021). Definitions originating from the settlement network perspective often emphasise the independent character of small towns and their autonomous roles, not merely borrowed from large cities (Bartosiewicz et al., 2019; Konecka-Szydłowska, 2016).

Another possible starting point for defining small towns is a *community-centred approach*. Primarily, American sociologists have engaged relatively extensively with small-town societies, dedicating classic works to the subject, such as "*Small towns in mass society*" (Vidich & Bensman, 1968) or "*Bowling Alone*" (Putnam, 2001). Their approach is rather normative and carries a positive value content regarding the essence of small-town life, with criticisms mainly revolving around the loss of

traditional small-town values and the dissolution of traditional structures (Hannemann, 2004; Merrett, 2001). If the previous approach emphasised central roles as its key, here the role of *social capital* must be highlighted (Hannemann, 2002; Konecka-Szydłowska & Kaczmarek, 2010; Liu & Besser, 2003). The scale of the small town space allows for the personal connection and strong embeddedness of all significant actors. This is partly made possible by the size itself: Antonín Vaishar emphasises the importance that residents cover small town distances on foot, at most by bicycle, rather than by car or public transport, thus creating occasion and opportunity for personal interaction (Vaishar et al., 2016).

At this point, it is worth recalling Joachim Burdack's observation, which discusses *the existence of a dual small-town image*, with parallel running small-town romantic and small-town sceptical attitudes (Burdack, 2013). Most of the small-town interpretations above can fundamentally be categorised into the first group, however frequent the criticism, which is mostly realised in the continuous out-migration of young people (Alston, 2004; Makkai et al., 2017), which is both a consequence and an accelerator of the erosion of small-town communities. Small-town values, that certain conservative attitude, which in part is a reflection of the characteristics of traditional societies (Lueders, 2018), can easily be inverted: in small towns, every everyday function is available, but typically there is only one of everything – one secondary school, one cultural scene, one sports team, one major employer – and often one single person for every role: doctor, director, mayor. This is a society in which everyone has their precise place, and which is rather difficult to change.

Nevertheless, despite all perceived or real limitations of the small town, perhaps precisely because of its conservatism, it is primarily and increasingly an attractive place to live, one that not only emits but also receives population. So much so that many approaches see their future in this: the expansion of the small town brand, which offers an attractive (Fertner et al., 2015; Kwiatek-Sołtys & Mainet, 2014) and sustainable (Knox & Mayer, 2009) alternative in a globalised world.

3 Results

3.1 The Small Town and Global Challenges

3.1.1 The Source of Global Challenges

The small town – or more precisely: the prototypical small town – is, on the one hand, the traditional centre of rural areas, historically offering services and employment to its residents. On the other hand, it is the bearer of a unique society and community, which is perhaps, on the whole, more rural according to Anglo-Saxon, and transitional, arguably semi-urban, according to Continental European interpretations. However closed we may consider these small town societies to be, these communities have not, and could not have, avoided the challenges stemming from globalisation.

To understand the relationship between small towns and globalisation, the geographical discourse on *scale* offers the most suitable starting point. From the outset, one of the most exciting questions concerning scales has been the juxtaposition and interconnectedness of global and local dimensions (Berki, 2017; Smith, 1992; Taylor, 1982). *Scale jumps* and the interpenetration of different scales (Swyngedouw, 1997) are undoubtedly of fundamental importance for the

development of small towns. We are certainly inclined to view small towns primarily from the perspective of locality, and this perspective is historically well-founded. At the same time, in our previous research, we have endeavoured to show how, in Central Europe, characterised by delayed modernisation, *small town development was and still is strongly dependent on central redistribution*; indeed, small town urbanisation was top-down in nature (Trócsányi et al., 2018, 2024). If we contrast this with theses regarding the weakening role of the nation-state scale and *detritorialisation processes* (Swyngedouw, 1989), it becomes clear that the challenge is not merely globalisation, but the vacuum left by the *retreat of the state* (Strange, 1996) as it dissolves into globalisation.

In Central Europe, the small town was made more urban than its surroundings fundamentally not by its citizens, but by its state-founded and financed institutions: schools, hospitals, courts, post office, railway station, and barracks. It was also the state that created the relatively broad foundations for small-town industrialisation in countries developing within the framework of planned economies. Therefore, when the cascading waves of globalisation and post-socialist transformation simultaneously brought *deindustrialisation, demilitarisation, and de-administration* (Hannemann, 2004), small towns, not surprisingly, consistently appeared on the losing side in spaces defined and reconstructed by new dimensions of uneven development (Nagy, 2015; Timár, 2007). Paradoxically, even phenomena that we are fundamentally justified in considering factors of social progress can lead to the relative decline of small towns. An example of this is the expansion of higher education, which has directed an increasing proportion of the population towards higher education instead of the secondary education still available in small towns, thereby becoming a significant factor in the out-migration of young people (Makkai et al., 2017). Perhaps even more importantly, the general digitisation of society, with an increasing proportion of private consumption and public affairs moving into online spaces, has allowed small towns to be bypassed, primarily in commerce and services, but secondarily in the traditional venues and actors of cultural and community life. This process is currently far from complete; in fact, in some respects, it leads to a sharp polarisation of the rural population, as the most competent groups within the local society – and thus obviously indispensable for the reproduction of small town development factors – will be able to bypass this level and connect directly to larger-scale (national, global) networks. In contrast, in the increasingly multilateral rural spaces, marginalised and isolated groups are emerging for whom even small town spaces will become almost inaccessible, and this *perforation of rural spaces* (Máté et al., 2024) further diminishes the already depleted resources of the traditional hinterland of small town development.

3.1.2 Dominant Forms of Global Challenges in Hungarian Small Towns

Economic Restructuring and Reindustrialisation

The transformation of 1989/1990 halted the relatively dynamic industrialisation experienced by Hungarian small towns in the 1970s and 80s, becoming the starting point for an intensive deindustrialisation process. This process was somewhat delayed and less dramatic than in the case of some of the classic "socialist" heavy industrial strongholds, but it also affected entire industries (e.g., textiles, leather and footwear, sugar). As a result, in small towns, where the share of industrial and construction

employment was still almost 40%¹⁶ in 1990, this figure decreased to 36% by 2001, a very moderate decline compared to the trajectories of Budapest or larger cities. Between 2003 and 2022, the gap between large and small towns further widened, as the number of industrial and construction employees decreased by 53% in the former and 43% in the latter. Consequently, a stable 33% of Hungary's industrial earners live in small towns.

Behind this apparent stability lies a significant restratification. Industrial earners are now concentrated in rural areas. 73% of industrial earners live in small towns and villages, while only about 23% are found in Budapest and larger cities (for all employed, this ratio is 40:60).

The process was far from uniform. The first wave of investment after the regime change affected small towns relatively little, and by the end of the first decade of the 2000s, it seemed to be losing momentum simultaneously with the global and European crises (Egedy, 2012; Neumann & Tóth, 2009), leading to a significant employment crisis (Altwicker-Hámori & Köllő, 2013). Reindustrialisation subsequently became the dominant narrative and explicit strategy in Hungarian economic policy (Dabasi-Halász et al., 2021; Kovacs & Domonkos, 2024; Póla & Egyed, 2019), despite some of its contradictions being known from the outset. These contradictions became increasingly evident later, as the emphasis shifted – not without some greenwashing – towards the production of electric vehicles and their necessary batteries (Czirfusz, 2023; Ricz & Éltető, 2025). At the same time, it is undeniable that reindustrialisation proved to be a successful strategy insofar as it almost eliminated the previously suffocating unemployment in small towns by the end of the 2010s.

Although there are examples to the contrary, small towns primarily benefit not from tier-1 investments, but rather from the related second and third-tier companies establishing their sites there. Research by Ernő Molnár revealed that path dependency, past industrial traditions, and the quality of human resources play a complex but very important role in the success of reindustrialisation (Molnár et al., 2020, 2022). Success in this sense can be considered the creation of a diversified structure with multiple pillars, relatively high added value, and visible participation of locally rooted SMEs.

Overall, with all its achievements, reindustrialisation and, more broadly, economic restructuring cannot be considered a closed or successfully resolved challenge. One symptom of this is the exhaustion of the reindustrialisation model itself, and more broadly, the Hungarian economic development model: as of spring 2025, when these lines are being written, only two of the last 10 quarters have seen annual GDP growth exceed 1%. The resources for industrialisation also appear to be depleted, with continuous doubts arising regarding the availability of energy, water, and labour – the conflicts related to the latter, where official and very vocal anti-migrant political communication clashes with the increasingly frequent presence of guest workers in everyday life, visibly causing social tension and potentially conflicts in small towns as

¹⁶ Although there are many hints in the first part of the paper about what is in the authors' mind regarding the definition of the small towns, under the conditions of the Hungarian urban network, we always calculate a stock of 315 units, containing every settlements with town rank and a population less than 30,000 people. The population of these towns is about 2.88 million, it accounts 43% of the urban. and 30% of the total population of Hungary.

well (Jankó et al., 2024). We have also touched upon the other problem: successful reindustrialisation results in a divergence of economic structures between small and large towns, which may also manifest in lagging incomes.

Small Towns and the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was precisely the kind of event that many had theoretically anticipated, and which was ultimately facilitated by the advanced nature of globalisation. The symbolic spaces of the pandemic were urban, primarily metropolitan areas. First, of course, was the hermetically sealed Wuhan, with an army of human resources mobilised by the Chinese authorities. Then came the images of Western cities under lockdown, with their empty, eerie streets; Indian metropolises, with masses of people waiting for hospital beds or trying to find oxygen cylinders; and later, images of various European cities with people protesting against restrictions, clashing with security forces (Pirisi et al., 2022). Smaller towns rarely found themselves in the spotlight, thus maintaining the dichotomy in public perception that identified large cities with danger and small towns with safety.

However, subsequent research did not necessarily confirm this perception. Differences stemming from higher population density and concentration tended to level out in the later stages of the pandemic, partly due to existing differences in age composition (Kulu & Dorey, 2021; Sigler et al., 2021; Uzzoli, 2022). Nevertheless, the challenges faced by small towns were complex. On the one hand, due to the lower complexity of the local economy, the consequences of exposure in a single sector were more acutely felt. In Hungary, spa towns represent a typical type of small town, for which lockdowns essentially crippled the foundations of their local economies.

Despite this, the direct economic impacts at the small town level were minor, even in 2020, which saw a 4.3% decrease in real GDP nationwide. Of the more than 54,000 small town enterprises employing at least five people, only 29 declared bankruptcy in 2020. Their revenue in Forints essentially stagnated, and their export revenue increased by 5% (partly due to exchange rate fluctuations). Unemployment rose only temporarily and to a lesser extent than in large and medium-sized cities. Overall, the data indicate that cities successfully integrated into the global economy adapted more successfully and quickly to this challenge as well.

The pandemic also attacked the foundations of small towns' identity through other means. As noted earlier, informal networks and social capital based on personal encounters and relationships are essential elements of small-town life, and COVID-19 partly eliminated, or at least dramatically reduced, these opportunities for interaction. Furthermore, Hungarian regulations attempted to manage the crisis of the central budget with quite specific measures, significantly reducing the economic manoeuvring space of local governments through several interventions (Kovács, 2020; Pálné Kovács, 2023). Measures such as the withdrawal of vehicle tax, the halving of local business tax, a ban on tax increases, and, not least, free public parking placed serious financial burdens on local communities.

Overall, the end of COVID-19 was followed by a very rapid "bounce back" – an almost seamless reintegration into the system of previous daily life (Pirisi et al., 2022). In this sense, small-town resilience stood the test of the pandemic, yet the crisis was a stronger signal than ever that small towns are just as exposed to dangers spreading

through global networks as much larger and more embedded places. It's just that they have far fewer resources to deal with these problems.

Small Towns and Migration

Migration is one of those phenomena that, in the context of globalisation, appear in small town spaces on entirely different scales and dimensions than before. Traditionally, small town migration was bidirectional: from the rural hinterland towards small towns, which served as an important modernisation channel for the rural population, and from small towns towards large cities. The two processes were roughly balanced for small towns, typically resulting in a positive balance, which allowed these settlements to slowly grow. The dimension of migration was predominantly regional, considering both directions (Trócsányi et al., 2018).

Although the 2008 crisis intensified labour migration from Hungary towards Europe (Kapitány & Rohr, 2014), it was in 2015 that migration as a topic became a significant element in the national discourse, and indeed, became a distinctly successful political product (Glied & Pap, 2016; Pap & Reményi, 2017). However, in this discourse, migration quickly became linked with large urban spaces, and Hungarian small towns were presented as being left out, as islands of safety. Hungary was inherently more of a transit country than a destination for migration, so Hungarian small towns did not have to deal with the reception and integration of refugees or immigrants from other cultures after 2015. This is never an easy process anywhere (Jonitz et al., 2024), because although migration could, in principle, be a suitable tool for slowing down ageing and counteracting out-migration, the rather closed small town societies and often the weaknesses of the local labour market also hinder this process.

Nonetheless, international migration has, albeit stealthily, reached the small town level by the 2020s, even in Hungary, which officially pursues an anti-migration policy. By this time, the "Hungarian model" based on extensive industrial development and employment expansion had reached its limits, leading to a specific labour shortage; in several cases, even the realisation of large investments would not have been possible without labour imports. This led to a dual narrative and the emergence of a distinction between "bad" and "good" migrants (Reményi et al., 2022). "Good" migrants arrive specifically for industrial and construction jobs; their stay is strictly time-limited, and they strive to remain invisible, to be as inconspicuous as possible – often these are groups living in small town spaces but isolated from small town societies, and they are very often surrounded by a hostile attitude from the local community (Bernát, 2020; Jankó et al., 2024).

However, small towns are currently participating in global and European labour migration not primarily as recipients, but as emitters. According to 2022 census data, 2.8% of all small town employees worked abroad; in border settlements, this proportion can exceed 20-25%, but in inland areas, for some small towns struggling with persistent crises or having German ethnic traditions, a value of 5-8% is also typical.

Permanent out-migration was particularly characteristic of small towns in the period between the 2001 and 2011 censuses. More precisely, during this period, small towns belonging to agglomerations recorded very strong migration gains, while prototypical small towns belonging to rural areas experienced an average annual migration loss of 1.7‰. It is important to emphasise that this out-migration was specifically age-

specific and largely affected young people in their twenties, with both educational and employment goals appearing among the motivations (Makkai et al., 2017). After 2011, out-migration slowed down and even statistically reversed. Among the real factors behind this, we must certainly mention the significantly improving employment situation from the mid-2010s onwards; however, another factor in the improvement results purely from the peculiarities of statistics. As the European labour market, which fully opened up during that decade, became more attractive, domestic out-migration was replaced by international migration, and Hungarian statistics are unable to reliably measure this, as out-migration does not involve "checking out" with Hungarian authorities or giving up one's Hungarian address.

Regarding the migration balance of small towns, several recent studies have highlighted a type of population movement in which often older, already retired segments move towards small towns (Fertner et al., 2015; Jaszczak et al., 2021; Steinführer & Grossmann, 2021). In the Hungarian context, there are few signs of this. The only significant exception was 2020, in which small towns with recreational functions, primarily on the shores of Lake Balaton, unexpectedly (and without further continuation) recorded a significant migration surplus. This phenomenon can be considered both a genuine migration response triggered by the pandemic and, again, we can suspect a statistical effect here, as many may have only then officially registered their "second home" properties, which they might have used previously anyway. For small towns – excluding, of course, those in agglomerations – to become mass destinations for a peculiar kind of rural or even small-town gentrification is still something to wait for. Thus, the migration balance is rather negative: eroding human resources on one side, and unwelcome guest workers, whom local society does not even attempt to integrate, on the other.

3.1.3 Resilience of Small Towns

Globalisation has fundamentally transformed the spaces and scales where small towns must find development opportunities and ensure the well-being of their inhabitants. The collapse of the state level, which previously provided the backdrop for development, after the regime change, the newly arising uncertainties in redistribution systems, and the global challenges presented above, have all contributed to the emergence of a development model that emphasises the *responsiveness of organisations and communities* to fend off uncontrollable and essentially uninfluenceable negative external impacts.

The academic career of resilience began with the 1973 study by Canadian ecologist Crawford Stanley Holling (Holling, 1973). In its original sense, it meant the recovery of a (complex) ecological system in an equilibrium state after a strong external impact or shock. It is not the aim of this study to review the evolution and widespread adoption of the concept in the social sciences, including human geography. Much more important is where resilience has arrived in this process, now as a distinct narrative, interpretive framework, and in many cases, a planning paradigm. Contemporary approaches in human geographical research have moved beyond interpretations focused on absorptive capacity or elastic rebound, *most frequently placing the emphasis on adaptive resilience* (Martin & Sunley, 2015), where the impacts on the system bring about its transformation and adaptation (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013).

The concept of resilience has been connected to small towns for years (Strzelecka, 2018). The resilience of small towns periodically comes to the forefront in connection with current social or economic crises (Lazzeroni, 2020) or in relation to climate change and the resulting natural disasters (Nazari et al., 2025; Porfiriev, 2009). At the same time, there are also a relatively significant number of approaches that interpret small town resilience as a counterpoint to the general decline and shrinkage characteristic of settlements, as resistance to it, primarily in demographic terms (Couch, 2016; Konecka-Szydłowska, 2018; Ljubenović et al., 2020; McManus et al., 2012).

If we accept the complex and adaptive interpretation of resilience, then we must also accept *that it is unlikely that a measurement procedure can be devised that would be able to quantify the differences in resilience among individual small towns*. Measurability is important for planning and indispensable for risk management, and quantitative resilience models also primarily (though not exclusively) seek to quantify the phenomenon from this starting point (Nagy & Szép, 2023; Renschler et al., 2010; Somers, 2009; Winderl, 2014).

The authors of this study instead follow the path of employing *case study-based approaches*, avoiding the statistical comparison of individual locations, if only because a significant measurement challenge regarding resilience is that the summation of individual social factors and descriptive statistics can be misleading, *as a strength in one factor is not necessarily able to compensate for a weakness in another*. Moreover, resilience requires the presence of attributes and competencies from the community that, at least in part, cannot be maximised simultaneously; their effects can cancel each other out.

Considering these two aspects, the authors endeavoured to create a *cognitive model* that might be suitable for examining the resilience of small towns (Pirisi, 2019). This model examines fundamental values of community resilience, such as *diversity, cohesion, and autonomy*, across three spheres (*economic, political, and community*). Diversity has been a key element of ecologically-based studies from the outset (Holling, 1986), but it also plays a significant role in purely social or even economic approaches (Adger, 2000; Brown & Greenbaum, 2017). Cohesion or interconnectedness plays at least as prominent a role in studies, either directly (Adger, 2005; Townshend et al., 2016) or embedded in the concept of social capital (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Petzold, 2016; Szabó, 2015). The dimension of autonomy plays a central role in the concept of community "resourcefulness" (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013). Along with these factors, the characteristics typical of a resilient small town community can be determined (Table 1).

		Factors of resilience		
		Diversity	Cohesion	Autonomy
Some aspects of the local production of space	Social structures and relations based on reciprocity	Diversity in different segments of the population (age, social groups, ethnic/ religious structure, subcultures, etc.)	Strong connectedness to the local community (identity), high level of trust and social capital, integration and social inclusion	Self-organisation, significant civic activity, and the important role of NGOs
	Economic activity and market-based relations	High variety in size and sectors of economic role players.	Locally rooted enterprises and corporate social responsibility	Local control and availability of economic resources, local markets, and supply chains
	Political activity and power-based relations	Representation of different values, involvement of diverse groups in governance	Cooperation between political wings and actors, unity in basic strategic goals	The possibility of local decision-making and strategic planning

Table 1: Attributes of the resilient settlement in the political, economic, and social spheres.

Source: Pirisi, 2019.

This model describes the conditions for *adaptive resilience*. In our interpretation, *resilience is therefore a social construct* created by a spatially organised community, interconnected by institutionalised and informal relationships. It is a sum of skills and knowledge carried by these relationships, enabling continuous adaptation to changing social, economic, political, and ecological conditions perceived as external to the community, maintaining the community's functionality, and possessing the ability to expand its own skills and knowledge and renew its structure, thereby reducing the community's vulnerability (Pirisi, 2019).

