

INTRODUCTION

The rural areas in Poland—as in the European Union, are characterized by a high diversification of spatial and functional systems; their status and development trends are essential for shaping the living conditions of rural populations, management capabilities, and pace of development. However, generally speaking, the countryside still dominates, characterized by its lower level of economic and social development, slower economic changes, and the demand to raise the level and quality of life of villages.

Gradually, but relatively quickly, the Polish countryside is becoming less agricultural and only relatively large farms maintain agriculture. The village, despite the many inconveniences and backwardness, is civilizational increasingly willing selected as the place of residence, especially in suburban and well communicated areas. However, to a large extent, the development of rural areas is highly depend on their position in the national and European spatial and economic systems.

Historically shaped rural structures in Poland imply different development scenarios, even often in the same region. Different paths of historical development at the local, regional and national level, evolutionary or revolutionary change functions and inner social and economic structures of rural settlements as well as the spatial layouts of rural areas. For the typical trends in rural areas should be counted increasing diversity of the level of socio-economic development, despite the alignment policy of development opportunities. In practice, the actual dynamics of rural development is very weakly connected to the local authorities' activity in the acquisition and utilization of available instruments to stimulate rural economies and societies, however, the rent of location had a stronger affect on the spatial differentiation of rural development than the European cohesion policy. The rural areas surrounding major cities, benefiting from the neighbouring markets, are characterized by rapid suburban growth and population increase. While the zones of lagging villages with low developmental dynamics occur in peripheral regions or parts of the regions and in relation to the network of the main cities—more often in eastern Poland than western Poland.

The changes occurring in the countryside are important determinants of both location (among others, availability and links to transportation and communication network nodes, connection to cities and small towns), the position in the natural environment (among others, local soils, watercourses, terrain form, vegetation types and complexes, raw materials, *etc.*) and the intensity of the settlement processes (rural settlement patterns, ownership structure of farmland, *etc.*) as well as demographic development (population density, settlement population size, *etc.*). All of these components

are the basis of socio-economic transformation of rural areas and diversities in the development conditions of rural local and regional communities.

However, similarly as in other European Union countries, such determinants are characterized by a very large inertia, as reflected in the persistence of spatial forms and rural settlement systems. In practice it means serious problems both in initiating and carrying out changes to improve the functioning or creation of new opportunities for rural development.

The transformation includes economic, social, spatial, and landscape rural structures associated both with transformations in agriculture and with violent urbanization processes.

The importance of agricultural activities decrease, while urbanization processes covering larger and larger areas within convenient transport routes to major cities and service centres, are predominantly spontaneous in nature. These processes are poorly controlled by local and regional governments.

Villages located in the impact zone of large cities, usually strongly urbanized, have lost or lose their social, economic, and landscape identity. Often, cultural continuity also breaks in vigorously growing spatial structures and strange and unfamiliar forms of architecture. As a result, development barriers are formed with a long-term impact, most often unrecognized or ignored in the investment processes of rural areas.

Expanding urbanization to successive rural areas accumulates and intensifies their spatial problems, which are a derivative of an excessive burden of unadjusted communication networks, social and technical infrastructure, and increasing privatization and social fragmentation.

The negative effects of unrestrained land-use utilization by intensifying and scattering rural structures are increasingly more evident and cumbersome, and coherence of the village as a spatial and socio-cultural integrity begins to become increasingly important¹. In this sense, the direction of rural development in Poland gradually crosses over European trends in rural spatial development and socio-economic functioning of villages.

In the following articles, reference is made to at least some of the current problems related to the development of rural areas in Poland and in selected Polish regions. At first, Krystian Heffner (University of Economics in Katowice) indicates the main direction of change in the rural space of Poland in the context of processes taking place in European countrysides. Then Zbigniew Ziło (Podkarpacka High School in Jasło) formulates a model of functioning and development of rural areas as a part of a geographic space in Poland. Next, Marcin Wojcik (University of Łódź) refers the position of rural space in the concept of modernisation to the example of Poland as a case study.

¹ See among others K. Heffner, 2012, *Ewolucja funkcji w zagospodarowaniu przestrzeni wiejskiej w Polsce* [in:] *Rozwój wsi i rolnictwa w Polsce. Aspekty przestrzenne i regionalne*, A. Rosner (Ed.), IRWiR PAN, Warsaw, pp. 39-60.

In turn, Wioletta Kamińska and Mirosław Mularczyk (both from Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce) try to assess the dynamics of economic cohesion of rural areas in Poland by spatial approach. Danuta Kołodziejczyk (Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics – National Research Institute) refers to the territorial perspective on the economic and social cohesion of communes in Poland. While Brygida Solga (Silesian Institute in Opole) introduces readers to the problems of foreign return migration, and explains its importance in rural development. Andrzej Miszczuk and Magdalena Miszczuk (both from the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin) analyzed financial determinants of rural area development in Poland for the period 2014–2020.

In the next article, Wioletta Kamińska considered the spatial aspects of transformation in the education structure of rural populations in Poland during the period 2002–2011.

In the following part of the book opening, Roman Rudnicki (Mikołaj Kopernik University of Toruń) explains changes in land use structure of agricultural holdings in Poland. The author provides a comparative analysis using the national agricultural censuses of 2002 and 2010. Piotr Łysoń (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Warsaw) discusses a comprehensive rural development policy from a non-agricultural perspective in the case of Poland. Next, Józef Stanisław Zegar (Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics in Warsaw) considers the importance of agriculture in Eastern Poland in the light of cso data. The same region is taken under consideration by Iwona Kiniorska (Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce) who analyses development conditions in rural areas under the influence of the EU cohesion policy. Also, Iwona Kopacz-Wyrwał (Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce) shows an example of Eastern Poland spatial diversity in living standards in rural areas. Anna Kołodziejczak (University of Poznań) evaluates the effect of UE financial assistance on the level of entrepreneurship in Wielkopolskie Voivodeship rural areas over the period 2007–2012.

The two texts discuss selected Polish regions: Monika Wesołowska (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University of Lublin) analyses the development of tourist function in rural areas of the Lubelskie Voivodeship and Mirosław Mularczyk (Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce) considers the changes of functional urban hierarchy in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship, combining it with the dominant functions of rural surroundings. In his article, Adam Jarubas (Marshal Office in Kielce) presents the general outline of the cohesion policy and its impact on the development of rural areas in Poland.

Editors of the volume are hoping that the papers will certainly become a vital part of discussion about the way space in rural areas of Poland are shaped. They may also be the basis for formulating policies for turning the Polish countryside into European spatial processes as well as rationalizing the structural transformation in rural communities and the economy.

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