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“Urban” or “rural”/“rural” and “urban”: perceptions of the type of the commune in Polish and French small towns.

▪ The origin of the paper is a research program in France and Poland on the quality of life in small towns (2011–2012). This cross analysis is based on common fieldwork sessions in Auvergne and Malopolska with visits, meetings of local actors, analysis of communes’ official websites and administration of questionnaires to residents.

Quality of life is defined by objective indicators (housing conditions and equipments, infrastructure of communes, environmental aspects, etc. [Winiarczyk-Rażniak, 2004]) but also by subjective elements, linked to the perceptions people have of the living environment and their way of living, sense of well-being and life satisfaction (Bordsdof, 1999; Sénécal et al., 2008; Anderson, 2009; Tremblay et al., 2008; Smith, 2004). The paper is focusing on these subjective aspects.

Research area

Small towns in Poland and France are a good representation to question the construction of territorial models and modes of spatiality as they make up over 75% of all cities and are inhabited by over 21% of all urban population in Poland and similarly in France (89% of urban units and 22.4% of the urban population).

“Small” towns are small in size, from 2,000 to 20,000 inhabitants according to official and academic references in France and below 20,000 inhabitants in Poland (Kwiatek-Sołtys, 2004, 2017; Konecka-Szydłowska, Hauke, 2012; Zuzajska-Żyśko, 2006), but they play a key role in the attractiveness of urban spaces and their surrounding areas.

Depending on their spatial location, they can be in the direct influence of bigger towns (integrated small towns) or situated in more isolate context.

Spatially varied provinces of Auvergne in France and Malopolska in the south of Poland became the research area. The provinces are somehow similar in terms of the location and the role in the country settlement network, as well as the position of small towns. 12 small towns in each province were chosen for investigation.

The towns differ in size (from 3,162 inhabitants to 19,494 in France and between 2,284 and 20,000 in Poland). Two towns (Wieliczka and Trzebinia) have recently reached the level of 20,000 inhabitants and formally became middle-sized towns. They also differ because of their location. Most of the investigated towns are outside the direct influence of regional metropolis, few are integrated ones to Clermont-Ferrand Metropolitan Area and Krakow Metropolitan Area. The towns also vary in their leading functions.

Small towns have therefore an interesting position to question the urban-rural divide or continuum. They are often described as places at the intersection of urban and rural systems, as intermediate places and play an important role in the urban-rural relations (Bell, Jayne, 2009; Mayer, Knox, 2010; Dimitrow, 2017). Especially, they are described as central poles and strategic places for rural and regional development in different European contexts (Carrière, 2008; Courtney et al., 2007; Hinderink, Titus, 1988). The problem of small towns in the context of a rural-urban divide is not a new one in literature of subject (Dimitrow, 2017). It has been analysed in terms of the size and socio-economic character of settlements, e.g. D. Szymańska considered urban or rural features by studying 20 different indexes of municipalities in Poland (Szymańska, 1992). A very commonly analysed aspect is one considering the role of small towns in a rural surroundings. Small towns play a significant role as service centres for rural areas (Heffner, 2002).

The issue and the hypothesis

The important issue is what is the place of small towns in the rural-urban divide/continuum? What can be learnt of the urban-rural spatiality through studies on small towns?

The hypothesis is that both local actors and inhabitants refer to a combination of rural and urban aspects to describe the quality of life of small

towns, in order to use positive aspects of both (equipments and services, urban dynamism on the one side; friendliness, solidarities and inter-acquaintance on the other) and minimize negative ones. It is therefore very difficult to overtake the urban-rural divide reference as it is widely used and referred to.

Promotion of small towns by local actors

The first step in the investigation was looking at the quality of life promotion of small towns by local actors. This was done by the analysis of images and words used to describe small towns on the websites of the selected towns.

Analysis of the images used in the websites headers shows that more websites focus on pictures of the small town surrounded by its rural environment or a composition of different pictures illustrating this urban-rural combination (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1. Character of images in the websites headers

| Province | No spatial reference | Urban images | Mix urban-rural | Total |
|------------|----------------------|--------------|-----------------|-------|
| Auvergne | 3 | 3 | 5 (+1 rural) | 12 |
| Ma opolska | 1 | 5 | 4 (+2 rural) | 12 |
| Total | 4 | 8 | 12 | 24 |

Source: authors' work based on websites of investigated towns

Few websites headers are graphic and symbolic, with no explicit references to spatial elements (Ambert, Commentry, Issoire and Niepołomice). In Poland, coats of arms are often used on the official web pages of Polish towns (e.g. Ciężkowice, Biecz or Wolbrom). When the focus is on urban elements these are usually city centres, market places, historical building, churches or simply the densely built-up area (e.g. Thiers, St. Porcain, Wieliczka or Gryb w). More often, images used to show small towns are a mixture of urban and rural aspects made by the combination of the panoramic view on the towns showing at the same time nice green surroundings (e.g. Brioude, Cournon, St-Flour, Nowy Wi nicz, Czch w, Rabka Zdr j). As far as the words and phrases describing the small towns are concerned, different words are used (Tab. 2).

