

Atlas of Small Towns (Poland) - assumptions and challenges

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Abstract:

More than 30 years have passed since the introduction of a new socio-economic and political system in Poland. It resulted in transformations in all sectors of the economy and in social and cultural life. Dynamic changes covered the entire area of the country, including small urban centers, which are the subject of this Atlas. The criterion for distinguishing a small town was the number of its inhabitants. It was assumed that it is a territorial unit with city rights, which has fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. At the time of the commencement of work on the Atlas (2019), there were 354 cities with less than 5,000 inhabitants, 184 cities with 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants and 184 cities with 10,000 to 20,000 inhabitants, which gave a total of 722 small cities. In the following years, due to the granting of city rights to new centers, their number increased slightly. Today, i.e. in 2025, there are already 817 such centers in Poland.

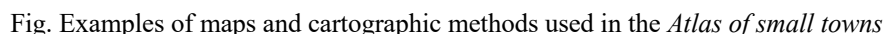
Small towns are characterized by socio-economic and functional specificity, which distinguishes them from medium and large cities and from rural areas (SMESTO 2003; TOWN 2014). At the same time, they are an important element of rural space and the system of cities (Courtney, Errington 2000; Cox, Longlands 2014; Powe 2013). On a local scale, they are the engines of economic development of rural regions. They are also a link in the system of connections between large urban centers and rural areas (Hinderling, Titus 2002). The relations of small towns with their rural surroundings affect the direction and level of local and regional development. Therefore, recognizing the state of development of small towns is an important and interesting research issue from the cognitive and application point of view (Bański 2021; Servillo et al. 2017).

A lot of studies are currently being created, the aim of which is to assess the socio-economic development of the country in a regional and local perspective. Scientific research and expert and evaluation studies commonly use maps, which synthetically and transparently present selected issues concerning the state of the spatial structure of the country. Unfortunately, they are usually fragmentary in nature, have different time and regional cross-sections, and very diverse presentation methods. Therefore, a need emerged to prepare a coherent cartographic study based on a uniform methodology and encompassing the entire spectrum of socio-economic issues related to small urban centres – from social and demographic phenomena, through economic structure to spatial development planning. Such requirements were set for the Atlas of Small Towns (Bański 2023). Its basic objective was to take a “picture” of the development status of small towns using the latest possible statistical data processed into a cartographic image.

The form and method of cartographic presentation were a major methodological challenge. Small towns are only small points on the map (to which specific quantitative or qualitative features should be assigned) and there are over 700 of them. Therefore, the variety of cartographic methods was clearly limited. Ultimately, point reference methods (qualitative or quantitative point signatures, point cartogram or diagrammatic choropleth map) presenting specific features of each centre were adopted for most maps. The mentioned methods enabled the identification of the features of individual small towns, but also made it possible to conduct their general diagnosis in relation to the presented topic. Additionally, they were supplemented by a surface reference method (isoline method), which allows for reading general regularities concerning the variability of features of small towns in the country.

The basic source material was data from the Central Statistical Office (Local Data Bank, National Census) and other statistical sources from public administration offices and from the IGiPZ PAN data sets. The statistical material refers primarily to 2019 or, in comparative terms, to previous years. The Atlas is an important source of information and its recipients are not only scientists, but also students, planners, public administration and a wide group of practitioners. In addition, the study can be used in the teaching process, primarily in higher education institutions.

The Atlas consists of nine sections that cover the full spectrum of socio-economic and spatial issues of small towns. These are: 1) Distribution of small towns, 2) Inhabitants, 3) Administration and finance, 4) Entrepreneurship, 5) Industry, 6) Housing and technical infrastructure, 7) Communication and connectivity, 8) Public services, 9) Spatial structure, 10) City planning by morphological typology.



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