

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SMALL TOWNS IN BULGARIA AND HUNGARY – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Definitions of small towns vary across European Union countries. Typically, the criteria for defining them as such are related to population size, density, and functions. Current paper aims to elaborate a theoretical framework for comparative analysis of small towns in Bulgaria and Hungary by presenting a critical review of theoretical debate on the definition and the nature of small towns in the European context; a thorough examination of the theoretical debate related to the concept and distinct features of small towns in Hungary; and a comprehensive analysis of the scholarly discourse that underpins the notions and unique characteristics of small towns in Bulgaria.

**Keywords:** settlement network, comparative analysis, theoretical framework, Bulgaria, Hungary, small towns

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## СРАВНИТЕЛЕН АНАЛИЗ НА МАЛКИТЕ ГРАДОВЕ В БЪЛГАРИЯ И УНГАРИЯ – ТЕОРЕТИЧНА РАМКА

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Дефинициите за малки градове са различни в отделните страни от Европейския съюз, в които обикновено се прилагат морфологичният и функционалният подход с използване на определени критерии – единият се основава на броя на населението, а другият – на мястото на тези селища в градската йерархия според функциите им. Често тези два подхода се прилагат заедно, въпреки че повечето учени са на мнение, че малките градове се описват най-добре във функционален смисъл. Изследователският проект (TOWN), изпълнен по програмата ESPON на Европейския съюз, препоръчва прилагането на интегриран подход, съчетаващ морфологични и функционални критерии, за по-добро описание и концептуална яснота при разграничаването на малки и средни градове. Настоящото изследване има за цел да разработи теоретична рамка за сравнителен анализ на малките градове в България и Унгария, като представи критичен преглед на теоретичния дебат относно дефиницията и същността на малките градове в европейски контекст; задълбочено разглеждане на теоретичния дебат, свързан с концепцията и отличителните характеристики на малките градове в Унгария; и цялостен анализ на научния дискурс, който е в основата на представите и специфичните характеристики на малките градове в България. Понастоящем малките градове в Унгария се определят въз основа на демографски, административни и функционални критерии. Обикновено те обхващат население между 2000 и 30 000 души, имат статут на град и предлагат градски начин на живот, но имат само местно влияние. Днес те се борят с многобройни проблеми поради демографския спад, застаряването на населението и миграцията на младите хора към по-големите градски центрове. Голяма част от тях разчитат на културното и природното си наследство за устойчиво развитие и разгръщане на туристическия си потенциал. След 1990 г. интензивните процеси на обезлюдяване и пространствена демографска и икономическа поляризация в България променят обхвата, структурата и стабилността не само на селата, но и на градската мрежа, и разликите между големите и малките градове нарастват значително. Малките градове имат решаващо значение в периферните и селските региони и служат като микрорегионални центрове, като играят ключова роля в регионалното и градското развитие. Въпреки че малките градове са от съществено значение за постигане на устойчиво и балансирано пространствено развитие, те много рядко са обект на цялостно географско изследване в България.

**Ключови думи:** селищна мрежа, сравнителен анализ, теоретична рамка, България, Унгария, малки градове

## INTRODUCTION

When discussing the term “small town”, it becomes evident that this type of settlement is challenging to define, and formal definitions are rare. On the one hand, a small town must be distinguished from villages with a micro-central role, and on the other hand – from cities that are the centres of a larger region. When the need arises to describe small towns, two approaches are typically encountered: one based on population size and the other on the place in the hierarchy of urban centres, according to the functions of the settlement/region. In most cases, both approaches appear mixed, but most authors agree that small towns are best defined in functional terms.

In Europe, we typically think of small towns that function as centres of a rural area, providing a marketplace, services, and jobs for the population of surrounding villages. In the development policy, they are rather overshadowed between villages and regional cities. Commonly, while the need to develop regional centres and villages is often heard, the role of small towns is neglected. At the same time, they play a prominent role in shaping the quality of life in rural areas. Even when small towns are mentioned, they are usually included in the category of rural development and are not distinguished from villages, even though their development requires different methods and different tools (Dövényi, 2003; Faragó, 2006; Hajdú, 2005; Zongor, 1999). In addition, Servillo et al. (2017) point out that small towns remain very often “hidden” from policymaking and academic research due to a shortage of available and comparative data, diverse institutional frameworks, and ontological complexity.

They are one of the main elements of the urban settlement network (Koulov & Mladenov, 2021) and must be researched.

Therefore, the paper aims to elaborate a theoretical framework for comparative analysis of small towns in Bulgaria and Hungary. To meet the research objectives the following paper structure is adopted:

- Critical review of theoretical debate on the definition and the nature of small towns in the European context
- A thorough examination of the theoretical debate related to the concept and distinct features of small towns in Hungary
- A comprehensive analysis of the scholarly discourse that underpins the notions and unique characteristics of small towns in Bulgaria

### SMALL TOWNS IN THE EUROPEAN LITERATURE – THEORETICAL DEBATE

When we speak about small towns in Europe, the delimitation by population size shows a varied picture. Most European countries, except for Northern Ireland, do not officially define small and medium-sized towns (Demazière, 2014).

However, the academic literature offers various interpretations primarily based on population size, applying different thresholds for small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) among and even inside of countries (Demazière, 2014; Servillo, 2014; Wagner & Growe, 2021). For example, studies consider settlements of small towns with less than 20,000 inhabitants in Poland (Czapiewski et al., 2016) and Serbia (Filipović et al., 2016) while under 15,000 inhabitants in the South-Moravian Region of the Czech Republic (Maly, 2016). Moreover, the OECD defines small urban areas as those with a population between 50,000 and 200,000 and medium-sized urban areas as those between 200,000 and 500,000 (OECD, 2024).

The size of a town or city depends on the characteristics of its geographical environment, settlement network, and cultural and socio-economic heritage. Moreover, it also varies over time, as the role, size, and share of the population of towns and cities have differed at different stages of economic development. For example, a town with a population of between 10 000 and 20 000 inhabitants in Central Europe is nowadays considered a small rural town, in most cases the centre of a microregion. In the Middle Ages or nowadays, in sparsely populated northern areas in Europe, a settlement of this size might be considered a regional centre, whereas, in a German or Dutch area with a dense network of towns, a settlement of this size might not be a central place. Distribution of small towns (10 000-20 000 inhabitants) and their density in Europe nowadays can be observed on Fig. 1 (appendix).

The administrative regulations generally set the lowest limit for the population of a small town as one of the criteria for its designation as a town. This is typically 2000 inhabitants in most countries, including Hungary. But this limit is not strict; in Hungary, a municipality of 1002 inhabitants has also been granted town status. The upper limit for the number of inhabitants is even more uncertain and less often defined. The upper limit is usually set between 30 and 50 thousand inhabitants, above which we speak of medium-sized towns.

Population size is broadly correlated with ranking in the hierarchy of settlements, but the correlation is not a universal law. In the settlement hierarchy, the functions of a small town are distinguished from those of a small rural micro-center by the local market, secondary education, administrative services of district importance, health services, shops, and commuting employment in the town. However, they seldom have a wide range of health services, hospitals, large cultural institutions, and theatres typical of medium-sized towns.