Tab. 2. Words and phrases describing small towns on the websites

| Province | Small town | City/cite | Capital, main city | Rural | No description | Town and commune |
|------------|------------|-----------|--------------------|-------------|----------------|------------------|
| Auvergne | 2 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| Małopolska | 3 (town) | 0 | 3 (local) | 1 (commune) | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 5 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 4 |

Source: authors' work based on websites of investigated towns

"Small town" is not the most commonly used word, only second in Auvergne and third in Małopolska (e.g. "Wieliczka – the salt town"; "A town of new opportunities"; "A town of numerous attractions" – Wieliczka). Other words are used: "cite" in French, with a reference to the history (and then the historical importance of the town with implicit reference to tradition and heritage); capital (or centre-city) referring to a not-so-small town (e.g. "World capital of cutlery industry" – Thiers), but also with no direct mention to urban place with focus on rural ("It aims at being the symbol of "rurality" – Yssingeaux and "rurality"), the centre of a region is common in Polish towns (e.g. "Main administrative, service and culture centre for the whole region" – Czchów) and sometimes even a commune – with no reference to the urbanity as the example of Bobowa which recently regained its city rights (e.g. "As far as education is concerned, the commune of Bobowa is a real phenomenon in Poland").

The identification of the small town level is not obvious as it often references other levels.

Quality of life promotion used by local actors was another important element in the analysis. The contexts of Polish and French towns differ, however some common attitudes can be found.

While sentences used for the description of quality of life are analysed it can be noticed that main aspects are related to the environment (natural, well preserved, good) but also the (good) level of services and infrastructures in the town e.g. "The very low level of air, water and soil pollution is characteristic" – Wolbrom (Tab. 3).

Very often, local actors use urban and rural references to promote their territory, leading sometimes to cliché statements ("city where living is easy", "human-sized towns") e.g. "This is a place to live and invest in" – Wieliczka. Representations of rurality and urbanity, and their clichés are widely used e.g. "...with all the advantages of a city combined with the attributes of the countryside" – Commentry. Positive aspects of both

Tab. 3. Aspects of quality of life description

| Province | "Living is easy" | Combination | Demarcation | Good level | Nice environment |
|------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|
| | | of urban and rural | from main cities | of equipments and infrastructure | and surroundings |
| Auvergne | 2 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 6 |
| Ma opolska | 0 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 5 |
| Total | 2 | 6 | 2 | 9 | 11 |

Source: authors' work based on websites of investigated towns

are mobilised and negative sides are often minimized (it is obvious in the explicit reference to urban troubles in big cities) e.g. "Modestly inhabited by 4,678 people, it avoids the troubles of big towns" – Billom.

The question is if this mixing of urban and rural promotion is a relevant one as it is also used by other territories (especially medium or even big towns).

