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NEW TRENDS IN SETTLEMENT DEVELOPMENT AND SETTLEMENT PLANNING OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC IN THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION

Abstract: This contribution outlines the principal tendencies of development of the settlement structure in the Slovak Republic during the recent transformational process (years 1990–1998). The focus is on the basic units and methodological problems of their delimitation, on the growth dynamics of urban and rural settlements and changes in their hierarchical position, on relations among the settlements, on the settlement processes and, finally, on reforms in the state conceptions of settlement planning, regions, towns and communities planning.

Key words: transformation period, settlement development, planning.

1. NEW TRENDS IN SETTLEMENT DEVELOPMENT

Following the significant political and social changes in Czechoslovakia after November 1989, the ensuing break-up of the country into the Slovak and Czech Republics, and the various pan-European tendencies (e.g. the processes of globalisation, European integration, emergence of the 'Europe of regions', renaissance of regionalism or localism, etc.), the settlement structure of Slovakia is being changed too.

The new situation is reflected in the research orientation of scholarly settlement studies. Analyses of these new trends in the settlement structure of Slovakia are now appearing in the scholarly literature (Bašovský, 1995;

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Bašovský and Slavík, 1993; Kára, 1990; Pašiak, 1993; Slavík, 1993a, 1998b), as have new approaches to town and regional planning (Hrdina, 1991; Hrdina, *et al.* 1994, 1997; Krampl, 1993; Slavík, 1998a), analyses comparing the common traits and specificities of the settlement structure and cities within Slovakia (Gajdoš, 1993; Pašiak, 1993) and within Central Europe more generally (Enyedi, 1990; Musil, 1992; Očovský, Bezák and Podolák, 1996; Slavík, 1993b; *Zentrensysteme ...*, 1994). Further, there has been a resurgence of studies dealing with the administrative functions of towns (Slavík, 1997a, 1997b), the new position of the capital Bratislava within the reorganised settlement system (Buček, 1995; Divinský, 1998; Faltan, 1997; Heriban *et al.*, 1992; Korec and Smatanová, 1997) and many others.

1.1. Basic settlement units

'Communities' are the basic territorial units in the Slovak Republic. Variations in their number depend on the predominating integrative or disintegrative tendencies in a given period. While the number of communities was decreasing during the whole post-war period (in 1989 reaching the lowest value in the entire modern history of Slovakia, i.e. 2,694 communities), thanks to disintegration of settlements the number of communities has increased during each year of the transformational period (in the years 1990–1998 by 200 approximately). In addition to the changes in number of communities, community names have also been changing at a significant rate in the contemporary time. The latter is of course typical of periods after important social-political transformations, though in Slovakia it concerns above all southern communities, with the return of the appellation 'saint', or contrariwise the abrogation of the appellation 'Russian', etc.

'Communities' are divided into two elementary categories: 'towns' and 'rural settlements'. Defining a 'town' has been a perennial methodological problem in urban geography. A principal change as to the town definition in the Slovak Republic was effectuated within the last population census in 1991. In contrast to former post-war censuses (i.e. in 1961, 1970, 1980), the special town classification was then replaced by a statutory criterion, according to which there are at present 136 towns in Slovakia (table 1, figure 1).

Table 1. Towns in Slovakia by classification in censuses and by statute in 1961–1998

Category	1961		1970		1980		1991	1998
	classif.	statute	classif.	statute	classif.	statute	statute	statute
Towns	51	66	70	117	146	121	135	136
Little towns	58	–	71	–	–	–	–	–



Fig. 1. Administrative division of Slovakia

Unfortunately even some official statistics, such as those of the UN, have not kept up with changes in the status of settlements. No less a publication than the UN's *World urbanisation prospects 1993* utilised an old definition from 1961 for former Czechoslovakia. Though *World urbanisation prospects 1995* utilised a more recent definition, official Slovak government classifications have nevertheless changed twice since the publication date.

Division of communities into lesser statistical units presents another methodological problem. At present the communities in the Slovak Republic are divided into the 'community parts' and so-called 'basic settlement units' (BSU). The community parts were first delimited in 1961 as the hierarchically lowest settlement units. In such way a 'compact community', one that cannot be further subdivided into 'parts', was also apprehended as itself a community part (as the lowest unit). In 1970, after introduction of the BSU system, this compositional principle was broken, a state that persists up to now.

