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## The future of Polish towns

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## **THE FUTURE OF POLISH TOWNS**

**Abstract.** The increase of the significance of towns focuses attention on their problems and development perspectives. Towns have to overcome numerous barriers, which impede their qualitative development. The Berlin Declaration of 2005 speaks about assumptions concerning the future of towns.

**Key words:** barriers, Berlin Declaration, quantitative development, urbanisation

Both in professional journals, and in daily newspapers we can find a lot of contradicting information on the future of towns. Certain reports see their bright future, contrasting the thesis of Europe of towns and that earlier of Europe of regions. Other statements declare that towns, especially large cities, decay, while their population numbers decrease.

The Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996 was a turning point in views on the future of towns. Just then, during the Conference their strategic significance for global development, and especially for regional development was noted.

Contemporary cities and towns are centres of innovation, transport junctions, centres of various services and information, and also main management centres. The number of population in rural areas continuously decreases<sup>1</sup>, with the only exception being that of suburban areas of towns and cities.

The most urbanised European countries include the Scandinavian countries, United Kingdom, the Benelux countries, and Germany. The least urbanised countries in Europe are Ireland, Romania, and Poland.

The organizers of the conference on the future of towns (Chicago, 8-10 July 2004) estimate that around 2010 there will be 75% of the Earth's population living in towns, as compared to 25% of 1950.

The outflow of population from towns to their suburban areas, and the dynamic growth of those areas result in numerous consequences, namely:

- outflow of population and jobs from the central city to its suburban area, which means a reduction of revenues from taxes but not of expenditures on supporting those areas (maintaining an efficient public transport infrastructure, services used by the population of the whole metropolis, etc.),
- quick civilisation advance of population living in suburban areas.

Also in metropolitan areas there occur other changes, such as, e.g.:

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<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that on a global scale within the next 20 years almost 2 billion people will move from villages to towns in the third-world countries (The UN Report for the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul 1996).

- developing new activity clusters (satellites) and "delegating" certain functions of the central city to them,
- increase in the neighbouring centres' competitiveness,
- specialisation and growing cooperation,
- territorial expansion and creating new satellites.

It happens very often that the development of towns is a sum of those phenomena.

Still housing is the main driving force for the expansion of towns. A desire to live in a contact with nature causes that residents of towns, and especially of large cities move out to suburban zones, creating there poorly organized and badly functioning megastructures.

Leaving historic city centres by the population, and mobility of that population foster urban renewal, but it also happens that those factors lead to the degradation of those downtown areas. On the other hand, when population and business entities leave the city centres, they also leave buildings, and owing to that, it is easier to modernize them.

Municipal authorities should have a vision of the urban renewal. Its processes are very costly, but unavoidable. That is why the development of a local economic base, which makes it possible to initiate those costly measures, is becoming more and more significant. In the light of trends that are presently noticed, Polish towns may experience numerous rises and falls, periods of fall and prosperity. All depends on the mobilisation of local authorities to remove barriers and to actively manage the development of towns, as well as on the necessary support provided by the government's policy.

In my opinion, the following are the most critical barriers to the development of Polish towns:

- lack of available land for capital investments, both public and private ones
- lack of a transparent system for creating conditions of physical planning order (with relationships between local physical plans and land integration),
- poor public-interest protection institutions,
- lack of government policy oriented on towns (including their development or regeneration),
- lack of research on urban development issues,
- poorly developed urban planning marketing.

**The availability of land** for capital investment projects is the basic thing. Division of private properties and unsettled legal issues cause that the mobilisation of a larger area of land requires buying up minor land plots from tens of owners. Presently, there is no institution in Poland, which would engage in the acquisition of land for the investors. It is the investor itself, who does that job, although effects are different. As a result, apart from a few exceptions, the shape and location of buildings on land plots depends more and more often on the land plot shape and dimensions, and not on the users' requirements and spatial order principles.

That unfavourable situation is worsened by the continuously deteriorating traffic accessibility of construction areas. The accessibility of land plots in the second and next development lines is a standard at housing projects. Complicated access roads, even those leading to multi-family housing complexes, are more and more frequent. It looks as if one has

forgotten that the legibility of the road system facilitates the "use of towns" and, what is even most important, increases the safety of people and properties (an easier and shorter arrival of an ambulance, fire brigade, or the police).

Municipal authorities avoid buying up roads after their geodesic division, while municipal utility companies do not take over newly constructed utility systems that have been financed by their involved users. More and more often numerous owners of land plots become owners of adjacent roads and local utility systems. Each subsequent investor has to obtain an individual consent of each of those owners, and that is often unaccomplishable. It is difficult today to assess the extent of that phenomenon. We can see the lack of any research on that subject.

The system of creating conditions for physical planning order is not transparent, starting from the statutory definition of the spatial order<sup>2</sup> to its attainment tools.