Quality of life perceptions by inhabitants

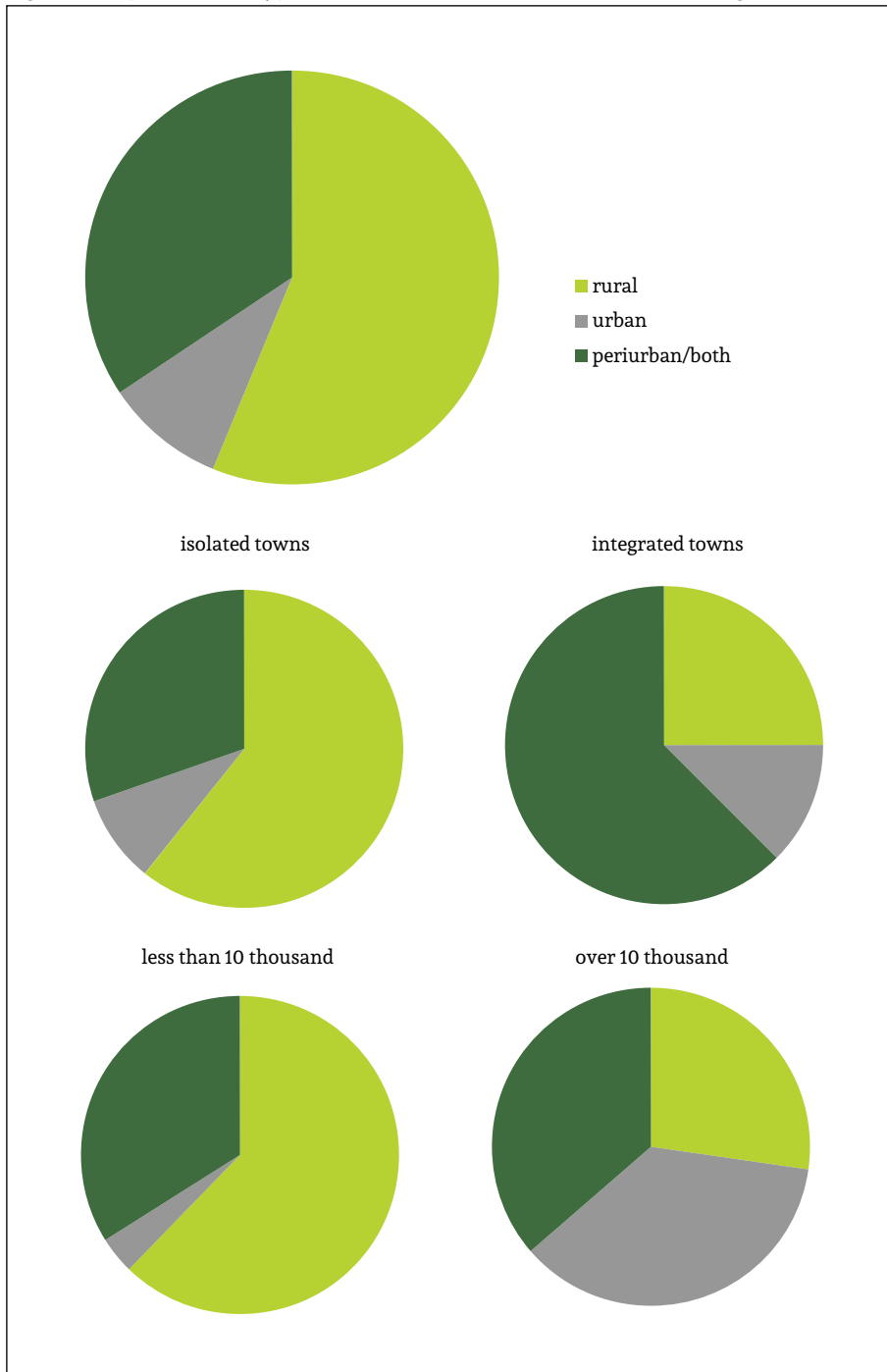
M. Dimitrow and M. Stenseke say that people's perception of rural and urban is largely shaped upon the presence or absence of certain physical characteristics (historical landscapes, visual codes and so on (Dymitrow, Stenseke 2016). It seems interesting to find out what the perception of small towns in Poland and France is in the opinion of their inhabitants. For that reason a similar questionnaire was prepared and filled (over 500 questionnaires) online in 2012 in French towns and collected through schools in a Polish case. Important to say that it is not a statistical analysis but the aim is to have general ideas of perceptions.

The respondents were of different sex, with a domination of women in both countries (76.6% in France and 71.1% in Poland), age, with the dominance of a working population, educational level and socio-economic status, with 50% employees.

The whole questionnaire consisted of many (16) different points/questions but for the aim of the paper only few are analysed.

