

SOUTH MORAVIAN COUNTRYSIDE: PROGRESS OR STAGNATION?

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ABSTRACT – South Moravian countryside: progress or stagnation?

Countryside may be also conceived of as a territory of lower population density. In this regard the fields and forests take up roughly 90% of the South Moravian Region. Other activities outside the urban area of the city of Brno are marginal, they can however constitute inappropriate dominant features or barriers in the landscape. The countryside as a social system is conversely subject to urbanization; this also applies to the periphery. Rather those countryside features have a better chance of survival, which are associated with a lower number of inhabitants of rural settlements, while those related with work in agriculture are quickly vanishing. The following trends and challenges can be anticipated in future: continuing suburbanization, counter urbanization and amenity migration, growing significance of leisure time and its impact on learning recreation, decreasing share of the primary industries and a rising proportion of services in the employment structure, growing importance of nature and landscape conservation, population ageing and development of services for senior citizens, internationalization, globalization and the demise of the barrier effect of the national border. It is of significance that the countryside provides alternative ways of living for the current population.

INTRODUCTION

Half a century ago, countryside used to be a symbol of backwardness and stagnation in contrast to the city which stood for progress and better quality of life. In the last fifty years, however, the perception of European countryside has seen remarkable changes in the direction from west to east. Although without any doubt social progress continues to be formed primarily in the cities, where the educational, research and development institutions are concentrated, the countryside plays an ever increasing role in the life of the society.

The Czech countryside naturally develops within the framework of the European and global trends. Concurrently some historical, natural and geographic specificities come into play, too. In the second half of the 20th century, the Czech village has gone through the stage of socialization and industrialization of farming marked by several specifics even in the context of the Eastern socialist camp. The South Moravian countryside is noteworthy due to relatively favourable natural conditions for intensive farming and it is exceptional because of its location in the theoretically most backward south-eastern corner of the state.

The following account originated in the process of addressing the EU DERREG 7th Framework Programme No. SSH-CT-2008-225204 titled “Development of the Europe’s Countryside in the Era of Globalization”. Within the scope of this programme, the South Moravian Region is compared to other nine case regions in other European countries. In such a comparison the South Moravian Region appears to be very rural and if we look at it from the perspective of the GDP per person, it ranks as a rather poor region of NUTS 3.

In reality the South Moravian countryside generally does not seem to be perceived as such. Is it the system of Europe-wide indicators or other values considered further in the context of regional, national and central European measures that matter in the evaluation of

regional advancement? What is more important – the hard data or the perception of the region by its inhabitants and visitors?

THEORY AND METHODS

Countryside is one of those terms with which everybody assumes to be familiar but which is extremely difficult to define accurately (WOODS 2005). HALFACREE (1993) categorizes the definitions of the countryside into two groups. The first one attempts to characterize the corresponding type of rural locality. The second group is based on a socio-cultural interpretation. It now appears, in the post-modern times, that the non-material definition may dominate its locality-based alternative.

The OECD methodology (also used by Eurostat) defines countryside as a territory of a density lower than 150 persons per square kilometre. But this definition does not consider the regional specificities that matter more in the rural space than in the cities. The Czech Statistical Office definition specifies that rural municipalities are those with less than 2,000 inhabitants and municipalities of up to 3,000 inhabitants unless they are settlements of at least an administration district of a municipality with extended competence or of a higher territorial unit. With respect to the remarkably different settlement structure of the South Moravian Region the regional administration of the Czech Statistical Office⁷ accepted a definition stating that rural space is constituted by municipalities with less than 4,000 inhabitants, including three towns formed by a larger number of small settlements.

According to this definition the rural space of the South Moravian Region is constituted by 647 municipalities with 44.2% of the population (2003–2007 average). These municipalities took up 96.1 % of the Region's surface area. If we return to the OECD definition, the South Moravian Region is a strongly rural space. If we do not include the city of Brno, the people living in the rural municipalities would constitute two thirds of the Region.

