

What factors induce differences in depopulation and ageing in the same geographical conditions - The case of Slovak former mining cities

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In many respects, scissors are deepening between the demographic development of urban and rural areas in Slovakia. It is mainly due to sub-urbanisation processes. However, as in many other countries, there is not only "one countryside" and one type of cities in Slovakia. The countryside in southeast Slovakia is demographically wholly different comparing to the rural hinterland of Bratislava or Trnava. A particular group of cities are mining cities, more precisely former mining cities because their natural resources have been exhausted over the centuries, or their extraction has become inefficient in a current global economy. However, they are solid pieces of the urban network, although their future is unclear.

In this contribution, we evaluate the development of 15 former mining cities in Slovakia (although in many of them, the term "town" could be more suitable at present). The selection criterion was that the decline in mining occurred in the last decades of the socialist period or after 1989. It means that it could directly influence the demographic developments during the last quarter of a century. Although most of these cities are located in the less developed southeast regions of the Slovak Republic, and the decline of mining impacts local economies, demographic trajectories are surprisingly differentiated. Of course, all cities are getting older, and it is a definite general trend. Nevertheless, some cities enjoy population increase by up to one fifth in the last quarter of a century, while others have lost up to one-fifth of the population. There are differences in both natural increase and migration. Some cities benefit from both processes, but on the contrary, many of them face depopulation caused by similar processes. In other cities, the natural increase remains relatively high, but migration loss is rising, and it is not only the case of cities with segregated Roma communities with higher fertility.

We are trying to identify drivers behind these, at first glance, surprising results. When and where does "macro location attractiveness" work? Does the distance from the larger cities have an impact, potentially reducing the need for long-distance or foreign labour migration? What is a realistic effect of the segregation communities presence? Are the development trajectories unequivocal, or can we observe instability? What about the influence of the state's regional and sectoral policies and their suitability for former mining cities? What is the nature of inter-governmental relations in the context of mining activities? Is it helpful from a population

development point of view? In the context of mitigating and adaptation, are these cities able to cope with the persistent impacts of mining activities (e.g. environmental, social)? Can we observe examples of policy transfers from other former mining cities from abroad (as many former mining cities around the world are in a similar situation)? Are they applicable in Slovak conditions? An important factor can be local capacities availability, the involvement of local actors and crucial local authorities. It is in question if they have sufficient tools and resources in their hands to influence local social, economic and population development. We assume that local communities are not passive actors, identify appropriate development and quality of life goals, and seek to correct or mitigate negative consequences of current developments. The different demographic trajectories can also be a reflection of the differently active local decision-making sphere.

Local governments of former mining towns are frequently in a difficult situation induced by population development. Their role and possibilities reduce the current scope of local self-government powers and the overall framework of local finance in Slovakia. The most fundamental impact is the flow of financial resources from shared taxes linked to the local population number. Similarly, they face difficulties in maintaining a primary education network funded similarly on the basis of the number of children. The complicated local social and economic situation reduces the price of real estate and the stagnation of property tax revenue, which is also one of the significant sources of local revenues. A declining population also threatens the provision of other public services under the pressure of a deteriorating scale economy if services are provided to fewer residents. Population processes also generate a growing demand for funding for social services in the context of ageing or poorer health of the inhabitants in part of these cities (e.g. as a result of mining professions). Several cities find it very difficult to cope with the combination of these aspects and often find themselves in difficult-to-solve situations related to the restructuring of financial flows and the mix of local public services, not to mention new investment needs. Paradoxically, for part of the growing cities, the unbalanced structure and variable dynamics of population processes raise significant problems in the inadequacy of the capacity to provide selected public services. The possibilities of active local policies are then limited if other actors' resources and other capacities are not available. More massive measures and initiatives, focusing, e.g. on family policy, housing policy, social policy or overall improvement in quality of life, are uneasy for implementation, although they are the subject of their efforts.

In this paper, we will try to interpret developments in mining cities on the example of different trajectories and approaches and their effects. We will try to find clusters of cities with similar development characteristics, identify development risks, find "good practices" working in

cities, or formulate recommendations for the decision-making sphere. It is also important to reveal changing approaches by different levels of government, including the EU level. The contribution combines a perspective on demography and human geography. The main aim is to find the essential factors of differentiation. In a simplified way, we want to identify whether belonging to a group of more and less demographically “successful” mining cities depend on their location pattern within the regional structure and urban network, and the associated exogenous factors, or whether population development is more the result of local proactive decision-making processes. The primary hypothesis is that geographical factors matter and local authorities have only limited tools that could affect population dynamics. However, we may find exceptions that go beyond this hypothesis. For example, a unique ‘local momentum’ may move the city differently than expected.