A comprehensive research project (TOWN) implemented under the European Union's ESPON program aimed to create a common pan-European framework for delimitating small and medium-sized towns to improve comparability. On the one hand, morphological classification is used to conceptualize small and medium-sized towns, which resulted in four town typologies (Russo et al., 2014). In this regard, small and medium-sized towns are defined basically as

		DENSITY (inh./kmq)		
		≤ 300	> 300 and ≤ 1500	> 500
POPULATION (inh.)	≤ 5000	OTHER SETTLEMENT	VST (Very Small Towns)	
	> 5000 and ≤ 50000		SMS ST (Small and Medium-Sized Towns)	
	> 50000		HDUC (High-density Urban Clusters)	

Fig. 2. Basic urban settlement typology according to ESPON TOWN project (Source: Russo et al., 2014, p. 36)

continuous urban clusters with a population exceeding 5,000 inhabitants and a density of more than 300 inhabitants per square km, excluding high-density urban clusters (HDUC) (Fig. 2). Additionally, settlements with populations below 5,000 inhabitants but with a density greater than 300 inhabitants per square km are classified as very small towns (VST). Furthermore, TOWN typology 2 determines large SMSTs as places with a population exceeding 50,000 but having a population density of fewer than 1,500 inhabitants per square km, the cutoff for large urban areas (Russo et al., 2014).

TOWN typology 3 refines the basic population categories and distinguishes between small (5,000–25,000), medium (25,000–50,000), and large (over 50,000) SMSTs (Fig. 3). In addition to the baseline, TOWN typology 4 offers more apparent distinctions among population density categories, specifying low (300–1000), medium (1000–1500), and high density (over 1500) SMST categories (Fig. 4).

On the other hand, the TOWN project conducted a functional analysis in the frame of 31 case studies covering different countries and regions to reveal small and medium-sized towns' actual roles in serving as micro-regional employment centers in their microregion and examined their territorial arrangements, whether they are networked, agglomerated, or autonomous (Sýkora & Mulíček, 2014; Servillo, 2014). Comparing the results of morphological delineation with

		DENSITY (inh./kmq)		
		≤ 300	>300 and ≤ 1500	> 1500
POPULATION (inh.)	≤ 5000	OTHER SETTLEMENT	VST (Very Small Towns)	
	> 5000 and ≤ 25000		Small SMT	
	> 25000 and ≤ 50000		Medium SMT	
	> 50000		Large SMT	HDUC (High-density Urban Clusters)

Fig. 3. TOWN typology 3 with three SMST classes by population size (Source: Russo et al., 2014, p. 44)

		DENSITY (inh./kmq)			
		≤ 300	> 300 and ≤ 1000	> 1000 and ≤ 1500	> 1500
POPULATION (inh.)	≤ 5000	OTHER SETTLEMENTS	VST (Very Small Towns)		
	> 5000 and ≤ 50000		Low density SMT	Medium density SMT	High density SMT
	> 50000				HDUC (High-density urban clusters)

Fig. 4. TOWN typology 4 with three SMST classes by population density (Source: Russo et al., 2014, p. 48)

case studies based on functional analysis highlighted the shortcomings of both methods. To address these issues, the TOWN project recommends integrating both morphological and functional aspects in the conceptualization of small and medium-sized towns (Smith, 2014).

Recent academic literature also includes studies that primarily use the functional approach (Jousseume and Talandier, 2016) or combine it with population size categories (Porsche et al., 2019). In France, Jousseume and Talandier (2016) identified facilities related to three key functions emphasized in geographical literature: retail, healthcare, and education. They characterized small towns by the coexisting presence of a large supermarket, a sizable retail park with specialized shops, a high school (for students aged 15-18), and a short-stay hospital equipped for surgery and associated specialists. Regarding their population, the functional analysis revealed a range from 6,200 to 35,500 residents. Additionally, the definition of a small town can be expanded to include large hub-boroughs, considered very small towns. Their delineation is based on the co-presence of a secondary school, a supermarket, and a nursing home, while their population typically ranges between 2,400 and 13,500 inhabitants. For medium-sized towns, the defining criteria include the existence of a higher education institution, more than eight furniture shops, and a maternity hospital or emergency ward. These criteria identified 110 medium-sized cities and 251 small towns in France (Jousseume and Talandier, 2016). In Germany, according to the definitions of the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs, and Spatial Development, a small town is a municipality with a population between 5,000 and 20,000 or one with at least a basic central function and some partial functions of a medium-sized center. Small towns can be further divided within this category: “very small towns” have populations between 5,000 and 10,000, while “large small towns” have populations between 10,000 and 20,000. Medium-sized cities have populations between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, most of which possess a medium level of central functions (Porsche et al., 2019).

## THE CONCEPT AND UNIQUE FEATURES OF SMALL TOWNS IN HUNGARY

Research on Hungarian small towns has revealed distinctive characteristics, development trajectories, and social dynamics that differentiate them within Hungary’s urban landscape. The concept of a “small town” in Hungary is generally defined based on demographic, administrative, and functional criteria, with small towns typically encompassing populations between 2,000 and 30,000 (Benedek & Moldovan, 2015). While many Hungarian small towns serve as local administrative or agricultural hubs, others function as suburban satellites to larger cities, showcasing varied socio-economic roles within the urban hierarchy (Szabó et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is undeniable that “As many houses, as many small towns perception” applies to the research of small towns in Hungary. Pirisi (2009) used the following definition: „the small town

is a settlement that excels from its environment through the density of social, and/or economic and infrastructural elements, offers a city-like way of living, and defines itself as a city, in whose spatial relations locality dominates”. But to make it suitable for practical empirical research, Pirisi and Trócsányi (2014) considered as small towns those settlements that had “town” legal status on 1st January 2013 and with populations less than 30,000 inhabitants. Their research concluded that small towns are shrinking, and the main problem is demographic decline, which is measurable not only quantitatively but also causes quality changes. Furthermore, they point out that the shrinkage of small towns is fundamentally ruining their identity and community values. To put it another way, what is going on is not solely the crisis of particular small towns in Hungary but the crisis of small towns’ existence as a whole (Pirisi & Trócsányi, 2014). Hungarian small towns also reflect the ongoing impacts of post-socialist transformations. Trócsányi et al. (2018) note that these towns once thrived under centrally planned economic policies, funneling resources into industries that collapsed post-transition. This economic shift led to an over-reliance on outdated infrastructure and further shrinkage as towns were left without robust economies. Many communities now seek economic revitalization through tourism and cultural investments, emphasizing the need for resilience and diversification (Trócsányi et al., 2018).

Horeczki et al. (Comitatus 2023) consider as small towns all settlements in Hungary whose population did not exceed 30,000 inhabitants and already had city status at the time of the 2022 census. The upper limit of 30,000 people was also the result of a compromise and partly reflects the weakness of the medium-city settlement circle (Pirisi, 2009). With the method used, 317 cities were finally selected for the analysis. The study showed that urbanization in Hungary seemed continuous and almost unstoppable until 2011: in the case of small towns, the shrinking of many traditional towns was offset by the growth of small towns with agglomeration and recreational functions, and the dynamic growth of the small-town network (until 2013) through formal urbanization. Behind the apparent stability, there are therefore dynamic processes which, due to their regional differences, also result in significant territorial reorganization. Horeczki et al. (2023) emphasize a significant demographic decline, with young residents migrating to urban centers for employment opportunities, contributing to aging populations and shrinking communities. Similarly, Makkai et al. (2017) investigate youth outmigration, noting that the loss of young adults undermines local labor markets, affecting economic resilience (Makkai et al., 2017).