However, the concept of resilience is not merely an academic question, *as it has become a fundamental element of EU planning in the last decade* (Baravikova et al., 2021; Joseph & Juncos, 2024), despite obvious uncertainties regarding its interpretation, especially its measurability. In Hungary, the era of resilience-based planning arrived in 2021 with the preparation of Sustainable Urban Development Strategies, a document that, in addition to large and medium-sized cities, was also prepared by some small towns. In these strategies, resilience appears as a tool for achieving long-term sustainability (Pirisi, 2023). The resilience of cities is interpreted as the sum of their *absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities*, meaning that resistance to crises and adaptation to changing circumstances are considered the

essence of resilience (and not, for example, rapid rebound or recovery). A resilient city, according to the manual serving as the basis for planning, is to be developed along the dimensions of a *prosperous city*, a *greening city*, a *digital city*, a *retaining city*, and a *servicing city* (MKB Consulting, 2021). With this, regional policy has elevated resilience to the level of a general narrative, essentially creating a metaphor for development. The conclusion, therefore, is that the guarantee for the development of small towns lies in their ability to develop the resilience inherent in their communities.

4 Conclusion

Historically, the small town was a very stable formation within the settlement network. It was, in fact, a living anachronism, maintaining its fundamental functions for centuries in an almost unchanged form by providing markets and services to the population of the surrounding rural areas. Even the modernisation that began in the 19th century and unfolded in the 20th century only changed this insofar as small towns became integrated into the institutional, infrastructural, and economic networks organised within nation-state frameworks. Consequently, small towns were spaces of stability, slow growth, and, on the whole, predictability.

This role has been transformed by the process of globalisation, fundamentally challenging the historically established roles of small towns. The external conditions determining development have disrupted previously functioning networks. They have caused a reorganisation in economic life, where the otherwise limited success of reindustrialisation is now taking place along the lines of integration into global networks. The conditions for the previous reproduction of local social structures have been changed by the increasing role of migration, primarily through out-migration.

Previously, the stability of small towns was primarily given by their low exposure to external shocks. This situation has changed; to counterbalance increasing exposure, a growing degree of resilience is, or would be, necessary. When we talk about the resilience of small towns, the strengths and weaknesses of these communities can be clearly outlined. If cohesion or interconnectedness is considered a determining factor, then its conditions are present within the framework of small-town society. Diversity, however, stands on more uncertain ground in all dimensions. The societies of ageing small towns, constantly losing young, skilled layers through migration, are homogenised in a negative sense; with the emptying out of certain age groups, the value of pluralism of these societies also decreases. The diversity of economic life is paradoxically most at risk in those places where the success of reindustrialisation is indicated by the appearance of a few particularly large players relative to the size of the local labour market, capable of drawing labour away from local small and medium-sized enterprises. Finally, the dimension of autonomy would also mean exercising control over the resources necessary for adaptation, in which regard, there are not simply shortcomings, but the tendency of change is also rather unfavourable in this respect. Some Hungarian small towns are trying to strengthen their resilience precisely by increasing their embeddedness at the expense of their autonomy, and – twisting the original concept – are awaiting guarantees for future development from the central government. This strategy may provide a short-term competitive advantage for certain communities, but in the long run, it is unlikely to lead to the creation of resilient and sustainable settlements.

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Povzetek

Prispevek obravnava pomen srednjeevropskih manjših mest v 21. stoletju. Čeprav ta mesta niso svetovna središča moči, v njih živi pomemben delež prebivalstva in zagotavljajo ključne storitve okoliškim podeželskim območjem. Avtorji poudarjajo, da je razprava o manjših mestih pravočasna, saj sta globalizacija in upad mehanizmov državne porazdelitve sredstev temeljno spremenila njihove razvojne pogoje. Članek preučuje različne konceptualne okvire ter izpostavlja različne pristope avtorjev, med katerimi so statistični, vidik centralnih funkcij in aksiomatski pogled. Članek ugotavlja, da lahko lingvistične razlike odražajo različne poglede. S poudarkom na učinkih globalizacije na madžarska majhna mesta v srednjeevropskem kontekstu članek predlaga koncept odpornosti kot analitični okvir. Obravnava več globalnih izzivov, s katerimi se trenutno sooča regija, kot so zmanjševanje vloge države, gospodarska prestrukturiranja in reindustrializacija, vplivi pandemije ter migracijska vprašanja. Pristop prilagodljive odpornosti poudarja pomen krepitve sposobnosti skupnosti za samostojno prilagajanje, kar je ključno za prihodnost manjših mest danes.

The Central-European small town: interpretations, challenges and resilience in Hungary

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Abstract

This paper examines the vital role of smaller towns in Algeria's urbanization, highlighting their influence on national and regional dynamics. As Algeria reflects global urbanization trends, disparities remain between the north and south. Smaller towns—urban centers with populations of 5,000 to 50,000—serve as key links between rural and urban areas, facilitating trade, services, and regional integration. Using census and economic data, the study employs quantitative analysis to evaluate their functions. Despite financial and administrative hurdles, these towns are crucial for promoting regional balance and easing urban concentration. The paper advocates policies to enhance infrastructure, economic opportunities, and services in small towns, emphasizing their significance for sustainable development and for reducing spatial inequalities in Algeria's growing urban landscape.

Keywords

Smaller Towns, Urbanization, Regional Dynamics, Economic Activities, Algeria

Izvleček

Vloga manjših mest v Alžiriji: urbani in gospodarski vidik

V prispevku preučujemo vlogo manjših mest v urbanizaciji Alžirije in izpostavlja njihov vpliv v nacionalnem in regionalnem kontekstu. Čeprav Alžirija odraža globalne trende urbanizacije, ostajajo razlike med severom in jugom države. Manjša mesta – urbana središča s 5.000 do 50.000 prebivalci – služijo kot ključne povezave med podeželskimi in urbaniimi območji, saj so to središča trgovine, storitev in regionalnega povezovanja. Studija z uporabo popisnih in gospodarskih podatkov kvantitativno analizira njihove funkcije. Kljub finančnim in upravnim oviram so ta mesta ključnega pomena za spodbujanje regionalnega ravnovesja in zmanjšanje koncentracije v velikih urbanih območjih. V prispevku zagovarjamo politike za izboljšanje infrastrukture, gospodarskih priložnosti in storitev v majhnih mestih, pri čemer poudarjamo njihov pomen za trajnostni razvoj in zmanjšanje prostorskih neenakosti v rastoči urbani krajini Alžirije.

Ključne besede

manjša mesta, urbanizacija, regionalna dinamika, gospodarske dejavnosti, Alžirija



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1 Introduction

Urbanization is a transformative process that continues to reshape societies worldwide, characterized by the increasing concentration of populations in urban areas (Tisdale, 1941). In recent decades, this phenomenon has accelerated due to factors such as natural population growth, rural-to-urban migration, and the formation of new urban settlements (Kojima, 1996). Algeria follows this global trend, with urbanization emerging as a defining feature of its socio-economic landscape. Understanding urban dynamics is essential, particularly in the context of smaller towns, which serve as crucial intermediaries linking rural and urban regions (Camagni et al., 2014).

The Algerian urban system exhibits pronounced regional disparities. The northern provinces, especially along the Mediterranean coast, have undergone rapid urbanization driven by economic opportunities and favorable geographic conditions. In contrast, the southern regions, constrained by harsh desert environments and limited economic resources, experience slower urban growth, highlighting an uneven distribution of development (Saidi et al., 2023). Within this framework, small and smallest urban settlements constitute vital yet often overlooked components of Algeria's urban network. These towns collectively accommodate a significant portion of the urban population, functioning as key centers for economic activity, social integration, and regional development. They play a crucial role in promoting balanced growth and addressing spatial inequalities by facilitating connections between rural areas and larger cities.

This paper aims to address two key objectives. First, it seeks to analyze the role of Algerian smaller towns within the broader urban network, assessing their contribution to national urbanization trends and their significance in shaping regional dynamics. Second, it examines the sectoral distribution of economic activities in these towns, identifying patterns and disparities that reflect underlying socio-economic conditions. This study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Algeria's urbanization by addressing these objectives, with a particular emphasis on the importance of smaller towns in fostering regional balance and resilience. The findings underscore the need for targeted policies that enhance infrastructure, economic opportunities, and service accessibility in smaller towns, thereby promoting sustainable and inclusive urban development nationwide.

1.1 Theoretical background

Urbanization, marked by the increasing concentration of populations in urban areas, has accelerated significantly in recent decades (Annez & Buckley, 2009). In 1900, only 15% of the global population lived in cities, but this figure rose to 51% (3.6 billion people) by 2010 and is projected to reach 70% (6.3 billion) by 2050 (United Nations, 2018; Zinkina et al., 2017). Urbanization involves the concentration of populations and the spread of urban lifestyles into rural areas (Kumar, 2017). This process is primarily driven by rural-urban migration, natural population growth, and the expansion of cities, although urban areas typically experience lower natural growth rates compared to rural regions (Cohen, 2006). As Davis (2020) notes, urbanization signifies a growing proportion of urban dwellers relative to rural populations, with migration playing a crucial role in this transition.

Jacobs (2013) describes cities as central hubs of social, political, and economic activity, functioning as focal points and connectors at local, regional, national, and international levels. As these spatial dimensions continuously interact, cities evolve within a dynamic and ever-changing context. In analyzing urban growth, Jacobs (2013) identifies twelve contextual variables that shape the diverse trajectories of city regions globally, highlighting the complex interplay between local, national, and global forces. Historical context is a critical factor, as a city's founding period and subsequent political, social, and technological developments influence its growth. Natural features, such as ports, mineral resources, or fertile land, contribute to economic and industrial viability. Geographical location significantly impacts access to markets and global trade networks, while population characteristics—such as demographic trends and educational attainment—play an essential role in labor market readiness and cultural development. A city's economic structure, shaped by industrial diversity and infrastructure, aligns closely with broader national and global economic trends. Institutional frameworks determine the adaptability of local governance in addressing urban challenges, while government structures—whether centralized or federal—impact intergovernmental coordination and policy execution. The national development context, including regulatory frameworks and developmental strategies, sets constraints and opportunities for urban expansion. Furthermore, global events, such as economic crises or geopolitical shifts, as well as supranational regional dynamics—such as EU integration or trade agreements—further influence urban economic trajectories. The sub-national context, which includes interactions within and among neighboring regions, emphasizes the importance of inter-regional cooperation. Finally, external factors such as international trade, migration, and cultural exchange strengthen the broader global networks that influence the development of city regions.

Towns emerge and flourish due to three primary factors: spatial advantages, agglomeration benefits for firms, and agglomeration advantages for consumers. Spatial advantages arise from proximity to essential resources such as raw materials or transportation hubs, which attract firms to locations where operational costs are minimized (O'Sullivan, 2000). Firms also benefit from agglomeration through cost reductions, improved access to labor markets, and risk mitigation by forming supportive business clusters that help navigate market fluctuations (McCann, 2004). Additionally, the concentration of consumers in urban areas reduces transportation costs and stimulates demand for a diverse range of goods, fostering non-price competition, particularly in industries focused on product quality (Lösch et al., 1954). The location and scale of towns reflect these economic forces and are deeply connected to broader urban systems shaped by transportation networks, logistics, and industrial specialization (McCann, 2004). Pile (1999) identifies three defining characteristics of cities: their density, their diverse social fabric, and their function as hubs within communication networks. He and Doreen Massey argue that the spatial characteristics of cities—marked by density and diversity—generate distinct social effects through "dense networks of interaction." Twentieth-century urban theorists have recognized these effects, including increased social detachment, the rise of civic associations beyond familial ties (Mumford, 1938), and greater tolerance of social differences (Wirth, 1938). Cities serve as multifaceted spaces for work, consumption, leisure, and creativity, facilitating both integration and separation of different aspects of life. Sudjic (1993) argues that contemporary sprawling metropolises, unlike traditional cities, pose greater challenges to comprehension, as they are structured around large-scale infrastructure—such as highways and mass transit—rather than

pedestrian-friendly layouts, resulting in our understanding of urban spaces lagging behind these rapid transformations.

Each country employs its own method for classifying cities, drawing on various factors. These classifications are often based on population density and the size of urban centers within a given region (OECD, 2011, although they may also incorporate functional or historical criteria (Dijkstra and Poelman, 2012)). Such classifications are crucial in understanding urbanization patterns and guiding urban planning efforts. The methodology recommended by the United Nations Statistical Commission for defining cities and urban areas is particularly important for ensuring consistency in international and regional statistical comparisons (GHSL, n.d.). Different nations apply various criteria to categorize urban areas, including population size, density, economic activities, and social factors (US Census Bureau, 2020). For example, Japan defines cities based on population size, housing density, and economic activity, while India uses population thresholds, occupational structure, and density as key determinants (Ritchie et al., 2018). These diverse approaches highlight the complexity of urban classification and reflect each country's unique characteristics and priorities in defining and managing urban areas.

In Africa, urbanization largely remains in its early stages, characterized by rapid yet unregulated growth, exacerbated by colonial legacies and recent neoliberal policies that have weakened urban planning institutions. Many African countries display a highly monocentric urban structure, where a single city—often the capital—dominates in terms of population, economic activity, and political influence. This urban primacy presents significant challenges, especially in providing essential services. The roots of mismanagement and inadequate infrastructure can be traced back to colonial-era institutional frameworks, compounded by ongoing political instability. Additionally, many African nations lack dedicated urban planning and development departments, while restrictive zoning laws in central urban areas have inadvertently contributing to the proliferation of slum and uncontrolled urban sprawl (Elmqvist et al., 2013). Small towns in Africa, as well as in Asia and Central America, are often more influenced by regional and national economic policies than by their own characteristics (Hinderink and Titus, 2002). Factors such as national policy impacts, uneven market access, competition from larger cities, fragmented trade relations, and limited local resources hinder their economic diversification. African small towns, in particular, act as crucial intermediaries between urban and rural areas, blending agricultural and non-agricultural activities (Wisner et al., 2015). They face significant challenges, including outmigration and reliance on the informal economy, largely due to underdeveloped infrastructure (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014). Often functioning as market centers for rural areas, these towns play a crucial role in facilitating the exchange of goods and offering some resilience against climate impacts. Nonetheless, their economies remain vulnerable to external pressures such as market fluctuations and policy shifts. Furthermore, these towns struggle to attract diverse funding sources due to limited economies of scale, legal constraints, and weak management capacity, which tend to channel investments toward larger cities (IPCC, 2014; Simon, 2014).

Several scholarly works examine the evolution of Algeria's urban system. Côte (1978) analyzed Algiers' position in the urban hierarchy, arguing that the capital's labor force is three times larger than Oran's, highlighting its anomalous status. In his 1994 study, Côte identified key features of urbanization post-independence, including a rapid increase in urbanization, rural migration, coastal concentration, the rise of industrial hubs, and an unstable urban hierarchy due to a lack of smaller urban centers (Côte,

1994). Belkhatir (1999) addressed three major challenges: economic disintegration of cities, overconcentration of population and resources in the Tell, and desertification. He proposed solutions such as accelerated urbanization, a competitive market economy, improved infrastructure, and decentralization. Raham et al. (2004) focused on the administrative division in eastern Algeria, suggesting that territorial reorganization should consider spatial, social, and economic factors, emphasizing the development of urban networks, infrastructure, and regional institutions. Kateb (2003) highlighted the stark contrast between prosperous coastal agglomerations and the underdeveloped interior, noting that small and medium-sized towns are increasingly important as urban settlements grow. Lastly, Saidi et al. (2023) analyze the processes of urbanization and the structure of the urban network in Algeria, focusing on the dynamics of urban growth, the significance of small towns, and the regional disparities that characterize the country's urban landscape. She also included a case study of a small Algerian town in her latest study (Saidi et al., 2024).

2 Methodology

Algeria is located in the Southern Mediterranean region, in North-West Africa, and at the heart of the Maghreb. Covering an area of 2,381,741 km², Algeria ranks as the 10th largest country in the world and the largest in Africa. It shares borders with several countries, including Tunisia and Libya to the east, Niger and Mali to the south, Mauritania and Western Sahara to the southwest, Morocco to the west, and the Mediterranean Sea to the north. This strategic location makes Algeria an important player geopolitically and economically in both Africa and the Mediterranean. Geographically, Algeria is divided into three major zones: the fertile coastal strip and Tell Atlas in the north, the extensive highlands in the center, and the vast Sahara Desert covering over 80% of the landmass in the south (Jules, 1859). Each of these zones is divided into three regions, resulting in a total of nine regions (Figure 1), each with unique environmental, socio-economic, and demographic features that influence settlement patterns and development trends. The northern regions are the most urbanized and densely populated, hosting major cities like Algiers, Oran, and Constantine, which serve as administrative, economic, and political centers. The highlands support agriculture and contain small to medium-sized towns that are gradually gaining regional importance. Conversely, the southern regions, although sparsely populated, are rich in hydrocarbons and have become prominent in discussions about environmental sustainability, energy policy, and regional equity.

Historically and culturally, Algeria's urban development has been influenced by a wide range of factors. Its Mediterranean coastline allowed contact with ancient civilizations such as the Phoenicians, Romans, and Ottomans, whose legacies are visible in coastal cities through trade networks and architectural heritage. Islamic urban traditions, seen in medinas, mosques, and souks, reflect religious and cultural norms shaped during the Arab-Islamic expansions, especially under the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates. The French colonial period introduced European planning principles and administrative segregation, leaving a lasting impact on Algeria's urban form and social geography. In the south, cities like Tamanrasset and Ghardaia adapted to harsh desert conditions, including water scarcity and remoteness, leading to unique urban strategies. Today, Algeria's urban system is a complex blend of Mediterranean, Islamic, African, and colonial influences. While coastal cities are increasingly connected to global networks, they still contend with colonial legacies, socio-spatial inequality, and the urgent needs of sustainable urban growth amid rapid population increase.

The Algerian urban settlements are classified according to Table 1.

Type of urban settlements	Definition
Large cities	Urban concentration with a total population of at least 100,000 inhabitants.
Medium-sized towns	Urban concentration with a population between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants
Small towns	Urban concentration with a population between 20,000 and 50,000 inhabitants.
Smallest urban settlements	Urban concentration with a population between 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants

Table 1: Classification Algerian urban settlements of urban settlements.
Source: Authors; Data: Loi n° 01-20 (2001), Loi n° 06-06 (2006).

This paper examined smaller towns as a group of small towns and the smallest urban settlements, characterized by a population between 5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants. The paper aimed to answer the following questions:

- What is the place of the Algerina's smaller towns in the urban network?
- What is the geographical and sectoral distribution of economic activity across the Algeria's smaller towns?

To answer the questions above, this paper is based on a quantitative analysis that employs, on the one hand, the Algerian general censuses of 1987, 1998, and 2008 (ONS, 2025) to examine the position of smaller towns within the Algerian urban network and on the other hand, the Algerian economic census of 2011 (ONS, 2025) to analyze the economic statistics of Algeria concerning smaller towns. This analysis employs the Location Quotient (LQ), a key analytical tool in economic geography and regional planning. It assesses the degree of concentration or specialization of a specific industry or sector within a defined geographic area relative to a larger reference region (Isserman, 1977). The LQ determines the extent of economic specialization in smaller towns. An LQ value exceeding 1.5 indicates a notable concentration or overrepresentation of a given economic activity within the area. It is important to note that Algeria's most recent general census dates back to 2008, as the scheduled 2018 census was delayed—first due to financial limitations, then further postponed to September 2022 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its results have not been published yet, while the economic census of 2011 was the first and last on the economic side. To analyze this data, we used Excel (Microsoft Corporation, Version 2019), SPSS (Version 26), and ArcMap (Version 10.4.1) software to visualize the results clearly.

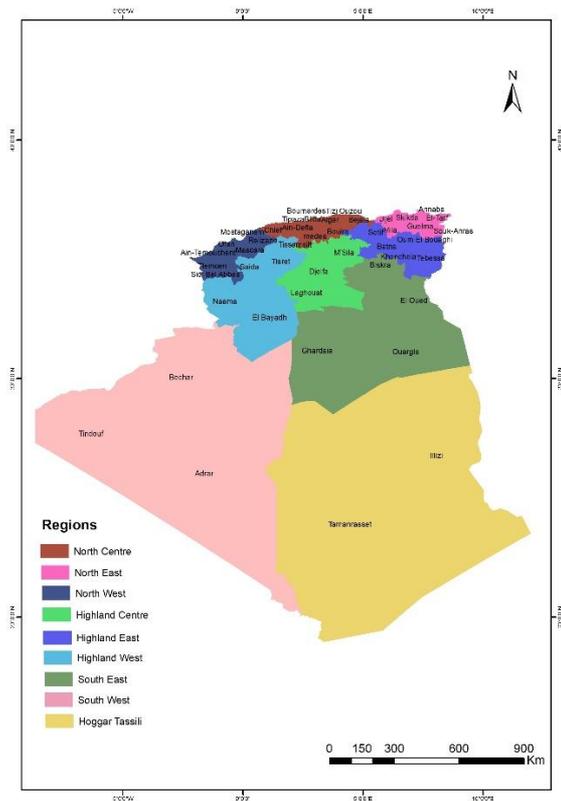


Figure 1: The nine Algerian regions.
Source: Authors; Data: ONS, 2025

3 Results

3.1 4.1 Smaller Towns in the Urban Network

Figure 2 illustrates Algeria's demographic transition by depicting the evolution of the rural and urban populations alongside the urbanization rate from 1960 to 2023. The graph presents key trends highlighting the country's shift from a predominantly rural society to one with increasing urban dominance. Between 1960 and 2023, the urban population has consistently increased, while the rural population has remained relatively stable, with minor fluctuations. This trend indicates a significant rural-to-urban migration driven by factors such as industrialization, economic opportunities in cities, and improved infrastructure. In 1960, the rural population was much larger than the urban population. However, by 1987, the two populations had become nearly equal, indicating a significant demographic shift. From 1998 onward, the urban population exceeded the rural population substantially, with the gap widening significantly in the subsequent decades. By 2023, the urban population reached its highest level, surpassing 25 million, while the rural population stayed below 10 million.

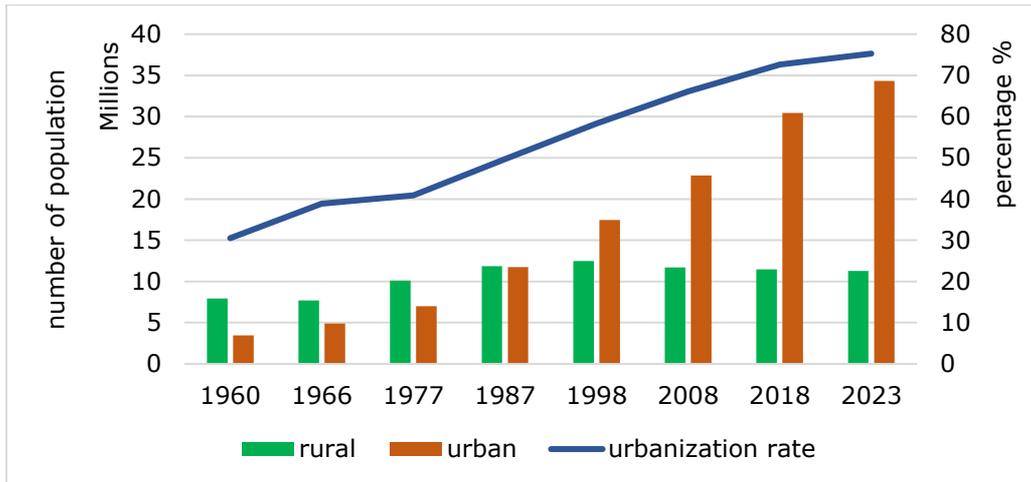


Figure 2: Evolution of urban and rural population and urbanization rates in Algeria from 1886 to 2023.

Source: Authors; Data: Macrotrends.2025

The urbanization rate has consistently followed an upward trajectory over the studied period. Beginning at a relatively low percentage in 1960, the rate has steadily increased, surpassing 50% around the late 1990s and reaching approximately 75% by 2023. This indicates a structural transformation in Algeria's settlement patterns, with urban areas housing a growing proportion of the total population. We can identify three key phases of urbanization: the first, from 1960 to 1987, signifies a rapid rise in the urban population driven by industrial development, rural exodus, and urban expansion. Economic policies that promote modernization may have also contributed to this shift.

The second phase, from 1987 to 2008, indicates that the trend of urbanization remains steady, with ongoing urban growth. However, rural population figures show minor increases in specific periods, possibly due to rural development initiatives. Additionally, with the availability of Algerian census data from 1987, 1998, and 2008, we present Figures 3, 4, and 5, which outline urbanization rates across Algerian provinces over these years, revealing significant national trends and regional disparities. Nationally, the urbanization rate rose steadily from 49.54% in 1987 to 58.27% in 1998 and further to 65.94% in 2008, with accelerated growth during the latter decade attributed to various factors (Saidi et al., 2023): (1) Natural Growth: This is the main driver of urban population growth, fueled by higher birth rates in urban areas compared to rural regions. (2) Rural-Urban Migration: Migration from rural areas to urban centers has been a significant phenomenon, particularly in regions such as the Highland Centre and Hoggar-Tassili. Younger populations often migrate in search of better economic opportunities, education, and improved living conditions, thereby contributing to urban growth. (3) Emergence of "De Jure" Towns: The rise in the number of officially recognized towns (new "de jure" towns) has also influenced urban growth. These towns often arise from administrative changes and urban sprawl, thereby expanding the urban network and increasing the urban population. High urbanization rates are evident in northern provinces such as Algiers, Annaba, Oran, and Constantine, where rates consistently exceeded 70%, reflecting their economic and administrative significance. Conversely, southern provinces, including Adrar, Tamanrasset, and Illizi, recorded significantly lower rates, remaining

below the national average due to geographic, demographic, and economic challenges. Moderate urbanization growth occurred in provinces such as Bejaia, Setif, and Mostaganem, showing gradual urban expansion and economic diversification. Regional disparities are pronounced: while northern provinces maintain high urbanization due to industrial and historical significance, southern and highland regions, such as Laghouat and Djelfa, display slower progress due to limited infrastructure and challenging environments.

The third phase, from 2008 to 2023, experiences a significant acceleration in urbanization, leading to a sharp increase in the urban population and a decline in the rural population. The urbanization rate reached 75%, indicating that Algeria has become a nation with a majority urban population.

The distribution of populations by city type in the last three censuses, as shown in Figure 6, indicates that the population in large cities more than doubled from 4,505,594 in 1987 to 9,604,736 in 2008, representing a 113% increase. Medium-sized towns increased steadily from 1,847,611 to 3,151,727, marking a 71% growth over 21 years. Small towns experienced significant population growth, rising from 2,279,481 to 4,265,810, which represents an 87% increase. The smallest urban settlements experienced a dramatic population increase, growing from 2,787,748 to 5,448,906, a 96% rise. This data reflects Algeria's substantial urban demographic shift between 1987 and 2008. The rapid growth in the urban population across all categories illustrates a nation undergoing profound socio-economic and spatial transformations. While large cities continue to dominate in population size, the increasing significance of smaller urban settlements highlights the diversity of Algeria's urbanization process.

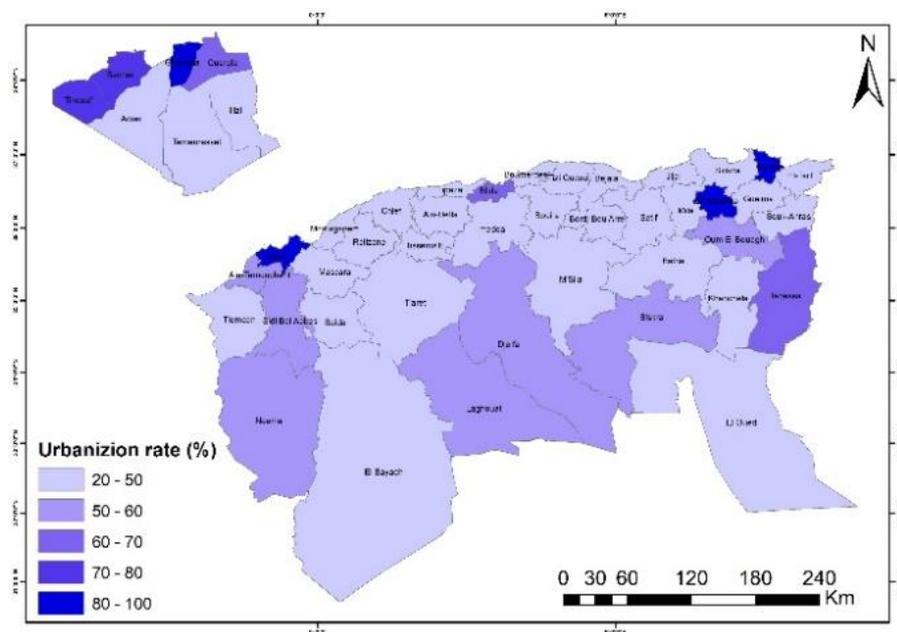


Figure 3: Urbanization rate in 1987.
Source: Authors; Data: Census 1987 (ONS, 2025).

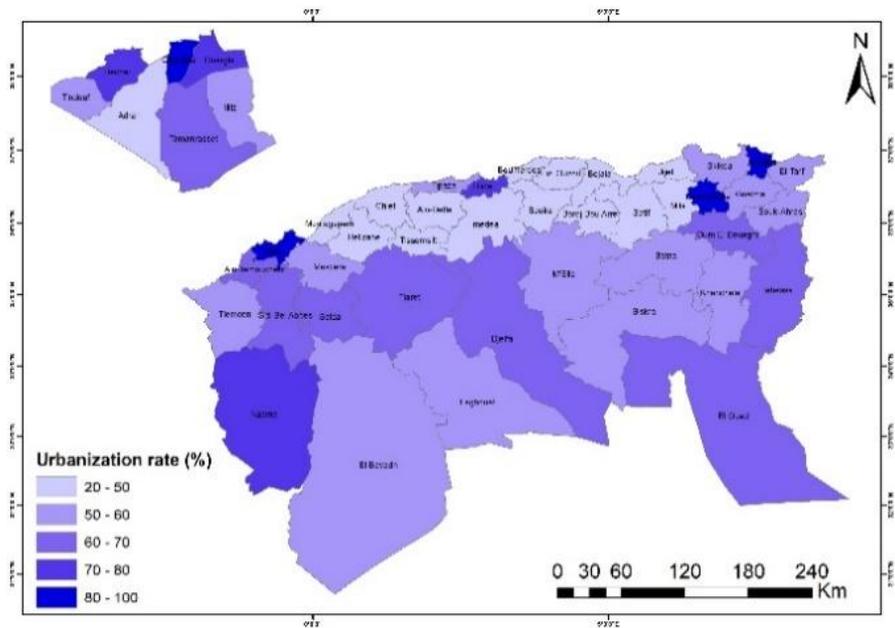


Figure 4: Urbanization rate in 1998.
Source: Authors; Data: Census 1998 (ONS, 2025).

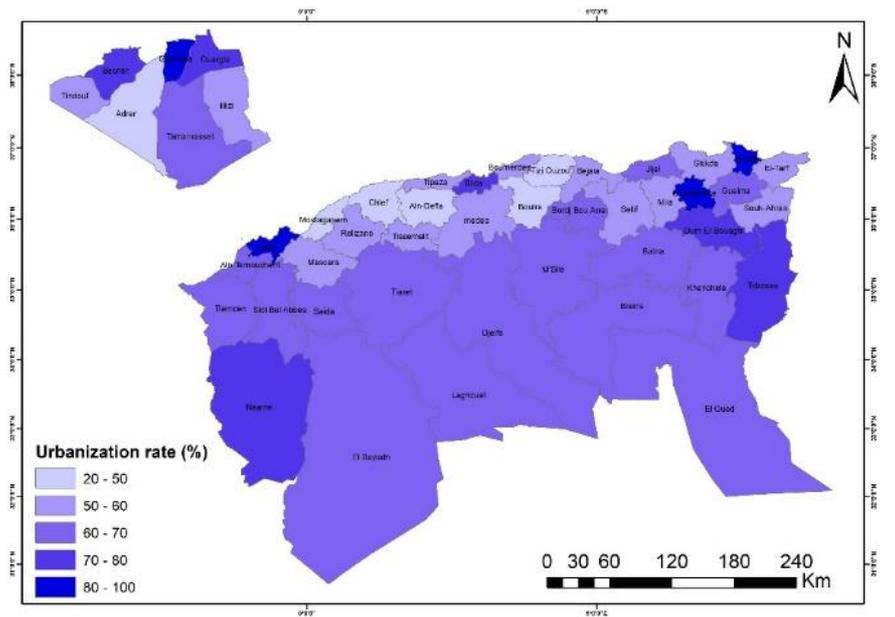


Figure 5: Urbanization rate in 2008.
Source: Authors; Data: Census 2008 (ONS, 2025).

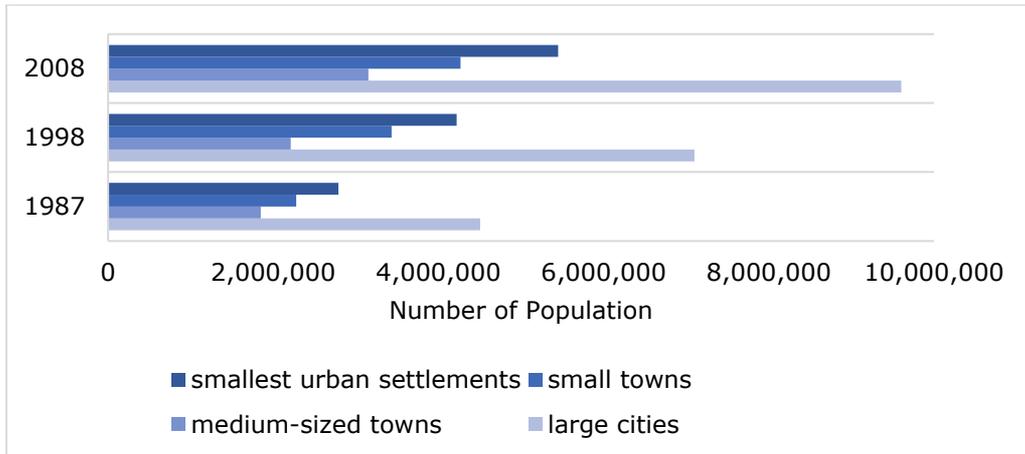


Figure 6: Distribution of the number of populations by type of cities in 1987, 1998, and 2008.

Source: Authors; Data: Census 1987, Census 1998, Census 2008 (ONS, 2025).

According to Figure 7, the number of large cities increased from 16 in 1987 to 33 in 2008, doubling over 21 years. Medium-sized towns increased from 26 to 47, while small towns expanded from 79 to 142; this represents an 80% growth over two decades, comparable to medium-sized towns but in more significant absolute numbers. The smallest urban settlements exhibited the most dramatic growth, from 277 in 1987 to 521 in 2008, nearly doubling in number. This result highlights the dynamic nature of Algeria's urban landscape from 1987 to 2008. While large cities experienced steady growth, the rapid expansion of small towns and the smallest urban settlements underscores the decentralization of urbanization. The unfavorable economic and security conditions that Algeria experienced during 1987-1998 encouraged the population to confine itself to the urban centers closest to the countryside. This caused strong urbanization of small towns in general and the smallest urban settlements in particular, which gained 122 units between the two periods. The gradual return of security and civil peace after 1998 influenced the development of the urban network, which was reinforced by 172 additional agglomerations, including six large cities, 13 medium-sized towns, 28 small towns, and 122 smallest urban settlements.

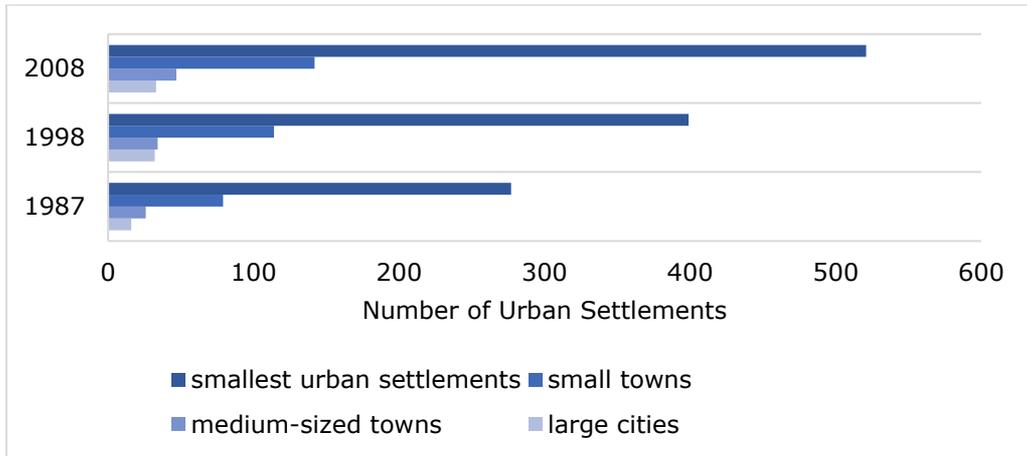


Figure 7: Distribution of the number of urban settlements by type of cities in 1987, 1998, and 2008.

Source: Authors; Data: Census 1987, Census 1998, Census 2008 (ONS, 2025).

The distribution of urban settlements in Algeria in 2008 highlights the critical role of smaller towns in the 'country's urban network (Figure 8). These towns are the most numerous and are primarily concentrated in the northern regions, where they serve as essential intermediaries between rural areas and larger urban centers. These towns promote economic integration, provide access to critical services, and enhance regional connectivity by linking agricultural zones with industrial and commercial hubs. In contrast, the southern regions show a much sparser distribution of settlements, revealing the challenges posed by harsh environmental conditions and limited infrastructure. The presence of medium-sized towns and large cities reinforces the urban hierarchy, but the dominance of a few metropolises underscores the need for more decentralized urban development. Strengthening smaller towns through targeted policies can foster balanced regional growth, reduce urban primacy, and improve service accessibility in remote areas. Their role in supporting sustainable urbanization and alleviating regional disparities makes them crucial components of Algeria's socio-economic landscape.

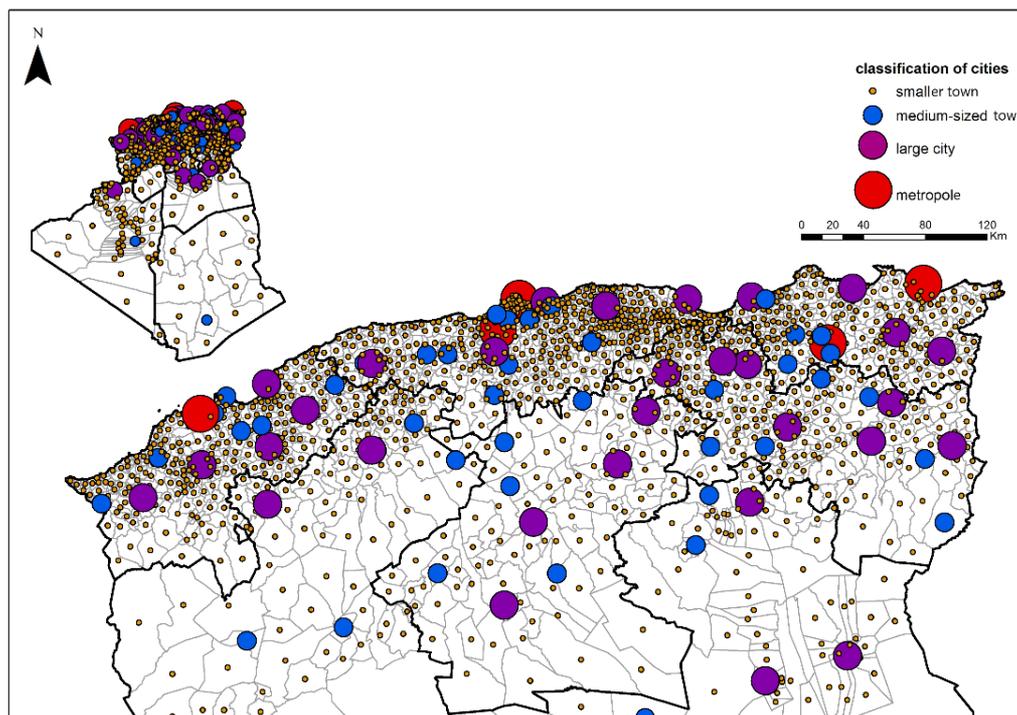


Figure 8: Distribution of urban settlements in 2008.

Source: Authors; Data: Census 2008 (ONS, 2025).

