

ACADEMIA Geography

POLAND'S SHRINKING MIDSIZE CITIES

ACADEMIA: What prompted you to analyze the recent situation of medium-sized cities?

PRZEMYSŁAW ŚLESZYŃSKI: I've been studying these issues for many years. Our Institute has been working with the Polish Ministry of Development for over a decade. I was one of the experts who worked on Prime Minister Morawiecki's Strategy for Responsible Development. The incumbent government decided to examine the condition of midsize cities to find out which of them need help.

Why was that considered a priority?

Someone in the government finally realized that the polarization-diffusion model of socioeconomic development, which was treated as a dogma in spatial planning by almost all governments since 1990, didn't work in Poland. That model urged the concentration of development in major metropolitan areas – “major” by our standards, of course – in the hope that they would

serve as the growth engines of their regions. We already know that this didn't happen, and there were many reasons for that. In my opinion, it was chiefly because midsize cities didn't work as an interface between these centers and the peripheries together with their infrastructure. A top law firm is unlikely to open its office in Żagań, because it's not the seat of the largest corporations, which create demand for such services. For the same reason, young and educated people who have professional aspirations and want to pursue a career will move to Warsaw, not Żagań, which lacks good jobs in good companies. In order to successfully reinclude midsize cities into the system, we need to halt certain unfavorable trends. First of all, we need to limit

Prof. Przemysław Śleszyński from the PAS Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization in Warsaw (author of an extensive study of 122 medium-sized Polish cities) explains why Poland's midsize cities are facing depopulation.

the excessive concentration of various functions – public administration offices, the headquarters of big corporations, law firms, and media companies – in just a handful of big cities. That's because pay levels will automatically go up and remain high in such cities, making them attractive for migrants. For that reason, the largest urban agglomerations in Poland, in particular Warsaw, attract the best educated individuals, ones who are resourceful and enterprising. Individuals who accept the pace of life in the capital, with all the traffic jams, the lack of time, and sometimes a 12-hour workday. From the perspective of the efficiency of the economy, that may be good for the capital and partly for the whole of the country, but it is disastrous and degrading for social and family life. It's nothing short of pathological. Consequently, two factors have played a role: my interests and the interests of my associates on the one hand and the government's willingness to help midsize cities tackle their problems on the other. I support this concept strongly, because midsize cities are very important.

Why is that?

Poland has a polycentric structure of settlement. Polish cities differ in size and are distributed relatively evenly across the country. For historical reasons, the west of Poland is obviously more urbanized than the east, and the north is less densely populated than the south. Poland is one of Europe's most polycentric countries, which is exceptionally beneficial. A similar



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situation can be observed partially in Germany and to a much smaller extent in Spain, Sweden, and Hungary. In those latter countries, the capital city sometimes accounts for half or more of the country's socioeconomic potential. Meanwhile, a sustainable system of urban settlement is good, because it facilitates synergies and has no negative feedback. Metaphorically speaking, the big don't eat the small. The results of the analysis I made prove that this favorable system is changing in Poland, and polarization is growing between Warsaw and several major agglomerations (Wrocław, Poznań, Kraków, and the "Tri-City Area" including Gdańsk, Sopot and Gdynia) on the one hand, and midsize cities on the other.

The list of the cities that are in danger also includes the ones that have slightly over 200,000 inhabitants, for example Radom and Sosnowiec. Can we call these midsize?

A medium-sized city typically has between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. For the purpose of the Strategy, however, those cities were taken into account whose status was somewhat lower than the capital of a province (*voivodship*). As for Upper Silesia and the Dąbrowa Basin, these regions indeed comprise such cities as Zabrze, Sosnowiec, and Bytom. The Katowice urban area has some unique characteristics. In certain aspects, it should be viewed as an entire region. However, it is strongly diversified – some urban centers, like Bytom, are experiencing considerable problems.

What could be done in practice to boost midsize cities?

There are several proposals. One of them consists of a package of various measures under Prime Minister Morawiecki's Strategy for Responsible Development. The current government is very open to changes. It has accepted many of our ideas related to settlement issues, probably unlike any other government before it. For example, the idea that if midsize cities regain their former position, they will be able to attract migrants, which will ward off their most important problem, namely depopulation.

Where would those migrants come from?

That's something that's difficult in practice. On the one hand, Poland has one of the world's lowest fertility rates – below the replacement level over the past several decades. What poses an even more serious problem, however, is the historically largest-ever exodus of Poles to foreign countries. It started back in the 1980s with the typical brain drain: it is estimated that one-fourth of Polish nationals with higher education left – back then, only several percent of the population had university degrees. Around 700,000–800,000 individuals left. Those were often engineers, doctors, culture creators – in a word, the country's elite. A vast

majority of those who left did not come back. Poland spent a large amount of money to educate them, and the West received highly-qualified workers. That was yet another reason behind the drop in fertility rates.