Cultural heritage plays a pivotal role in the identity and economic potential of small towns. Csurgó and Megyesi (2016) add that local identity creation is essential for small-town resilience, as communities reframe their image to attract tourism and investment (Csurgó & Megyesi, 2016).



Horeczki and Egyed (2019) used the term „small cities” for towns with less than 20,000 inhabitants. They stated that the classification of small towns with a population below 5,000 inhabitants as urban settlements is a mere formality that is justified neither by their urban functions nor their regional role. Beluszky and Sikos (2020) distinguish settlements with city status and those with urban functions and conducted city hierarchy research. They found out that 45 % of the cities did not prove to be cities based on functional aspects. Seven categories were separated, and the minimum population of real cities - not counting the capital - was set at twenty-two and a half thousand people. The border between small and medium-sized towns is permeable, but an important distinction is that, in terms of functionality, medium-sized towns are not wedged between county centers and small towns. And the population of small towns typically does not use the various services locally but in the central cities (Beluszky and Sikos, 2020).

It is important to emphasize that while traditional small-town functions might have been questioned, there seems to be a revaluation of traditional small-town values recently. Two pillars are worth highlighting: firstly, small towns appear much more capable of transforming into sustainable habitats harmonizing with elements of the natural environment than urban spaces (this segment has not been researched empirically in Hungary by now). Secondly, small towns are being revalued as secure places during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pirisi et al., 2022; Uzzoli, 2022). This narrative is likely to strengthen now, especially when societal, political, military, and economic risks are on the rise.

In the history of Hungary, the categorization of cities was primarily determined by their feudal status (Beluszky, 2003). There were two categories. The free royal city (*civitas*) had relative internal autonomy and was exempted from the direct rule of the landowner by the king and was organized around industry and trade almost without exception. The other is the ‘market town’ (*oppidum*), a settlement owned by the landowner, subordinate to the landowners but with some urban function. Typically, the free royal cities were larger, and the large number of market towns tended to be found in small towns and even in villages. However, the smallest Hungarian royal city Rust, with around 1,000 inhabitants, was granted the status in 1681. It is now part of Austria and has a population of around 2,000.

The medieval administrative system was modified by a law adopted in 1848, which provided for a more modern urban structure. In the law, a small town was defined as a municipality of less than 12,000 inhabitants, a medium-sized town between 12,000 and 30,000 inhabitants, and a large city as a municipality of more than 30,000 inhabitants (Csomós, 2009). It is important to note that the law was drafted before the start of the modern urbanization process in the context of a traditional society based on agriculture but with the need for modernization.

Table 1.

*Number of municipalities by their central role according to the NCDSN of 1971 classification. Source: Rechnitzer & Smahó (2016)*

Central role type	Number of municipalities classified	Percentage of total municipalities
National centre	1	0,03
Advanced higher level centre	5	0,15
Higher level centre	7	0,22
Partial higher level centre	11	0,34
Secondary centre	65	2,02
Partial secondary centre	41	1,28
Advanced lower centre	142	4,43
Lower centre	530	16,52
Partial lower centre	292	9,10
Municipalities in the Budapest agglomeration	44	1,37
Other municipalities	2071	64,54
All municipalities	3209	100,0

The status of towns was regulated by law in 1876. The number of settlements with urban status decreased significantly, and by the beginning of the 20th century, there were 42 towns left in Hungary, taking into account the territory of the country today.

The German Walter Christaller (1933) laid the foundation of settlement hierarchy research and formulated the central place theory (Große, 2010). In Hungary, the National Concept for the Development of Settlement Networks of 1971 dealt with the grouping of settlements according to their functions (Bibó, 1986; Beluszky, 2003) (Table 1).

Before 1990, in line with the National Concept for the Development of the Urban Network, the secondary and partial secondary centres were proposed to be awarded a rank of towns, which had to meet strict criteria. Later on, the government simplified the criteria for municipalities to become towns, and the criteria were considered to be merely indicative. Today (2024) there are 348 towns in Hungary, with an average population of 19806, and the smallest town with 1002 inhabitants. The most common category of cities is between 10 and 20 thousand inhabitants (Fig. 5).

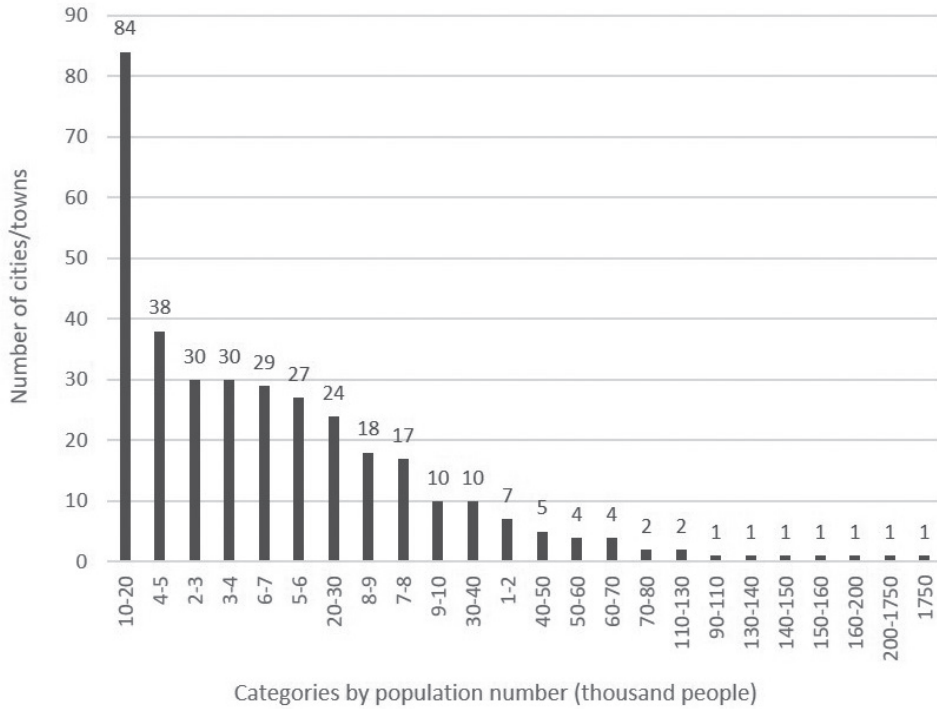


Fig. 5. Frequency of different city/town population categories in Hungary (2024)  
 (Source: Authors compilation based on data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office)

Today, the large number of newly designated cities has mostly exhausted the pool of potential cities that are not yet cities but have a central role.

There are still some non-urban settlements with a population well above that of many cities (up to 5-10 thousand inhabitants), but these are typically located in the Budapest agglomeration. At the same time, the Hungarian settlement network is characterized by the fact that in the central and southern parts of the country (Hungarian Plain), small villages were destroyed by the Ottoman conquest in the 16th and 17th centuries, and their inhabitants formed large villages, which by the 20th century had reached 10 000 inhabitants. They all have urban status today, even if they do not have a classical centre of attraction due to the lack of small villages. Number of cities and towns in Hungary for the period 1885-2021 is shown on Fig. 6.

Having examined the size and structural characteristics of the urban network in Hungary, we consider as a starting point for the development of the indicator

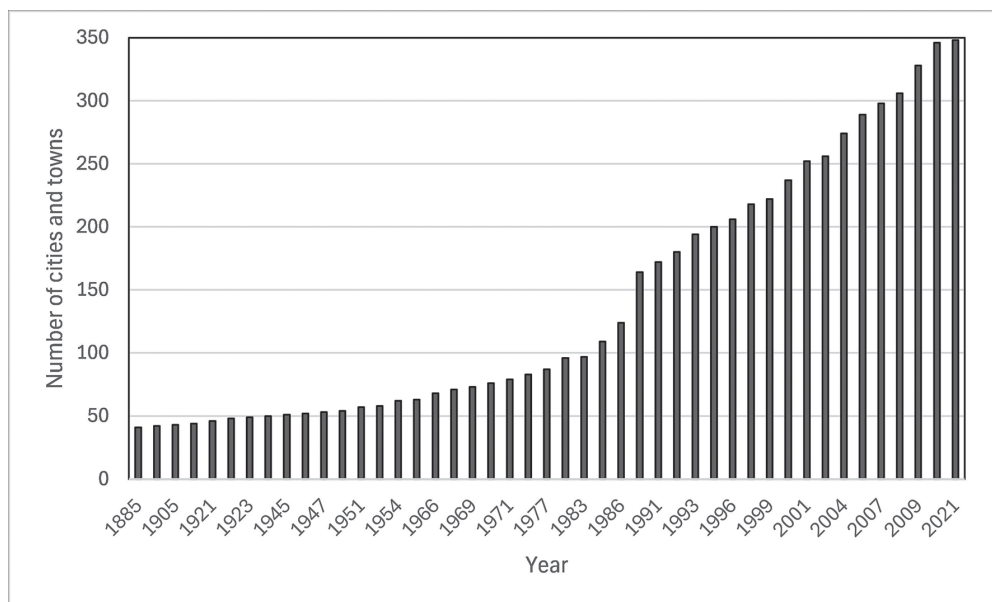


Fig. 6. Number of cities and towns in Hungary (1885-2021) (Source: Authors compilation based on data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office)

systems those settlements that have urban status but are not cities with county rights as small towns. These municipalities correspond to the broader definition of a small town, both in terms of size and function.

## SMALL TOWNS IN BULGARIA – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Urbanization is a complex social, economic, and demographic process related to the increasing role of cities/towns in the settlement system and in the life of the country. The criteria and indicators used for defining a given settlement as urban (city/town) are different in different countries. The most commonly used are indicators such as number of population, population density within the settlement, built-up area compactness, predominant non-agricultural employment, the administrative role of the settlement, etc. In most countries, cities have a regulated administrative and legal status and are included in special lists (Penkova, 2009).

The centralized creation and management of settlement systems during the socialist period in Bulgaria, which sought a uniform and balanced development of the entire territory, failed. The polarized development of the settlement network - aggravated by the demographic crisis - continued and intensified in the years after 1989. That polarization is manifested by an increase in spatial inequalities

and concentration of demographic, economic, and social infrastructure potential in the large cities of the country. Small towns experience even more intensive processes of population reduction, a decrease in their vitality, and an inability to compete with the large regional centers. Traditionally, small towns in Bulgaria are generally located in poorly developed or more vulnerable territories such as border, mountainous, and rural areas, or areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. The unloading of this high concentration of human and economic potential in the largest cities requires the implementation of effective regional policy, through creation of new competitive centers, which will provide favorable conditions for: attracting investments, employment, education, tourism and recreation, etc. The role of small and medium-sized towns in that process is indisputable, and therefore, it is necessary to study the latter from the point of view of their internal differences: despite the fact that those type of settlements fall into the same category with respect to some quantitative parameters - in this case the number of population – significant differences are observed in terms of their socio-economic, infrastructural, spatial and cultural-historical development, demographic structure, functions, and role in the regional development.

In Bulgarian scientific literature, urban settlements are associated with the performance of mainly non-agricultural functions – artisanal in the past, and later – industrial, transport, commercial, cultural, administrative-service, tourist, etc. functions, which exert an attractive force on the surrounding territory. In geographical studies, greater attention is paid to the *classification* of cities/towns. However, in Bulgarian scientific literature, there is no unified approach to classifying urban settlements by population number. Different classifications are observed in different historical periods, closely related to the specifics of the socio-economic and political development of the country at the time. In previous decades, no regulated and objective criteria for the status of the two main settlement types – city/town and village - were applied. This inadequacy was to some extent overcome by the adoption of the Administrative-Territorial Organization of the Republic of Bulgaria Act in 1995, which provides that a settlement can be declared urban if its population number is not less than 3500 inhabitants, and not less than 1000 inhabitants in the case of resort settlements. Some qualitative parameters were also introduced (for example, the settlement must have sufficient social and technical infrastructure). The change of settlement status from rural to urban is initiated by the mayor of the settlement or the mayor of the municipality.

Razboynikov (1933) reviews the scientific publications related to the classification of settlements in Bulgaria. He points out that at the end of the nineteenth century, Shkorpil and Shkorpil (1892) noted that there were still no legal definitions for a city, town, village, etc. in Bulgaria. Razboynikov notes that Ishirkov (1910) accepted the following types of settlements: hamlets, villages, large villages (“palanks”), and towns, where the so-called “palanks” represent a

transitional settlement type between a village and a town, subsequently dropping out of the classification. Razboynikov examines the List of Settlements in the Kingdom of Bulgaria according to the census of December 31, 1926. The types of settlements in this document are *towns, villages, hamlets, railway stations and stops, monasteries, suburbs, inns and farmsteads, mining settlements, and separate single houses*. Cities/towns are not yet divided into separate types themselves.

Before the Second World War, the classifications of urban settlements proposed by Ishirkov (1925) and Batakiev (1931) were applied, which took into account purely geographical features.

After 1944, the greatest attention was paid to the quantitative, functional, and regional classifications of Bulgarian urban settlements, the development of which was characterized by areal expansion, construction of industrial facilities, and the need for new residential complexes. In the early 1970s, quantitative and qualitative classifications of the settlements were introduced, based on one, or a complex of parameters. Due to the intensive change in population number, the adopted thresholds between the individual categories of urban settlements in quantitative classifications quickly changed over time.

Kiradzhiev (1969) examines how the administrative division of the country and, accordingly, the change in the administrative functions of cities influence their development. The change in the population number in the period 1946-1965, as well as other parameters indicative of the state of small towns, were also examined in detail.

Penkov and Hristov (1975) classified urban settlements according to the number of population into: 1. Largest – pop. over 100 thousand inhabitants; 2. Large – from 50 to 100 thousand inhabitants, 3. Medium-sized – from 40 to 50 thousand inhabitants. 4. Close to medium-sized – from 20 to 40 thousand inhabitants, 5. Small – from 10 to 20 thousand inhabitants, 6. Smaller – from 5 to 10 thousand inhabitants 7. Smallest – up to 5 thousand inhabitants. Later, Kiradzhiev (1977) proposed the following classification by population number: 1. City of over 1 million; 2. Large cities - more than 100 thousand inhabitants; 3. Medium-sized - from 20 to 100 thousand inhabitants, 4. Small - from 10 to 20 thousand inhabitants; 5. Smallest – less than 10 thousand inhabitants. Penkov and Dimitrov (1987), however, based on the population censuses of 1975 and 1985, believe that it is appropriate to consider small towns those with a population of less than 10 thousand people.

For the purposes of the General Scheme for the Development of the Productive Forces and the Unified Territorial Development Plan of Bulgaria in the 1970s, a number of sectoral and branch classifications of Bulgarian settlements found wide practical application. Most of the economic-geographical studies emphasize that it is the functions which a city/town performs that are the most important feature of their classification. In Bulgaria, the first to make an attempt

at *functional classification* of urban settlements were Penkov and Penkova (1953), followed by Velchev (1960), Baczwarow and Miczew (1965), Marinov et al. (1973). Penkov and Hristov (1975) divide urban settlements (cities/towns) according to their functions into: 1. Urban settlements with unique functions; 2. Urban settlements with complex functions; 3. Urban settlements with multiple functions; 4. Urban settlements with two main functions – a) industrial-transport, b) industrial-agricultural, c) industrial-resort and d) industrial-tourist; 5. Urban settlements with one main function: a) ore mining and flotation, b) coal mining and electricity generation, c) wood processing, pulp and paper, d) resort. Small and medium-sized towns fall into the last two categories. Kiradzhiev (1977), based on the employment composition of the active population and the socio-economic development, proposes the following functional classification of Bulgarian urban settlements: 1. Capital; 2. Multifunctional: a) of inter-district importance, b) of local importance; 3. Industrial; 4. Agricultural, and 5. Resort towns. Donchev and Radeva (1983) attempted to classify settlement systems by the degree of industrial development, distinguishing six industrial types, while Donchev (1984) also proposed a functional classification of the settlement systems in Bulgaria.

Kiradzhiev (1977) proposes a genetic classification of urban settlements, stating that the emergence and duration of a city's existence significantly affects its current development. At the same time, he emphasizes that the genetic factor is indeed important, but cannot be regarded as ultimate. The author distinguishes five groups of urban settlements: 1. Ancient; 2. Medieval; 3. From the era of Ottoman rule; 4. From the capitalism era; 5. From the socialism era. According to Kiradzhiev (1977), the economic-geographical, and more precisely - the transport-geographical location - is of particular importance in characterizing urban settlements, and therefore distinguishes the following categories: 1. Cities that represent centers of transport arteries of international importance; 2. Cities that represent centers of transport arteries of national importance; 3. Port cities with railway connections; 4. Port cities with no railway connections; 5. Cities that represent nodal railway stations; 6. Cities on railway stations; 7. Cities with no railway connections. With the increase of spatial differences, Kiradzhiev (1987) proposes a classification of urban settlements according to population number dynamics for the 1946-1985 period, based on the total number of population, the functions performed by the urban settlement, and the economic profile – all regarded as factors strongly influencing the formation and the dynamics of the population number.

With the growth of the urban population and the formation of urban agglomerations, the topic of daily labor migrations gained increasing popularity. Apostolov (1980) attempts to typologize cities according to daily labor migrations, distinguishing four labor-functional typological groups of urban settlements: a) labor-attractive, b) attractive-residential, c) residentially-attractive, and d) residential.

Some regional studies consider the demographic processes in urban settlements, with no particular focus on small towns, which are merely regarded as part of the urban settlement network: the study of the demographic development of the urban settlements in Dobrudzha region (Michev, 1974), and the research on Danubian towns in Bulgaria (Kiradzhiev & Mladenov, 1990).

The *complex classification* represents a serious challenge to geographical research. The implementation of a complex classification of urban settlements in Bulgaria is extremely difficult due to their great diversity in terms of geographical location, emergence and development, functional structure, etc. Konakchiev (1973), using seven metric features, prepares a complex classification based on statistical and mathematical methods. That classification has a certain value in revealing the differences between urban settlements in Bulgaria, but it lacks the geographical element – the geographical location and historicism – features regarding the emergence and development of urban settlements. In addition, the transport, resort, and service functions of the urban settlements are not taken into account. As a result, one class combines urban settlements that exhibit little, to no similarity.

Kiradzhiev (1977) considers the size of the territory over which a city extends its influence as the most important criterion, and proposes the following complex classification of Bulgarian urban settlements: 1. Capital; 2. Regional and sub-regional center; 3. Micro-district center; 4. Center of a zone with local gravity; 5. Municipal center.

Devedzhiev (1978) develops a complex functional classification of the settlement network and settlement systems. In addition to the classifications by size, functions, etc., Hristov (1973) proposes a regional-territorial classification of the settlements in Bulgaria, which classification is in functional dependence on the economic zoning: 1. Basic settlement; 2. Settlement partially functioning as a local center; 3. Local center; 4. Micro-district center; 5. Sub-district center; 6. Regional center. The capital city is out of the ranking, although it also performs regional functions. A little later, Hristov (1977) motivates the need for a regional-territorial classification, as the division of settlements in the regional-territorial classification is interdependent on the territorial economic unit, which in ascending order has the following form: 1) settlements partially functioning as a local center; 2) micro-district center; 3) sub-district center; 4) regional center; 5) capital city.

In the 1980s the so-called *functional typology* of settlements in Bulgaria was developed, based on the classification of settlements by a complex of parameters. According to that typology, the settlements in Bulgaria form *eight functional types*: Sofia - given its unique settlement characteristics - is classified in a specific, zero functional type (Dimitrov, 2002; Koprarev, 2002). Depending on the administrative-territorial organization of the country, and the functions



performed by some administrative centers, the latter are defined as regional centers, municipal centers, and mayoral centers.

After 1989, the classifications of settlements, including small and medium-sized towns, have been dictated by the need for the development of specific regulatory and strategic documents, or specific policies, such as the Categorization of Administrative-Territorial and Territorial Units (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works). The new moment during that period was that the classifications were correlated with the specific characteristics of the spatial settlement system of the European Union. When reviewing the scientific literature during that period, it was found that small towns were very rarely the subject of research in Bulgaria. According to Regulation No.5 from 1995, urban settlements are divided into: very small (under 10 thousand inhabitants); small (10 to 30 thousand inhabitants); medium (30,001-100,000 inhabitants), large (10,001-400,000 inhabitants), and very large (over 400,000 inhabitants) (Regulation No. 5, 1995). Later, in 2003, for urban planning purposes, urban settlements were categorized as follows: 1. very large - over 200 thousand inhabitants; 2. large - from 100 thousand to 200 thousand inhabitants; 3. medium-sized - from 30 thousand to 100 thousand inhabitants; 4. small - from 10 thousand to 30 thousand inhabitants; 5. very small - up to 10 thousand inhabitants (Regulation No. 7 of December 22, 2003). In the National Spatial Development Concept (NSDC) for the 2013-2025 period, urban settlements are arranged in 6 *hierarchical levels*, based on their demographic, administrative, transport, health, educational, cultural, economic, and tourist importance. Correlation with the European ESPON classification was also sought. The NSDC pays special attention to small towns of the 4th hierarchical level, which are assumed to determine the direction of development of peripheral, rural, and mountainous areas, as well as to the smallest towns – forming the most numerous - 5th hierarchical level. In the so-called “Baseline model” of the NSDC, the hierarchical system of cities/towns extending their influence over areas of different sizes has been defined as follows:

- 1st level – the capital city of Sofia – a center of European importance for the national territory (a city of the 4th level of the Metropolitan European Growth Areas (MEGA) according to the European ESPON classification);

- 2nd level – large cities, centers of national importance for the territory of the regions - Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Ruse, Pleven, and Stara Zagora. According to the European ESPON classification, only the cities of Plovdiv, Varna and Burgas are of the 2nd level (Transnational–national);

- 3rd level – medium-sized towns, centers of regional importance for the territory of the regions – regional centers and other prominent towns, such as Svishtov, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Kazanlak, Dimitrovgrad, Asenovgrad, Karlovo, Dupnitsa, Petrich - a total of 28. According to the European ESPON classification, that level is called “Regional–Local”;

- 4th level – small towns with microregional significance for the territory of groups of municipalities – a total of 90 (Northwestern region – 16 towns; North Central region – 11; North Eastern region – 10; South Eastern region – 15; South Central region – 20; South Western region – 18;

- 5th level – very small towns and villages, centers of municipal significance for the territory of the respective municipalities – a total of 139, distributed by regions as follows: North Western region – 30; North Central region – 19; North Eastern region – 20; South Eastern region – 13; South Central region – 29; South Western region – 28. In this system, each center of a higher level also performs the functions of a center of the lower levels. The areas of influence of the urban settlements of the five hierarchical levels coincide respectively with the boundaries of: the municipality – at the 5th level (LAU 1); a group of municipalities – at the 4th level; a district – at the 3rd level (NUTS 3); a region – at the 2nd level (NUTS 2); the whole country – at the 1st level (NUTS 0).

One of the shortcomings of the classifications made so far is that in many cases they do not apply to all urban settlements, and most often the developed methodological approach is only applied to individual cities. The other main drawback is that most of the classifications address a specific problem related to current social problems and trends in the urban planning of small towns, and more specifically - the development of green systems (Dragozova-Ivanova, 2011), inequalities in the use of health services (Rohova, 2017), the renovation of central parts (Vlasarev & Peev, 2019), the potential for revitalization of industrial buildings (Hristov & Savcheva, 2020), the different approaches to the regeneration of industrial buildings depending on the size of settlements (Hristov, 2019), the infrastructure and transport problems of small towns (Dimitrov, 2016). Petkova (2004) tracks the population dynamics in Bulgarian urban settlements for the 1985–2001 period. Donchev and Karakashev (2015) divide urban settlements into *five categories* according to the functions they perform: metropolitan functions (Sofia); complex functions (Varna, Plovdiv, etc.); multifunctional (i.e. combining at least 3 economic activities or industries: Shumen, Dobrich, etc.); two main functions (with different variations between the leading sector – transport, tourism, agriculture, etc.). For example, Gorna Oryahovitsa is a town of an industrial-transport function, while Velingrad performs a tourist-industrial function, as well as monofunctional (such as Madan, Rudozem, Laki, Belovo, Bankya, Sozopol, Varshets, etc.). The latter mainly include small towns. The classification of urban settlements by leading industrial activity is also widely used:

- Mining: Bobov Dol, Radnevo, etc.;
- Transport services: Cherven Bryag, Gorna Oryahovitsa, etc.;
- Industrial-agrarian: Karlovo, Karnobat, etc.;
- Agro-industrial: Dulovo, Mizia, etc.;

- Recreational tourism and balneology: Nesebar, Balchik, Varshets, Hisarya, etc. (Petkov & Penerliev, 2020).

The theoretical and practical aspects of monofunctional urban settlements are reviewed by Penerliev (2019, 2023). In 2012, Ilieva studied large and medium-sized towns in Bulgaria in the context of regional development and regional policy.

Until the Liberation (1878), there were no precise data on the number and size of urban settlements in that part of the Ottoman Empire which is now present-day Bulgaria. The oldest data are from the population census of 1887, when 74 urban settlements were registered. Until the end of Second World War, there were no significant changes in the number and spatial distribution of settlements in the country. The first decades after the Liberation were characterized by relatively slower changes in the structure of the urban settlement network, which was mostly due to the slow economic development of the predominantly agrarian country. By 1920, the number of urban settlements in Bulgaria had reached 92. In the whole 1887-1920 period, that number increased by 18, of which 7 villages were declared towns, while the other 11 towns were annexed by Bulgaria as a result of the various peace treaties in the 1913-1919 war period. The largest urban settlements had more significant development, and the increase in their population was largely due to refugees from territories that remained outside the country's borders. As a result of the regaining of some predominantly Bulgarian-inhabited lands, along with declaring of several villages as towns, the number of urban settlements reached 106 by 1946. The years after the Second World War left a deep mark on the development of the settlement network in Bulgaria. With the rapid industrialization, the collectivization of agriculture, and the high spatial concentration of industrial capacities, the number of urban settlements increased significantly. A large number of villages gained urban status, although in many cases they did not have the necessary potential for that. Often the subjective factor prevailed, while the objective potentials were overestimated by the then expert assessments.

By 1958, 14 urban settlements had been formed on the basis of combining a total of 40 rural settlements. Eight new urban settlements were declared in the period between 1946 and 1958. The town-forming factors in their case were the industry (Dimitrovgrad, Velingrad, Madan), transport (Mezdra, Levski), and administrative and management functions (Kubrat, Godech), etc. After 1958, the urbanization processes developed at a very rapid pace. Large, but mostly low-efficiency enterprises, were built in the newly-declared towns, which required a significant workforce. At the same time, a large part of the landless farmers, receiving low wages in the agricultural cooperatives they were employed in, started migrating to the urban settlements. In this way, the Bulgarian countryside became the main source for recruiting low-skilled labor - mainly for the industry, transport and construction. By 1975, additional 77 villages were declared towns,

most of which fell into the category of very small towns. That was done on the basis of the industrial, transport, administrative, and resort functions performed by those settlements.

Between 1976 and 1985, large and medium-sized towns continued to grow, due to both natural population increase and positive net migration rate. During those years, the number of small towns increased. However, most of them exhibited a population decline. Many of those small towns were not able to attract new settlers. In terms of demographic potential and population reproduction, they did not differ much from large villages. Twenty-two new towns emerged, while the leading factors were again the development of industry (Beloslav, Dolna Mitropolia, Boboshevo), historical heritage (Shipka, Pordim, Byala Cherkva), and seaside tourism (Primorsko, Obzor, Byala).

After 1985, for the first time, the number of the Bulgarian urban population started to decline. Until 1992, the number of urban settlements in the country grew by just one – as a result of the division of the town of Srednogorie into the historically existing two separate settlements – Zlatitsa and Pirdop.

