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CITY-FORMING PROCESSES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

The Katowice conurbation is one of the most interesting settlement systems in Poland. It is distinguished by its close proximity to as many as 54 municipalities (including 17 major cities and medium-sized cities/towns) covering an area of 3,329 square kilometers (1,285 square miles) and inhabited by about 2 million people (2019 data). The conurbation's origins date back to the 19th century, and its dynamic development took place after World War II. Although individual cities developed independently, they were linked by the same city-forming factor – hard coal mining and, to some extent, also other branches of traditional industry. This in turn has had significant consequences for the economic, business-related, political, social, and spatial dimensions of the conurbation.

On the one hand, the dominant industry in the region influenced the direction of urban development, created job opportunities, was the source of a specific, strong mining culture, determined the infrastructure and urban landscape, and impacted political decisions. On the other hand, it was constantly subject to transformation, as described by Assoc. Prof. Robert Krzysztofik, professor of socio-economic geography at the University of Silesia.

It seems that transformation may be the key word to understand the area and all the processes taking place in it, which in one way or another affect the lives of its inhabitants. The term "transformation," however, is very complex.

In the 19th century, we were confronted with transformation at the time of the transition from the feudal era to the industrial era. Then we witnessed the effects of the efforts to modernize the Polish industry in the 1970s and 1980s. In the history of this country, the next huge, or even revolutionary breakthrough was, of course, the early 1990s. Today, in turn, the so-called green and digital transformation and smart regions are frequently mentioned.

"Already from this short enumeration, it follows that there is an overlap of the time perspective and the transformation process, a hierarchical overlap, so to speak," the geographer comments. "It can be observed with regard to all changes that originate at global, state, regional, and local policy levels. Top-down recommendations related to the fight against the effects of climate change are a succinct example. Moves made at the level of the European Union or, even more broadly, decisions taken at successive climate summits, have a major impact on the direction of the entire conurbation's transformation, including the cities that comprise it. A good example is the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, as it forces many changes in the functioning of the world and individual regions".

And here a paradox appears. Since the very beginning of the formation

of this interesting settlement form, the conurbation, namely each of the cities and towns, have developed independently. Despite the mutual dependencies and many common city-forming processes, key decisions have been and most likely will be made in such a way that the local community will be affected by the changes as little as possible.

"The point of the inhabitants is basically this: we know that the fight for cleaner air and climate is important, but it should not be done at our expense," says Prof. Robert Krzysztofik. He adds that the green transition could prove challenging for this region, which had a natural abundance of coal deposits, and which developed and gained its current status thanks to the mining industry. It suffices to go back to the 1990s, when Poland was not yet a member of the European Union. The subsequent liquidation of mines, as well as the closure of many large enterprises throughout the country, without financial support or any an idea for the future, were the sources of socio-economic decline, mainly in the smaller cities and, what is particularly worth emphasizing, caused many human dramas.

It is also worth noting that the industry dominating in the Katowice conurbation has been the source of energy security for the region, which is one of the largest producers and consumers of energy in Poland.

"It is therefore not surprising that many municipalities not only have no intention to close coal mines, but actually plan to develop the existing infrastructure and build new ones. Such actions are certainly not encouraged by national, let alone global, sentiment against the coal sector," the scientist explains.

In this context, it is interesting to look at the entire Katowice conurbation. In such a settlement pattern, there are mainly centrifugal forces, in contrast to large, developed cities, such as Cracow, Warsaw, or Wrocław. This means that the centers of gravity are distributed slightly differently, without being concentrated in one central point on

the map. This particular collection of cities resembles a plasma rather than a collection of independent and distant points. According to research, larger cities, such as Katowice, Gliwice, or Sosnowiec, cope best with the effects of various transformations. The third city is a good example of a change in function or rather a certain specialization that occurred as a result of successive transformations. While today's Katowice is a cluster of service and office centers, Sosnowiec has become a place for the development of logistics, a fact that has made the city attractive for many international companies.

"It is true, therefore, that each of the cities, as a result of the transformation and using the potential it already has, should find its own new specialization and path of transformation. So maybe it is worth changing the structure of employment or the function of former industrial buildings or even entire housing estates, as it was successfully done in Katowice or Sosnowiec? It is apparent when we look at the Nikiszowiec District in Katowice, the Katowice Cultural Zone, or the Jacek Kuroń Park in Sosnowiec, in the Kazimierz Górniczy post-mining district," says Prof. Robert Krzysztofik.

"Of course, this is not an easy task. Cities often compete with one another. As a consequence, those with less potential are negatively affected. A good example is Świętochłowice, surrounded by larger cities, which they are forced to compete against on many levels. The limited amount of funding available to local governments does not help the transition either. This, in turn, means that unavoidable changes are introduced in a fragmentary way, sometimes a bit randomly. However, their responsible and consistent implementation should not be abandoned. Thanks to them, individual cities should become better places to live. Only then will they be attractive not only to the present, but also to new residents. When will we see the new face of the Katowice conurbation? I believe it is a matter of the next ten or fifteen years," the researcher concludes.