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## In the shadow of urban development. Postwar depopulating towns in Poland, 1946-1990

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### ABSTRACT

The article addresses the problem of depopulating towns in the postwar period (1946-1990) in Poland. The essence of this study is to highlight the problem rather neglected in scientific research on two levels – empirical and explanatory. In the article, a full inventory of towns, which recorded a decrease in population, in the period, was made on the basis of available statistical sources and relating studies on the issues of population. Due to short-term population swings, only the facts related to depopulation that took place in perspective of the designated research sub-periods were taken into consideration: 1946-1950, 1950-1960, 1960-1970, 1970-1980 and 1980-1990. The analysis was made on the basis of the contemporary administrative division of the country into provinces. The primary purpose of the article was an attempt to answer the question regarding the role of depopulation in the socialist period and the possible connotations of this fact, in relation to population loss reported presently in Polish towns. The starting point was, however, a detailed discussion of conditions of urban depopulation in the socialist period. It was recognized that the understanding of this genetically multifaceted problem should form the basis of interpretation to any generalizations made in relation to the past, present and future demographic changes in Poland and other countries. It was also found that understanding the facts connected with demographic development should be a canon of research conducted with reference to the analysed problems. The raised issue of demographic decrease in Polish towns during the socialist period, falls within such an explanatory model.

KEY WORDS: depopulation of cities, demographic transformations, Poland, socialist period

### 1. Introduction

The history of cities in Poland and around the world indicates a constant evolution of their economic, spatial and social structures. Strands of events, but also determined conditions of general development trends lead to the constant evolution of agglomerations, both in terms of quantity as well as their potential. A characteristic feature of these changes is their unevenness in the geographical space. On one hand, the changes that are visible on a regional and local level, which has been presented in more detail later in the article, and on the other hand, diametric differences occur on the international or European level. It should also be noted that both contexts refer to the more distant past (HOHENBERG & LEES, 1995) as well as the nearest past (TUROK & MYKHENKO, 2007). The collapse and regress of some formerly significant feudal towns, already in the nineteenth century were accompanied by the dynamic growth of new and strong industrial

and mining centres. Later, in the second half of the twentieth century, a crisis of some large western cities was observed, with simultaneous rapid population growth in the former socialist countries of Europe.

In Europe, particularly in its central and eastern parts, the Second World War was an important turning point. Political changes, followed by decisions in economic matters and the implementation of investment methods in this aspect were essential in urbanization processes. It was significant that these objectives could be implemented thanks to strong natural population increase, associated with the post-war baby boom of the late 1940s and 1950s. Hence, the two key features of socialist urban development after World War II are the accelerated industrialization of towns and population growth (MUSIL, 1980; CITIES AFTER SOCIALISM..., 1996).

Assuming the above thesis, however, the question about the extent of the changes remains, and, most of all, whether the observed phenomena of

post-war demographic development in urban networks was accompanied by simultaneous depopulation in some of them? If so, what was its scale? Adopting these assumptions, the aim of this article is an attempt to explain the processes of depopulation in Polish towns in the years 1946-1990, both in terms of network analysis, as well as basic determining conditions.

The article attempts to answer these questions, and simultaneously tries to expose the fact that this problem of demographic transformations in post-war Polish towns, generally overlooked in scientific studies, may at least partially fill in research gaps in this area. It can also form grounds for a research reflection in relation to the situation that is taking place today (after 1990), where a dual character of changes in urban population is highlighted, although, in relation to the previous period, it has reverse proportions.

## 2. Methods and source data

The article adopts an explanatory and empirical narrative. First of all, the basic causes of the observed phenomena were explained and in this case, a reference point was the cause and effect mode, which, in relation to geographical research on towns, takes the form of genetic and functional explanations.

Data on the population of Polish cities was derived from sources of the Central Statistical Office – Statistical Yearbooks of Poland, as well as works by JELONEK (1956, 1967) and GAWRYSZEWSKI (2005). An analysis of population decrease was made and expressed both in absolute terms as well as percentage. Spatial differentiation of the degree of urban depopulation in Poland was presented with the signature method. Point signatures were applied to show the decrease in population on maps.

As mentioned, the results in this aspect were treated as utilitarian and subordinated to general explanations of analysed processes. Due to the fact that all towns in Poland were discussed, more detailed demographic indicators were resigned from. Depopulated town was defined in paper as urban center that in determined period noted statistical population decrease. Information about the number of depopulating towns and the scale of the phenomena was presented on a regional basis (using the contemporary administrative division of Poland). The essence of this assumption was to capture territorial disparities within the Polish borders. Variability of administrative boundaries of provinces and their number was, in turn, the basis for the adoption of the contemporary administrative division of Poland. Firstly, it better

reflects the perspective of retrospective research. Secondly, it eliminates the research dilemma related to the administrative division before 1975 and the one in force since 1975.

The article assumes time frames of 1946 and 1990. The year 1946 refers to the first year of the post-war Polish state with its new borders, and new political and economic system. The second date indicates the first full year after the collapse of the socialist era in Poland.