Between 1992 and 2001, two new towns – Hadzhidimovo and Bozhurishte – were declared, bringing the number of urban settlements to 240 (Kopravev, 2002; Dimitrov, 2002). During the period between 2001 and 2011, 15 rural settlements were declared urban. All of those fell into the category of very small towns. The leading factors for their status change were the development of tourism, some industrial production, as well as the provision of some services in the field of education and healthcare at the lowest spatial level: Banya (2002), Slivo Pole (2002), Vetren (2003), Glodzhevo (2003), Kostandovo (2003), Sarnitsa (2003), Aksakovo (2004), Kiten (2005), Dobrinishte (2006), Kuklen (2006), Marten (2006), Momin Prohod (2006), Sveti Vlas (2006), Aheloy (2009) and Chernomorets (2009). As of 1st Feb. 2011, the number of urban settlements in Bulgaria was already 255, but by 2021 that number grew by 2 more (the villages of Kran and Ignatievo were declared towns), thus reaching the current total number of urban settlements in Bulgaria – 257.

A characteristic feature of the Bulgarian population is its concentration in large cities. As of 2021, 36% of the country's population is concentrated in the six largest cities (with a population of over 100 thousand inhabitants) - Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Ruse, and Stara Zagora. The deepening processes of depopulation and spatial polarization are changing the scope, structure and stability not only of the villages, but also of the urban settlement network of the country. As a result of migration processes, low birth rates and high mortality rates, the changes in the spatial distribution of the population continue, with consequences being related to divergent changes in the size of the different categories of urban settlements. The differences between the large and the small ones are deepening. The trend of concentration of younger population in the large cities continues. As a result of these processes, the concentration of population

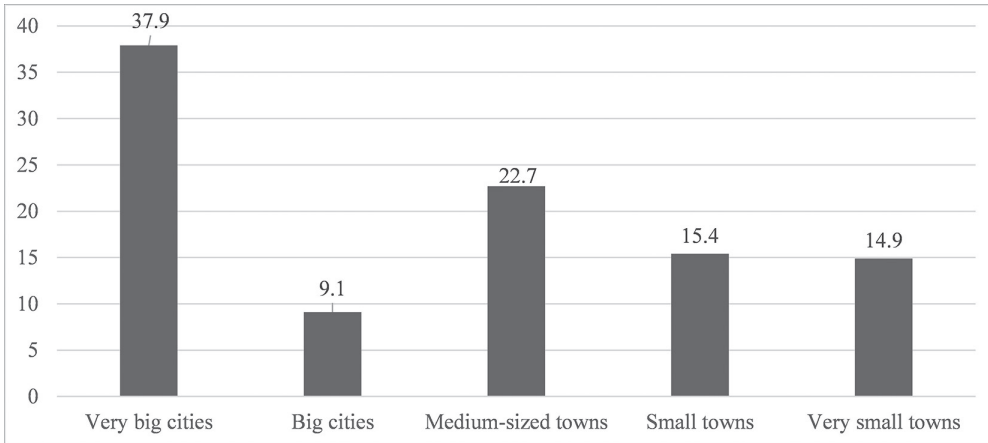


Fig. 7. Relative share of the urban population (%) by categories: very large - over 200 thousand people; large – from 100 thousand to 200 thousand people); medium-sized (from 30 thousand to 100 thousand people); small (from 10 thousand to 30 thousand people) and very small (under 10 thousand people)

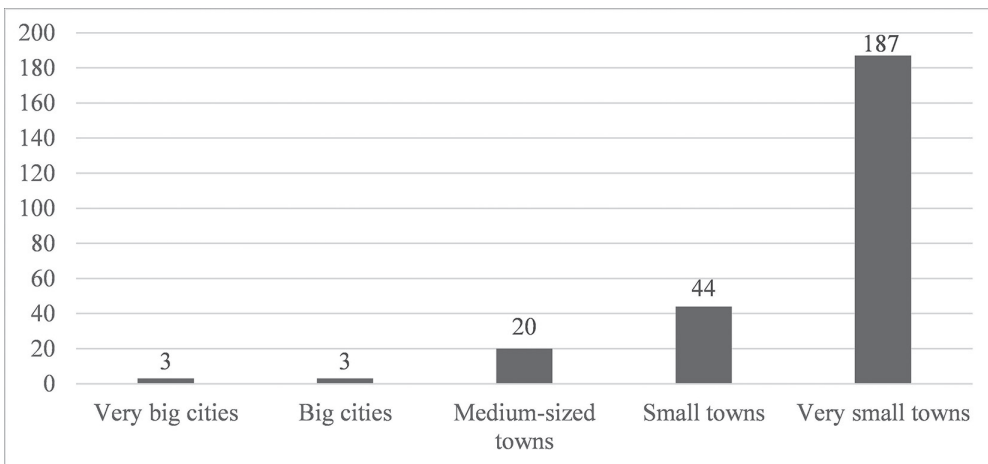


Fig. 8. Number of urban settlements by categories: very large – over 200 thousand people; large – from 100 thousand to 200 thousand people); medium-sized (from 30 thousand to 100 thousand people); small (from 10 thousand to 30 thousand people) and very small (under 10 thousand people)

in very large (over 200 thousand people) and large cities (from 100 thousand to 200 thousand people) is increasing, and has currently reached 47% of the total urban population. As a result of the higher rates of population decline, the number of very small (up to 10 thousand people) and small towns (from 10

thousand to 30 thousand people) as of 2021 reached 44 and 187 respectively (89.9% of all urban settlements). However, just 30.3 % of the urban population resides in those two categories of towns (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8).

## CONCLUSIONS

Undoubtedly, it is challenging to define the category “small town” in a European context, and at the national level, due to variations in historical and cultural development, geographical location, population, administrative functions, and economic activities. Typically, small towns play a vital central role in rural areas and shape the quality of life by providing the necessary services, infrastructure facilities, and job opportunities. However, small towns often remain overshadowed by villages and regional cities in policymaking, and so far, have received limited research attention. Scholars’ debate shows that two approaches are typically encountered when the need to describe small towns arises: one is based on population size, and the other - is on the place of small towns in the urban hierarchy, which is determined by the functions of the settlement or region. Often the morphological and functional approaches are implemented together, although it is stated by most scholars that small towns are best described in functional terms.

The intricacy of small towns’ definitions shows the importance of contextual factors and the need for integrated classification based on population size, density, and functions, which is a subject of elaboration in the theoretical debate in European research. The administrative regulations generally set the lowest limit for the population of a small town as one of the criteria for its designation as a town and is typically 2000 inhabitants in most countries. The upper limit for the number of citizens is even more uncertain and differs widely among countries, e.g. for Germany – up to 20,000 and France – up to 35,500 people. Due to varied population thresholds for determining small towns in Europe, a comprehensive research project (TOWN) implemented under the European Union’s ESPON program, aimed to create a common pan-European framework for delimiting small and medium-sized towns to improve comparability. For a thorough understanding and delineation of small and medium-sized towns, the TOWN project performed morphological (population size and density) and functional (economic and service roles) evaluations and highlighted the shortcomings of both approaches. To address these issues, the TOWN project recommends the implementation of the integrated approach combining the morphological and functional criteria, for a better understanding and conceptual clarity in the delimitation of small and medium-sized towns.

Small towns in Hungary have revealed distinctive characteristics, development trajectories, and social dynamics that differentiate them within the

country's urban landscape. Historically, the categorization of urban settlements was primarily determined by their feudal status and has been constantly modified afterward, following shifts in Hungary's political, economic, and demographic development. Nowadays, Hungary's concept of a "small town" is generally defined based on demographic, administrative, and functional criteria. Commonly, small towns in Hungary encompass a population between 2,000 and 30,000, have city status, and offer an urban lifestyle, but have a local influence only. Under a centrally planned economy, the Hungarian small towns received state support and funding, but nowadays are struggling with numerous problems due to demographic decline, aging population, and youth migration to larger urban centers. Furthermore, the economic transformation of small towns shows regional disparities and exhibits differentiated growth paths with some thriving as suburban satellites, while others stagnate. Cultural heritage plays a pivotal role in the identity and economic potential of small towns in Hungary, so the shrinkage of small towns fundamentally erodes their identity and community values. Nowadays, many small towns are looking to tourist and cultural investments as tools for economic regeneration, thus becoming more resilient and diverse. Small towns appear to be much more capable of sustainable transformation, harmonizing with elements of the natural environment, than dense and highly urbanized spaces (this segment has not been researched yet empirically in Hungary). Also, small towns are being considered as more secure places following the COVID-19 pandemic, and that is likely to strengthen as a trend, especially when societal, political, military, and economic risks are on the rise.

The complex typology of urban settlements in Bulgaria is extremely difficult due to their great diversity in terms of geographical location, distinctiveness in their origin and development, demographic features, functional structure, etc. During the so-called communist period, the urban network was constantly expanding, and the greatest attention was paid to the quantitative, functional, and genetic classification of Bulgarian cities/towns. Due to intensive changes in population numbers, the main problem was the rapid change of thresholds adopted for the different categories of towns in the quantitative (morphological) classifications. After 1990, with the transformation of the political and socio-economic system in the country, the geographical research on the settlement classifications (including small and medium-sized towns) changed their objectives according to requirements of specific normative and strategic national documents, seeking correlation with the settlement system in the European Union.

Small towns in Bulgaria increased significantly in number in the years after the Second World War and left a deep imprint on the development of the settlement network in the country. The state-forced industrialization, as well as the collectivization of the rural economy, caused substantial migration flows from

rural areas, and as a result, the number of towns rapidly grew. That was mainly because many villages were designated as towns, despite the fact that very often they lacked the necessary prerequisites for obtaining urban status. Since 1990, the intensive processes of depopulation, and spatial demographic and economic polarization in Bulgaria, have changed the extent, structure, and stability not only of the villages but also of the urban network. As these negative trends have deepened in the last decades, we are witnessing consequently divergent changes in the number, size, and importance of the different urban settlement categories. The differences between big and small towns are vastly widening, and the number of small towns in Bulgaria is currently 44, comprising more than 15 % of the total population (2021). Small towns have crucial importance in peripheral and rural regions and serve as micro-regional hubs, playing a key role in regional and urban development. Although small towns are essential to attaining sustainable and balanced spatial development, they are very rarely the subject of comprehensive geographical research in Bulgaria.

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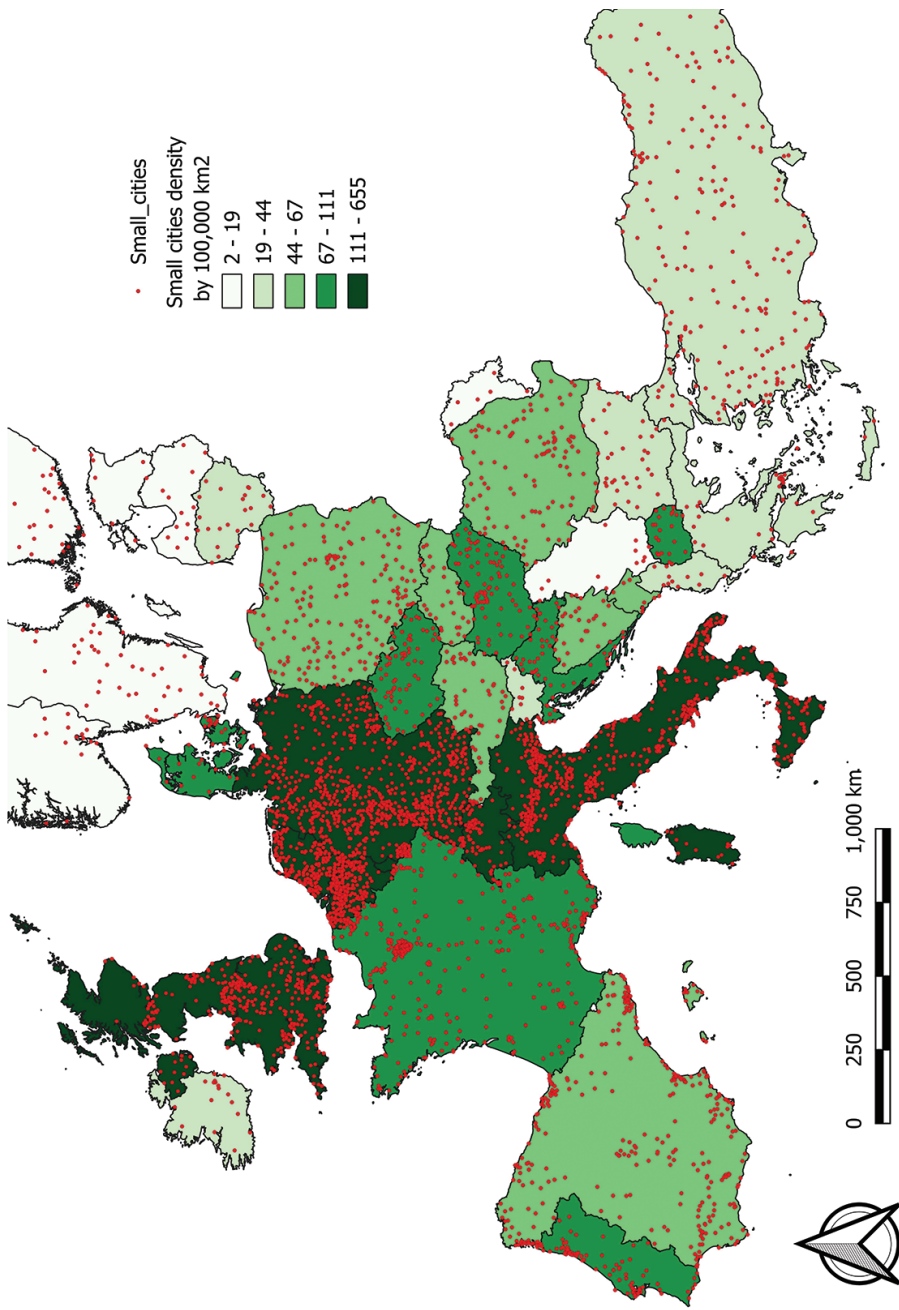


Fig. 1. Distribution of small cities (10 000–20 000 inhabitants) and their density in Europe (Cartography: Zakaria Suleiman. Source of map: <https://www.opendatasoft.com/en/>)