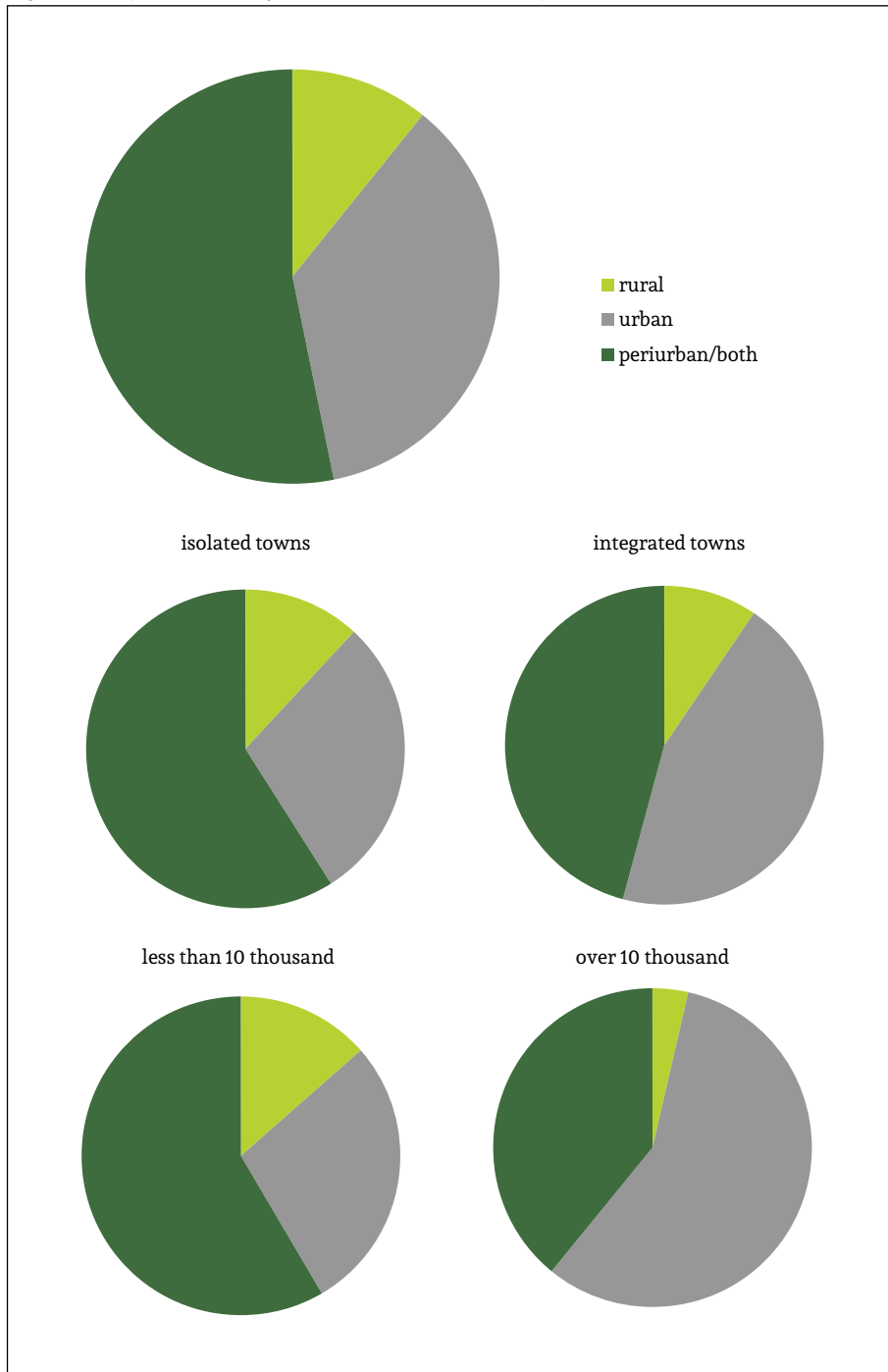
Questions of time and reason for moving in were given as those aspects can clearly influence the perception of the town. A majority of people in Polish small towns have been living there for a long time (often since birth) while the residential mobility is more important in France.

Fig. 1. Perception of the type of the commune – urban or rural – Auvergne



Source: authors' work

Fig. 2. Perception of lifestyle – urban or rural – Małopolska



Source: authors' work

The former place of residence was a village in 55.6% in Polish cases, while in French towns 36.7 % came from villages, 32.7% from another small town and 30.6% from a big city (in Poland only 15.1%).

The situation as for the reasons for coming is completely different as it clearly refers to a quite different contexts and residential personal histories in France and Poland. For French towns work seems to be the most important reason, when for Polish ones it is still marriage and family reasons. Nice surroundings is also important in the choice, as well as personal connections (family, childhood place). The proximity of nature and countryside is not very important in the choice of residence.

The question on how inhabitants consider their commune/town (and a lifestyle) is interesting (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).

In France a majority of people perceive their towns as “rural”, mainly in peripheral small towns and in towns with population smaller than 10,000 inhabitants. One third also refers to an urban/rural (or periurban) commune. Urban is never the majority of the answers.

In Poland, as for the life style, the answer “partly” was the common one and only in bigger towns 60% of answers refer to the urban lifestyle.

The focus is therefore on the small towns as an “in-between” places that are partly urban and partly rural. It is interesting to notice the difference between France (more focused on “rural” perceptions, in a context where quality of life is prized) and Poland (more focused on “urban”, in a context where the differences between rural and urban is very important in terms of equipments and infrastructures).

Conclusion

For all small towns, the combination of different spatial aspects and the combination of rurality and urbanity can be noticed. They are clearly “in-between” spaces for their inhabitants and local stakeholders.

Even if French and Polish towns differ a lot, the same patterns and models are used by both local actors and inhabitants.

Space identification and quality of life descriptions tend to use the positive aspects of rural and urban elements and minimize the negative ones.

Can the rural or urban lifestyle be treated as the element of space identification and if so, to what extent?

Researches on small towns illustrate the “process character of the production of space in modern societies” but also the difficulty to overtake the divide and analyse the diversity of the combinations.

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