Since 1970 Slovak communities consist of the above-mentioned BSU. These are called 'town-planning areas' in selected (more important) towns, and 'settlement localities' in other towns and rural settlements. It has to be stressed that both categories have been created by totally different criteria. While 'settlement localities' are point units with at least 30 permanently residing persons (inhabitants) and is exactly localised in the space, 'town-planning areas' are surface units designed on the basis of a dominant function and covering the whole cadastral territory of a town without even the necessity of a permanently residing population. That is the reason why these different units should be separately registered and evaluated.

1.2. Growth dynamics of urban and rural settlements

Prevalence of smaller settlements is characteristic of the system of Slovak communities; the communities with 200 to 1,000 inhabitants have retained their dominant position comprising 56.6% of all communities. The overall share of inhabitants across all size categories is nevertheless relatively balanced, with over 10% residing in the 6 categories reaching the highest population concentration (20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants). At the same time, this is the category with the biggest population increase.

In the preceding decades the towns were the most dynamically growing element of the settlement structure. Following the dynamic growth of Slovak towns in 1970–1980, bigger than ever before, and after the gradual slowing in the following decade, it is the process of stagnation that is evident today. This slowing is a result of both the unfavourable demographic situation and stagnation in housing construction throughout the country.

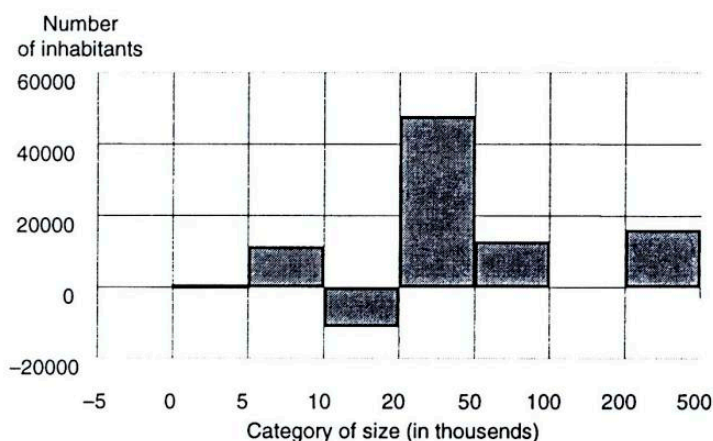


Fig. 2. Increase (decrease) of town category of size in Slovakia 1991–1997

Since 1970 the town category with 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants has been the most numerous one. The biggest share of urban population is however concentrated in the category with 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants – almost 900,000 persons live in such towns (figure 2). The absence of bigger towns with 100,000 to 200,000 inhabitants is a defining characteristic of the Slovak settlement structure. According to *Project of urbanisation of the Slovak Republic* and its periodic updates (1976, 1983, 1988), by the year 2000 4 large urban conurbations should have appeared due to continued concentration of population in the transformational period. But the current trends of stagnation and

disintegration of communities overall mitigate against the fulfilment of this prognostication. Town growth is at a low ebb, with some towns even manifesting a decrease in the number of their inhabitants. Up to 29 of the 136 towns in Slovakia have been decreasing in population owing to disintegration of communities and negative trends in natural population movement and migration in the years 1991–1996. Only the town category with the biggest share of inhabitants (20,000 to 50,000 persons) has seen any increase. This is in sharp contrast to the pre-1989 period when no size category of towns in Slovakia recorded a decline of its population.

1.3. Changes in the town hierarchy

The most radical changes in development after 1989 affected the hierarchy of the Slovak towns as a result of reforms in the country's administrative arrangements. These were modified twice in the period 1990–1996 changing in particular the position of towns as administrative centres.

After abrogation of the 'regions' in 1990 a transitory stage in organisation of the local state administration was achieved between 1991 and 1996. Subsequently the 'districts' as the second level of the local state administration were dismantled. Also the new territorial units – 'areas' – were created as the first level of the local state administration. Considering that the number of the areas (i.e. 121) substantially exceeded that of the former little districts (i.e. 77 to 95), unusual towns came to be classified among the administrative centres. The absence of the regional level of the state administration and formation of the specialised state administration with its centres during the years 1991–1993 were characteristic of this transitional period. Attempts at decentralisation of some central institutions from Bratislava, towns such as Košice or Banská Bystrica for example were a new tendency.

This transitional period ended with passage of the new Act of National Council of the Slovak Republic (no. 221/1996) on the territorial and administrative division of the country. In this Act 7 biggest cities and the 9th biggest one (i.e. Trenčín) became the seats of the reorganised administrative regions. Moreover, through establishing 79 districts the Slovak Republic has in fact reinstated the system of 'small districts' that has been used during all previous historical periods. Most protests and objections were, not surprisingly evoked by the selection of districts' seats. The biggest conflicts for a district's seat took place in the case of 'twins' – towns lying close to each other with competing claims to primacy. In these cases purely political decisions usually prevailed over detached objective criteria.

Another significant tendency coherent with the hierarchy of settlement centres in the transformational period is the gradual designation as 'towns' of settlements with university or top education facilities. While before 1989 we could find in Slovakia only two university centres (Bratislava and Košice) although a further 6 cities were the seats of comparable institutions, currently the cities of Nitra, Banská Bystrica, Žilina, Prešov and Trnava are the centres of new universities as well, and in this year (1997) the smallest regional centre, Trenčín has also become the seat of a university.

Since creation of the fully independent Slovak Republic, Bratislava has been establishing itself as the capital of the country and is being incorporated into the system of European capitals.

1.4. Relations among settlements and settlement processes

In the current transformational stage we can observe a tendency of decreasing intensity in some relations among settlements in Slovakia, above all in those at a greater distance. Economic transformations are reflected in reduced commuting. Stagnation in house-building in towns has caused marked depression of migratory flows to towns and an overall migration decrease. Continued informatisation and new technologies should bring major changes in intensity as well as in structure of relations among settlements in the future. With regard to the processes of European integration, interregional and interurban relations should render a new dimension.

After 1989, at which time the number of officially designated communities in Slovakia reached its lowest value in the country's modern history (i.e. 2,694) thanks to the preceding phase of community integration, the trend has been wholly overturned with a process of community disintegration now taking place. This was, in part, one of the first manifestations of democratisation in our society and, as a matter of fact, it was a reaction to the most flagrant cases of groundless community integration pursued in the preceding period (Slavík, 1994). Disintegration of communities reached its highest intensity in 1990, in the moment of post-revolutionary euphoria, continuing rather more sporadically in subsequent years. Somewhat paradoxically, while disintegration of rural settlements was more pronounced in absolute terms, the most substantial changes to population and settlement structure were caused by disintegration of towns.

Notwithstanding the process of disintegration of Slovak communities, inefficiency of the functioning of self-administration in a large number of settlement units has been cited from the very beginning of the transformational process as a perhaps larger problem. Development of a new conception of 'joint

community councils' suggests a certain resolution of local self-government reform.

Radical change in the development trajectory of our society markedly alters the direction of the urbanisation process in the Slovak Republic. The process of concentration of population in towns as a part of the preceding urbanisation process has been stopped, or even reversed. We may expect the beginnings of Western-style suburbanisation (in fact already now taking place in hinterlands of the biggest cities) and, perhaps, also of counterurbanisation (so far braked only by legislative fiat). In place of the construction of new urban places, renovation and modernisation of existing settlements will be accentuated. The rational arrangement of the space – economisation of settlement – will be the primary aspect.

After the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1994, a new state in Europe is being established according to new urbanisation processes and possibilities. As a part of Czecho-Slovakia, the territory of Slovakia was among the most urbanised countries of the world in terms of the share of urban population (e.g. in 1990 Czecho-Slovakia was in the 10th place with 77.5% of urban population). In the recent structure of 43 analysed units in Europe published in *World urbanisation prospect* (1995) the Slovak Republic takes the 34th position ahead of Ireland, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Rumania. An interesting fact is that all newly created states with the exception of Moldavia and Bosnia-Herzegovina exhibited higher urbanisation rates than Slovakia. The considerably lower urbanisation degree of the Czech Republic (i.e. 66.5%) compared to former Czecho-Slovakia is surprising too.

2. NEW TRENDS IN PLANNING OF SETTLEMENTS

After 1989 there emerged an understandable aversion to the term 'plan' amongst Slovak politicians, resulting in the closure of the country's most important planning institutions, including the Research Institute of Regional Planning (VUOP) and the State Institute for Territorial Planning (URBION). After this initial expression of rejectionism however the necessity of urban planning was reasserted, this time through the newly established private project institutions. From 1995 the institution dealing with the problems of regional policy, the Commission for Strategy of Development of Society, Science and Technology was created out of the Centre of Strategic Studies (itself established in 1991).

The *Conception of territorial development in Slovakia* (1994, revised 1997) is considered as the most significant document dealing with the planning of

settlements in Slovakia. In this document as well as in other related strategic plans there is a renewed effort to plan new trends in settlements in accordance with European or global settlement tendencies.