## 3. Conditions of urban depopulation in Poland in the years 1946-1990

After the Second World War, over the following decades, Poland and its towns registered a steady increase in population (KANTOR-PIETRAGA, 2014). In the years 1946-1950, the total number of urban population increased by 2.2 million (EBERHARDT, 1989). The population growth after 1946 was shaped by two opposing factors:

- 1) a strong increase in the number of births, causing a large rate of natural increase and,
- 2) increased emigration movements that reduced the total population growth (DANGEL, 1962; GAJEWSKI, 1965; ROSSET, 1965; ŻURKO, 2000).

In general, in this period, population growth in Polish towns was caused by natural population increase, industrial development and the Polish population returning from abroad, and settling in towns and cities (LITTERER, 1955). A region that reported an extraordinary growth rate and character of demographic transformation was the so-called Recovered Territories (KOSIŃSKI, 1960; GAWRYSZEWSKI, 1988; LACH, 1996).

In the following years 1950-1960, the urban population in Poland increased by 5 million which, according to KOSIŃSKI (1968), was driven by natural population increase, administrative changes and internal migration balance.

The period 1961-1970 was characterized by an adverse trend of demographic development, which manifested itself in an inhibition of the total population growth, resulting in a rapid drop in the birth rate. There was also a general decline in spatial mobility of the population. Despite this, the urban population increased from 14.3 million to 17.2 million (ZDROJEWSKI, 2000). During this period, the process of depopulation of central districts of large cities was initiated (Warsaw, Krakow and Łódź), and 37 small towns observed population decrease. In the 1970s, about 15% of cities reduced their population to such an extent that even the natural population increase was unable to offset migration loss (ZDROJEWSKI, 2000). The phenomenon of central district depopulation

in cities was consistent with the one observed in western and socialist countries. In Western Europe, but also in former East Germany, this loss also entailed peripheral districts, therefore cities like Leipzig or Liverpool registered a significant total decrease of inhabitants (RINK ET AL., 2012).

As a result of a socio-economic crisis in the 1980s, a wave of migration outflow came, with reference to mostly large cities and those located within the historic Upper Silesia. The crisis caused mass migration of the population to some European countries (primarily Federal Republic of Germany) and emigration overseas, especially to the United States (ZDROJEWSKI, 2000). At the beginning of the 1980s, population growth in towns depended more on the natural increase than the migration balance or administrative changes. Since the mid-1980s, the number of births decreased and natural population increase in towns was slightly lower than migration balance.

The ongoing economic stagnation, and emigration abroad, resulted in the fact that in the years 1979-1988, there was a decline in the dynamics of urban population growth to 1.4% per annum (GAWRYSZEWSKI, 2005).

#### 4. A regional dimension of urban depopulation in Poland in the years 1946-1990

One of the key demographic phenomena in the initial phases of the postwar period was the further spatial redistribution of the population. Its result came in very different states of population in towns,

even within the same regions. This, in turn, was associated both with the state of war destruction, as well as the local economic base of cities.

However, the basic problem of population consisted of issues of national or supraregional importance: further migration in Poland and in the relationship: country – foreign countries, lack of political stability in areas connected to Poland, minority issues, in particular relating to the German population and, finally, social, political and economic problems, such as family disruptions, high infant mortality, disparity between the number of men and women, and also the lack of earning opportunities within the framework of the centrally planned command economy or hidden unemployment in rural areas. The totality of these factors affected the final image of differentiation in demographic processes taking place in particular regions of Poland (Table 1).

An isolated case relating to depopulation of a regional nature was a matter of changing the political boundaries between Poland and the Soviet Union in 1951. This concerned both the Sokalszczyzna and the region of Ustrzyki Dolne. In both cases, the rural, as well as urban areas periodically experienced a partial depopulation. The total depopulation of dozens of villages and several towns was also recorded in neighbouring areas of the Bieszczady Mountains, which was connected both with the battles with the Ukrainian underground and later, Operation Vistula (MARYAŃSKI, 1961). Still at present, apart from tourist areas, some villages are uninhabited there (SOJA, 2008).

Table 1. Number and share of towns in the contemporary Poland that noted population decrease, 1946-1990, according to the administrative division of 2014 (by author on the basis of Annex 2: Kantor-Pietraga, 2014)

