

SMALL TOWNS: AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE MORAVIAN SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

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Abstract

The paper brings characteristics of Moravian towns with inhabitants below 15 thousand. The towns still play an important role in the settlement structure. Their share in the country's population remains stable. As compared with larger towns and cities, the parameters of their natural and social environments exhibit a number of advantages. The future of small towns in Moravia is discussed with impulses for the conservation of urban functions being seen in the provision of central services for rural hinterlands and in specialization. Main future significance of small Moravian towns consists in the insurance of sustainable development of Moravian countryside, in the provision of alternative life style offer for a part of the population, and in keeping up local and regional identities in the process of globalization.

Key words: small towns, Moravia, settlement system, marginality, urban functions, way of life

SMALL TOWN AS A PHENOMENON OF MORAVIA

The paper explains the system of settlement in the historical land of Moravia which has been a part of the Czech state since the very beginning of its history. Although Moravia as an administrative unit does not exist any longer now over 50 years, the awareness has survived until today. Unlike the Bohemian system of settlement, the Moravian-Silesian settlement system was not centralized but rather formed as a system of three nuclei. In the course of industrialization which was accompanied by intensive urbanization after the year 1850, there were three nuclei crystallizing in the region of Moravia and Silesia: Brno as a trading center, Olomouc as a cultural center with the Archbishop's seat and with the oldest Moravian university, and Ostrava as a center of industry and power generation. Importance of historical towns such as Opava, Znojmo and Jihlava was gradually decreasing while the significance of the formerly peripheral town of Zlín began to grow in the 1930s, supported by the enterprising activities of Tomáš Baťa.

The above listed major centers of Moravia and Czech part of Silesia are added a number of medium-sized towns. A majority of them play a role of district centers, which indicates that their position with respect to government investments, number of civil servants, etc. is rather specific. In spite of the fact that district councils were abolished from 1 January 2003, districts are still in force and district towns still have many operating district institutions such as courts, cadastral bureaus, statistic offices, hygienic service, etc. Medium-sized towns which are not district centers developed as a rule on the basis of their industrial function. This function of theirs has been passing through a transformation in the last twelve years, which may result in a changed position of these towns within the system of settlement.

Table 1: List of largest towns in Moravia and Czech part of Silesia in 2002

ORDER	TOWN	REGION	POPULATION
1	Brno	South-Moravian	373 272
2	Ostrava	Moravian-Silesian	315 442
3	Olomouc	Olomouc	102 246
4	Havířov	Moravian-Silesian	85 502
5	Zlín	Zlín	80 581
6	Karviná	Moravian-Silesian	64 653
7	Opava	Moravian-Silesian	61 145
8	Frýdek-Místek	Moravian-Silesian	61 018
9	Jihlava	Vysočina (Uplands)	50 377
10	Prostějov	Olomouc	48 027
11	Přerov	Olomouc	47 988
12	Třebíč	Vysočina (Uplands)	39 022
13	Třinec	Moravian-Silesian	38 800
14	Znojmo	South-Moravian	35 691
15	Orlová	Moravian-Silesian	34 697

Another segment of the provincial system of settlement are small towns. In conditions of Moravia, small towns are considered to be all municipalities with the status of town and the population below 15 thousand. The existing lower limit for awarding the town status is 3 000 inhabitants although there are also some smaller municipalities occurring in the group from the former times. According to the above criterion, there are 109 small towns in Moravia at the present with a total population of 600,000 inhabitants.

Attention paid to small towns both in Czech and foreign geographical literature apparently does not correspond to the significance of the segment within the settlement system. Let us mention works published by Dövényi (1988), Hinderink and Titus (2002), Munduch and Spiegler (1998), Niedermayer (2000), Sokolowski (1999), Žigrai (2000) or Slavík (2002).