2.1. The state conceptions and documents

2.1.1. The conception of territorial development in Slovakia

The directive document that controlled the process of urbanisation in Slovakia during the former regime (*Project of urbanisation in SR* and its updating, 1976, 1983, 1988) has already been replaced by the new *Conception of territorial development in Slovakia* (1994, revised 1997). This document of course starts from a completely new set of assumptions about the changed conditions of territorial development and the requirements of gradual and systemic incorporation of Slovakia into European structures. New settlement interrelations are not only based on changed political and economical conditions in Slovakia, but also on relations and conditions of so-called post-industrial stage of society development.

In the *Project of urbanisation* document the settlement system in Slovakia should be reconfigured in terms of a polycentric settlement system (based on Christallerian assumptions about relative competitive ability against other European regions) with the emphasis on national regional centres as the main foci of development, with the support of territorial-settlement interconnection of regions close to the border and gradual improvement of international interconnection of Slovakia with Europe.

The document distinguishes two types of basic settlement structures: the 'focus of settlements' and the 'axis centre'. Foci of settlements are settlements aggregated around particular settlement centres (the pole of development). There are four hierarchic levels of settlements centres as follows:

- of state and international significance (6),
- of regional and state significance (6),
- of regional significance (7),
- of local significance (19).

The main development poles are settlement foci of the highest hierarchic level where the centres are major cities or national capitals. The Slovak term – settlement focus – is meant to be interchangeable with internationally recognised terms such as 'urban regions' or 'agglomerations'. 'Development axes' as the second type of basic settlement structures are divided into 'settlement development belts' and 'communication-settlement (interconnected) axes (figure 3).

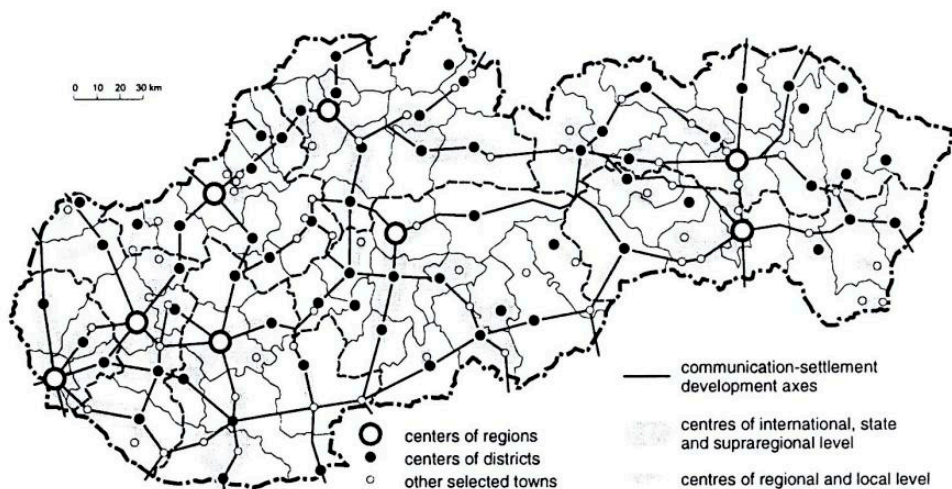


Fig. 3. Development centres and axes of Slovakia

The reconceptualisation of the Slovak settlement system starts from two basic premises: integration into the pre-existing European settlement network and the formation of optimal conditions for harmonious and effective development of all activities of society.

Linkage to the European settlement network means not only the acceptance of European conceptions of settlement network development and the conceptions of neighbouring countries respectively, but also the introduction onto the European stage of Slovak ideas about the optimal interconnection and utilisation of settlement structures.

From the viewpoint of international relations and according to the official conception, the *Project of urbanisation*, the realities dominating settlement structures development in Slovakia are as follows:

- geomorphological characteristics in Europe and Slovakia (Alps, Carpathians, Danube) providing some unique advantages as well as barriers;
- from the viewpoint of settlement and urban characteristics in the Central European region and in agglomerations of European significance (Vienna, Budapest, Katowice, Ostrava) that can positively influence the structural development in Slovakia;
- settlements along frontiers or short distances from larger cities (Brno, Bielsko-Biała, Nowy Targ, Mukačevo, Lvov, Győr, Miskolc) will be important for subsequent development of settlement structures in Slovakia;
- European communication networks will be able to influence the development of settlement structures in Slovakia mainly in 'multimodal' corridors of European significance and as they contact or pass through Slovakia.