The Algerian urban system is characterized by a macrocephalic structure, highlighted by a significant disparity between the dominant city, Algiers, and the cities at the following hierarchical levels (Figure 9). This situation is also similar to findings from other studies, such as Matei (2024), who concluded that Constanța serves as the primate city in the region between the Danube and the Black Sea, illustrating its urban polarization effect and macrocephalic urban system. For decades, urban development efforts in Algeria have focused on programs aimed at meeting essential needs, including housing, infrastructure, and public facilities. These initiatives have stimulated urban growth, leading to an increase in the number of urban units. However, the evolution of these units requires considerable time for smaller towns to ascend the urban hierarchy (Saidi et al., 2023; Bousmaha Ahmed et al., 2021). As a result, the current distribution reveals a significant number of small urban units, which, over time, have the potential to accommodate larger populations than the existing major urban centers.

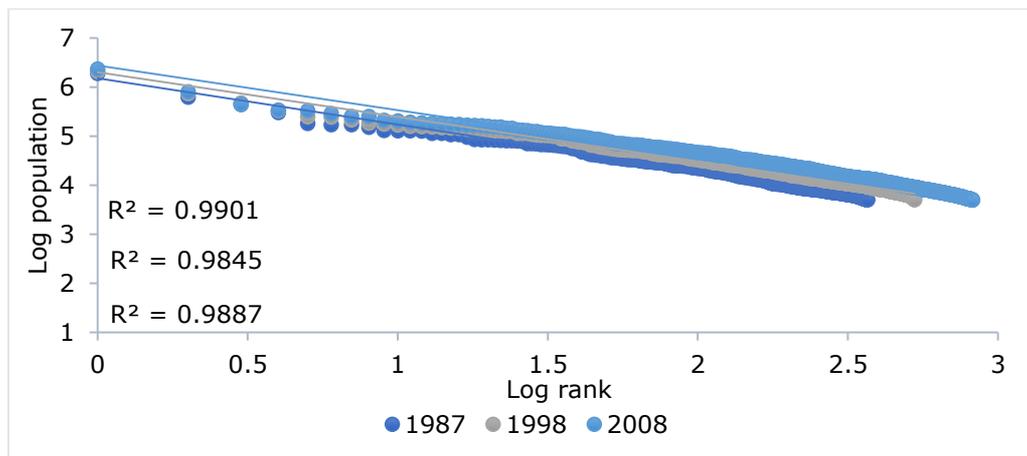


Figure 9: Hierarchical distribution of cities with more than 5000 inhabitants in 1987, 1989, and 2008.

Source: Authors; Data: Census 1987, Census 1998, Census 2008 (ONS, 2025).

3.2 Smaller Towns in the Spatial Structure of the Economy

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of economic entities across various types of cities in Algeria, highlighting differences in enterprise density, sectoral composition, and overall economic activity. The number of enterprises per 1,000 inhabitants rises as city size decreases, with the smallest urban settlements exhibiting the highest enterprise density (42.62) compared to larger cities (27.56). This implies that smaller urban areas depend more on small-scale enterprises for their economic support.

Table 2: Distribution of economic entities by different types of cities and sectors of activities.

Source: Authors; Data: Census 2008 and economic census 2011 (ONS).

	Ent. (per 1000 inh.)	Ent. (%)	Share of sectors (%)				
			C	T	I	S	Tot
Large cities	27.56	34.70	0.99	56.37	9.26	33.38	100
Medium-sized towns	35.65	13.55	0.79	58.47	10.02	30.73	100
Small towns	42.19	24.12	0.88	51.34	13.70	34.09	100
Smallest towns	42.62	27.63	0.97	52.99	11.35	34.69	100
Total	34.98	100	0.93	54.51	11.01	33.55	100

Ent. – Enterprises, inh. – inhabitants, C – Construction, T – Trade, I – Industry, S – Services, Tot – total

The sectoral distribution shows that trade leads in all city types, accounting for the largest share of enterprises (ranging from 51.34% in small towns to 58.47% in medium-sized towns). Services constitute the second-largest sector, with their highest share found in the smallest urban settlements (34.69%) and the lowest in medium-sized towns (30.73%). Conversely, the industry remains relatively underrepresented across all city types, making up less than 14% of enterprises, with its strongest presence in small towns (13.70%). Construction shows a significant

concentration in the smallest urban settlements (27.63%), notably higher than in large cities (34.70%), indicating the importance of construction activities in shaping urban development in emerging settlements.

Ultimately, the data suggests that economic activities differ by city size, with smaller towns showing higher enterprise density and a stronger reliance on trade and services. The relatively low share of industry across all city types signifies a limited industrial base, reinforcing the dominance of commerce and services in Algeria's urban economies.

To delve more deeply into the context of small towns, we present Figure 10, which illustrates the relationship between the Algerian population and the Location Quotient (LQ), highlighting the distribution of economic specialization across various population sizes. The plot shows that most settlements display an LQ of around 1, indicating no significant specialization, while higher LQ values (above 1.5) are distributed across different population ranges, suggesting overrepresentation in specific economic sectors. Multiple LQ levels (2–7) indicate variations in sectoral dominance, with construction, services, trade, and industry being overrepresented in certain areas. However, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient (-0.070) suggests a weak and statistically insignificant negative correlation ($p = 0.086$) between population size and LQ, implying that economic specialization does not heavily depend on population size. This indicates that smaller towns can exhibit economic concentration in specific sectors, regardless of their population, on the one hand, and indicates a relatively balanced economic profile or lack of specialized economic activity in these towns on the other hand.

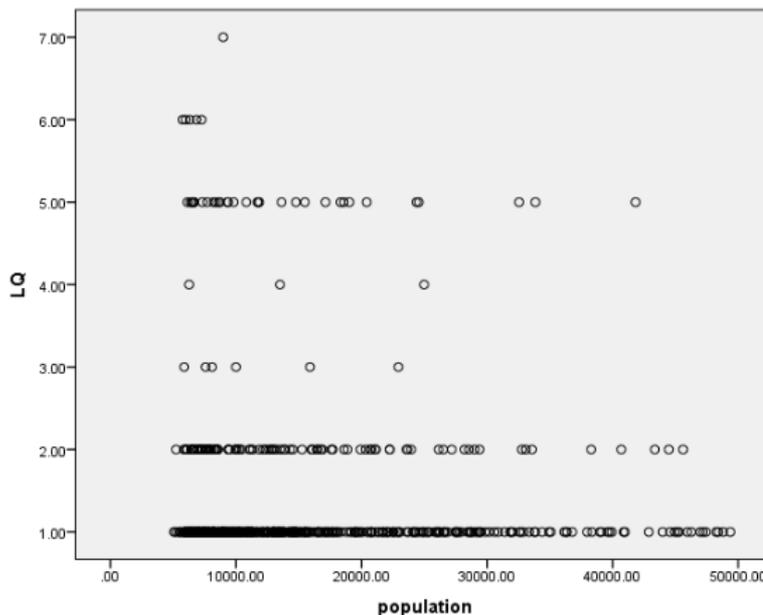


Figure 10: The relationship between the Algerian population and the Location Quotient (LQ).

Source: Author; Data: Census 2008 and economic census 2011 (ONS).

Legend: overrepresented LQ categories – 1: none; 2: construction; 3: services; 4: trade; 5: industry; 6: construction & industry; 7: construction & trade.

Construction is the most prevalent sector among those that are overrepresented, as seen in towns such as Amizour, El Braya, and Souk El Had in the northern region, Arris in the Highland East, Ain Salah in Hoggar Tassili, and Hassi Messaoud in the southeast. This dominance suggests that many smaller towns in Algeria are experiencing localized construction booms, possibly linked to infrastructure development or urbanization projects. The industry is particularly prominent in towns like Ouzellaguen and Tazmalt in the Bejaia province in the Kabylie region and in Tadjenanet in the Mila province, which is known for its clothing industry. The services sector is overrepresented in fewer towns, such as N'Goussa, Beni Amrane, and Magrane. This scarcity of specialized service-based economies suggests limited development in the service sector within smaller towns. Trade activities can be found in Menea in the Ghardaïa province, Sed Rahal in Djelfa, and Abou El Hassan in Chlef, which has pockets of economic activity linked to local crafts and regional trade. Six towns have both overrepresented construction and industry (Beni Yenni and Beni Zmenzer in Tizi Ouzou province, Leflay and Oued Ghir in Bejaia province, Khiredine in Mostaganem province, and Ain Melouk in Mila province). Additionally, one town in the northern region of Tizi Ouzou features both overrepresented construction and trade.

4 Conclusion

This study provides a thorough analysis of the role and importance of smaller towns within Algeria's developing urban system, highlighting their strategic value in promoting balanced territorial growth and regional cohesion. Defined as towns with populations ranging from 5,000 to 50,000 residents, these settlements nearly doubled in number from 1987 to 2008, reflecting decentralization driven by historical, socio-economic, and political factors. These towns act as crucial links between rural and urban economies, supporting trade and essential services. The findings emphasize a diverse economic base in smaller towns, especially in trade and services, while also revealing regional differences in industrial and construction activities shaped by geographic and infrastructural limitations. This aligns with McCann's (2004) agglomeration theory, which highlights how proximity to resources and markets boosts economic activity. The use of the Location Quotient (LQ) shows that economic specialization in these towns is not solely dependent on population size, indicating potential for sector-specific growth independent of demographic weight. Additionally, the dominance of these towns in northern regions—particularly near metropolitan centers like Algiers—strengthens their role in regional connectivity and urban resilience. However, significant disparities remain, with southern towns remaining underdeveloped due to environmental challenges and lacking infrastructure. The macrocephalic urban structure, centered around Algiers, further intensifies these inequalities, although smaller towns continue to expand in response to political stabilization and state investment. These findings support prior research on how geography, history, and institutional frameworks influence urban systems (Cohen, 2006; Saidi et al., 2023; Elmqvist et al., 2013). Ultimately, the study advocates for targeted policy measures to improve infrastructure, promote economic diversification, and strengthen governance in smaller towns. Such strategies are vital for reducing urban primacy, narrowing regional gaps, and fostering inclusive, sustainable urban growth across Algeria's diverse territorial landscape. Although one limitation of this study is its reliance on data from 2008—Algeria's most recent published census—the delayed release of the 2022 census results has restricted access to current population figures. Future research should incorporate this upcoming data once available to offer more accurate and up-to-date insights into Algeria's demographic and urban trends.

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Povzetek

Ta prispevek preučuje vlogo manjših mest v procesu urbanizacije Alžirije. Pri tem se osredotoča na njihovo vlogo pri oblikovanju nacionalnega urbanega sistema in odpravljanju regionalnih razlik. Urbanizacija se po vsem svetu pospešuje. Zanj je značilna vse večja koncentracija prebivalstva v urbanih območjih, Alžirija dobro ponazarja ta proces, ki je še posebej izrazit v severnih obalnih provincah, kjer so gospodarske priložnosti večje. Nasprotno pa južne regije doživljajo počasnejšo rast mest zaradi zahtevnejših okoljskih razmer in omejenih virov. Ta neenakomeren urbani razvoj odpira vprašanja o položaju in potencialu manjših mest v širšem alžirskem urbanem omrežju.

Postavili smo dva glavna cilja: analizirati vlogo manjših mest v urbanem okviru Alžirije in preučiti sektorsko porazdelitev gospodarskih dejavnosti v teh mestih. S tem smo prispevali k niansiranemu razumevanju urbanizacijskih procesov v državi, pri čemer poudarjamo pomen manjših mest pri spodbujanju uravnotežene rasti in odpravljanju regionalnih neenakosti.

V teoretičnem delu prispevka smo se posvetili konceptu urbanizacije kot transformativnem procesu, ki zajema dejavnike, kot so migracije s podeželja v mesta in rast prebivalstva. V prispevku raziskujemo kako urbani sistemi delujejo kot medsebojno povezana omrežja, na katera vplivajo družbenoekonomske, zgodovinske in geografske spremenljivke. Ta okvir zagotavlja analitično ogrodje za razumevanje zapletene dinamike rasti mest v Alžiriji.

Metodološko smo uporabili kvantitativni pristop, kjer smo se naslonili na podatke iz splošnih popisov prebivalstva v Alžiriji, izvedenih v letih 1987, 1998 in 2008 in popisa gospodarstva iz leta 2011. Analiza se osredotoča na manjša mesta, opredeljena kot urbana naselja, ki imajo med 5.000 in 50.000 prebivalcev. Izračunali smo lokacijski količnik (LQ) za ocenjevanje koncentracije gospodarskih dejavnosti v teh mestih glede na večja urbana območja, pri čemer smo prepoznavali vzorce specializacije v različnih sektorjih.

Ugotovili smo, da so manjša mesta ključna gospodarska središča, kjer je velika gostota podjetij in močna odvisnost od trgovine in drugih storitev. Vendar se ta mesta soočajo s precejšnjimi izzivi, vključno z omejenim dostopom do različnih virov financiranja in infrastrukturnimi pomanjkljivostmi. Ugotavljamo, da prihaja do izrazitih razlik v rasti mest med severnimi in južnimi regijami Alžirije, kar potrjuje tezo, da imajo gospodarske priložnosti in zgodovinski kontekst ključno vlogo pri oblikovanju urbanega sistema.

Prispevek izpostavlja potrebo po ciljno usmerjenih politikah za krepitev gospodarstva in izboljšanje infrastrukture v manjših mestih, ki so bistvenega pomena za spodbujanje regionalnega ravnovesja in odpornosti v času velikih sprememb v urbanih območjih. Potrebni so strateške razmisleki za ustvarjanje gospodarskih priložnosti in izboljševanje dostopa do storitev, kar so ključni ukrepi za ublažitev prostorskih neenakosti, ki so značilne za alžirsko urbano krajino.

Analysis of development factors and by-products of small towns – case study of the town of Chojnice (Poland)

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Abstract

Small towns constitute a vital component of the local economy. However, they currently face numerous challenges related to demographic trends, urban investments, and the availability of local products. The town of Chojnice in Poland was selected as a case study for the research on the development factors of small towns and their by-products. Methods such as SWOT analysis were applied to assess development factors and local products, while the role of resources in creating by-products was also evaluated. The results indicate that Chojnice is experiencing a demographic crisis, while its unique geographical location presents both an advantage and a disadvantage.

Keywords

Small towns, territorial marketing, small-town development, social factors, economic factors, environmental factors

Izvleček

Analiza razvojnih dejavnikov in stranskih produktov malih mest – študija primera mesta Chojnice (Poljska)

Mala mesta predstavljajo ključen element lokalnega gospodarstva. Trenutno se soočajo z različnimi izzivi, povezanimi z demografskimi trendi, urbanimi investicijami in razpoložljivostjo lokalnih proizvodov. Mesto Chojnice na Poljskem je bilo izbrano kot študija primera za raziskovanje dejavnikov razvoja malih mest in njihovih produktov. Uporabljene so bile metode, kot je analiza SWOT, za oceno razvojnih dejavnikov in lokalnih produktov, prav tako je bila ocenjena vloga virov pri ustvarjanju produktov. Rezultati kažejo, da Chojnice doživljajo demografsko krizo, medtem ko njihova edinstvena geografska lega predstavlja tako prednosti kot tudi slabosti.

Ključne besede

Mala mesta, teritorialni marketing, razvoj malih mest, socialni dejavniki, ekonomski dejavniki, okoljski dejavniki



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1 Introduction

Small towns play a crucial role in regional networks and serve as important elements in the urban structure of states. They often determine the degree of development in a given region, as they act as centers for cultural and social events. However, despite their significance, they are frequently undervalued in development policies. The development trajectory of such urban centers is not straightforward, as it is influenced by numerous internal and external policy factors, including social, economic, and environmental aspects.

Among economic factors, the most critical appears to be a high level of business activity and ongoing investments, particularly those related to infrastructure. According to Gong et al. (2022), industrial investments, together with GDP per capita and urban density, are the most influential elements affecting the development of small towns. Investments often drive economic growth, thereby increasing the attractiveness of towns. Such actions attract new entrepreneurs, and business activity becomes a key driver of development (Voronov, 2022). Additional factors that enhance the situation in small urban units include investments in transport—such as roads and other communication routes that connect local producers with markets—as well as social and healthcare services provided by towns (Rondinelli, 1983).

A significant social factor is the demographic situation of towns. As Vilcea et al. (2024) points out, population decline can have considerable consequences and pose challenges for future development. Therefore, it is crucial to implement dedicated social policies aimed at preventing depopulation or minimizing its adverse effects. Local authorities should actively pursue external funding and support local social and economic initiatives (Voronov, 2022).

Among environmental factors, geographical location plays a fundamental role in urban development, as it directly affects town functioning. Settlement functions of the area, possibilities for expansion, and appropriate spatial planning also play a crucial role (Tang et al., 2023). The location of towns often enables development due to favorable natural conditions, such as the availability of resources and unique environmental assets.

Given the wide range of factors influencing development, small towns face numerous challenges. Atkinson (2020) notes that to develop effective political strategies and incorporate them into efforts toward social, economic, and territorial cohesion, a thorough understanding of the operational model of such urban centers is necessary. Small towns play a pivotal role in the broader regional policy by supporting the development of rural areas, integrating rural and urban economies, and transforming agriculture toward commercial production (Rondinelli, 1983). Technological advancements in the modern world can significantly aid in promoting small and medium-sized towns as key drivers of sustainable regional development (Noronha, 2020). However, their developmental role may vary depending on the context in which they are examined, which imposes a pessimistic perspective on certain assumptions but underscores the necessity of policies tailored to local needs and challenges (Hinderink & Titus, 2002). Therefore, the development of small towns requires local authorities to leverage available resources to adapt to dynamic conditions and successfully compete with other communities (Daniels, 1989).

1.1 Characteristics of the Study Area

The subject of this study is the town of Chojnice, located in Poland, in the southern part of the Pomeranian Voivodeship (Figure 1). It serves as the administrative center for Chojnice County, the Urban Municipality of Chojnice, and the Rural Municipality of Chojnice. The town directly borders its rural counterpart and, as a county seat, indirectly connects with the municipalities of Brusy, Czersk, and Konarzyny. Situated on the boundary of the voivodeship, Chojnice also shares borders with Tuchola and Sępólno Counties, which belong to the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship. The nearest towns include Człuchów, a comparable urban center, as well as Czersk, Brusy, Tuchola, and Sępólno Krajeńskie. Chojnice's historical origins trace back to the medieval period, a legacy still evident in its urban fabric. The town retains its medieval fortifications, including defensive walls with towers, the Człuchów Gate, and the parish church located near the Old Town Market.

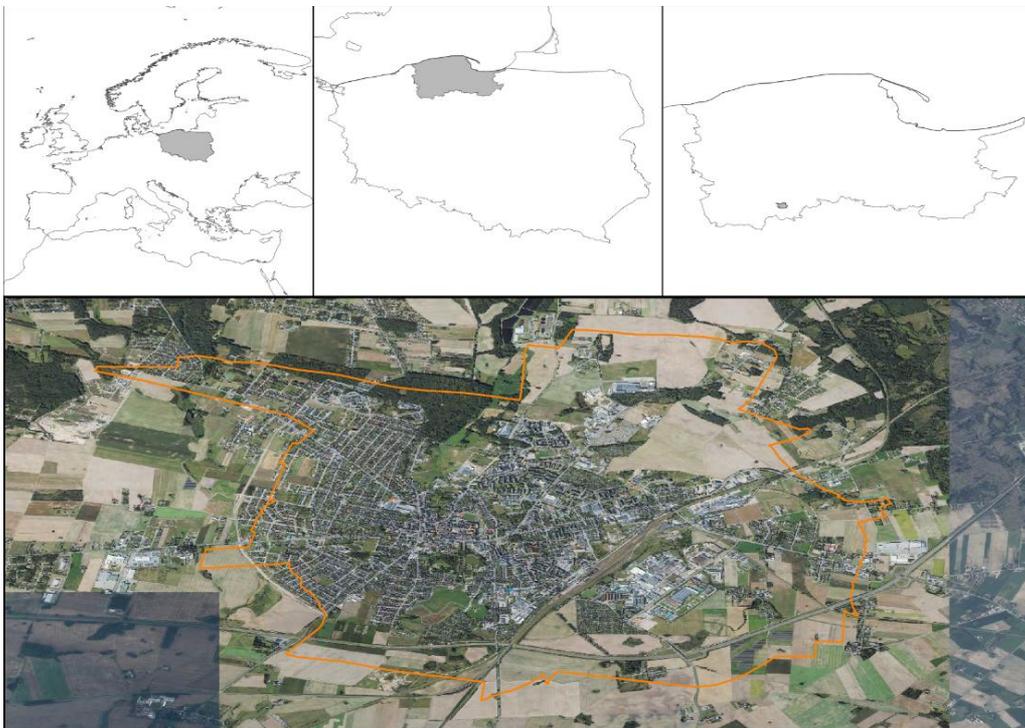


Figure 1: Location of the town of Chojnice in the context of Europe, Poland, and Voivodeship.