Apart from the theoretical work and statistic data analysis, the research of the issue of small towns in Moravia dwells on a detailed processing of case studies. There are 16 such studies finished up to now (let us mention Vaishar and Zapletalová 1998, Vaishar et al. 2001) and other 5 are being processed at the present time. The research is made by methods

of regional geography in whose focus there is a relation between natural and social aspects of small towns environment in combination with aspects of geographical position, historical development and sociological traits of population. The hitherto obtained materials provide relatively wide possibilities to generalize the actual situation of small towns. First research results were already published (e.g. Vaishar, Kallabová and Trávníček, 2002). Since 2003, the research is supported by the Grant Agency of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic within the framework of Grant Project No. IAA3086301.

SMALL TOWNS AND THE MICRO-REGIONAL SETTLEMENT STRUCTURE

Population in the group of small Moravian towns decreased only by 2.54 ‰ in 1991-2001 while the total number of inhabitants in the Czech Republic dropped by as much as 7 ‰ in the same period of time. This suggests that the share of the above mentioned group in total country's population remains stable and even showing a very slight increase in several last years. Theoretically, there is one small town per an area of 202 km² in Moravia; accordingly, an average distance between the small Moravian towns is 14.2km. The set of 109 small Moravian towns is strongly differentiated, which can be illustrated by average and extreme values of some indicators which have been borrowed from the Census of 2001.

Table 2: Average and extreme values of demographic indicators

FEATURE	UNIT	AVERAGE	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM
Population	Inhabitants	5 495	Úsov 1 196	Zábřeh 14 561
People 0-14 years	%	16.95	Židlochovice 14.12	Jaroměřice 20.07
Post-productive age	%	17.32	Slušovice 11.73	Koryčany 21.80
In primary sector	%	5.29	Adamov 1.73	Staré Město 17.97
In industries	%	36.12	Tovačov 18.78	Břidličná 56.07
School-leaving exam	%	34.65	Budišov n.B. 22.21	Tišnov 43.30
Believers	%	43.50	Oslavany 23.00	Brumov-Bylnice 79.26
Single family houses	% of flats	51.87	Adamov 8.34	Klobouky 96.03

Functions of the small Moravian towns are differentiated similarly as the demographic characteristics. There are small towns which are multi-functionally developed to ensure services, job opportunities and social contacts for relatively large hinterlands. A considerable part of small towns based their function on industrial production. Specialization in the tertiary sector occurs at a lower scale. Many small towns specialize in the dwelling function, which is the case of some small towns in the hinterland of large cities or the case of the smallest towns which have lost their former production functions.

Geographical position of the small towns plays an important role for their existing and future significance. One of particularly important factors is their accessibility by traffic, which influences both the investment potential and the attendance rate. Another important aspect is the geographical situation with respect to other settlement centers – both larger

and more significant, and potentially competing small towns. Very influential may be also the administrative barriers such as state borders. The coming into existence of a new Czech-Slovak state border had an adverse effect on the prosperity of small towns situated on the Czech-Slovak border, which are also most far away from the major developmental impulses coming from the West.

As many other regions, Moravia has experienced a rapid growth of individual motor-ing, which leads to a realistic possibility of some needs of at least a part of the population being satisfied not only in the nearest small towns but also in more distant medium-sized towns and cities. The trend is expressed by numerous indicators of which one is for example the attendance of hypermarkets. It is therefore a question of extent to which the tendency towards overcoming the micro-regionalization and the ruralization of small towns shows in Moravia.

It should be pointed out that the trends occur but their intensity is far from reaching the intensity of processes occurring in west Europe. The society of central planning con-served to a considerable measure the settlement system originating from the end of the 1940s, strengthening the function of small towns in some cases by the localization of big industrial enterprises and later on by the implementation of a so called settlement system of centers, which clearly preferred the so called centers of settlement – including the small towns – at the account of non-center rural settlements.

Figure 1: Network of small Moravian towns (drawn by E. Kallabová)



Although it is nearly a must to have a passenger car while living in the Moravian countryside, neither the technical condition of the fleet nor the price of fuels can be considered favorable for daily commuting at a longer distance as related to the population's income. Therefore, a considerable part of rural inhabitants apparently satisfy their current needs of urban services in the nearest small towns. Public transport is heavily restricted due to its low effectiveness –particularly in marginal areas- but with the exception of major transit veins it is still directed to the nearest centers.

The small towns in Moravia still seem to play a relatively important role in the structure of settlement. They are a key for the preservation of rural settlement, which is important not only with respect to the restriction of excessive concentration into central regions of the country but also with respect to landscape maintenance and preservation of cultural heritage. Small towns without any pronounced function of the center have a specific significance of their own since they provide an alternative style of living for a part of population that is not negligible.

SMALL TOWNS AS AN ALTERNATIVE PLACE FOR LIVING

Small towns represent a specific environment for their inhabitants and visitors. In relation to natural environment their significance can be expressed by the fact that one can observe the surrounding landscape from nearly any corner of such a small town. Although the values of nature surroundings may be differentiated in the individual towns –being expressed for example by the coefficient of ecological stability as a proportion of permanent green areas (forests, meadows and pastures) in the total area of the region- it is the easy accessibility of nature offered to the inhabitants of small towns, which represents an advantage as compared with the large and medium-sized towns.

With only some exceptions, small towns have usually a higher percentage of flats in single family houses, which results in larger green areas near the houses. This provides both for the satisfaction of population's environmental requirements of sufficient greenery and for the satisfaction of social requirements relating to the ownership of private property of which the individual is his/her own master.

The specific feature of the social system can be expressed by the fact that people do not need cars to move around in a small town. Inhabitants or visitors moving around on foot or bicycle can feel the place in an entirely different way than passing-by drivers. This relates to a higher level of social control and hence personal safety of inhabitants. Although there are some socio-pathological phenomena occurring at a higher rate also in small towns –and particularly in small towns that have lost some of their production functions- the occurrence is lower and under a better control than in large towns and cities.

Social systems of small towns are differentiated, too. Specific social environment can be found in towns with extensive immigration after World War II. The reason was replacement of German population in borderland towns by immigrants from other regions. Other towns were known to have huge companies with thousands of employees established during the era of Socialism, for whom hundreds of flats were built. Apart from the varying

demographic structures, common features of these immigration towns usually include a lower social stability of the population, lower level of the population's identification with their town, lower level of social control, and sometimes also a certain distrust to be observed to exist between permanent inhabitants and immigrants. A reliable statistic indicator of the situation is usually a decreased level of religiousness.

The existing social system of some small towns is destabilized by insolvency or bankruptcy of industrial production leaders and hence by a high unemployment rate. This shows dramatically in the small towns which were affected by the down-scaling of coal mining and related industries. In these cases, it is not only the high unemployment ranging often around 20 % but also the loss of very well paid and preferred jobs that were not corresponded to by qualifications and adaptability of redundant workers.

The technical infrastructure of small Moravian towns improved after 1990. All towns are linked to remote or local water supplies with good drinking water; withdrawals from individual wells are not necessary. Sewerage systems connected to waste water treatment plants are planned to be finalized before the end of 2004. All these small towns are connected to the gas-supply system, which markedly changed the way of heating. The small towns are fully connected to the telephone system and digital telephone exchanges, their areas being covered by signals of all four mobile telephone operators and all four Czech national TV stations. Some small towns have built a cable network for local TV broadcasting. Connection to Internet from any of the small towns is no technological problem. All towns have functional systems of communal waste collection and ecological disposal. Waste separation level varies but the system is being introduced everywhere. Most local motorways and other communications are provided with asphalt road surface. Unfortunately, the quality of roads recently worsened due to low financial means for maintenance and increased traffic, which is however a problem of large cities, too. It follows from the above that the technical infrastructure of small towns is comparable with the facilities of large towns and cities – if not even better, considering the fact that it is newer.

The social structure quite logically exhibits some differences. Most of these small towns have available a full social infrastructure of the lowest urban degree. Should a facility be missing, it is as a rule a temporary phenomenon occurring due to current market fluctuations. In dependence on the population, hinterland size and specialization, some small towns are equipped with some hierarchically higher facilities although the facilities cannot be compared with those of large towns and cities in terms of structure.

There is no doubt that as to the hierarchically higher services the small towns are referred to higher centers. But their situation is as a rule still better than that of villages because the towns developed in locations more favorable for transport with routes between them being historically constructed as the lines of higher order than roads between towns and surrounding villages. The factor is important in marginal regions whose road patterns exhibit lower densities than those in central regions. In these areas, people who wish to visit a larger center often have to reach their small town first and from there continue along the communication of higher class.

In the process of globalization, small towns retain the regional identity of their micro-regions and they are at the same time places which provide the best chance to preserve the

specific regional ethnographic features. This can be expressed among other by the fact that the small towns –unlike medium-sized and large towns- are capable of keeping the contacts with compatriots and organize their meetings.

FUTURE OF SMALL MORAVIAN TOWNS

The future of small Moravian towns will be apparently differentiated. Paradoxically, the greatest chance of maintaining the urban function is that of relatively poor centers of marginal regions. With respect to the non-existing competition of big towns, the preservation of their urban function as centers of peripheral hinterland will become clearly necessary and doubtless.

In Moravia, these regions can be found in borderland mountains where the factor of unfavorable natural conditions is further augmented by the existence of administrative barriers – although their gradually decreasing significance can be expected in the future in connection with the future EU membership of all neighboring countries. However, similar characteristics are shown by a so called inner periphery represented by the Bohemian-Moravian Uplands on the historical boundary with Bohemia and by some inland mountain ranges. Small towns in these regions will most likely experience a multi-functional development as they will have to ensure for their hinterlands both a wide range of jobs and urban services, social and cultural contacts, and to mediate a connection with the outer world.

Another possibility of how to maintain urban functions of small towns is to support their specialization. Industrial specialization is expected to remain the same although the number of towns with the specialization is expected to decrease due to the expected dislocation of traditional industries from cities, where they will be replaced by services of the highest hierarchical level and hi-tech industries linked to universities. Risk of industrial specialization however consists in the fact that if the chosen industry declines, the decline will also apply to the town. Specialization of small towns in the tertiary sphere is expected to play an ever more significant role – be it the localization of secondary schools, medical services of super-local significance or even spa functions. Plans of small towns often include specialization in the sphere of tourism. Here it is worth pointing out that although some attractivities for travel exist practically in all small Moravian towns or in their surroundings, it is only some of them that can really specialize in this sense. And even in these few towns, the specialization would call for considerable investments into infrastructure and advertising. Furthermore, the specialization in tourism in the conditions of Moravia without the attractivities of the Alps or sea coast appears to be perhaps even less stable than the specialization in industries.

Specialization is a sound way for small towns in fertile lowlands with good traffic connection pattern with existing competition of larger towns as well as between the small towns mutually, where rural seats are often self-sufficient in terms of primary service, which means that the hinterlands of small towns in these regions are small or none and the bonds of hinterland municipalities to their centers are loose.

A specific development can apparently be anticipated in small towns situated within the hinterlands of big cities. Within the framework of sub-urbanization processes these small towns may provide high-quality housing for people working in cities, or they can even offer themselves for the dislocation of some manufacturing or non-production activities. Inhabitants of these small towns will have always a wider choice of jobs, services, social contacts, etc. than people living in more remote small towns. Major risk can be seen in the loss of identity since the towns are going to be perceived as parts of the cities.

Small towns with insufficiently large hinterlands will not even find a meaningful urban specialization and they are expected to ruralize gradually. Even in these cases, however, they are still going to be long classified as larger rural seats with the sufficient local market to keep basic services. These former towns will therefore be capable of providing a relatively good-quality housing for inhabitants who prefer rural style of life but are not prepared to entirely give up some advantages of living in the town. In the future, the ageing Czech population will most likely not prefer living in small villages where services including medical care can be reached with ever increasing difficulties due to worsening transport connection.

It is therefore to be expected that at least a part of the small Moravian towns will keep their urban functions also in the near future. Small towns will continue to be an important constituent in the Moravian system of settlement with their task being the insurance of sustainable development of the Moravian countryside, the provision of alternative life style offer for a part of population, and the conservation of local and regional identity in the process of globalization.

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