Measuring the regional advancement or stagnation is by no means a simple issue. Economic and demographic aspects, environmental situation, quality of life and probably a series of other perspectives are brought into play. A certain assessment was attempted by PERLÍN AND ŠIMČÍKOVÁ (2006) or by BAŇSKI (2008), who singled out factors of location and socio-economic and technical-organizational factors.

Experience attests to the fact that a significant proportion of the region's development must be attributed to its centre. In this regard we need to consider the function of the city of Brno, the second largest in the Czech Republic and a prominent university, commercial and transport centre.

While the system of economic and demographic indicators at the level of a region, districts and frequently also municipalities is elaborated to a great degree of detail, the assessment of the environment and standard of living is rather complicated. It is quite obvious that in most cases we cannot make do with hard data. Since at this moment we still do not know the questionnaire survey results of the project, we can only speculate about the actual situation.

⁷ The position of countryside within the South Moravian Region. The Czech Statistical Office Brno 2009, p. 171.

The countryside is apparently fairly differentiated. Within the national framework, we can hypothetically distinguish between the countryside of Bohemia and Moravia and the countryside of the interior and the borderland. Of significance are also conditions peculiar to each location (distance from the centre) and the natural characteristics. This also applies to the South Moravian countryside which includes the suburbanized countryside in the environs of Brno, the peripheral countryside in the border areas, the internal periphery and the countryside of the South Moravian vales with a substantial proportion of grapevine and fruits cultivation.

The momentum of the hitherto countryside conception in the central European context is associated with agriculture (a representative example for many others is BIČÍK AND JANČÁK 2006). As a matter of fact, in today's Europe the primary activities in the countryside still have a strong representation in the land use but their importance in terms of employment, economy and way of life is quickly waning. We still more often refer to multifunctional countryside, to its urbanization and changing conception (CLOKE ET AL. 2006).

SOUTH MORAVIAN COUNTRYSIDE

The South Moravian countryside is tackled within the framework of the South Moravian Region which is a state administration and self-governing unit of NUTS 3 in compliance with the EU terminology. The Region's surface area is 7,195 km² and the population totals 1,147,000 which results in a mean density of 159 persons per km². The city of Brno has 370,000 inhabitants on a surface area of 230 km². The remaining area is thus characterized by a population density of 112 inhabitants per km².

The population of the rural municipalities of the South Moravian Region was half a million. On average a rural municipality had 783 inhabitants. The most common were medium-sized municipalities with 500–999 inhabitants. The majority of the population (almost one third) lived in large rural municipalities of over 2,000 inhabitants. Roughly one third of the rural space was characterized by the population density lower than 50 persons per km² and another one third by a density of 50–99 persons per km².

In terms of land use, the farm land constituted 63.6%, forest land 26.0% and built-up areas 1.6% of the surface area. From the national perspective the Region's proportion of agricultural areas is above the average and the share of forest areas conversely deeply below it. The coefficient of ecological stability⁸ results more favourable (0.76) for the South Moravian towns (with the share of forests at 30%) than for the countryside (0.62).

Remoteness tends to be measured by the accessibility of the nearest centre. The seats of administrative districts (put plainly, the nearest towns or central villages) are accessible by road within 30 minutes for 92.6% of the rural inhabitants. Brno is accessible for 21.4% of the population of the South Moravian countryside within 30 minutes, while for 24.2% of the inhabitants within a period exceeding one hour. The frequency of the public transport lines is important, too. The majority of the territory is nowadays covered by the Integrated Public Transport System, which associates 20 carriers. The system covers 513 municipalities and 1,030,000 inhabitants by 289 lines. It assures high frequency, regularity and low transfer waiting times of the lines also during weekends and holidays.

⁸ Ratio of ecologically stable and unstable areas.

Although the population of the South Moravian countryside is subject to ageing⁹, it is on average still younger in comparison with the Region's towns. The age category of 0–14 years constitutes 14.8% of the population, while inhabitants over 65 or older constitute 14.7% (16.2% in the cities) of the total. The average age in the South Moravian countryside is 40 years and 41.4 years in the South Moravian towns. An approximate degree of natality as well as a general fertility rate were slightly lower in the countryside than in the towns but the countryside showed remarkably lower percentages of children born out of wedlock and abortions (including miscarriages).