Source: Author's own work.

From a physical-geographical perspective, Chojnice is situated within the Krajeńskie Lakeland mesoregion, as classified by Kondracki (1998). This mesoregion forms part of the Eastern Pomeranian Lakeland macroregion, which in turn belongs to the broader Pomeranian Lakelands. Chojnice is the largest urban center within this geographical area, characterized by postglacial landforms, terminal moraines, and widespread brown soils. These features contribute to significant agricultural land use (Kondracki, 1998). The town's southern and southwestern surroundings primarily consist of agricultural areas, whereas to the north and northwest, Chojnice borders the Charzykowy Plain. This adjacent region is distinguished by extensive forest

complexes and numerous lakes, shaped by sandur formations associated with the Great Brda Sandur. The forested areas near Chojnice constitute part of the larger Tuchola Forest complex.

Due to its distinctive geographical and historical attributes, Chojnice possesses considerable tourism potential. The town directly borders the Zaborski Landscape Park, which serves as a buffer zone for the Tuchola Forest National Park—an area recognized for its scenic and ecological value (Lijewski et al., 2008). The presence of numerous nature reserves in the vicinity further underscores the rich biodiversity of this region. Additionally, the abundance of lakes and rivers, including the nearby Charzykowskie Lake, provides excellent conditions for the development of water sports and recreational activities.

One of the primary factors influencing Chojnice's location during the medieval period was its position at the intersection of significant trade routes. In contemporary times, the town continues to function as a crucial transportation hub. The primary transport corridor is National Road No. 22, a historically significant route that once connected Berlin and Königsberg, passing directly through Chojnice. To enhance traffic efficiency and divert transit flow away from the town center, a southern bypass was constructed, now accommodating the primary transit route. Other notable regional roads include Provincial Road No. 212, which links Chojnice with the central part of the voivodeship; Provincial Road No. 235, which connects Chojnice with Brusy and Kościerzyna; and Provincial Road No. 240, which facilitates access to Tuchola.

Chojnice is also a significant railway junction, with five railway lines connecting it to Tczew, Piła, Krzyż, Człuchów, Kościerzyna, Tuchola, and Bydgoszcz. However, due to insufficient investment and financial constraints, these railway lines remain non-electrified, limiting their role within the broader rail network and confining them primarily to regional and short-distance travel. Despite these infrastructural limitations, the expansion of the railway network historically contributed to the emergence of an industrial district in Chojnice, which today accommodates several manufacturing enterprises across diverse economic sectors.

The town actively fosters collaboration with neighboring local governments and serves as a regional center for culture and education. In partnership with municipal authorities and non-governmental organizations, Chojnice organizes numerous cultural and public events, enhancing its prominence within the region. Additionally, the town hosts a significant number of primary and secondary schools, some of which achieve commendable rankings at the regional and provincial levels, attracting students from surrounding towns and rural areas.

The role of the town of Chojnice as the cultural centre of the region is evident through its recurring cultural events and dedicated infrastructure. Major investments in recent years have included the redevelopment of the Chojnice Cultural Centre, which, in addition to exhibition space, primarily houses a cinema-theatre hall operating as a cinema on a daily basis, as well as the reconstruction and modernisation of the municipal amphitheatre located in the former town moat. A significant historical and cultural landmark in the town is also the Historical and Ethnographic Museum.

Among the most notable cultural events organised in Chojnice are the Chojnice Operetta Nights, Organ Concerts, the InterTony Partner Cities Festival, and the "Chojnicka Fiesta" Street Art Festival. For several editions, the town also co-

organised, in cooperation with neighbouring municipalities, the International Folklore Festival “Kashubian Encounters with the Folklore of the World.” The town’s summer cultural programme is particularly rich, attracting not only Chojnice residents but also visitors from across the region.

2 Methodology

In the analysis of development factors and subproducts of the town of Chojnice, several methods were employed. One of these methods involved analyzing and compiling data obtained from the Local Data Bank, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the current demographic and economic situation of the town. Another method used was the SWOT analysis, which involved evaluating various criteria in terms of opportunities, threats, and strengths and weaknesses. In this study, the gathered information was divided into the four aforementioned categories, and a detailed analysis was conducted. This method enables the identification of a path for future actions based on recognized opportunities and strengths, while simultaneously considering the weaknesses and threats, and finding ways to prevent or eliminate their impact.

Additionally, an assessment of the contribution of resources (i.e., natural, human, and capital) in the creation of selected subproducts offered by the town was conducted. The evaluation was based on assigning each subproduct an importance score on a scale of 0 to 5, where a score of 0 represented the weakest rating and 5 represented the highest. The subproducts were grouped according to the classification proposed by Szromnik (2016), as shown in Table 1.

No.	Subproduct	Components of the Subproduct	Markets
1.	Tourist (T)	Accommodation facilities, tourist information, catering, transport companies	Tourists, holidaymakers
2.	Investment (I)	Labor market, raw material resources, premises, human resources	Socio-economic environment, entrepreneurs
3.	Residential (R)	Real estate resources (houses, apartments, plots), communication infrastructure, location of residential estates	Residents of the town and surrounding areas, companies and entrepreneurs
4.	Social (S)	Job opportunities, social offerings	Residents, job seekers

5.	Commercial and Service (C&S)	Availability of services, specialization and assortment, access time, equipment of establishments	Town residents and those from nearby towns
6.	Educational and Cultural (E&C)	Cultural offerings, educational institutions, theaters, cinemas	Parents, youth, social organizations
7.	Trade and Exhibition (T&E)	Trade infrastructure, conference halls, tradition of organizing such events	Entrepreneurs, advertising and marketing agencies
8.	Recreational and Sports (R&S)	Sports facilities, sports events, infrastructure	Youth, sports clubs, active sports enthusiasts, tourists
9.	Public (P)	Administration, public services, communication	Residents, institutions, tourists

Table 1: Classification of Territorial Product into Subproducts.

Source: Own study based on Szromnik (2016).

The assessment of human, natural, and capital resources in the context of their contribution to the creation of local sub-products was carried out based on an independent estimation of their relative significance. The evaluation was conducted using a six-point scale, assigning an appropriate number of points depending on the importance of a given resource in the development of the sub-product or its impact on its quality. The resources were identified on the basis of conducted analyses as well as data and information collected about the town.

3 Results

At first glance, the socio-economic situation in Chojnice appears to be positive. According to data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS) for the year 2024, the town recorded 922 unemployed individuals (accessed on 29.03.2025), which constitutes a small percentage in relation to the total population of the town. According to data from GUS, the unemployment rate among the working-age population of Chojnice in December 2024 stood at 4.2%, a figure comparable to the average rate in the voivodeship (4.6%) and lower than the national average (5.1%). In comparison with the entire Chojnice County, the town performs considerably better, as the county's unemployment rate at the end of 2024 was 8.6% (data from the County Labour Office in Chojnice). This confirms that Chojnice serves as an employment hub not only for its residents but also for inhabitants of neighbouring municipalities, and reflects the town's relatively high level of socio-economic development.

A more significant issue, however, is the growing disparity in the gender and age structure (Figure 2). Currently, individuals over the age of 60 constitute nearly 25% of the total population, while those under the age of 20 make up only 21%.

Unfortunately, an increasingly noticeable problem in the town is the aging population and the outflow of young, educated individuals seeking employment elsewhere. This phenomenon is driven by a low demand for labor in comparison to the number of graduates from schools and universities residing in the town, as well as lower wage rates compared to larger cities in the region. Consequently, fewer educated individuals choose to settle in the town. Chojnice shares this fate with other Polish cities, as there is a noticeable outflow of residents moving to surrounding rural areas while continuing to work in the town. This trend increases the migration balance, particularly for individuals aged 35-50. However, this phenomenon is not yet as prominent due to the ongoing suburbanization of the town and the continuous expansion of its suburbs (Table 2). To address these challenges, the town of Chojnice has developed the Municipal Strategy for Solving Social Problems, which includes diagnostics of key social and demographic issues and strategies for preventing such situations.

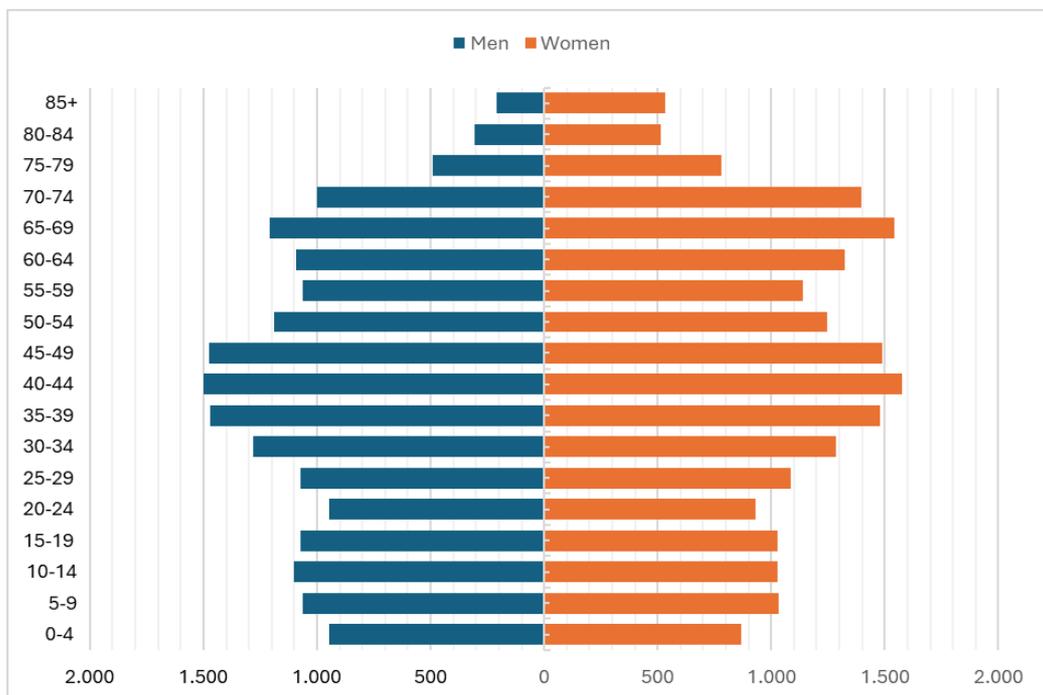


Figure 2: Gender and age structure of the town's population.

Source: Own study based on data from the Local Data Bank - <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/bdl/start> (accessed on 29.03.2025).

The town of Chojnice has a population of 38,360 residents (as of 31 December 2024, source: Local Data Bank). However, it also serves as a hub of daily life for the wider region, which is why the population decline observed over the years (Fig. 3) is not as evident in the town's day-to-day functioning. According to data obtained from the resources of the Central Statistical Office, the number of inhabitants has been steadily decreasing since 2010.

The town's demographic situation is therefore becoming increasingly challenging. When these figures are compared with the chart illustrating the age and gender structure—showing an alarming trend of population ageing—it can be concluded that, if this trend continues, the town may be facing a demographic crisis in the near future.

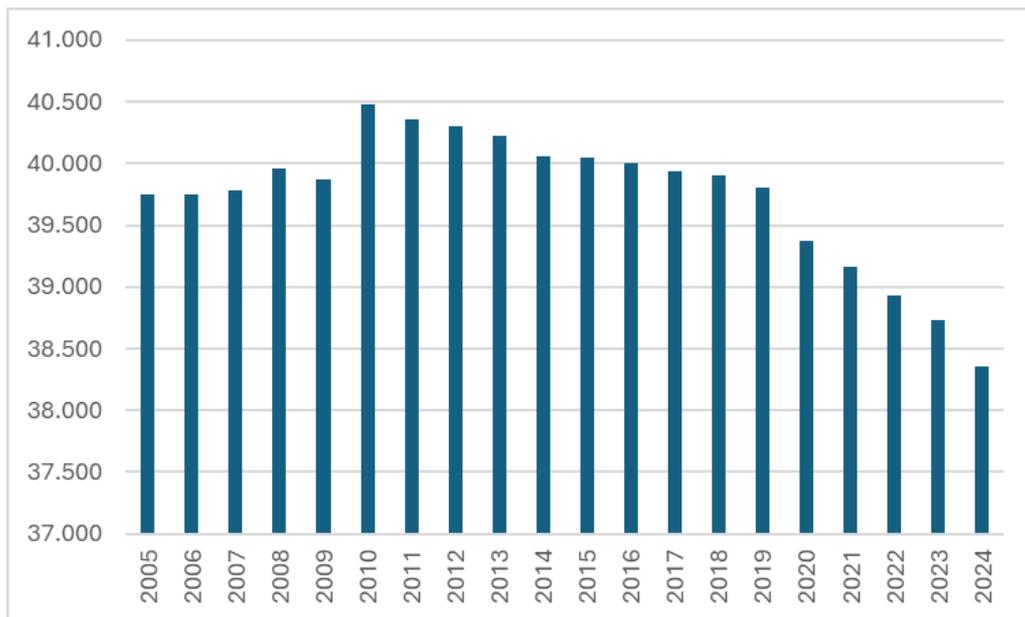


Figure 3: Graph illustrating changes in the population of the town between 2005 and 2024.

Source: Own study based on data from the Local Data Bank - <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/bdl/start> (accessed on 09.08.2025)

The town of Chojnice faces the challenge of population decline (Fig. 4). In addition to a negative natural population growth, the issue of migration is shaped by two main factors: the outflow of residents to larger urban centres in the region (Gdańsk, Gdynia) and suburban migration beyond the town's administrative boundaries. In the first case, the problem primarily concerns young people who emigrate in pursuit of higher education and due to the desire for professional development in sectors of the economy that are not present in the town. In the second case, migration mainly involves individuals aged 30–45, which results in a loss of municipal budget revenues from residents' taxes. According to the Development Strategy for the Town of Chojnice until 2030, these changes have an impact on the local labour market in the form of reduced labour supply, leading to a decline in the area's competitiveness. Unfortunately, a similar situation is observed in other regions of Poland, where a portion of the population—particularly young people—migrate to larger urban centres, often in central parts of the country, in search of education or employment.

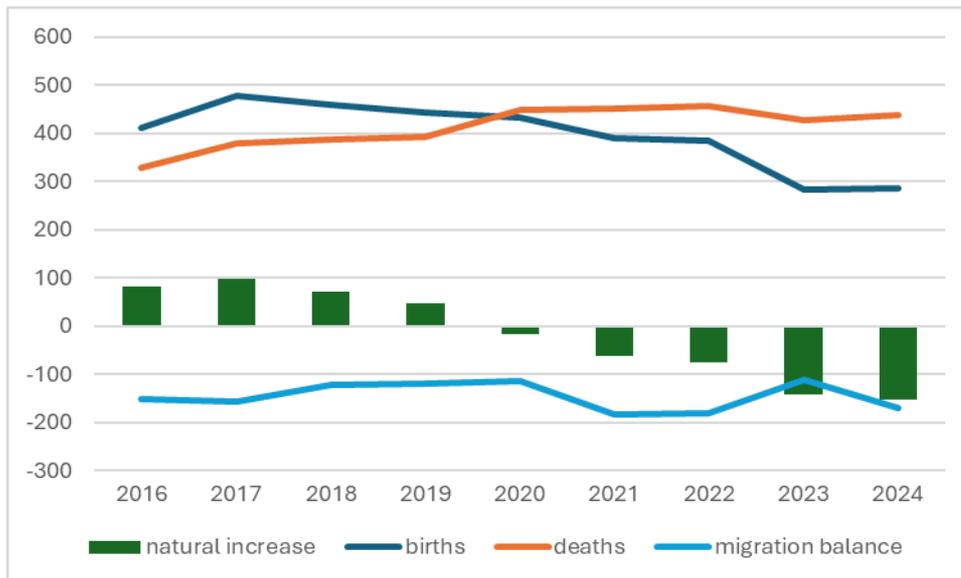


Figure 4: Graph presenting data on the number of births and deaths, natural population growth, and migration balance.

Source: Own study based on data from the Local Data Bank - <https://bd1.stat.gov.pl/bd1/start> (accessed on 09.08.2025).

According to data from the Register of Schools and Educational Institutions of the Ministry of Education and Science, the town of Chojnice hosts 62 educational institutions, including 8 primary schools, 14 secondary schools, and 4 post-secondary schools. The primary schools educate 4,157 pupils, the secondary schools 4,963 students, and the post-secondary institutions 609 students. Among the secondary schools, there are 6 general secondary schools (1,845 students), 5 technical schools (2,480 students), and 3 vocational schools (638 students).

The curriculum of general secondary schools primarily prepares students for higher education; consequently, most graduates leave for universities in other cities. Technical schools, in addition to preparing students for higher education, include professional qualification examinations, while vocational schools provide exclusively occupational qualifications. The vocational profiles offered are diverse, yet they are dominated by electro-mechanical, IT, construction, agricultural, logistics, food and gastronomy, sheet metalworking, carpentry, metalworking, and upholstery skills. This constitutes a relatively narrow and specialised workforce.

However, in the case of Chojnice, where most employment is concentrated in the private sector and the largest enterprises are meat processing plants, fish processing facilities, carpentry workshops, and manufacturers of machinery or steel structures, the demand for new employees is not sufficient to absorb even a significant proportion of the graduates from the town's schools.

The most dynamic sector of the town's economy appears to be the residential and road construction industry. In many parts of the town, new residential buildings are continuously being erected, indicating a high demand for real estate. Similarly, in the field of road construction, both the town and neighboring municipalities have undertaken repairs to improve the poor condition of local roads, largely supported by

external funding opportunities. The majority of residents are employed in private enterprises operating in various sectors of the economy, which reflects a significant economic development of the town.

Opportunities	Zagrozenia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Well-functioning social welfare programs</i> - <i>Development of the housing and construction market</i> - <i>A large number of private sector enterprises</i> - <i>Industrial development in the suburban zone</i> - <i>Initiatives aimed at mitigating the negative effects of poverty and adverse social conditions</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aging population - Migration of young, educated individuals - Outflow of residents to surrounding areas - Educational offerings not aligned with the local job market - Lack of development prospects within the town - Absence of a single major employer to drive growth for both residents and the town - High fragmentation of enterprises

Table 2: Opportunities and Threats resulting from the socio-economic situation. Source: Own elaboration.

Strengths	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location along National Road 22 and Provincial Roads No. 212, 235, and 240 - Located at a railway junction with lines 203, 208, 210, 201, and 281 - Attractive surroundings for settlement, tourism, and recreation (Tuchola Forest, Charzykowskie Lake, Brda River) - High level of education, with secondary schools being very popular in the region - Diversified structure of business size and industry - Numerous investments improving the investment and settlement attractiveness of the town 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improving socio-economic conditions for residents - Developing housing market - Investments in the development and improvement of road infrastructure - Investments and development aimed at improving cultural infrastructure - Increasing demand for leisure activities in nature, active recreation, and cultural tourism

Weaknesses	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peripheral location within the voivodeship - Surrounding areas of significant natural value, leading to investment limitations - Insufficient number of businesses in sectors with high technological intensity - Low incomes and wealth levels of residents - High municipal budget debt - Weak tourism infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deteriorating environmental conditions in the town, especially air quality during the autumn and winter seasons - Industrial activities migrating to neighboring municipalities due to the decreasing availability of investment land in the town - Difficulty in finding employment after completing education - Migration of young people in search of employment in other areas - Growing, uncontrolled suburbanization of the town

Table 3: SWOT analysis of the town's development factors.

Source: Own elaboration.

SWOT analysis of the factors contributing to the development of the town of Chojnice (Table 3) indicates that the town's development is significantly influenced by the available transportation infrastructure, high levels of education, numerous infrastructure investments, and attractive natural surroundings. Opportunities identified include the rising demand for outdoor recreational activities, a developing housing market, and new investment opportunities. On the other hand, weaknesses and threats include issues such as the town's peripheral location within the region, investment restrictions due to proximity to ecologically valuable areas, the deteriorating environmental conditions (especially air quality during the winter months), low income levels among residents, insufficient tourist infrastructure, and the migration of young people seeking employment elsewhere.