The problem became even more acute after 1989.

There are cities in Poland in which half of the local inhabitants migrated abroad or to larger cities after the fall of communism. Unemployment and the collapse of industrial facilities deprived midsize cities of economic prospects and resulted in low earnings, so people started to leave again. In 2004, the year in which we joined the EU, the number of Poles who had left reached one million. In 2007, Poland's Central Statistical Office calculated that so-called temporary emigration, for a period of over 12 months, had reached 2 million. For around 10 years, the number of Poles who have emigrated to the EU countries has hovered around 2–2.5 million. And these are, for the most part, people who didn't join the population of midsize cities for economic reasons.

Are migration trends still so strong among the Poles?

Fewer and fewer people are leaving. Smaller towns, rural areas, peripheries, less densely populated areas, where pay levels are lower, no longer have such potential in the form of people who could emigrate. I'd like to stress that migration as such is nothing bad, if those who leave are replaced by others or by new generations. But the number of new births is now too low.

Why is that?

One of the reasons is the Second Demographic Transition, a theory that explains the changes in marriage and family behavior. It was formulated by the Dutch researchers Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk van de Kaa in the 1980s. According to this theory, as civilization advances, people become less likely to get married and to have and raise children or they keep postponing reproductive decisions. They sometimes adopt lifestyles that are based on consumerism and hedonism. Some highly-developed countries, such as France, Germany, and many other countries of Western Europe, experienced this already back in the 1970s. Poland did so, too, but 20 years later. That's because the more conservative a country is, the later it experiences the Second Demographic Transition. Family has always been very important to us, but "yet again" something "bad" came to us from the West and we stopped getting married and having children! One's career is all that matters! An educated woman wants to work all day and then go to the movies, instead of cooking and washing diapers. Of course, that's a malicious simplification, but it metaphorically shows a certain dangerous trend in mass culture characterized by a shift away from family values, egoism, the rat race, and so on.

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But many educated women in France have two or three children.

That's where we get to the bottom of the problem. In our part of the world, both spouses can work and fulfill their professional, personal, cultural, and other needs, which is a great achievement of modern-day civilization. However, that requires them to successfully reconcile work and family life. That's why pro-family policy is so important here. Such a policy was strikingly absent in Poland after 1990, perhaps even earlier. Many factors contributed to that situation, but I think that the fact that the state no longer felt responsible for citizens, a certain U-turn away from the excessive social welfare or even pathological supervision of many spheres of life in the Polish People's Republic. I remember that the labor minister called for the establishment of daycare centers in the workplace around 2006. That was a great idea, it would have allowed parents to save many hours of the time they spent commuting and mothers to often continue their jobs without risking being driven out of the job market. The idea was mocked mercilessly only because the minister represented the party Self-Defense. She was accused of having ideas "taken straight from the Polish People's Republic," there was talk of "socialist relics."

Those accusations were absurd.

Unfortunately, however, they were formulated by influential media outlets. Since that time, such absurdities have only worsened in Poland, because the ideological and political divisions have deepened. The Poles have lost their common sense. There are still too many people who can't think independently, who allow themselves to be guided by the media message, who judge others based on their political leanings. That's a complex problem that results from the lack of civic engagement. In other countries, in turn, democracy has developed since the 18th or 19th century. Some parties have evolved for a hundred years...

...and the same newspapers have been published without interruption for 200 years...

...whereas our country was under partition. In the interwar period, the country was also very divided, but a lot was done, there were certain self-preservation instincts on strategic issues, Piłsudski talked to Dmowski. After that, there was the war, the period of communism – what could be built in such conditions? Especially in a country whose geographic and geopolitical location between Germany and Russia is so unfortunate. We are still behind the countries in which democracy was built.

Let's get back to demographic problems. What is the second reason behind low fertility rates?

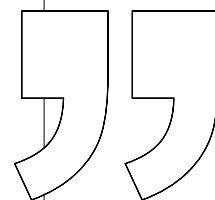
Economic factors. Many studies show that young people are hindered in starting a family by insecurity

about their future, which is related to the risk of losing a job, having no apartment, and so on. All these "junk" contracts, difficulties getting mortgage loans. At the same time, the Poles are a very responsible nation in the individual sense. On the one hand, they cherish family and traditional values; on the other, they think about their future. If parents don't have sufficient income as a result of a specific job market situation, they don't want to extend their family to prevent their children from living in greater poverty. I'm largely speculating, but the theory of fertility that was proposed in the West in the 1960s by Becker and Leibenstein in a sense highlighted that problem, in the context of not the welfare of children but the fact that the parents fear their standards of living will fall or they won't be able to earn more, because they will have to look after the family. Admittedly, the modern-day economic factors or even purely economic issues generally play an excessive role in social life.