Mortality was slightly higher in the countryside than in the towns (10.5 and 10.3 of deceased per one thousand inhabitants). Variations consisted in the causes of death: circulatory system illnesses prevailed in the countryside and tumours in the cities. The countryside was characterized by a higher natural decrease of the population (0.9‰) than the towns. On the contrary, the countryside witnessed a population increment of 6.3‰ due to migration to which corresponds the total positive balance (5.4‰) of residential mobility. Towns had a negative tendency also in terms of migration. As a result in the last period the share of rural population in the South Moravian Region increased.

A notable difference to the detriment of the countryside rests in the educational structure of the population above 15 years of age¹⁰. Elementary education and completion of apprenticeships without the GCSE examination (71.2% compared to 52.7% in the towns) considerably predominate in the countryside. This relationship becomes inverted in the case of secondary and higher education. The proportion of university graduates residing in the countryside is only 5% as opposed to 14% in the towns.

This correlates with the lower entrepreneurial activity of the rural population. The rural space of the South Moravian Region has 199 economic entities and 108 active enterprises per 1,000 inhabitants (as of 2008). Budgets of the rural municipalities dispose of CZK 15,500 per inhabitant, while in the towns it is double the amount. Quite surprisingly, the countryside has more beds in accommodation facilities per thousand inhabitants (29.9) than the urban areas. However, if we look at the development trend, the relative growth of the number of economic entities between 2001 and 2008 was clearly higher in the countryside. Yet the towns were marked by a higher growth of entities in the primary sector and in enterprises associated with primary production, while the countryside saw a higher growth intensity in services.

THE FUNCTION OF THE SOUTH MORAVIAN COUNTRYSIDE

Up until recently primary activities were considered as the traditional countryside's function, i.e. chiefly agriculture and forestry complemented – based on the concrete conditions – by water management and extraction of mineral resources. At present the countryside is being attached the importance of a space for tourism and recreation and also for nature conservation. In connection with the development of suburbanization and counter urbanization additionally the residential function and the related communal enterprising become asserted. Furthermore, other branches such as industry, power engineering, commerce and services are gaining ground in the countryside.

If we wish to discuss the rural functions, we need to get over the original dichotomy. On the one hand the countryside can be perceived as a territory, and on the

⁹ The population data are an average for the years 2001–2008.

¹⁰ Population and Housing Census 2001

other as a social system determined mainly by the typical way of life. If we talk about the rural functions in the first sense, then land use is decisive. It is obvious that primary activities are still performed on by far the largest proportion of the rural areas – in our case they account for roughly 90%. Other activities may form inappropriate dominant features in the area (e.g. wind power plants) and barriers (e.g. transport structures) or otherwise alter the aspect of the landscape (e.g. solar power plants), but their areal extent is negligible. The cultivation structure may also incline towards the so-called “energy crops”. As for its function, the South Moravian countryside remains characterized by farming and forestry.

According to the second group of criteria the South Moravian countryside – including even its peripheral parts outside the suburbanization zones – is subject to extensive and fairly fast urbanization. The development of technical infrastructure makes the urban amenities accessible also to the rural population and markedly affects its lifestyle. The principal difference against the cities lies in the lower level of education of the rural population and the ensuing consequences for the sectorial structure of employment, entrepreneurial drive, etc.

The primary industry presently employs only around one tenth of the rural population. A large part of the population residing in the South Moravian countryside commute for work to the urban areas and thus for them the countryside only retains its residential function. The tie to the land disappears but it was already seriously disrupted by the socialization of the countryside during the last regime and post-war population exchange on ethnic principles in the borderland rural regions.

Some functions of the countryside deriving from its role as the counterpart to the town in the social sense are equally threatened. It can be assumed that in future namely those functions will become preserved which stem from the small number of inhabitants of small rural settlements – social control, for example. Other functions that were previously tied to common work of the rural inhabitants in agriculture are getting lost. The South Moravian countryside however has a certain defence mechanism against the above-mentioned trends at its disposal. It is the surviving folklore connected with the culture of wine. Nowadays the male folk dance “verbuňk” forms part of the intangible world heritage of the UNESCO. The folk festivity called “Ride of Kings” applied in the same category. Viticulture is a typical example of an interlocking of local products, their processing and local sale which asserts itself elsewhere in the Czech Republic only with great difficulties.

