

# Urbanonyms in small settlements: terra incognita of (Czech) place name studies

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## Abstract:

Much has been written about urbanonyms or the names of streets, squares, parks and other objects in various parts of the world, e.g. Azaryahu (1996), Alderman (2003), Light (2004), Palonen (2008), Berg – Vuolteenaho (2009), David (2011), David – Mácha (2014), Bucher et al. (2013), Eróss, (2017), Mácha et al. (2018), Berkemer – Stadler (2020), or Rusu (2021). This research included comparative and single case-studies, as well as synchronic and diachronic analyses tracing the development of urbanonyms in different localities. Thanks to these studies, we have learned about the evolution of urbanonyms in time and space and the differences in street naming practices in individual countries, languages, and regions. Furthermore, we have understood how historical events, changes of political regimes, and ethnic and linguistic diversity of cities influence the choice of urbanonyms, renaming policies, and the visual representation of urbanonyms in the city space.

A few exceptions notwithstanding – e.g. Gonzáles-Faraco – Murphy (1997), Gabbert (2007), David – Mácha (2014), Mokwena (2021) – the vast majority of these studies have focused on country capitals and other large cities as a primary arena for ideological struggles. There is very little available information on the names of streets, squares, parks, and other objects in small settlements. Although “rural urbanonymy” may sound paradoxical, hundreds and thousands of small villages and towns have officially or unofficially adopted street names and other urbanonyms across the Czech Republic and other countries. However, we do not know how widespread this practice is, what is the character of rural urbanonyms, and to what extent they compare to what we already know about the politics and practices of street naming in large cities.

The paper provides information about urbanonyms in small settlements in Czechia. The implementation of street names in small settlements is not mandatory, so it is an excellent subject for research on factors influencing their adoption and also about how people use official names to express their identities, political preferences, and spatial ties. The study estimates the number of municipalities with urbanonyms, identifies key spatial factors influencing their presence and character, and summarizes their typology, motivation, and level of identification. It is based on the analysis of a representative sample of municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants. The sample is stratified into three subsamples – Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia – due to systematic and statistically significant differences in population size and settlement area in these historical lands, but also due to historical differences in their development and the influence of regional and local identities. In Bohemia and Moravia, two random samples were drawn for each land – a total of 600 municipalities from Bohemia and 400 municipalities for Moravia. In Silesia, all municipalities falling under the population threshold of 5,000 (i.e. 249) were analysed due to their significantly smaller total number. In all, 1,249 municipalities were analysed which represents 20% of all municipalities in the country.

Statistically significant differences were found between Bohemian, Moravian, and Silesian municipalities. The last had the highest percentage of municipalities which have decided to adopt urbanonyms in their public space, officially or unofficially (30%). This strongly correlates with differences in the mean population size which is nearly two-times larger in Silesia than in Bohemia and Moravia. Indeed, population size has proven to be one of the key statistically significant factors explaining the presence of urbanonyms also within each subsample. However, it was not the only one. Another crucial factor was the mean distance from the nearest large town (over 25,000 inhabitants). Municipalities with urbanonyms were, on average, two times closer to large towns than municipalities without urbanonyms.

The predominant motivation of urbanonyms is the orientation function followed by traditional oral names and commemoration. The predominant level of identification is the local level. The greatest diversity exists in traditional oral names, which account for the largest proportion of unique names and occurrences. Significant differences exist between municipalities with the official town status on the one hand and townlets and villages on the other. Towns have a greater proportion of commemorative names and names with international and national levels of identification, while townlets and villages have a greater proportion of traditional oral names and names with regional and local levels of identification. In this respect, small towns are more like large cities than townlets and villages of the same size.

Among commemorative names, personalities dominate. Their vast majority is represented by Czech writers and politicians. The choice of personalities with the national level of significance is, however, rather limited compared to large towns and cities, showing a distilled and idealized nationalist version of Czech history. However, a high number of diverse local figures are commemorated, contributing thus to the strengthening of local identities.

Proximity to large towns correlated negatively with the percentage of commemorative names and the international and national levels of identification, while population size correlated positively with these variables. It would appear that larger municipalities and municipalities closer to large towns attempt to look more cosmopolitan and “worldly” while small municipalities and municipalities further away from large towns conserve more systematically strong local identities and traditional toponymic heritage.

Overall, however, local level of identification and the prevalence of non-commemorative names distinguish small settlements from large cities. Renaming is relatively rare and when it does occur, it is not always the result of political but rather aesthetic preferences. As in cities, a number of alternative names have been recorded as well which often replace official street names in everyday conversations. Further research is needed on the everyday toponymic practices and the use and perception of official urbanonyms. Also, a comparative research is called for to see whether small settlements in other countries manifest similar trends.

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