Province	1946-1950		1950-1960		1960-1970		1970-1980		1980-1990	
	Total	%								
Dolnośląskie	30	13.2	0	0.0	5	7.8	20	18.5	8	15.1
Kujawsko-pomorskie	18	7.9	3	9.7	8	12.5	10	9.3	4	7.5
Lubelskie	16	7.0	3	9.7	0	0.0	4	3.7	1	1.9
Lubuskie	1	0.4	0	0.0	5	7.8	6	5.6	1	1.9
Łódzkie	13	5.7	1	3.2	2	3.1	2	1.9	3	5.7
Małopolskie	8	3.5	0	0.0	1	1.6	0	0.0	4	7.5
Mazowieckie	24	10.5	7	22.6	4	6.3	12	11.1	9	17.0
Opolskie	9	3.9	2	6.5	2	3.1	8	7.4	1	1.9
Podkarpackie	23	10.1	1	3.2	1	1.6	6	5.6	1	1.9
Podlaskie	10	4.4	2	6.5	5	7.8	4	3.7	1	1.9
Pomorskie	5	2.2	1	3.2	2	3.1	2	1.9	3	5.7
Śląskie	3	1.3	0	0.0	3	4.7	7	6.5	6	11.3
Świętokrzyskie	8	3.5	1	3.2	1	1.6	5	4.6	3	5.7
Warmińsko-mazurskie	3	1.3	0	0.0	2	3.1	1	0.9	1	1.9
Wielkopolskie	41	18.0	10	32.3	21	32.8	12	11.1	4	7.5
Zachodniopomorskie	16	7.0	0	0.0	2	3.1	9	8.3	3	5.7
Poland	228	100.0	31	100.0	64	100.0	108	100.0	53	100.0

The loss of population in central and eastern provinces was, in turn, conditioned by migration outflow associated with the settling of lands newly connected to Poland. There, throughout the 1940s, the German population was deported. In all the provinces in the area of the Recovered Territories, it was obvious that flows in population did not yet offset the losses resulting from hostilities and their consequences (OLECHNOWICZ, 1947; VON KOERBER, 1960; THE ZIELONOGORSKIE PROVINCE..., 1961; BANASIAK, 1963). However, in several regions (Lubuskie, Pomerania, Silesia, Warmia-Mazury) the stabilization trends were noticeable (Fig. 1). The number of towns that recorded a decrease in population there was significantly lower than those that registered population growth (SOJA, 2008).

Taking into account such geographical and historical factors as the location of a town before World War II in Poland or Germany and its size potential, it should be noted that starting from 1945, there was a group of towns particularly vulnerable to depopulation. They included small urban centres, located in the pre-war eastern German regions, in rural areas, which, during World War II, in most cases, suffered significant damage to their housing, municipal and economic

infrastructure. The study by KRZYSZTOFIK (2007) reveals that as many as 59 of them, due to the low rate of population, were deprived of their municipal rights in 1945.

Also, small towns untouched by the ravages of war found themselves in a difficult situation. VON KOERBER presented it in an interesting way (1960, p. 71): "Stabilization or decline in the population of small towns after 1948 was causally related to the reduction of their natural functions, which at least in their modest beginnings - in addition to the extensive "field " of robbery, sale, the black market, etc. - were formed in the early postwar years. Starting from the 1948/1949, the legal trade of goods, the supply of manufacturing and consumer goods, as well as the purchase of agricultural produce were made "similar" to villages, therefore taken away from small towns by their system of communal cooperatives, purchasing and contracting agents, cooperative farms, state assets and machine centres. Crafts also died out there or their leftovers were preserved in deterrent and inefficient form of "co-operatives". Few individual craftsmen still remained only in villages... It was even worse with services of all kinds, especially in the fields of health care and culture".

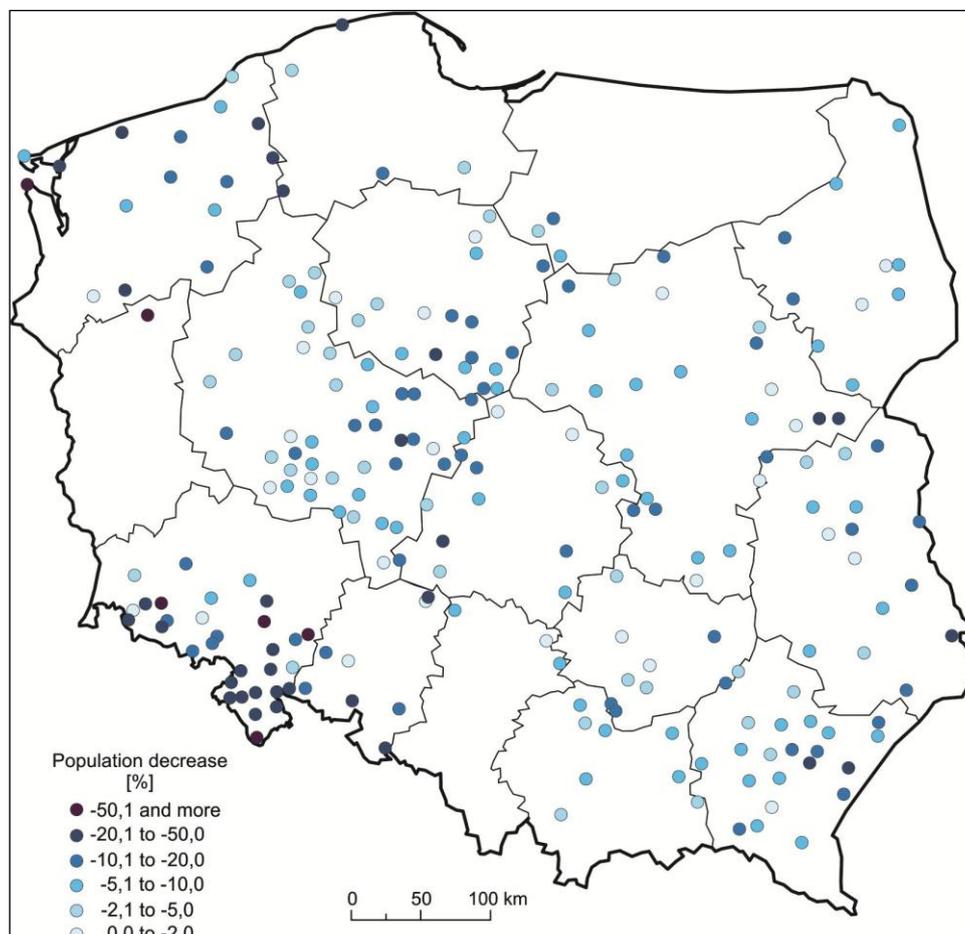


Fig. 1. Population decrease in towns of Poland, 1946-1950 (by author on the basis of Annex 2: Kantor-Pietraga, 2014)

The problem of degradation of crafts and small-scale production in the process of collapse (and depopulation) of small towns also drew the attention of KING (1967). However, in the later part of his studies, VON KOERBER (1960, p. 73), quoting the study by J. Karst, summarizes the demographic situation of small towns in the Recovered Territories, "all this meant that settlers did not establish a link with the new place of residence, did not get to like their town and considered their stay there temporary, seeking better conditions of earning and more attractive places."

This problem was particularly important in the course of subsequent demographic processes in the Recovered Territories, and had its connotations also in the case of depopulation of some towns. Advice on improving the living and working situation in small towns, including depopulating towns in the first post-war decades,

was presented in the studies of TŁOCZEK (1955) and KROL (1967).

The stabilization of the number of depopulating towns (the 1950s and 1960s) took place in all regions, with the exception of Mazovia and Greater Poland (Fig. 2). To some extent, it also concerned the area of the contemporary Kujawy-Pomerania and Lublin provinces. The biggest land area of depopulating cities led through the provinces of Greater Poland and Kujawy-Pomerania. DANGEL (1968, p. 211) located the central, non-industrial area on the border of the two provinces, which featured not only a noticeable trend towards depopulation of some towns, but also the lack of dynamic urban development in general, both in terms of their demographic potential, as well as an increase in the number of new towns. The reasons for this state of events are to be discerned in weak industrialization of the region.

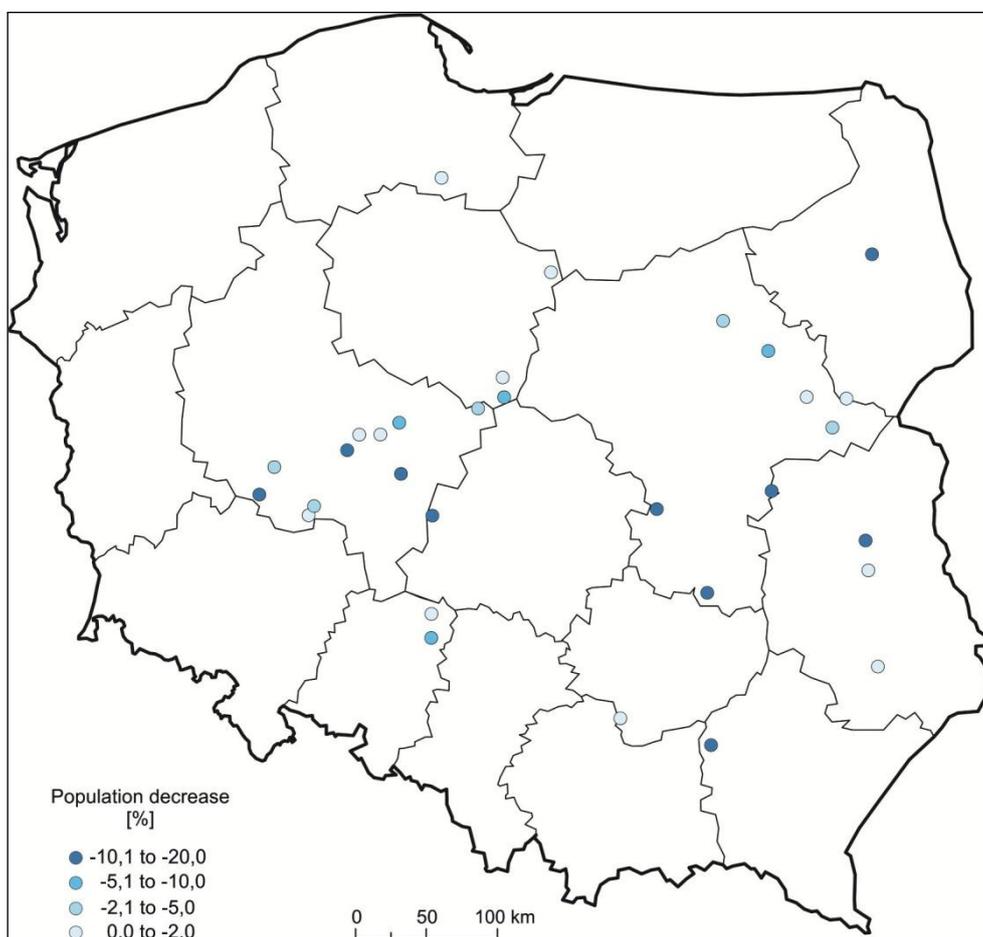


Fig. 2. Population decrease in towns of Poland, 1950-1960 (by author on the basis of Annex 2: Kantor-Pietraga, 2014)