CONCLUSIONS: TRENDS AND REACTIONS

In near future it can be expected that the South Moravian countryside will witness the following trends:

- Continuing and gradually declining process of suburbanization and developing counter urbanization within the framework of amenity migration. Further increase in the share of inhabitants with a permanent rural residence not only in the hinterland of big cities but also selectively in some peripheral locations.
- Growing importance of leisure time, progressively more popular trends of learning and experience recreations. Specific population groups (hypothetically more educated members of the middle class) will be slowly turning away from purely relaxation or organized styles of recreation in the process of which they practically

do not come into touch with the local population and will incline towards individual recreation focused partly on learning about the concrete locations.

- Further declining share of the primary industries in the employment structure, development of other branches of industry and rural functions. Agriculture will still more incline towards the landscape maintenance position. On the other hand other land-intensive branches of industry which are less demanding on everyday contact with the customer will gain more ground in the rural space. Among them may well rank facilities producing renewable energy but also technical infrastructures, including waste dumps.
- Increasing significance of nature and landscape conservation. These activities will mainly concentrate on the rural space where they will provoke controversies regarding the economic use of space on the one hand but will raise attractiveness of the area on the other.
- Population ageing. The share of senior citizens in the rural space shall inevitably grow due to the current demographic trends and the departure of young and educated people to the cities. This opens up opportunities for developing a specific branch of services for senior citizens.
- Internationalization and globalization. The barrier effect of the state border will decline. The countryside may acquire significant financial aid from European projects and funds. Concrete development will, apart from other factors, depend on the share of the EU resources allocated for agricultural production and rural development.

The question of development or stagnation of the South Moravian countryside can be discussed in terms of its prerequisites for optimum responsiveness towards the aforesaid trends. The rural area of the Region is the hinterland of the largest and most important Moravian city of Brno which fully integrates this area at a regional level. At an inter-regional level the Region nevertheless includes several peripheral areas located by the national and land borders.

Natural conditions in the southern part of the South Moravian countryside are beneficial for the surviving agricultural production (but the lack of moisture may gradually prove to be a limiting factor). The South Moravian countryside as a whole is not very ecologically stable due to a high proportion of arable land. The South Moravian landscape, even in its southern lowland part, is not monotonous but undulating and dominated by the Pavlovské vrchy Hills above the Nové Mlýny water reservoirs. The fringe parts of this area are attractive for the development of recreation and tourism thanks to the height articulation of the relief, vegetation and cultural and historical sights. South Moravia is the only Czech territory with a thriving viticulture and folklore. It is a great example of interconnection of tourism and local products.

Rural settlements of above-average size (from national perspective) provide a sufficient internal market for the sustenance and development of at least an elementary level of services, they dispose of a big enough human potential for the preparation of development programmes and they usually have adequate budgets allowing for the allocation of subsidies. Neither Austrian nor Slovak border microregions provide a significant potential for a long-term economically beneficial collaboration. Viewed from the European perspective, it is unambiguously an inner periphery.

It needs be asked what the appropriate definition of progress or stagnation actually is. The experience of the last 50 years demonstrates that the perspective of progress shifts

from quantitative economic indicators towards quality criteria related to the social sphere. Although in the past 20 years capitalism lacking the social dimension has been trying to convert all values into the market and financial criteria, the turn to a better quality of life will outweigh it in the end.

The problem consists in the fact that the quality of life is hard to define. If we exaggerate a bit, we can say that the real quality of life is not related to the indicators used for its evaluation because the hard data are almost always in contradiction to human experience that also follows the patterns of individual age and of educational, cultural and other characteristics of the specific social groups. This leads us to the conclusion that different people may simultaneously perceive the South Moravian countryside as progressive and regressive. And this is the way it should be since the possibility of choice is the essence of a democratic society. It can be assumed that the South Moravian countryside offers such a choice.

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