That has not changed for many years.

But why? This needs to be studied. Another important issue for midsize cities was the administrative division reform, which was carried out in 1999. There are more and more arguments in favor of the claim that lowering the number of provinces to 15 from the previous 49 was not an optimum solution and that it contributed to growing disparities between regions, that a decision was made to invest only in the development of

In Poland, we have to think about resolving the problem of transportation and traffic jams, especially by reducing daytime mobility.



provincial capitals. From the outset, researchers have agreed in their criticism of this model, which failed to reflect actual burdens and spheres of influence, was characterized by numerous historical and cultural contradictions, and so on.

What should be done about this?

The old division of the country had not only advantages but also disadvantages. One of the fundamental shortcomings was the fact that the old provinces were too small to pursue a reasonable and effective regional and pro-development policy. Things might look better if the model of regional policy were more centralized, because we can see high tension between regions, which are vying for funds for investment projects. This

results in chaos in investment policy and, by the same token, ineffective spatial planning. Therefore, if we were to return to a division based on more provinces, the number would definitely not be as high as 49.

My analyses show that there are two optimum administrative division models for Poland. One of them could involve reducing the number of provinces (*voivodships*) to a maximum of 10 or 12, with no more than 120 counties (*powiats*). The reform of the 1990s essentially restored the system of counties that had existed previously for historical and cultural reasons. This was a mistake, because that former division had been designed for the times when people had moved on horseback, when population mobility was different. Today, we use cars, so we can get from the capital city of one county to the capital of another in a matter of a quarter-hour. That's absurd. Aside from that, there are now 314 counties, which have been given insufficient powers. In addition – I would like to say this again – we are facing depopulation. According to my estimates, by the year 2050 Poland's population will decline not by 3-4 million, but rather by 5-7 million, because the Central Statistical Office overstates population numbers by including in its projections those who have emigrated from Poland without officially reporting a change of address. We can therefore expect that the situation in many peripheral areas will be catastrophic in 20-30 years' time. Cities will be smaller, some of them will even shrink by half in terms of the number of inhabitants. If the decline alone is not the worst thing, rapid population aging and labor market turbulence will pose a serious problem. The state should now prioritize deciding what model of territorial and administrative divisions would be most effective and rational.

If some of the counties (*powiats*) were to be eliminated, what benefits would that bring?

It would be possible to do more things in larger counties. By the same token, the center would be stronger, it would fulfill more functions and offer more attractive jobs and careers, it could attract more migrants. In my opinion, there are 100-150 natural such regions, and this division results from the current shape of commuting routes and local labor markets, which are centered around selected county capitals. I realize that these 100-150 cities would attract people away from small towns and rural areas, but that would be the lesser evil, because a city of 10,000 inhabitants that is losing its population will manage, unlike a city of 100,000. Its infrastructure is too extensive, too much money has been invested. In some regions of the country, for example in the east or in the south, that would be even beneficial, because they are still characterized by agrarian overpopulation, by low, "unfinished" urbanization, and by ineffectively dispersed rural settlement.

What about your second model? What would it involve?

Eliminating the counties (*powiats*) entirely and increasing the number of provinces (*voivodships*) to around 20, maybe 30. Both models I propose would also involve reforming the communes (*gminas*). As I said, not all of them will be able to support themselves financially using their revenue, some of them would have to apply for subsidies. But a commune exists not only to receive funds from the central budget, if it wants to be governed locally, it should support itself financially. There is also the problem posed what are referred to as "donut communes," namely rural communes surrounded by urban communes that have the same names and sometimes seats that are located nearby, such as Bolesławiec and Siedlce. There are around 150 communes of this type. This generates high costs of maintaining of what are essentially duplicate administrative functions: the inhabitants pay their taxes in the rural commune yet use the services located in and maintained by the urban commune. There are also many small communes in the east or north of Poland that could be merged in a way that would benefit their inhabitants. The less affluent communes could be merged with the more affluent ones.

I doubt that any rich commune would like to merge with a poor one.

And that's where we get to an important issue, namely the state's role in administration. This means a discussion similar to the one that pertained to Warsaw as an administrative unit. If Warsaw is the capital of the country, then responsibility for its development should fall not only on the city's authorities but also on the central government. The state should be an active negotiator or, if local communities can't reach agreement, it should make decisions on such issues, otherwise this is very costly for us.