Of course it is recognised that a strong influence will be exerted on contemporary settlement planning in the transformational period by the inertial moments of the preceding state system.

2.1.2. The settlement planning in Slovakia and global documents

New trends of settlement development in Slovakia and changes in their planning have been discussed in European and World conferences devoted to settlement development issues. These include the documents *Agenda 21*, *Agenda Habitat*, *Europa 2000*, *Europa 2000+* as well as the other European publications dealing with planning (*The European charter of regional planning*, *The European charter of cities*, *The European charter of local and regional autonomy*). The Slovak government's response to these international statements was presented in the *National report* about settlement and living development in SR tabled at the Conference of United Nations Habitat II.

2.2. Planning of regions

The absence of effective mechanisms of regional policy (despite government passage of the *Principles of regional economical policy* in 1991) was a significant brake on regional development during the first years of the transformation period. In reaction to this situation, the existing Centre of Strategic Studies was transformed in 1995 into the Commission for Strategy of Development of Society, Science and Technology in the Slovak Republic as the lead institution in developing regional policy. Even so the reduced ability to solve the regional problems resulted from the absence of basic legislative documents elsewhere in the administrative sphere, from the absence of the regional degree of state administration in 1991–1996, and from the absence of autonomous regions (particularly substituted by the system of regional agglomerations of cities and rural communities).

During the transformation period, attention has been paid to the solution of a new phenomenon in regional development – unemployment and the problems of economically backward regions. The development of wider co-operation across borders was in fact decelerated by the aforementioned legislative deficiencies and the lack of full Slovak participation in two Euroregions (Euroregion Carpathians and Euroregion Tatras). After 1997 the government further elaborated on the overall regional policy conception, in particular in the areas of linking regional policymaking on the republic level with county-level

policymaking. Such steps are taken in full conformity with the *European charter of regional and spatial planning*.

In the *National report* (1996) the discussion of regional policy listed the following priorities: the further elaboration of regional development law, development of institutions and infrastructures of regional administration, the establishment of new programmes of regional development, co-ordination of regional development with territorial planning, the improvement of interregional labour mobility. During 1997–1998 there were finished the territorial plans of all 8 new administrative regions – counties.

2.3. Planning of town and rural communities

How is the planning of smaller towns and rural communities being handled currently? The reintroduction of self-administration for cities and villages (after more than 40 years) was a considerable change that enabled settlements to enact comprehensive plans, new decision-making structures and economic initiatives. During the first years of the transformation period the formation of new territorial plans for Slovak cities mostly stagnated (in part due to the noted aversion to plans and planning). More recently the situation has improved and at present there have been approved the territorial plans for a great many Slovak cities, with others nearing completion. In cities where the construction of new apartments under the former regime (continued by the current government) was not completed, the construction of new apartments was stopped.

The concentration of attention on the restructuring of historic cities centres as well as removal of negative influences of the former regime is considered as a positive fact at the present stage of cities planning. The recovery of self-administration and independent economy of cities enabled it. The results of 'positive' reconstruction of historic centres in more Slovak cities are considerably higher than results from whole period of 'socialistic construction'.

The elaboration of urban development strategies (Bratislava, 1993, 1997, Trenčín, 1995) that should solve the position of cities in regions and their role in regions development is the newest tendency in planning of cities and regions in SR.

The rural settlement system as a whole is in crisis. The aging of rural inhabitants, stagnation of construction, continued emigration, insufficiency of employment vacancies are characteristic phenomena. The formation of territorial plans for rural settlements stagnates (financial insufficiency) what decelerates legislative conditions for faster course of starting suburbanisation processes mainly in the vicinity of larger cities. The *Program of village revitalisation* (the idea is coming from Austria and Germany) tries to solve countryside planning.

There is now the official government program (the government resolution on this programme is involving more and more villages, though its parameters are strictly limited to 'methodological' issues. Recently agrotourism, as one of the forms of rural tourism development, has received more attention with many villages in Slovakia having high potential for such activities.

3. CONCLUSION

The significant socio-economic transformations experienced in Slovakia since 1989 have had strong effects on both the structure of settlement planning and on the structure of settlements themselves. These experiences have been carefully considered in this paper, as have parallel processes of integration into European settlement structures and assimilation of international town planning charters. It may be that the most significant planning document, the *Conception of territorial development in Slovakia*, sufficiently includes the newest trends of settlement development. However, its implementation requires much more change, especially in the legislative sphere where the process of assimilating European documents has been too slow. However, the time horizons will also depend on dynamics of changes in other subsystems of society.

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