The primary causes of air pollution in the town are so-called low emissions and excessive vehicular traffic. Traffic flow through the town is hindered by an inadequate road network, which results in the concentration of vehicular movement in the town centre. This leads to traffic congestion and generates spatially accumulated linear emissions. Another contributing factor to air pollution is the absence of a district heating network in certain areas of the town, compelling residents to heat their homes using coal- or wood-fired boilers.

Resources	By-produkt								
	T&E	P	S	I	R	T	R&S	C&S	E&C
Natural	3	3	1	2	3	5	5	3	4
Human	3	3	5	4	4	2	3	5	5
Capital	3	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	5

Table 4: Evaluation of the contribution of resources to the creation of subproducts in the town of Chojnice.

Source: Own study.

Each resource plays a different role in the creation of specific subproducts, with some having greater weight and others less, depending on the characteristics of the subproduct (Table 4). Nevertheless, the high contribution of capital resources to each subproduct is assessed (Figure 5), indicating the need for financial investment in the development of each of them. Natural resources play the smallest role, at least in the case of several subproducts.

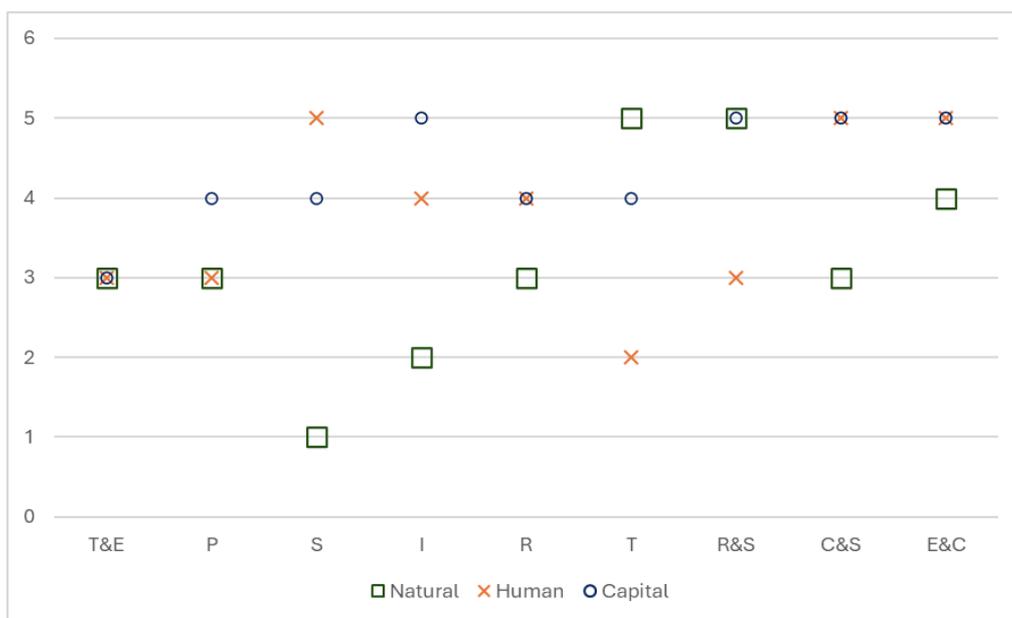


Figure 5: Spectrum chart of the assessment of the subproducts of the town of Chojnice.

Source: Own elaboration.

In the town of Chojnice, it is necessary to develop investment, tourism, and educational-cultural products. The primary goal should be to provide jobs for young people with higher education, who are currently migrating out of the town. Furthermore, investment activities should be undertaken to attract more investors to the town, which will allow the creation of new jobs and strengthen the economy.

4 Conclusion

Small towns face many challenges regarding their development. In the case under consideration, several conclusions can be drawn to help understand the issue of development based on the use of local resources. One of them is the good transportation location and satisfactory condition of the roads, which aligns with Rondinelli's (1983) statement regarding the impact of road investments on the development of small towns.

A concerning fact is the poor air quality in the town, particularly during the winter months. Tripathi and Mitra (2022) note that for small urban centers in India, a healthy climate, alongside infrastructure availability, is a primary factor influencing their development. Given the town's natural surroundings and the nearby protected areas such as the National and Landscape Parks, the poor air quality in the town appears paradoxical. This is likely linked to infrastructural deficiencies, such as inadequate heating networks or the ongoing problem of managing the greatest possible amount of car and transit traffic from the town center.

For Chojnice, a significant problem seems to be the outflow of the population in search of employment. Perhaps a solution would be a partial structural reorganization of the service sector, focusing it on highly specialized services, which, in turn, require higher qualifications, as these sectors tend to develop much faster compared to other sectors of the economy (Emran & Shilpi, 2017). Such an approach would lead to the town's development as well as retain a portion of educated young people who would find employment locally in their field. Similar actions have been taken in the Moravian region, where small towns have undergone a transformation, converting low-innovation sectors into workplaces primarily based on services and cultural tourism (Vaishar et al., 2022).

Chojnice has the necessary resources to develop its tourism services. According to Kowalczyk (2000), environmental resources and natural attractions are considered one of the main factors attracting tourists. Unfortunately, these attractions alone are not enough; there is a need for investments in tourism and accommodation infrastructure to fully exploit the potential shown in the assessment of the contribution of resources to the creation of the tourism subproduct. The town has all the conditions to develop in this direction and attract external funding.

An important issue concerning the analyzed town, as well as most similar urban centers, is the decrease in population and the gradual aging of society. Wirth et al. (2016) note that one alternative for small towns in economic and demographic crises might be adopting the Slow City Strategy and Life Beyond Growth, which focus mainly on factors affecting the quality of life in the town. These strategies may also partially influence the town's tourism popularity.

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Povzetek

Majhna mesta imajo pomembno vlogo pri delovanju lokalnega gospodarstva, saj pogosto služijo kot središča storitvenih dejavnosti in kulturnega življenja v regiji. Imajo velik razvojni potencial in sposobnost prilagajanja sodobnim urbanim razmeram; vendar je ključno, da se osredotočijo na učinkovito rabo lokalnih virov, ki jih imajo na voljo. Takšen pristop lahko bistveno olajša odločanje in zmanjša potrebne finančne vložke. Pomemben vidik je tudi sodelovanje z okoliškimi urbanimi in podeželskimi območji.

Toerien (2018) izpostavlja pojav »paradoksa majhnega mesta«, pri katerem se več središč v regiji razvija z izkoriščanjem posameznih gospodarskih panog (npr. turizma), medtem ko druga, podobna mesta zaostajajo. Posledično se sosednja majhna mesta pogosto medsebojno dopolnjujejo, kar se kaže v pojavu, znanem kot funkcionalna polarizacija (Korcelli-Olejniczak idr., 2022). Ta pojav vključuje medsebojno neizključujoče se dejavnosti v mestih – na primer, nekatera mesta v regiji se usmerjajo v nišne storitve in/ali industrije, medtem ko se druga osredotočajo na zagotavljanje storitev okoliškim podeželskim območjem.

V primeru Chojnic je možnost takšnega "kompromisa" trenutno minimalna, k čemur prispeva njegov status največjega središča na območju. Vendar pa bi se ob investicijskih priložnostih v sosednjih mestih verjetnost takšnega scenarija lahko povečala.

Izvedene analize in ocene vpliva virov na mesto Chojnice kažejo tako njegov potencial in priložnosti kot tudi vidike, ki bi lahko negativno vplivali na njegov razvoj. Pomembno je, da mesto čim boljše izkoristi razpoložljive vire in jih uporabi kot temelj za oblikovanje lokalnih produktov, ki bodo gonilo njegovega razvoja.

Shrinking Small Towns in Serbia: Development Challenges and Planning Policy Opportunities

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Abstract

Serbian territorial policies actively supported small towns during the socialist period, fostering growth. However, the post-socialist transition brought socio-political changes, economic restructuring, and widespread depopulation. Subsequent territorial policies have largely neglected the development of small towns, resulting in urban shrinkage across much of the country. This paper examines the developmental challenges facing small towns in Serbia, focusing on their current position within national spatial policy and planning framework. Drawing on European spatial policy and theoretical insights, the research aims to: 1) identify the primary obstacles to development of small shrinking towns; and 2) explore potentials for policy improvement. The findings highlight the need for a more targeted and strategically aligned policy framework to revitalize Serbia's small towns.

Keywords

small towns, shrinking town, Serbia, spatial policy, urban policy

Izvelek

Krčenje majhnih mest v Srbiji: razvojni izzivi in priložnosti prostorske politike

Srbske teritorialne politike so v času socializma aktivno podpirale majhna mesta in s tem spodbujale njihov razvoj. Toda prehod v postsocialistično obdobje je prineslo družbeno-politične spremembe, gospodarsko prestrukturiranje in depopulacijo. Kasnejše teritorialne politike so večinoma zanemarile razvoj majhnih mest, kar je povzročilo krčenje urbanih območij po večjem delu države. Prispevek obravnava razvojne izzive, s katerimi se soočajo majhna mesta v Srbiji, pri čemer se osredotoča na njihov trenutni položaj v okviru nacionalne prostorske politike in prostorskega načrtovanja. Na podlagi evropskih prostorskih politik in teoretičnih spoznanj raziskava 1) opredeljuje glavne ovire za razvoj majhnih mest, ki se krčijo, ter 2) ugotavlja možnosti za izboljšanje politik. Med ugotovitvami je izpostavljena potreba po bolj ciljno usmerjenem in strateško usklajenem okviru politik za oživitev majhnih mest v Srbiji.

Ključne besede

majhna mesta, krčenje mest, Srbija, prostorska politika, urbanistična politika



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1 Introduction

Small towns in Europe are experiencing a complex and often challenging period of development (Böhme et al., 2022). Once vital centers of commerce, industry, and social life, many are now grappling with the effects of globalization, demographic shifts, and evolving economic landscapes. Across various regions, common trends emerge: deindustrialization erodes traditional economic bases (Fertner et al., 2015), younger generations migrate towards larger urban centers in search of opportunities (Makkai et al., 2017), and centralized policies often prioritize metropolitan growth, sometimes inadvertently marginalizing smaller settlements (Ehrlich et al., 2012). These interwoven factors contribute to urban shrinkage, characterized by population decline, aging, and a weakening of the social and economic fabric of small towns. However, despite these widespread challenges, the importance of small towns is increasingly recognized at the European level, acknowledged for their crucial role in territorial balance, cultural heritage, and as providers of essential services within their broader regions (Knox & Mayer, 2009; Servilo et al., 2014; Kah, 2024).

Serbia, undergoing its own unique socio-political and economic transformations, exemplifies these broader trends. During the socialist era, state-led industrialization and urbanization policies propelled the growth of numerous small towns. However, following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the later shift to a market economy, many of these towns have experienced rapid shrinkage (Ljubenović et al., 2025). Furthermore, spatial divide has emerged, with concentration of capital, economic and administrative functions in a small number of major cities (Živanović & Gatarić, 2017; Stojanović & Vojković 2005) leaving small towns isolated and under-resourced. Although the demographic potential of small towns is widely recognized (Kokotović Kanazir, 2016), their performance is largely hindered by institutional shortcomings (Spasić et al., 2007). In Serbia, the planning and governance framework has failed to effectively promote their growth, resulting in their continued marginalization. One part of a problem is a lack of definition of urban areas as well as their official categorization by size in national urban policy (Ljubenović, 2022). Internationally, the United Nations and European Union harmonized the definition for urban areas, identifying towns as settlements with a population of at least 5,000 people located within contiguous grid cells with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per square kilometer. Building on this, ESPON's project TOWN further defines small towns as urban settlements meeting the same density criteria, but with a population between 5,000 and 25,000 (Servilo et al. 2014). The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) categorizes all settlements as either urban or other based on administrative-legal criteria, however, there is no further classification of urban settlements. In the Serbian context, small towns are generally defined by researchers as urban settlements with populations under 20,000 (e.g., Kokotović Kanazir, 2016; Spasić et al., 2007). Given the absence of a formal classification in policy, this study adopts the definition of small towns as settlements categorized as urban by SORS, with a population between 5,000 and 25,000. Shrinking is understood as a complex process with multiple economic, demographic, and spatial causes. Since population loss is both an early sign and a common measure of this process (Turok & Mykhenko, 2007; Wiechmann & Wolff, 2013), it is used as the main indicator for identifying shrinking small towns in this study. Accordingly, small towns that experienced population decline between two inter-census periods are categorized as shrinking.

Serbia's urban system is characterized by a stark primacy of the capital city, Belgrade, few larger cities and the vast majority of small towns. According to the 2022 Census,

29% of Serbia's urban population lives in Belgrade, which is four times larger than the second largest city, Novi Sad. Only three other cities have populations exceeding 100,000 (Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac) that serve as macro-regional centers. There are 25 urban settlements with 25,000–100,000 inhabitants, often serving as regional centers (Živanović et al., 2019), while the vast majority of urban settlements (80) belongs to the category of small towns. Around 40% of the national population still lives in predominantly rural areas. This settlement structure presents a challenge for balanced development, as many small towns function as important local hubs yet lack the demographic and economic capacity of the sub-regional centers.

Demographic and economic decline is linked to broader urbanization and centralization trends. Socialist-era urbanization strategically favored Belgrade and a few other major cities. The absence of adequate regional development policies led to intense concentration of population and capital in Belgrade, now home to 29% of Serbia's urban population and four times larger than the second largest city, Novi Sad. Serbia lacks evenly distributed mid-sized cities (200,000–500,000 inhabitants) that could drive balanced internal development (Tošić & Krunić, 2005). This centralization marginalizes small towns, reducing their role to population sources for larger urban centers (Stojkov & Šećerov, 2012). While Vojvodina's small towns, benefiting from better connectivity and planned development, have maintained some vitality, those in Central Serbia face more severe shrinkage.

This paper examines the multifaceted development challenges facing small towns in Serbia, focusing on their role and position within the current Serbian spatial policy and planning framework. Set against the backdrop of European policy recommendations for fostering balanced and sustainable territorial development, the paper aims to assess the existing planning and policy framework for small towns in Serbia and discuss its alignment with European policy directions. While not yet a full EU member, Serbia is on the path to complete integration with the union. Consequently, the country's spatial and urban policies have been adapted to align with EU standards. By understanding both the national context and the broader European guidelines, the paper seeks to: 1) identify the primary issues and challenges hindering the development of small shrinking towns within the existing Serbian urban and spatial policy framework; and 2) explore potentials for policy improvement.

2 Methodology

This paper employs a desk-based research methodology, drawing primarily on a systematic review of policy documents and scholarly literature relevant to small-town development in Europe and Serbia. The theoretical background section focuses on the causes of shrinkage and the European policy context, serving as a foundational literature review. It synthesizes insights from academic sources and European policy documents to establish a set of evaluative criteria against which Serbia's planning policies are assessed. Following this, a review of the development context and challenges of small towns in Serbia provides the basis for a critical examination of Serbia's planning policy framework, conducted through an in-depth analysis of key legal, strategic, spatial, and urban planning documents at the national, regional, and local levels. This document analysis is complemented by insights from scholarly articles and reports addressing the specific development challenges of Serbian small towns. Beyond demographic change, the analysis also included economic restructuring, urbanization patterns, and the broader political and institutional context since the Second World War. Synthesizing the findings, the congruence and gaps

between European policy recommendations and the Serbian planning framework for small towns are determined and recommendations are drawn.

To ensure robustness, a systematic source selection process was applied. The literature review drew from academic databases and search engines including Google Scholar, EBSCO, SCIndeks, and NarDus (in both English and Serbian), using keywords such as "small towns", "urban shrinkage", "Serbia spatial policy", "Serbia settlement network" and "post-socialist urban development", to identify relevant scholarly works. For European-level documents, official institutional repositories were consulted, including the European Commission (2025), ESPON (2025), and the portals with documents of EU Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning (e.g. Territorial Agenda, 2025). Selection criteria required that documents explicitly or implicitly addressed small towns.

For Serbian documents, the analysis covered laws, strategies, and spatial and urban plans across all three planning levels (national, regional, and local). Sources included the official portals of the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, the Agency for Spatial Planning and Urbanism of the Republic of Serbia, the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, as well as municipal self-government websites for local-level planning practices. The documents were analyzed using a content analysis approach. Each was coded according to the parameters in Table 1.

Criterion	Description	Relevance to Research
Type of document	Law / Strategy / Plan	Differentiates normative and strategic frameworks
Spatial scale	National / Regional / Local	Identifies planning hierarchy levels
Explicit references to small towns	Mentions, definitions, or specific provisions	Shows visibility of small towns in policy
Demographic projections	Presence of population forecasts and trends	Evaluates whether planning is evidence-based
References to urban shrinkage	Mentions of population decline or outmigration	Measures policy acknowledgment of shrinkage
Development priorities and compliance with European policy recommendations	Consistency with European policy recommendations for small towns planning	Shows alignment with small-town needs and links Serbian framework to European policy context

Table 1: Criteria for analysis of Serbian policy framework.

Source: Author.

This targeted selection and review process aimed to cover both the normative framework (legislation and plans) and analytical insights (research studies), providing a comprehensive basis for evaluating planning policy impacts on small towns.

3 Theoretical background

3.1. Causes of shrinkage and specific challenges of small towns

Unlike larger urban areas, small towns show unique patterns of development and shrinkage. These are shaped by a diverse mix of territorial, economic, institutional natural and historical conditions. Historically, they served as vital trade, service, and smaller industrial hubs for rural regions. However, global economic restructuring has led to deindustrialization, with the loss or transformation of these traditional sectors (Makkai et al., 2017). Their narrow economic bases, often reliant on few industries or single employers, make them particularly vulnerable to economic downturns (Fol & Cunningham-Sabot, 2010). Larger cities attract investment and talent, further diminishing the competitiveness and economic relevance of small towns. Changing global food networks and rural decline also weaken their function as markets for local products (Božić, 2017) and service providers.

Demographically, small towns are aging due to the out-migration of young, educated individuals seeking better opportunities. This exodus exacerbates aging, reduces the workforce, stifles innovation, weakens community ties, and erodes social capital (Makkai et al., 2017).

National and regional policies often favor larger cities, leading to centralization of public services like schools and administration. This reduces local employment and civic engagement in small towns (Ehrlich et al., 2012). Post-socialist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), marked by the end of formal urbanization and reduced state funding, has further impacted small towns. (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2013).

The national urban hierarchy marginalizes small towns, especially in regions dominated by major urban centers (Servilo et al., 2014). In these areas, the dominant urban centers overshadow the influence of the smaller towns, even though the latter provide the primary living environment for 36.3% of the EU population (Eurostat, 2024). According to the territorial arrangement, three types of small towns are distinguished (ESPON 1.4.1., 2006):

- agglomerated - cities on the edges of densely populated agglomerations;
- networked – cities in areas dominated by medium-sized cities, well connected to European transport networks;
- cities in remote and peripheral areas.

Agglomerated and networked towns often have better prospects, while small towns remote/peripheral ones suffer from isolation and poor connectivity (Cox & Longlands, 2016), accelerating outmigration and shrinkage (Steinführer & Grossmann, 2021). These factors create a self-reinforcing cycle: economic decline fuels demographic shrinkage, which further weakens public services and investment attractiveness, intensifying revitalization challenges.

3.2. Small towns in European policy

The significance of small towns is being increasingly acknowledged at the European level, which is becoming more apparent in recent policy. (Kah, 2024). European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) was one of the first attempts to create a long-term strategy for balanced territorial development in Europe. Its vision has

shaped policies aiming to reduce regional disparities and foster sustainable development across both urban and rural areas, where small towns have significant role. Developing a balanced, polycentric urban system with strong urban-rural links is a main spatial development guideline. Specific policy orientations that are particularly relevant for small towns include (European Commission, 1999):

- Building networks of smaller towns in sparsely populated and economically weaker regions.
- Fostering cooperation between cities at regional, cross-border and transnational level in order to develop functional complementarity; promoting cooperation.
- Managing the physical expansion of towns by following compact-city model.
- Improving accessibility with various types of transport through an integrated approach to planning.
- Preserving and developing natural and cultural heritage.
- Promoting economic diversification of small towns depending on single structure.
- Fostering urban-rural partnership through integrated approach; maintenance of a basic supply of services and public transport in small towns in rural areas.

Urban Agenda for the EU recognizes the significance of smaller cities and their hinterlands in European economy (European Commission, 2019). It highlights the importance of the thematic partnership approach for smaller towns to support institutional and financial capacity. However, it does not provide details on actions specifically targeted at towns.

Europe 2020 Strategy sets out targets for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2020a). Although small towns are not explicitly addressed in this document, its emphasis on innovation, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability provides a framework for revitalizing small towns as part of broader regional development.

Territorial Agenda 2030 highlights the importance of balanced development and recognizes the specific needs of various territories, including small towns. It recognizes the potential of small towns to cushion polarization through polycentric development, and address their development in several key ways (European Commission, 2020b):

- Fostering cooperation and networking among cities, towns and surrounding areas within a single functional region
- Applying a place-based strategy that uses distinct potential of each area to address its specific challenges,, such as depopulation.
- Implementing a multi-level policy framework to strengthen cooperation between and across spatial levels, including urban-rural partnerships

The New Leipzig Charter provides guidance for applying principles defined in Territorial Agenda 2030 at urban scale (European Commission, 2020c). It emphasizes comparable living conditions in small and medium-sized towns, especially in shrinking areas. This highlights the importance of including small and medium-sized towns in urban policy, ensuring that they aren't overlooked as well as awareness that the challenges of urban decline are not limited to large metropolises but also affect smaller urban centers. The Charter notes that local authorities are responsible for local urban development in their national context, setting strategic guidelines and operations. Small-scale neighborhoods are linked to broader functional areas, and towns play a key role in stabilizing surrounding rural areas. It also calls for integrated urban-rural planning forming a complex network of functional interdependencies and

partnerships between towns, cities within functional urban areas or other territorial entities.

The ESPON's (European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion) project TOWN focuses on the role and functions of small and medium sized towns (SMST) in the European territorial structure, as well as the potentials and limitations for their development. The project's report emphasizes the variety of small towns in Europe (egg. residential, productive, or with creative knowledge profile), wherefore it is not recommended to form the policy for their development at the European level. Several recommendations derive from this report (Servilo et al., 2014):

- The development of a comprehensive national territorial policy framework that acknowledges the roles and functions of SMSTs within their regional settings, while remaining flexible enough to accommodate their differences.
- The establishment of national or regional hierarchy to prioritize support for certain small towns (e.g. like micro-regional centers).
- Applying place-based approach depending on the regional location – focusing on ties to larger cities for agglomerated SMST; on clusters for networked SMST; or on rural hinterland relationships for autonomous/isolated SMST.
- At the local level, SMST should be viewed from an endogenous perspective and the possibility of developing a high quality of life.
- Providing SMST with additional resources and support from higher levels (EU, national, regional), since local governments in many countries have limited authority and financial power.
- A place-based approach should be applied flexibly and creatively—respecting regional and local contexts, engaging a broad array of local stakeholders, and leveraging local insights to formulate a long-term strategy.
- Fostering inter-municipal cooperation, cross-border cooperation and urban/rural cooperation.

There are also specific measures for shrinking small towns in CEE, which include local economy restructuring, green space development, and flexible and creative solutions for public services (Servilo et al., 2014).

ESPON's Policy Brief on the Role of Small and Medium-sized Towns and Cities in Territorial Development and Cohesion gives following key policy recommendations (ESPON, 2024):

- Encourage polycentric development and functional urban–rural linkages.
- Develop integrated and flexible territorial programs to accommodate the unique dynamics of small towns.
- Enhance capacity building and intermunicipal cooperation.
- Foster economic diversification strategies that are based on local cultural, social, and environmental capital and promote green transition.
- Implement participatory, data-driven local development agendas.
- Summing up the insights from European policy documents, the following recommendations emerge for small towns planning development framework:
- National level: establishing a hierarchy and typology of small towns based on their territorial position, location and relationship with larger urban areas.
- National and regional level:
 - forming a network of small towns in order to foster regional cooperation,
 - connecting small shrinking towns with growing and prosperous areas,
 - providing institutional and financial support.

- Local level:
 - the development of an endogenous approach within the framework of an integrated strategy,
 - urban-rural cooperation,
 - local networking – engaging various local actors,
 - the development of compact city model, with quality public and green space,
 - economic diversification.

4. Development Challenges of Small Towns in Serbia

Over the past several decades, small towns in Serbia have faced significant difficulties driven by a complex combination of demographic, economic, spatial, and institutional factors.. These challenges, emerging prominently during the turbulent transitions of the 1990s and deepening into the 21st century, have redefined the role and potential of small towns within the national urban network.

Serbian small towns are diverse, shaped by distinct historical and geographical influences. Vojvodina, with its planned urban development under the Habsburg Empire, contrasts with the more organically evolved small towns of Central Serbia (Filipović et al., 2016). The Central Serbia has a greater heterogeneity in the types of small towns, which mainly developed along the main travel routes as marketplaces, exhibiting varying roles from local rural hubs to sub-regional centers and specialized towns like spas or industrial/mining towns (Spasić et al., 2007). A unifying characteristic is their role as municipal centers closely linked to their rural surroundings.

Serbia's transformation from a primarily agricultural society was driven by state-led industrialization and urbanization following Second world war. This period was marked by a significant growth in both the number and size of small towns, often driven by monofunctional industrial development and rural-urban migration (Filipović et al., 2016). However, socialist policies also fostered spatial imbalances, concentrating development in larger urban centers, particularly Belgrade.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the subsequent socio-political and economic turmoil of the 1990s marked a critical turning point. The transition to a market economy was significantly delayed and complicated in Serbia, exacerbating existing spatial disparities and triggering new challenges (Perić, 2016). The centralized socialist system was dismantled, replaced by a neoliberal model amidst political instability and economic crises. While refugee influx in the 1990s temporarily masked depopulation trends, urban shrinkage became evident after 2000, revealing the demographic consequences of the post-socialist transition.

Demographic decline is a primary challenge. Since the 1990s, economic and social transformations have dramatically altered the Serbia's settlement network, leading to pronounced population imbalances. Negative natural growth, characterized by persistently low birth rates since the 1990s, combined with out-migration, has led to substantial population loss. Between 1991 and 2002, Serbia's population declined by about 4.2%, with rural settlements declining even more sharply at 9.1%. Young, skilled individuals emigrate to larger Serbian cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš) or abroad for better opportunities. In the 1991–2002 period, 31 out of 81 small towns experienced shrinkage This number rose to 61 in 2002–2011 and further to 70 in

2011–2022, indicating intensifying shrinkage (Table 2, Figures 1–3). Notably, population increase in the most recent inter-census period is attributed solely to immigration, while the primary factor contributing to depopulation is the negative natural increase (Ljubenočić et al., 2023). On the other hand, there are no comprehensive data on migration. Only internal migrations are monitored in the form of the number of immigrants and emigrants from towns, but not the direction of migration.

Period	Number of shrinking towns	Population decline			
		0–5%	5–10%	10–20%	> 20%
1991–2002	31 (38.3%)	12	11	7	0
2002–2011	61 (74.4%)	27	26	7	1
2011–2022	70 (85.4%)	9	17	40	3

Table 2: Prevalence and intensity of shrinking small towns in Serbia.

Source: Author; Data: Census of population, households of abandoned apartments and apartments in the Republic of Serbia (1991, 2002, 2011, 2022).

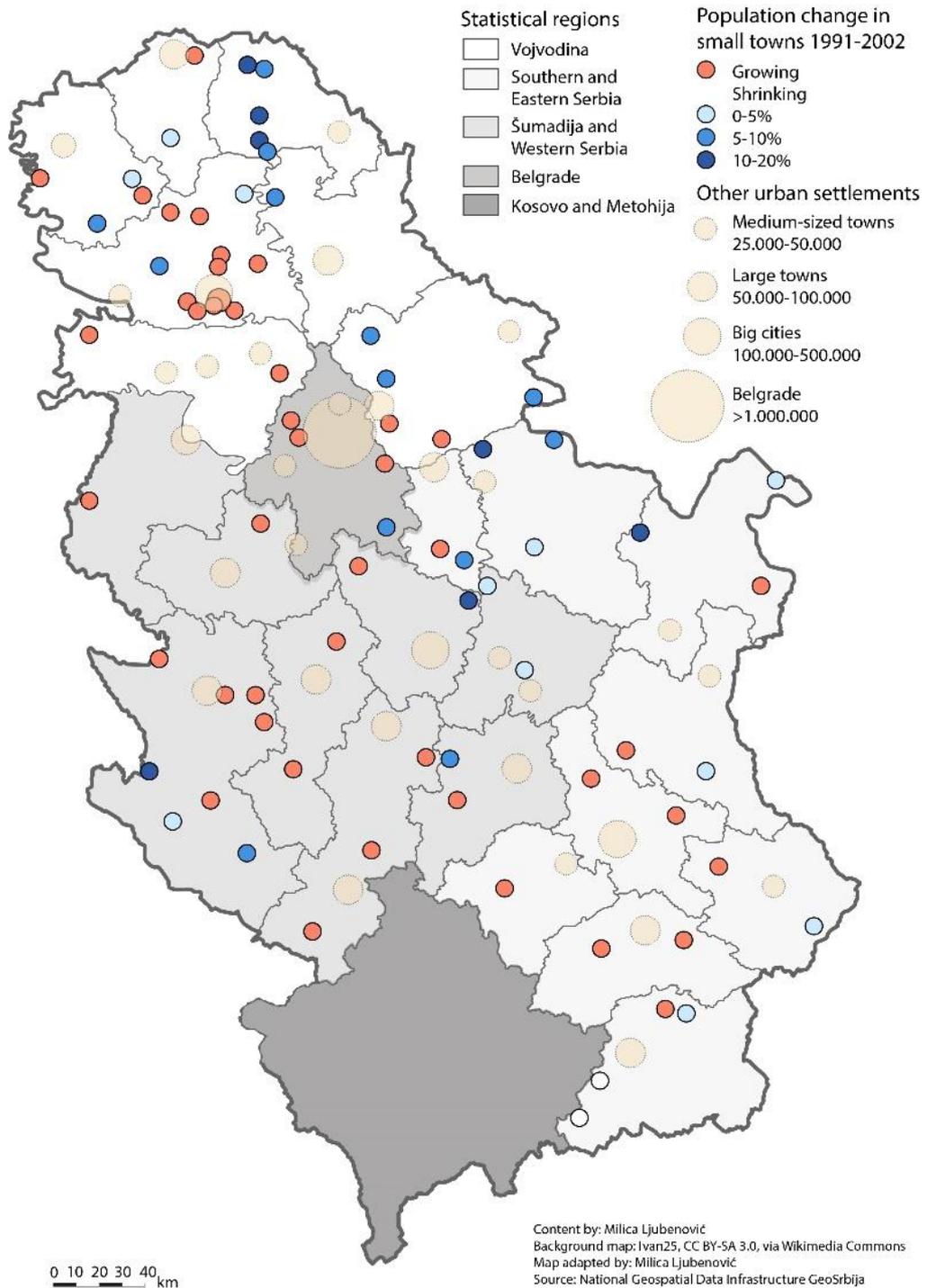


Figure 1: Prevalence and intensity of shrinking small towns in the urban system of Serbia in the period 1991–2002.

Source: Author; Data: Census of population, households of abandoned apartments and apartments in in the Republic of Serbia (1991, 2002).

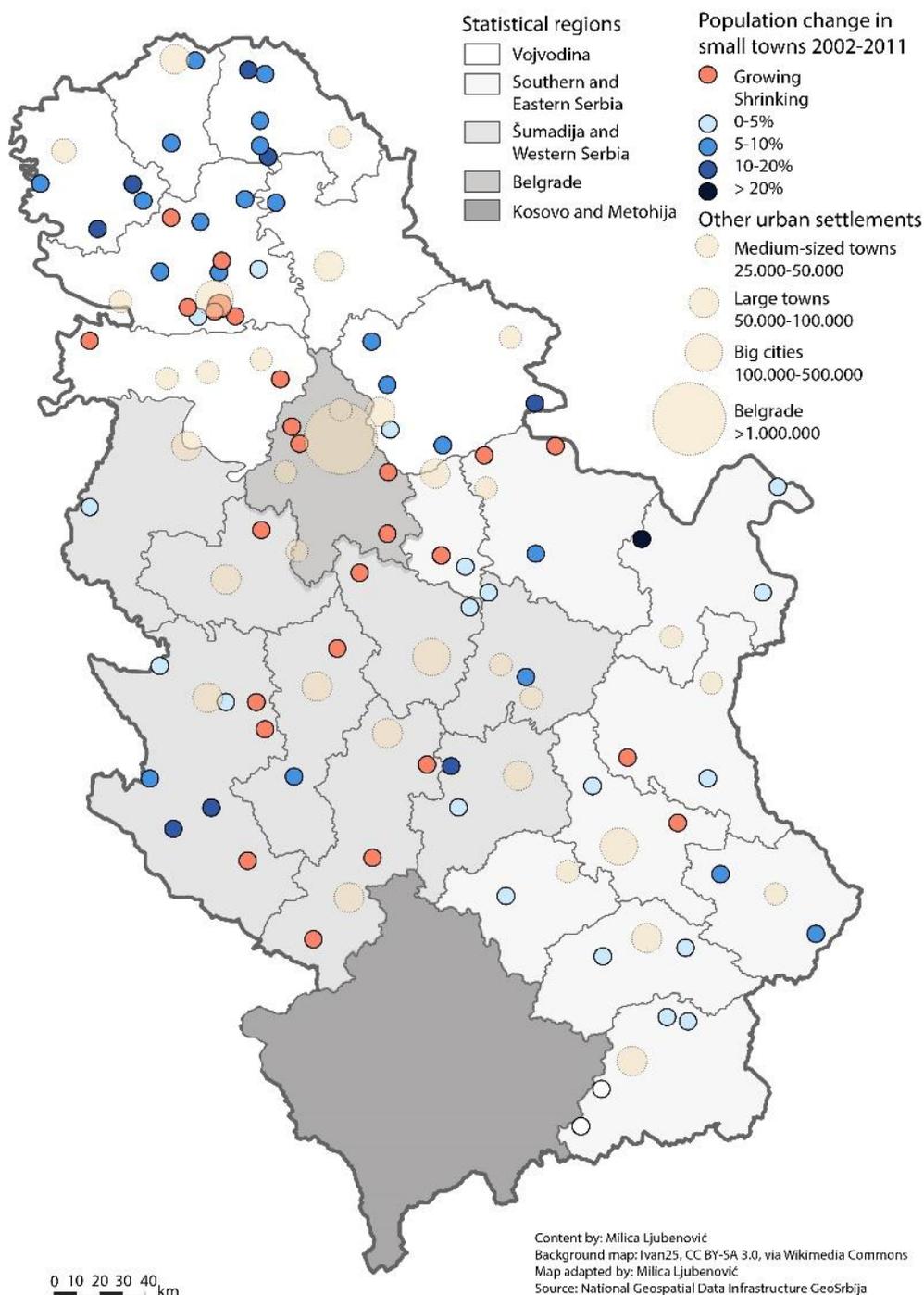


Figure 2: Prevalence and intensity of shrinking small towns in the urban system of Serbia in the period 2002–2011.

Source: Author; Data: Census of population, households of abandoned apartments and apartments in in the Republic of Serbia (2002, 2011).

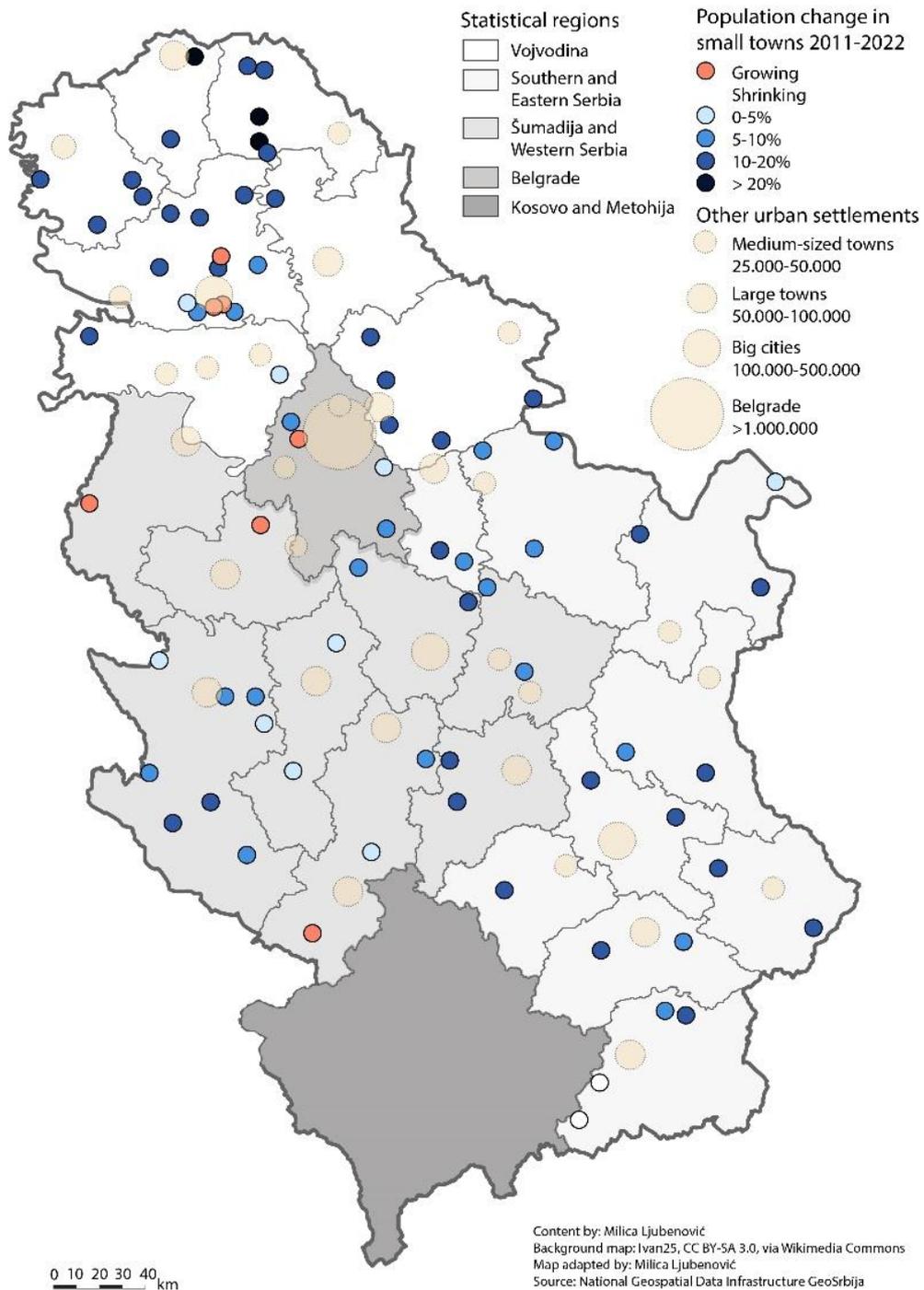


Figure 3: Prevalence and intensity of shrinking small towns in the urban system of Serbia in the period 2011–2022.

Source: Author; Data: Census of population, households of abandoned apartments and apartments in in the Republic of Serbia (2011, 2022).

This demographic shift results in an aging population within small towns. The exodus of younger residents depletes the workforce and diminishes the social capital vital for community cohesion and long-term development.

Small towns in Serbia are economically vulnerable due to their historical reliance on narrow industrial bases. They traditionally functioned as industrial or service centers for rural areas. However, with the onset of deindustrialization and the economic restructuring that followed the collapse of the socialist system, many of these traditional industries were unable to adapt. Former industrial centers such as Trstenik, Aleksandrovac, and Majdanpek lost their economic significance, resulting in job loss and reduced economic activity. Unsuccessful privatization further exacerbated this, leaving many towns with monofunctional economies overly dependent on single, struggling industries. The lack of economic diversification not only undermines local resilience but also hampers the ability to attract new investments or foster innovative sectors that might stimulate sustainable growth (Lang, 2005).

Demographic and economic decline is linked to broader urbanization and centralization trends. Socialist-era urbanization strategically favored Belgrade and a few other major cities. The absence of adequate regional development policies led to intense concentration of population and capital in Belgrade. Serbia lacks evenly distributed mid-sized cities (200,000–500,000 inhabitants) that could drive balanced internal development (Tošić & Krunić, 2005). This centralization marginalizes small towns, reducing their role to population sources for larger urban centers (Stojkov & Šećerov, 2012). In Vojvodina, small towns benefiting from stronger connectivity and more structured development, resembling the network type in ESPON's typology, have managed to retain a certain level of economic vitality, although they experienced notable population decline in the last intercensal period (Figures 1–3). Networked towns in Sumadija and Western Serbia have been comparatively more resilient, showing the least shrinkage. By contrast, many small towns in Southern and Eastern Serbia are remote or peripheral, including several border towns, and are experiencing the most severe depopulation. Finally, agglomerated small towns located on the fringes of Belgrade and Novi Sad benefit from proximity to large urban centers, yet census data indicate that even these towns have undergone mild population decline. Small towns did not experience suburbanization; most population loss was due to migration to larger cities or abroad. However, around major cities like Belgrade, some suburban municipalities have grown at the expense of the urban core, and smaller towns near metropolitan areas might lose population to those peri-urban zones.

The political and institutional context further contributes to the shrinkage of small towns. The post-socialist transition weakened decentralized governance structures, eroding local autonomy. The authoritarian 1990s regime and the subsequent fragmented transition process after 2000 diminished the capacity of local self-governments to manage development effectively. Small towns have become increasingly reliant on central government support, limiting their ability to implement tailored, local policies. Moreover, national urban policies have traditionally prioritized larger urban centers, reinforcing the marginalization of small towns in regional and local development strategies (Stojkov & Šećerov, 2012). This policy bias, coupled with the rapid and often uncontrolled process of urbanization during the socialist period, has left small towns with weakened roles in the national economy and diminished quality of life.

5. Planning and policy framework for small towns in Serbia

Serbia does not have a dedicated policy specifically for small towns; instead, issues related to them are managed within broader spatial and urban development documents. The selection followed the criteria derived from European policy recommendations, with the aim of identifying whether and how Serbian planning documents respond to challenges of small-town shrinkage (Table 3). At the national level, the selection focused on laws that guide the spatial organization, territorial development, and autonomy of local self-government, as well as the umbrella strategic and planning documents that frame urban and spatial development across the country. At the regional, the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia was chosen as an illustrative case, given that it represents the most underdeveloped region with the pronounced population decline. This choice reflects the methodological logic of extreme cases (Yin, 2009), where challenges and gaps are most visible. At the local level, four towns were chosen, each representing a different cluster as obtained in previous research (Ljubenović et. al, 2025). The selected documents were then subjected to content analysis, whereby each was coded by type, scale, and explicit references to small towns, population decline, and demographic projections, as well as their alignment with European policy recommendations.

Document	Type	Level	Relevance
Law on Regional Development (2009, with later amendments)	Law	National	Provides the legal framework for balanced territorial development; basis for addressing regional disparities that strongly affect small towns.
Law on the Territorial Organization (2007, with later amendments)	Law	National	Defines the system of settlements and administrative units; key for understanding the position of small towns within Serbia's settlement hierarchy.
Law on Local Self-Government (2007, with later amendments)	Law	National	Regulates the autonomy and competencies of municipalities; directly relevant for governance capacity of small towns.
Law on Local Self-Government Financing (2006, with later amendments)	Law	National	Defines municipal revenue sources; crucial for assessing the financial capacity of small towns to implement development measures.
Strategy of Sustainable Urban Development of the Republic of Serbia until 2030 (2019)	Strategy	National	Main urban policy document; includes goals for sustainable development of cities and towns, indirectly covering small towns.
Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia 2010–2020 (2010)	Spatial plan	National	Umbrella spatial development framework; basis for guiding spatial development
Regional Spatial Plans (4 plans covering Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia, 2010s)	Spatial plan	Regional	Used to examine how regional planning addresses shrinkage.

Local strategic documents (Aleksinac Knjaževac, Bela Palanka, Majdanpek)	Strategy	Local	Define development priorities at municipal level; illustrate how small shrinking towns set goals and strategies.
Municipal Spatial Plans (Aleksinac Knjaževac, Bela Palanka, Majdanpek)	Spatial plan	Local	Provide statutory spatial frameworks; include demographic projections and settlement structure, crucial for analyzing shrinkage recognition.
Plans of general regulations (Aleksinac Knjaževac, Bela Palanka, Majdanpek)	Urban plan	Local	Detail land use and development controls; show how planning instruments address practical implications of demographic decline.

Table 3: Analyzed legal, planning and development documents relevant to small towns in Serbia, categorized by type.

Source: Author.

The Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia (PPRS) for 2010–2020 serves as the umbrella document for spatial planning, while the new plan for 2021–2030 has not yet been adopted. This document embraces a polycentric urbanization model as a means to achieve a more balanced population distribution, aiming to alleviate the negative demographic, economic, and social impacts of rapid, uncontrolled migration. To support this approach, the plan emphasizes strengthening the role of small and medium-sized urban centers.

In addition, it calls for enhancing demographic dynamics and human capital in areas suffering from depopulation or adverse demographic trends, particularly in eastern and southern Serbia. Certain urban centers and small towns (such as Negotin, Kladovo, Majdanpek, and Knjaževac) are identified as needing an economic shift toward modern, sustainable industrial production, tourism, and other compatible activities. The plan also recommends fostering cooperation among municipalities rich in natural resources to integrate environmental protection with tourism development. Additionally, PPRS advocates for a spatial-functional development model based on functional urban areas. This model involves connecting major urban centers with surrounding settlements, establishing a hierarchical network among centers, and transferring certain responsibilities to less functionally significant areas. The ultimate goal is to create a dynamic urban–rural structure, supported by improved transportation links, infrastructure, and local partnerships, while simultaneously building distinct urban identities and encouraging re-industrialization.

To create a more efficient regional structure for the country, the Law on Regional Development was adopted in 2009. This law defines the division of Serbian territory into regions and categorizes them by development levels, indicating whether they are developed or underdeveloped. According to the Law on the Territorial Organization of Serbia, the territory is divided into national, provincial, and local levels. However, of the regions established by the Law on Regional Development, only Belgrade and Vojvodina actually possess a regional level of governance. Although local units are categorized into five development groups and funding is allocated for things like inter-regional cooperation and supporting underdeveloped areas, the mechanisms for true regionalization and decentralization of power are missing (Ministry of Construction, 2016).

On the territory of Serbia, there are ten spatial plans at the regional level out of which four cover the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia. These regional spatial plans further elaborate on the urban centers hierarchy established in PPRS, identifying sub-regional and local centers. In the case of Central Serbia, these plans, however, do not follow statistical regions since they were adopted before the Law on Regional Development. The absence of an institutional framework for regional governance complicates their implementation. Moreover, inter-municipal cooperation is mentioned only in some of the regional plans, without detailed elaboration (Ljubenović, 2022). The newest policy document for long-term development of urban settlements in Serbia is the Strategy for Sustainable Urban Development of the Republic of Serbia until 2030, adopted in 2019. This strategy addresses all urban settlements collectively while considering demographic trends. It suggests that rather than expanding urban areas, efforts should focus on increasing compactness and redeveloping existing built-up zones, possibly through repurposing specific locations. Consequently, the strategy calls for re-evaluating current urban planning documents, such as general urban plans and regulation plans.

The strategy also notes that small urban settlements have been adversely affected by the rationalization of public services, implemented solely for cost efficiency without in-depth needs analysis, which has reduced their functional significance compared to rural areas. To address this, it recommends improving the availability and quality of public services in urban areas and calls for the creation of a sustainable development fund. This fund would integrate urban and spatial interventions into national and local budgets, align strategic planning with traditional urban planning, and enable local governments to secure funding for updating urban plans.

With the adoption of the Law on Local Self-government in 2007, local self-governments received greater authority, which includes the adoption of local self-government unit spatial plans, urban plans, and development programs. Furthermore, the Law on Local Self-Government Financing, enacted in 2006, has granted municipalities increased financial power and additional revenue from payroll taxes, enabling them to finance development projects. However, they still have a high dependence on the central government (Kopanja et al., 2013).

The urban plans in many small towns are still based on an outdated assumption of growth and are not properly adapted to the current conditions. Despite negative demographic trends, many towns in Serbia still focus on increasing population density and expanding construction areas (Figure 4). Demographic development projections were mostly positive, but actual trends did not reflect this. One reason is that most of the plans were made before the 2011 Census, which was the first to provide a realistic picture of demographic development. Strategic plans are developed as a formal obligation, with ambitious economic goals, and they are generally not implemented or fail to impact urban and spatial planning (Ljubenović, 2022). Moreover, connections with the rural environment are typically insufficiently elaborated. Additionally, citizen participation in planning is low, with the primary issue being a lack of motivation among citizens for direct involvement in the plan's development (Maričić et al., 2018).

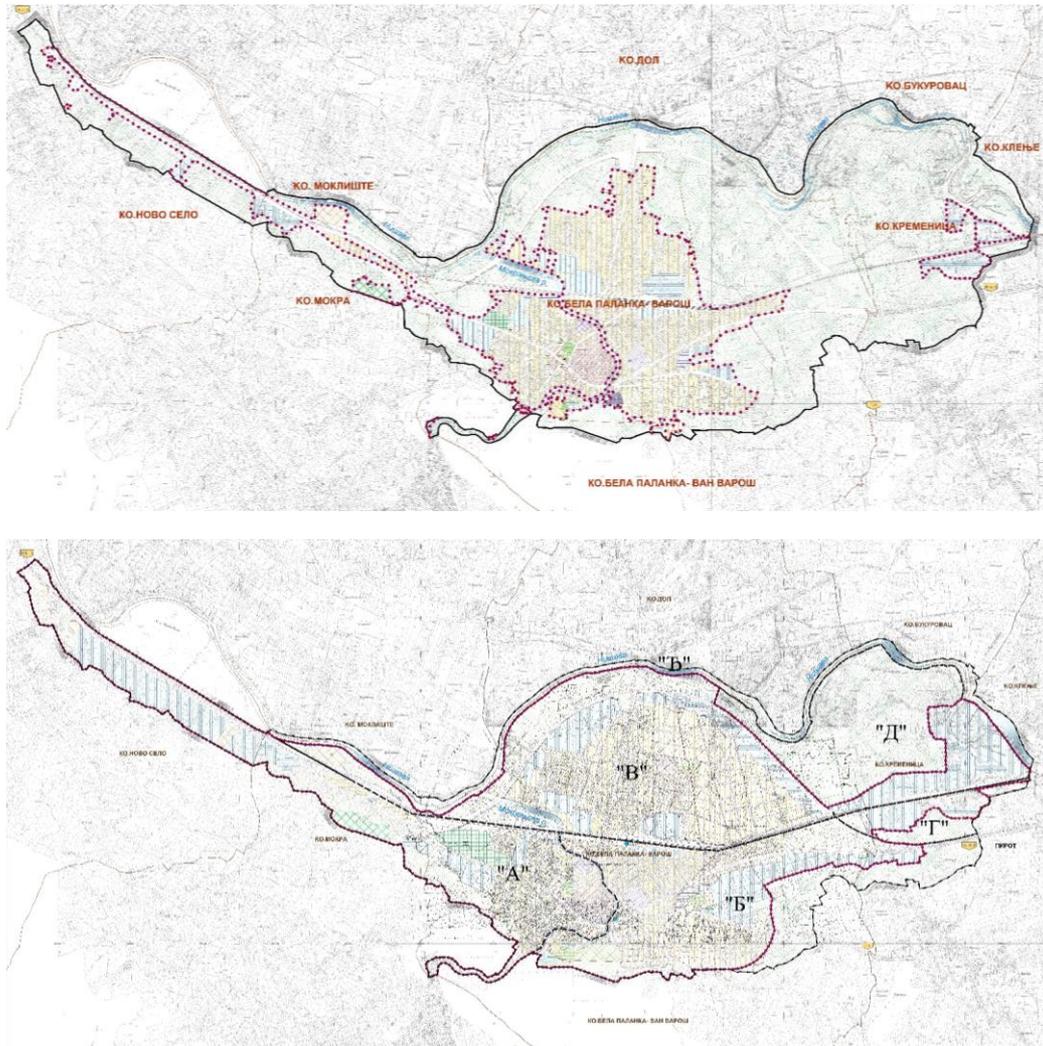


Figure 4: General regulation plan of Bela Palanka from 2013: upper figure - Existing functional organization within the scope of the plan with the predominant land use (the red dots represent the boundary of built-up area); lower figure - Plan boundary and boundaries of the planned construction area of a settlement with a predominantly land use (the red dots represent the boundary of the planned construction area).
 Source: https://belapalanka.org.rs/pgr_bele_palanke.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The planning and policy framework for small towns in Serbia, according to the analyzed documents demonstrates a degree of alignment with European policy recommendations, particularly in its stated intentions. The Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia embraces the principle of polycentric urbanization, identifies the need to strengthen small and medium-sized towns and promote functional urban areas through inter-municipal cooperation, echoing the European policy emphasis on networking and territorial cooperation. However, PPRS addresses all small towns as

unique category, without referring to their specifics, excluding several noted examples.

Furthermore, the Strategy for Sustainable Urban Development of Serbia until 2030, with its focus on compact urban development and re-evaluating urban planning documents, aligns with the European policy orientation towards compact city models and sustainable urban growth. However, this document does not make any categorization of urban areas and leaves the determination of locations for priority intervention to the local level.

The Law on Local Self-Government, by granting municipalities greater authority and financial power, theoretically empowers local actors to implement development strategies, which resonates with the European focus on multilevel governance, higher level support and place-based approaches. This is the only document that gives a categorization of local self-government units.

However, despite these points of convergence at the national and regional level, several critical gaps and challenges emerge when considering the Serbian policy framework. Firstly, while Serbian policy documents mention inter-municipal cooperation, regional networking, and functional urban areas, the institutional mechanisms and financial incentives to effectively realize these concepts appear weak. The initiators of inter-municipal cooperation in Serbia are mostly external – private investors, international financial institutions or donors (Pavlović Križanić, 2010), there are also examples of cross-border cooperation, and the largest number of projects resulting from inter-municipal cooperation relate to the field of waste management. The absence of regional governance structures, which is also the deficiency of many post-socialist countries (Ehrlich et al., 2012), hinders the potential for coordinated action and resource pooling amongst small towns, as promoted by European policy through networking and cooperation frameworks. In this respect, the Shrink Smart project also recommends the alignment of planning and urban regeneration policies at the regional level, the establishment of agencies focused specifically on urban regeneration, and the creation of regional urban planning mechanisms that can provide a coherent strategic framework for development (Bernt et al., 2012). The regional level is also recognized as the most suitable for defining inter-municipal cooperation (Domhardt & Troeger-Weiß, 2009).

Secondly, the Serbian policy framework, while acknowledging the need for economic diversification in struggling small towns, provides limited specific guidance or targeted support measures. PPRS still relies on the reindustrialization approach. European recommendations emphasize the importance of place-based approaches, tailored to the unique characteristics of different types of small towns (agglomerated, networked, remote/peripheral). The unique advantages of small towns, based on endogenous resources, are recognized as the basis for the development of creative strategies aimed at new, innovative paths of development (Selada & Cunha, 2012; Noronha & Vaz, 2015). In contrast, Serbian policy documents tend to offer broad recommendations applicable to all urban areas, with less granular strategies that address the diverse needs of small towns in different territorial contexts. The lack of a clearly defined hierarchy or typology of small towns at the national level, as suggested by the ESPON TOWN project and recognized as crucial for targeted policy interventions in the European context, is also evident in the Serbian framework.

The failure to implement planning concepts for urban centers and their functional areas has allowed negative development trends to persist. This has also intensified the polarization of Serbia's territory, widening the gap between developed centers (mostly larger settlements) and an increasingly underdeveloped periphery, which includes almost all smaller municipal centers and rural settlements.

The national strategy's emphasis on compact cities and re-evaluation of urban plans is pertinent, but its effectiveness is hampered by the continued prevalence of urban growth paradigms in local urban plans. As observed, many small towns in Serbia still operate under planning approaches focused on expansion rather than adaptation to demographic decline and economic restructuring. This suggests a disconnect between national strategic direction and local planning practice, highlighting a potential weakness in the policy implementation chain. This is also a consequence of unsynchronized timeline of inconsistent order of adopting plans, which are further unsynchronized with census conceptions and therefore base their analysis on outdated trends (Ljubenović, 2022).

Finally, the issue of limited citizen participation in planning processes in Serbia presents a significant challenge to the effective implementation of integrated place-based approaches. Endogenous development strategies, local networking, and urban-rural cooperation, all emphasized in European recommendations, require active engagement of local stakeholders and communities. The lack of citizen motivation and mechanisms for meaningful participation in Serbian planning processes may undermine the potential for truly place-sensitive and locally-driven development in small towns, which is crucial for building local economic resilience (Cox & Longlands, 2016).

When comparing these findings with international experiences, it becomes evident other countries are also still seeking appropriate approaches for dealing with small towns shrinkage. Governance responses to shrinkage vary: for instance, there are youth-oriented revitalization programs emerging in parts of East Asia (Kim, 2024), and resilience-based planning approaches being discussed in Europe (Eraydin & Özatağan, 2021). In Western European context, small towns have sought to counteract decline by leveraging niche strengths, such as attracting commuters or retirees by enhancing their residential appeal (Fertner et al., 2015). In the case of post-socialist context of Estonia and former East Germany, it is shown that recognizing the needs and priorities of local community and building social capital is important for using endogenous resources and developing successful local strategies in shrinking small towns (Leetmaa et al., 2015).

In conclusion, while Serbian planning policies express alignment with several key principles of European territorial development policy, significant gaps exist in terms of concrete implementation mechanisms, targeted support for diverse types of small towns, adaptation of local planning practices to demographic realities, and fostering genuine local participation. For Serbian small towns to effectively address their development challenges and harness their potential within the national urban system the primary step would be to form a national policy with specific concerns of small and medium-sized towns. This policy should include typology of small towns based on the problems and challenges they face, the territorial position and the relationship with larger urban areas. Based on that, their redevelopment strategies should be defined, with specific packages of measures for each level (national, regional, local), which must act synchronously, in order to ensure the development of adequate regional and local plans and programs. It is also necessary to establish adequate

governance structures and implementation monitoring mechanisms. By identifying priorities and areas for action, it is possible to design more tailored and place-based policy interventions, and direct adequate resources and funds. A shift in local planning paradigms towards sustainable shrinkage management rather than growth, and enhanced mechanisms for citizen engagement are crucial next steps for small towns revitalization contributing to a more balanced development and resilient urban–rural continuum across Serbia.

Besides its practical contribution in offering guidelines for aligning Serbian planning frameworks with European policy recommendations to address the acute challenges of small-town shrinkage, this research also advances the broader comparative debate on urban shrinkage. The analytical framework – linking European policy recommendations, national legal and planning frameworks, and local planning practices – offers a transferable approach that can be applied to other countries facing similar issues in small towns. Thus, beyond its national scope, this study contributes to the cumulative knowledge on small-town planning policy in shrinking regions across Europe and beyond.

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Povzetek

Majhna mesta v Srbiji se soočajo z vedno hujšo krizo urbanega krčenja. Medtem ko so bila v času socializma aktivno podprta in so se razvijala, je postsocialistični prehod prinesel gospodarsko prestrukturiranje in družbeno-politične spremembe, ki so povzročile obsežno depopulacijo. Ta trend so dodatno okrepile poznejše teritorialne politike, ki so ta manjša naselja večinoma zanemarile. Prispevek preučuje prostorsko politiko in načrtovalski okvir Srbije ter ju primerja z evropskimi priporočili. Ključna ugotovitev je izrazit razkorak med načrtovalnimi cilji in njihovo izvedbo. Čeprav nacionalni dokumenti, kot je Prostorski plan Republike Srbije, zagovarjajo načela policentrične urbanizacije in krepitve majhnih mest, so institucionalni in finančni mehanizmi za uresničitev teh ciljev šibki ali celo neobstoječi. Poleg tega se ta razkorak kaže tudi na lokalni ravni, kjer številni občinski prostorski načrti še vedno načrtujejo rast, namesto da bi se prilagodili realnosti demografskega upada. Prispevek izpostavlja nujnost bolj ciljno usmerjenega in strateško usklajenega okvira politik. Priporoča oblikovanje posebne nacionalne politike, ki bi vključevala tipologijo majhnih mest ter opredelila krajevno prilagojene strategije za njihovo oživitev in prispevek k bolj uravnoteženemu nacionalnemu razvoju.