Spatial order is a reflection of the economic and social order, including also the legal order. It conditions development and progress. Despite that, spatial order occupies a remote place in the social hierarchy of importance. The best example of that is the citizens' and the authorities' reluctance to comply with the spatial order, reluctance to look for the balance between the sphere of public interest and that of private interests, although it is known that spatial order can protect both the owner and the entrepreneur against unfavourable, external effects of actions undertaken by other owners and entrepreneurs.

Spatial order is the local law's function. But law is not all – it was already Tacit who asked, "What's law without customs?" Those countries, which have reached a high level of spatial order (Germany, Holland, United Kingdom, the Scandinavian countries) have clearly reduced conflicts in space and maintain the property market in balance, have well organised systems of spatial planning, as well as the related systems of monitoring and supervising changes in space.

Practically, **the urban planning marketing** does not exist. This is due, among other things, to the fact that the potential marketing offer is very poor. Very often municipalities are not owners of land they offer, the legal status of that land is not always settled and clear, and land owners do not always agree on the value of properties being offered. This creates a number of uncertainties which rather discourage than encourage acquiring land for capital investment projects. The land, which finally can be acquired, often does not conform with its size, location, and shape to the previously intended project.

**Public-interest protection institutions** are important instruments of the protection of spatial order and development of towns. In Poland those institutions are weak, and their actions not coordinated, starting from the central government level to the local one. On the central government level, the Ministry of Construction, the Ministry of Regional Development, and the Ministry of Environment take care of the spatial order, including the development of towns. The division of competencies and responsibilities between those institutions is very blurred, and staff potentials of each of them very small. Other governmental and regional

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<sup>2</sup> Art. 2.1 of the *Spatial Planning and Management Act* reads: "spatial order means such a development of space, which shall make a harmonious unity and include in orderly relations any functional conditions and requirements, as well as those social, economic, environmental, cultural and composition and aesthetics ones."

public-interest protection institutions that participate in the process of providing opinion and coordinating spatial development plans are not furnished with proper information databases, which would allow for a competent assessing of the situation and predicting the effects of contemplated solutions. Those institutions are often guided by subjective criteria and express views that go beyond the sphere of their competencies. That situation adversely impacts the quality and effectiveness of spatial planning, and indirectly, the development quality of new towns.

**The government's policy concerning the development of towns** was expressed in the very general *Policy Concept of Spatial Development of Poland*, adopted by the Parliament of Poland and published in the Official Journal on 16 September 2001. All subsequent governmental documents deal with that problem only in a very fragmentary way. So far, that policy has not been provided with proper instruments through enacting operational programmes or the relevant laws and acts, like the revitalisation law, or the public-private partnership law, which have been talked of for years.

In such a situation, these are mainly local authorities, which are responsible for the development of towns. Local authorities cope with the growing motorization and the resultant traffic and transport needs, as well as with the lack of plans and shortage of funds for almost any project, and all that with an increasing difficulty. To make things even worse, one **can notice the lack of any research** concerning such problems of urban development, as e.g.:

- changes on the property market, including those in municipal property stock,
- land needed for capital investment projects,
- dynamics of construction processes,
- changes in land use structure,
- level of degradation of the housing stock,
- durability of building structures, including especially prefabricated panel buildings.

The development problems of Polish towns are in many instances similar to those faced by the West European towns many years ago. However, there are problems in Poland, which were not encountered in the West Europe, like e.g.:

- an accelerated rate of motorization (the number of passenger cars per 1,000 population doubled in the second half of the 1990s), which revealed a high inefficiency of traffic and transport systems in our towns,
- a greater than in the West European towns share of large-panel, prefabricated buildings in the structure of housing stock and areas,
- a smaller than in the West European towns share of single-family housing in the structure of housing stock,
- the so-called infrastructural gap, amounting to almost 10% in large cities (this concerns developed areas, completely without utility infrastructures, or only partly provided with them).

Directions for the solutions should be looked for by analysing good examples, provided by the West European countries and concerning:

- redevelopment of city centres (Stockholm, Birmingham),
- transport solutions (Oslo, York),

- modernisation of the housing stock (Leipzig, Lille),
- restructuring of degraded areas (Newcastle).

It is also necessary to consider at least the recent assumptions concerning the future of towns, included in the so-called Berlin Declaration (July 2000), adopted as the final declaration of the world URBAN 21 conference. The Declaration reads, among other things, as follows:

- Cities and other levels of government should adopt effective urban policies and planning processes, which integrate the social, economic, environmental and spatial aspects of development, recognising the interdependence between the city and the region, and between the urban, rural and wilderness areas.
- Cities should strive to alleviate poverty and meet the basic needs of their citizens by promoting economic opportunity and enabling community actions.
- Cities should adopt such social policies and measures, which will lead to the reduction of violence and crime.
- Cities should embrace information and communication technologies and promote the life-long education of all their inhabitants to become "learning cities" and to achieve global competitiveness.
- Cities should also promote the use of environmentally friendly technologies and materials, including renewable resources or energy and higher efficiency in the use of natural resources.
- Cities should strive to promote local economic development, including recognising the role of the informal sector and integrating the informal into the formal economy.
- Cities should, in co-operation with other levels of government, provide incentives, which will encourage the private sector to think globally, act locally and to reach out to the poor in a non-discriminatory manner.
- Cities should conserve their historical heritage and aspire to become beautiful places where art, culture, architecture and landscape bring joy and inspiration to the inhabitants.
- Cities should adopt appropriate land use planning and implementation measures with a view to promoting vibrant economies, functioning land markets, affordable housing and suitable infrastructure.
- Cities should promote the development of an appropriate integrated public transport system which is fast, safe, accessible and affordable; better manage the use of private cars and encourage the use of environmentally friendly means of transport.
- Cities should attempt to achieve a good balance between the natural and built environment and should take action to reduce air, water, land and noise pollution, thereby enhancing the inhabitant's quality of life.
- Cities should govern themselves and order their relations with all their inhabitants, without discrimination, in accordance with the principles of democracy and good governance, with special outreach to women, youth and minorities.
- Cities should establish forums, bilateral and multilateral partnerships to facilitate networking, mutual help and faster dissemination of best practices.

- Non-government organisations and community-based organisations should be empowered to participate fully in equitable and sustainable development.
- The private sector, local, national and international, should bring to bear financial instruments and investments in a manner that promotes sustainable urban development.
- National governments should give high priority to their urban development policies in the framework of national and regional policies.
- National and regional governments should ensure that cities have sufficient power and resources to carry out their functions and responsibilities.
- The World Bank, the UN Development Programme, the UN Centre for Human Settlements, and other international agencies should intensify their co-operation with cities, non-government organisations and community-based organisations in the fields of housing, urban development and poverty alleviation.

In order for Polish towns to respond to challenges put by the Berlin Declaration, they have to get support from governmental programmes (National Development Plan) and European programmes. The extent of neglects, especially in the transport and municipal infrastructures, as well as the early phase of urbanisation, which reflects all defects of the quantitative development causes that local authorities will not be able to overcome all those barriers by themselves. Without that, it will be difficult to speak of qualitative changes in the wide sense of the word. Despite great efforts of many towns, which they put into making up delays in infrastructure and the aesthetisation of urban space, the needs and expectations of inhabitants grow much quicker. When viewed from that position, the rating of Polish towns is still not the best one. That race with the needs and expectations of the city dwellers should be taken into account in development policy directions of large cities. In parallel to laying foundations for qualitative changes (integration of land, efficient planning and decision-making procedures, effective marketing), one should increase care for the quality of public space<sup>3</sup> in towns and accelerate renewal problems. All that will require a considerable streamlining and modernisation of the legal system and operation of institutions involved in spatial management.

## Literature

1. *Final report from the UN Habitat II Conference*, Istanbul 1996.
2. *Final Declaration of the World URBAN 21 Conference*, July 2000.
3. *"The Future of Towns" – conference proceedings*, Chicago 8-10 July 2004.
4. *Spatial Planning and Management Act of 27 March 2003* (published in *Dziennik Ustaw* No. 80, Item 717).

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<sup>3</sup> Art. 2.6 of the *Spatial Planning and Management Act* reads: "public space area is an area of a special significance for satisfying the needs of residents and improving the quality of their lives, which fosters establishing social contacts due to its location and functional and spatial features; this area is determined in the study of conditions and spatial development directions of the municipality."

## THE FUTURE OF POLISH TOWNS

### Summary

The views on the future of Polish towns are quite diverse. On the one hand, towns are perceived as centres of innovation, transportation junctions, or "engines of development," and, on the other hand, they are seen as hardly functional areas, suffering depopulation, failing to protect people against hazards or give them a feeling of security, and expanding onto larger and larger areas.

The following are the barriers to the Polish urban development:

- lack of available land for capital investments, both public and private ones, and lack of a transparent system for creating conditions of physical planning order (with interdependence between local physical plans and land integration),
- poorly developed urban planning marketing,
- poor public-interest protection institutions,
- lack of government policy oriented on towns (including their development or regeneration),
- lack of research on urban development issues.

The authorities of Polish towns should precisely analyse the causes of such barriers, as well as useful models of development. In fact, that will not be sufficient. For Polish towns to face challenges, brought at least by the Berlin Declaration, they have to find support from government (e.g. the National Development Plan) and European programmes. In parallel to the creation of foundations for qualitative changes (land integration, efficient planning and decision-making procedures, effective marketing), it is necessary to increase care for the quality of public space in towns and accelerate renewal processes. Those activities will require streamlining and modernisation of legal systems and operations of the institutions serving urban and physical planning.

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