The area of the contemporary Greater Poland province constituted an interesting example. The maximum growth trend of depopulating towns in this area was recorded in successive years of the 1960s. In the years 1960-1970, the loss of population was recorded there in as many

as 21 towns, while in the area of the adjacent Kujawy-Pomerania province - in 8 towns (Fig. 3). Thus, these two regions - the current Kujawy-Pomerania and Greater Poland provinces accounted for almost half of the cases of demographic decline in Polish towns in the 1960s. All of them refer to

small towns whose population did not exceed 20 thousand inhabitants, with very limited possibilities of development. At the same time, both in the Greater Poland region and the neighbouring Kujawy-Pomerania, an increase in the number of medium towns and cities was recorded, showing a sharp

increase in industrialization, and thus constituting real competition for small towns, located in rural areas. Development was often limited not only by the lack of industry, but also by poor transportation accessibility, making it difficult to commute to work in neighbouring centres.

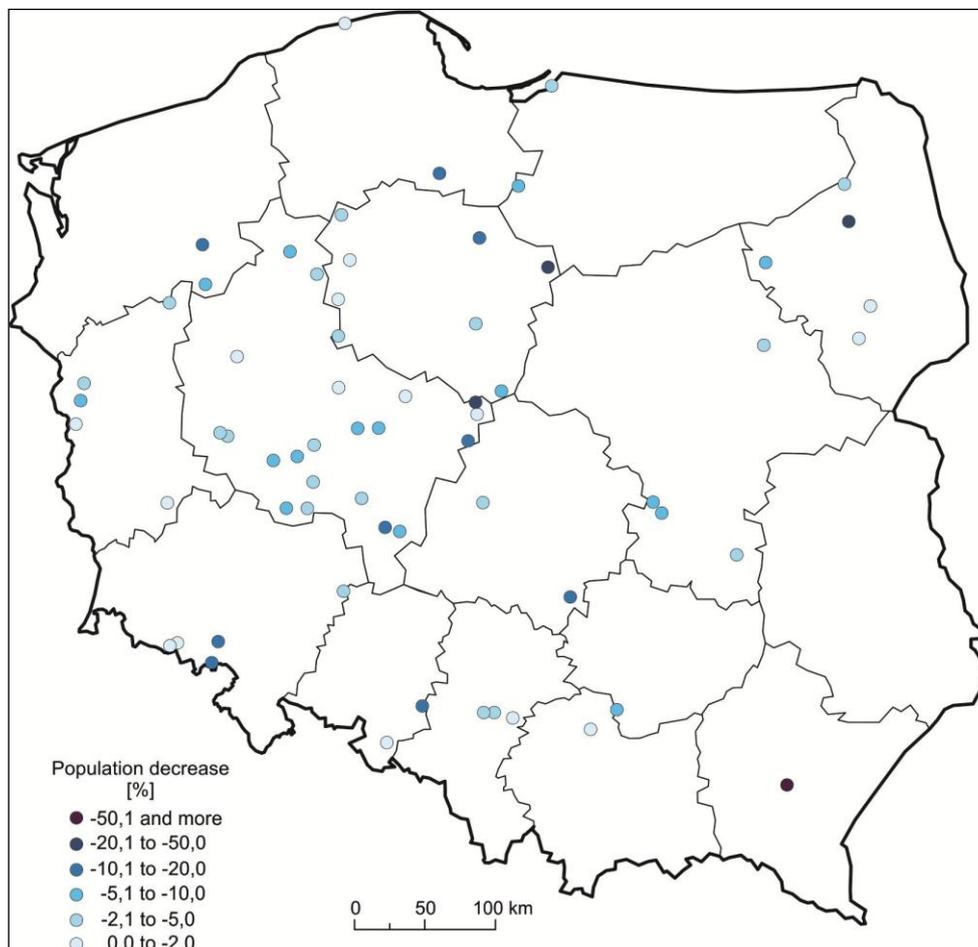


Fig. 3. Population decrease in towns of Poland, 1960-1970 (by author on the basis of Annex 2: Kantor-Pietraga, 2014)

Depopulation trends in some towns were noticeable in the same period also in Lower Silesia. In this respect, the region was similar to the neighbouring Czech Republic, and specifically to the so-called borderland inhabited by a German population before World War II (KOSIŃSKI, 1961). Analogies in this case can be seen particularly in relation to the Sudetes area.

The cause for the regression of some small towns could also be a paradoxically very dense urban settlement network. This is because it caused a distraction and depletion of development potential, which was directed by a larger number of towns. Also taking into account the restrictions in services and commercial activities of the time, the image of towns was created, which, from an economic point of view, were relatively susceptible to depopulation processes.

A visible increase in the number of towns experiencing population loss took place in the 1970s. It should also be noted that this sub-period, in terms of the studied decrease of the population, was the most highlighted in the analysed time frame of 1946-1990. Also, an increase in the number of regions in which the phenomenon occurred was very noticeable. Compared with the decade of the 1960s, as many as 10 of the 16 regions showed an increase in the number of depopulating towns (Fig. 4). In a few cases, this growth exceeded 100% (Lower Silesia, Mazovia, Opole, Podkarpackie, Swietokrzyskie, West Pomerania).

The phenomenon of urban depopulation in the 1970s shall be identified with migratory flows from the less economically developed regions of Poland to larger and, more importantly, still emerging industrial centres. The second group consisted of emigration regions, where the level

of industrialization was not the lowest, however, it was characterized by significant depreciation of infrastructure, local impact range, and relatively low salaries. Against this background, new industrial investments of the 1970s offered more favourable opportunities for higher salaries. In addition, living in a large urban centre became equally attractive for town inhabitants of eastern regions, as well as those from industrialized Lower Silesia. The influx of migration to cities in Poland in the 1970s was, therefore, was largely based also on migration from towns with no perspectives to emerging or rapidly expanding large industrial centres.

There was yet another problem – the so-called demographic capacity of towns, which, already in that period was pointed out by DANGEL (1974, p. 275). DANGEL referred this concept to the issue of the relationship of housing availability to the population, but with emphasis on the relationship: the location of jobs – the location of places of residence. Given these interactions, he drew attention to the fact of a significant scale of commuting, which is derived from a shortage of housing in developing cities, in contrast to stagnant or depressed cities, where the housing situation was

relatively more favourable. Deficiencies in housing in dynamically developing (industrialized) cities were thus a limitation of the scale of depopulation in mostly smaller towns of emigration character. DŁUGOSZ (1992, p. 22) indicates some other limitations. He emphasizes the role of registration limitations reported in the 5 so-called separated Polish cities and 22 other towns of the then province of Katowice, existing in the 1960s and 1970s.

The group of towns experiencing the highest intensity of the phenomenon of depopulation in this period accounted for very small towns, whose population, in most cases, did not exceed 5 thousand. This applied to almost all Polish regions. It is also difficult to interpret the phenomenon of depopulation in terms of the function of these towns. In the area of contemporary Lower Silesia they were spa towns as well as industrial towns. In this group, there was also Węgliniec, an important railway junction. However, the most distinctive group of small towns suffering from depopulation were local shopping and service centres that complemented their functions by so-called field industry (KANTOR-PIETRAGA, 2014).

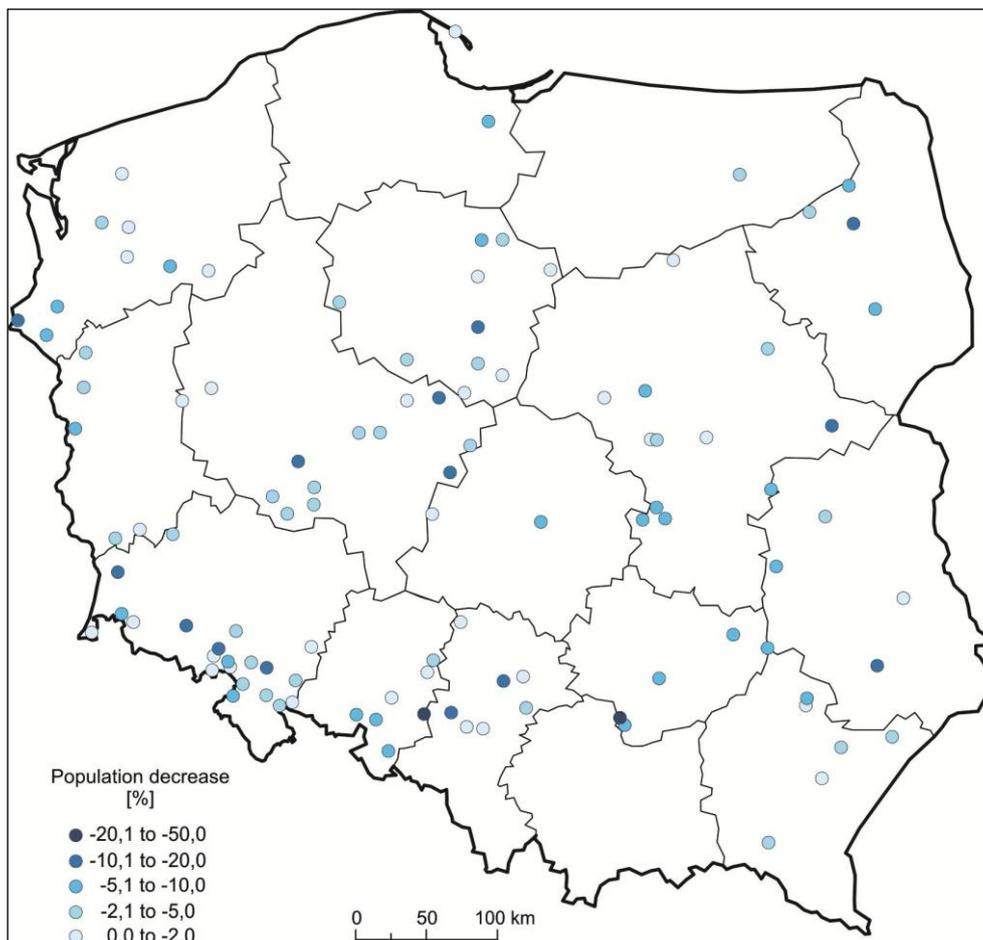


Fig. 4. Population decrease in towns of Poland, 1970-1980 (by author on the basis of Annex 2: Kantor-Pietraga, 2014)

Some conditions of urban depopulation were in this period merely regional. In the 1970s, depopulation was most evident in the area of the historic Upper Silesia (today parts of the Silesia and Opole provinces). In contrast to Lower Silesia, the post-war wave of migration to Germany here was limited. In the 1970s, as a result of the so-called family reunification process, but mainly due to economic opportunities created by emigration to the Federal Republic of Germany, the first wave of emigration to that country took place (GIERCZAK, 2015). The economic aspect superimposing the political and geographical aspect, is clearly reflected by the list of towns experiencing population loss in the 1970s in the area of the present-day province

of Opole. Apart from Paczków, all other emigration centres were located in the eastern – Upper-Silesian part of the region. In the Upper Silesian towns located within the present-day Silesian province, the migratory outflow was to a large extent offset by the influx from other Polish regions, which was connected with a much higher level of industrialization than in the region of Opole.

Distinct changes in the process of depopulation of towns in relation to the 1970s took place in the following decade: 1980-1990. The number of depopulating towns throughout Poland considerably decreased during this period (Fig. 5). In regard to the area of contemporary provinces, only in Warmia-Masuria was it similar to the 1970s.

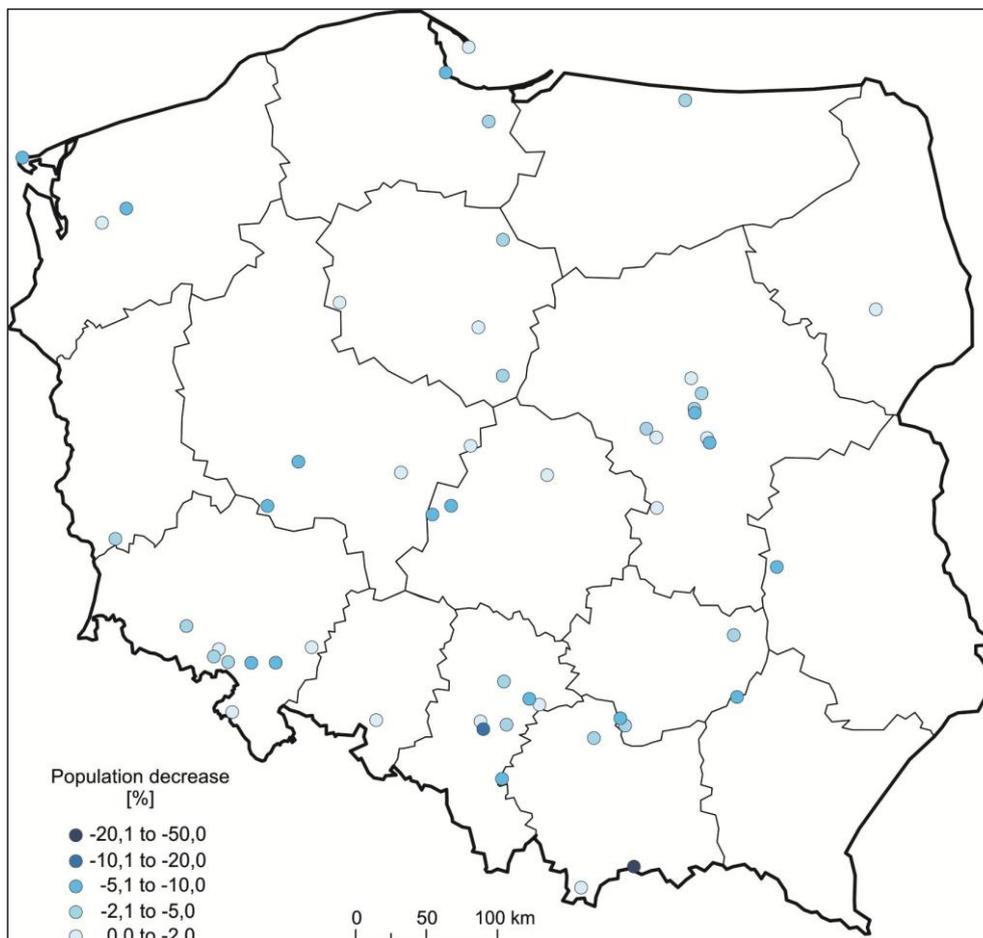


Fig. 5. Population decrease in towns of Poland, 1980-1990 (by author on the basis of Annex 2: Kantor-Pietraga, 2014)

Determinants of changes that took place in the 1980s, in relation to the phenomenon of urban depopulation, were demographic and socio-political. They were mainly the result of the compensatory boom with one of its consequences being the demographic and economic stabilization of society. After quite 'turbulent' transformations of the 1970s, with a high index of migration, in the next decade towns experienced consolidation of the newly established socio-demographic structures.

In the 1980s, living conditions improved to some extent. This involved not only widespread access to work, but also – increasingly – apartment ownership in the framework of multi-family housing, although the waiting period for apartment allocation was often several years. This was undoubtedly a result of the economic restructuring of Poland, initiated in the 1970s, and continued on a smaller scale in the 1980s.

Another important element determining the reduction in the number of depopulating towns was political problems and, above all, their consequences relating to martial law and the general economic crisis. The first of the factors affected only the first half of the 1980s, whereas the other continued to grow throughout the decade. Martial law and political turmoil in the early 1980s clearly influenced the restrictions in migrations. The reason for these restrictions was the decline in the number of new industrial investments, and thus – the reduction in the number and size of economic impulses, which constitute the essence of the influx, but also the outflow of migration.

In reference to the above comment relating to the attractiveness of cities (the 1970s and 80s), the position of small towns during this period undoubtedly decreased. Well-being was improved by satisfying professional, housing and other needs related to the comfort of everyday life (access to trade and multiple services). In the 1980s, the quality of life in cities significantly deteriorated, even at the level of basic human needs (food supply, problems with municipal services, etc.). Hence, in many cases, there was a barrier to leave a small town or village for larger urban centres.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

As indicated in previous chapters, urban development is not uniform in time and space. Even in this seemingly uniform socialist period. Particularly, scientific and popular literature published at the time, saw the process of urbanization in a rather schematic approach – sustainable development, defined mostly in terms of quantitative demographic growth. In fact, this development took place in most towns. Regardless of the number of reported increase in urban population, however, there was a simultaneous process of depopulation that took place in a fairly large group of towns.

This natural phenomenon, characterized by the existence of two opposing demographic trends within the defined stage of socio-economic transformations of regions and states, was also characteristic for the socialist period. This resulted primarily from spatial redistribution of the population stimulated by industrialization, the will to improve the quality of life, professional ambitions of residents, and also by local specifics of social or economic conditions.

The effect came in the form of the phenomenon of spatial mismatch of certain regions of the country to the increasing role of the above-mentioned

pro-development stimulants. Naturally, towns reporting high interest increase in the population had to be accompanied by demographically stagnant and regressive centres.

Duality of demographic transformations in towns of the socialist period, in terms of their population, continues today. But, compared to the previous period, the proportions have changed. Today, most towns record population loss. Earlier, this percentage did not exceed 10%. After 2010, the percentage of towns experiencing total population growth is similar. What is especially noticeable is the increase in depopulating and shrinking cities and medium-sized towns (KRZYSZTOFIK ET AL., 2012; RUNGE, 2013; SHRINKING CITIES..., 2014). In the years 1946-1990, this group of cities, in the majority, showed population growth.

Can we therefore assume, in retrospect, that the era of cities in Poland has ended? Probably not entirely. Depopulation of cities is largely caused by more general demographic trends associated with the concept of the second demographic transition (OKOLSKI & FIEHEL, 2012). The increase in urban population results therefore primarily from reported migration influx. Undoubtedly, while taking into account current trends of demographic development, a return to the previous state of the socialist period is not to be expected.

This period represented an important stage in the historical process of urban transformations. Population growth definitely stabilized the development of towns, and thereby contributed to the organization and development of economic and spatial structures. Undoubtedly, in many rapidly industrializing towns, a new model of local communities was created. At this point, one may put forward the thesis that the more a town diverted from this model, the more prone it was to depopulation. Even more so in the case of small towns located peripherally to the most important development cores. The paradox of contemporary times is that the same criteria that were important to keep population growth 30-40 years ago, are now insufficient.

The problem of uneven population development and the generally reported loss of urban population is going to become one of the fundamental research and policy challenges in the nearest future, not only in Poland but also in many European countries (MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ ET AL., 2012; GROSSMANN ET AL., 2013; HAASE ET AL., 2013; KANTOR-PIETRAGA, 2014; SHRINKING CITIES..., 2014). Is the past experience in this scope going to be helpful? Yes, especially when it allows us to capture basic phenomena and processes taking place regardless of the era.

Understanding the demographic past of towns is also important, due to the fact that the phenomena occurring today, despite some deception of being contrary, do not always represent their "mirror image". This is particularly important in the planning stages of towns and building their strategic image. Knowledge and understanding of demographic transformations of Polish towns after World War II should therefore be a solid starting point in the formulation of theses and rules regarding their future.

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