What was your position on the discussion that was held several months ago, on the idea of merging Warsaw with its neighboring communes?

Scholars agree that if a small town or communes have very strong functional links to a big city – commuting routes, schools, stores, institutions, public administration offices, and so on – everything should be managed together. Discrepancies arise only once specific proposals are made. In my opinion, a metropolitan area should be formed as a separate territorial unit, and not just in Warsaw. These could be given a catchy name, one that doesn't give rise to any ambition-driven controversies. For that reason, Warsaw should expand – or strictly speaking, what it has now, which we call a daily urban system or a functional urban system, should be converted into a specific, legally sanctioned administrative and territorial unit with a uniform system of management. What politicians

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were proposing back in the spring, however, was one of the worst possible roads. Instead of encouraging discussion and seeking friendly support from experts, which they would have certainly received, they unexpectedly announced their plans with respect to the capital. After the fact, I wrote a long expert opinion for the Senate, where I explained everything, but that was probably too late. The problem is that a decision was made to choose the softest of all models for creating such functional areas, allowing communes to reach agreement all by themselves. This approach can lead to varying results. For example, one commune may refuse to agree to a joint investment project, so the investment will have to be made in a worse location, for example where the time spent on commuting and the exploitation costs will be higher. There may be problems related to waste disposal or connection to the sewage system. There are many absurdities that follow from the fact that in 1990 we believed perhaps too much that we can be completely autonomous and responsible for the common good, despite having no established experience in this field.

As an old Polish saying goes, a noble in his own manor is equal to the head of a province?

There no sense of responsibility for the common good, or – to put it shortly – the belief that we're our own masters.

And an absence of thinking in terms of the entire community.

Yes, the reluctance to take responsibility for something that goes beyond our backyard. That works on many levels. Examples include dispersed development and chaotic urban planning. The right of ownership means you can erect a building wherever you want, as long as you own a plot of land. There are numerous legal loopholes even in protected areas. For example, you can build a house near the woods, three kilometers away from a village. Under the law, the local authorities are obliged to build an access road, connect it to the sewage system, organize waste disposal, snow removal, and so on. On the PAS Committee for Spatial Economy and Regional Planning, we have recently calculated the costs related to such dispersed settlement. We are planning to release a report in the spring of 2018. Hundreds of billions of zlotys are involved here, and it's one reason why the Polish economy is not competitive.

If development is dispersed, we need more of everything.

My colleagues from Opole, Prof. Krystian Heffner and Dr. Piotr Gibas, have calculated that if a house is located more than 300 meters away from other houses, each additional meter beyond the 300 meter mark means an average cost of 1,600 zlotys over eight years

for the commune. If we multiply this by all the buildings of this type, we get around 60 billion zlotys a year. This means pouring enormous sums of money down the drain. The fact that we spend so much time in traffic jams every day in big cities is yet another result of dispersed development, because no public transport is then effective – bus stops would have to be located at every house. That's why dispersed suburbs usually have no public transport, and every family has a car, or even two, if both spouses work. There are communes that allocate space in their plans to a population 10 times larger than their current population. After that, construction permits are issued for buildings located 4-5 km away from a primary school or a drug store. In Poland, we need to consider other ways of resolving the issue of transportation and traffic jams, especially by decreasing daytime mobility, otherwise we will run short of land for roads. Some suggest that we should increase the mobility of the Poles who commute to work. Does this mean that they should commute 100 kilometers?

The low salaries in Poland would not be enough to cover the costs.

I calculated once that if we took the average salary in provincial capitals, it would pay off to commute to work if the average commute distance were 30-40 kilometers. That is why we need to deconcentrate labor markets to make sure they develop as well as possible not only in provincial capitals. That is a solution for midsize cities.

What can be done to help them recover from the economic crisis?

We need reindustrialization and local business incentives, tax exemptions for creative startups. We need to deconcentrate the functions of economic management: not everything needs to be located in Warsaw. This applies also to other institutions. It proved possible to relocate the National Science Center to Kraków. We need to encourage people to settle down in midsize cities and towns, where the costs of living are lower, traffic congestion is lower, people have more time for themselves and their families, for social life. Maybe we could achieve this by regulating housing programs and directing them away from metropolitan areas to midsize cities. Development policy should focus more on regions and it should be more specialized, not identical in the whole of Poland in terms of incentives, tax exemptions, and so on. The state should persuade companies, local governments, also the biggest cities that this will benefit everyone. We need public approval, but in these political conditions, this is a rare commodity

INTERVIEW BY ANNA KILIAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI