

# Socio-Economic Determinants of the Development of Small Cities in the Berlin-Brandenburg Metropolitan Region

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## Abstract

*The identification of socio-economic determinants of the development of small urban centers functioning in the conditions of transformation and metropolization of space constitutes a significant research problem in the area of urban geography. In this study, the problem is discussed in the context of East Germany. The aim of the article is to characterize the most important contemporary determinants and factors influencing the development of small cities in the Berlin-Brandenburg Metropolitan Region. This characterization is based on analyses involving over 100 cities and refers to the spatial and population development of individual urban centers in the years 1990–2015. The research also used statistical material and spatial data sets published by official German national and regional institutions. In the course of the analyses, it was established that the conditions determining the development of small urban communes within the research area are very complex. This results from the overlapping of transformation determinants and factors universal for the whole area and the determinants resulting from the metropolization processes, whose nature and impact diversify in space.*

**Keywords:** small cities, socio-economic development, metropolitan region, transformation, East Germany, Brandenburg, Berlin

**JEL:** R11, R58

## Introduction

The rebirth of Germany as a reunited, truly democratic federal country in 1990 was the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the regions and cities functioning within the hermetic boundaries of the communist German Democratic Republic for over four decades. The fall of the GDR made it possible to start the large-scale transformation processes controlled from the West, which were supposed to speed up the modernization of East Germany in the political, social, and economic sphere, and thus gradually integrate it with the western part of the country, bringing it closer in terms of civilization progress (Kollmorgen 2005, 2009).

Intensive transformations taking place in East Germany since the early 1990s quickly brought many positive effects, including the democratization of life, modernization of the economy, and the unprecedented modernization of the transport infrastructure system. However, the costs of the transformation reforms, particularly in the social and demographic aspects, also turned out to be significant. Structural unemployment, which affected both vast rural areas and the traditionally industrial areas, caused mass migrations of the young, economically most “valuable” population to West German regions. Due to the intensification of these tendencies, nearly all of the cities of the former GDR entered the phase of extremely unfavorable structural transformations—i.e., rapid city

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shrinking (Stadtschrumpfung). The transformation of East Germany was therefore only partially successful (Barnick 2008; Hannemann 2003; Lang and Tenz 2003; Loest 2009).

The disadvantageous long-term consequences of the reforms in East Germany affected the area of the Berlin agglomeration—the largest monocentric German agglomeration, intensively developing its metropolitan functions—to a relatively small extent. The dimension of “political” investment, oriented at the modernization and integration of the structures of the German capital after 1990 significantly mitigated the crisis phenomena. Both Berlin itself and the numerous communes of the neighboring Brandenburg, closely connected with the central city, resisted the negative tendencies by maintaining their previous functions or even gaining new ones making use of the advantageous development conditions.

The aim of the article is to characterize the most important contemporary determinants of the development of small cities within the Berlin-Brandenburg Metropolitan Region (BBMR) in the years 1990–2015 (i.e., during the 25 years of East German transformations). The basis for this characterization included studies involving communes which on the eve of the transformations in 1990 had a population below 20 000. The analyses refer to the determinants and factors influencing the development of individual cities, with particular consideration given to the aspects of population and spatial development.<sup>1</sup>

The research carried out for the purpose of this study was based on statistical material published by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt) in Wiesbaden and the Statistical Office for Berlin and Brandenburg (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg), and on the spatial data sets of the Office of Geodesy and Geoinformation for the State of Brandenburg (Landesvermessung und Geobasisinformation Brandenburg) in Potsdam.

## 1 The problem of identifying small cities in Germany

In many European countries, a traditional legal-administrative criterion of the identification of cities is applied, according to which a city is any territorial unit which has a so-called city status. In the case of East German regions, but also countries such as Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, the criterion comes from the period of medieval processes of settlement planning, including city-forming processes which covered Central and Eastern Europe as part of the so-called East Colonization (Ostkolonisation), which culminated in the 13th century. The universality of the approach to the identification of urban settlements based on the legal-administrative criterion, observed in Europe, does not exclude different location of cities in territorial-administrative structures of individual countries, especially as these countries often have vastly different systems. And so for example, while in Poland cities can have a form of an urban commune, they can also be an administratively separated part of an urban-rural commune; in Germany, the only territorial-administrative form of a city is an urban commune (Stadt, Stadtgemeinde). According to 2015 data, there were 2 060 urban communes in the Federal Republic, including 599 in East Germany (within the area of the former GDR).

When it comes to the terms used for the basic categorization of urban settlements in terms of their size—i.e., terms such as “large city,” “small city,” etc., the practice of statistical institutions was adopted and in principle the approach dating back to the 19th century still applies. The first publication to define the terms for various size categories of cities with the use of the quantitative criterion (population size) is considered to be the issue of the *Bulletin of L’Institute International de Statistique* of 1887, which was published in relation to the first World Statistics Congress summoned by the International Statistical Institute (ISI). In the context of proposals concerning the possibility of achieving international comparability of census books, volume 2 of the *Bulletin* contains attempts at assigning the terms “la grande ville,” “la ville” and “la campagne” to the quantitatively specified urban or rural settlement populations with the use of closed or open-ended

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1. In accordance with the general definition of development, by urban development is meant a process of both quantitative and qualitative changes of subjective nature. Qualitative changes taking place in a city distinguish its development from simple growth. In this work the increase in the population size of urban communes is treated as a certain symptom of urban development, not its primary measure.

value ranges (Körösi 1887). The internationally adopted point of view on the classification of cities in terms of their size quickly took hold in the German statistical tradition through the activity of the Imperial Statistical Office established in 1872 (Das Kaiserliche Statistische Amt). It should be noted that in general terms, it was not contested by the subsequent successors of this institution over the following decades, in spite of the occurrence and considerable dynamics of post-industrial transformations of urban systems both in Germany and other European countries.

Nowadays, the size classification of cities most frequently quoted and used in Germany, based on the population size criterion, includes: large cities (Großstadt), medium-sized cities (Mittelstadt), small cities (Kleinstadt), and the so-called miniature or “rural” cities (Zwergstadt, Landstadt). This classification directly refers to the traditional division adopted by the ISI and assumes that a large city is a commune with city status and a population over 100 000, a medium-sized city—an urban commune with a population between 20 000 and 100 000, and a small city—a city with a population of 5 000–20 000. In this division, the class of small cities definitely excludes miniature (“rural”) cities with a population below 5 000 (Bähr, Jentsch, and Kuls 1992; Heineberg 2006). According to the above-mentioned classification, in 2015, German cities included 79 large cities and 612 medium-sized ones, while the remaining 1 369 urban communes consisted of small and miniature cities.

Apart from the traditional, simple, and thus popular size classifications of cities, more complex ones taking additional criteria into consideration also function in Germany. Unfortunately, sometimes, they do not refer directly to the traditional city-village dichotomy which makes it possible to differentiate between urban and rural local territorial units based on the legal-administrative criterion. In some cases, they can therefore be devoid of the values of operability. Quoting various examples of size classifications of cities functioning in Germany does not seem necessary here. Regardless of the specific form and detailed findings, most of them are “trapped” in the tradition started over a hundred years ago. This remark actually applies not only to the German statistical practice, but also to the methodological canons applicable in this regard in other European countries. The invariably popular view according to which every city with a population of 100 000 or more can be called a large city is particularly controversial.

In this study, for the purposes of the analyses carried out, it was assumed that a small city is an urban commune (administrative unit with city status) with a population of up to 20 000. Therefore, small cities include both the smallest centers with a population up to 5 000 (Zwergstadt, Landstadt) and the “proper” small cities (Kleinstadt) with a population of 5 000–20 000.

## 2 The specificity and consequences of the transformations in East Germany

The analysis of socio-economic determinants of the development of urban communes in East Germany after the so-called German reunification undoubtedly requires understanding of the essence of transformation processes initiated in the former German Democratic Republic after 1990. In this context, not only the course of the transformation itself is important, but also its consequences. In many respects, the East German transformation fit into the general trend of post-communist system transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, but at the same time, it was characterized by a clear “regional” specificity and unprecedented dynamic (Schroeder 2006; Wiesenthal 1999; Zwahr 2000).

The actual character of the so-called German reunification (Vereinigung, Wiedervereinigung), which in fact consisted in the dissolving GDR joining (Beitritt) the FRG, determined the character of the East German transformation, defining its specificity and difference from the simultaneous transformation processes taking place in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The transformation of the former GDR was an exogenous one, carried out according to the top-down approach. All of the organizational solutions introduced were modelled on the ones proven in the “old” Federal Republic. Both “ready” institutions, finances, and goods, as well as personnel, elites, and knowledge were transferred from the west, assuming unconditional socio-cultural adaptation of the Germans living in the eastern parts (Bertram and Kollmorgen 2001; Kollmorgen 2005, 2009).

The transformations in East Germany were rather violent. Referring to the speed of these changes, the term “structural shift” (Strukturbruch) is often used. It came down to a rapid, radical change

of all the conditions of socio-economic development of regions, cities, and communes (Hannemann 2003). Within a short time, the structure of the economy and the political system changed due to a very quick, schematic adoption of the economic, political, and legal regulations of the West German system. The structural transformations of the East German economy turned out to be particularly fraught with consequences, as this economy was confronted with the global economy — functioning in the conditions of globalization, deregulation, liberalization, and flexibility of production — in what looked like a kind of “trial by fire.” The GDR’s economic structure was marked by obsolete plants and factories, industrial monoculture, and insufficient productivity, due to which the first and most significant result of the changes was a collapse of industry. Deindustrialization caused huge unemployment, as new jobs created in the services sector were not able to compensate for the effects of employment reduction in the industry sector. The oversupply of labor was quickly intensified by numerous non-industrial structural transformations, including the decollectivization of agriculture (De-LPGsierung), dismantling of the political administration structures (De-Administrierung), and closing down of military institutions (De-Militarisierung). The unemployment rate recorded in the first post-reunification years reached a very high level, unseen in West Germany, in particular in the peripheral areas, situated far from the largest cities.

The radical and rapid restructuring of economic structures carried with it many negative consequences, including above all mass internal migrations between regions, selective in terms of the population’s social and age structure, with a negative balance on the part of East German regions. The best educated young inhabitants of the “new states” set out in search of jobs and better living conditions mainly to Hamburg, Rhineland, and the richest agglomerations of southwestern Germany. The process of intensive outflow of people overlapped with the unfavorable tendency of falling birth rates. Within the quarter of a century of the transformations, both these processes led to considerable depopulation of East Germany. In the years 1990–2015, the population within the area of the former GDR (including Berlin) decreased from the level of 18,2 million to 16,1 million.<sup>2</sup>

The economic transformations, combined with unfavorable demographic phenomena and local processes, including the progressing suburbanization (Stadt-Umland-Wanderung), led to the occurrence and escalation of the phenomenon of city shrinking (Stadtschrumpfung). The “erosion” processes of local economies and the depletion of the economic base, and consequently the physical reduction of urban structures reached an unprecedented scale. The process of shrinking affected nearly all East German cities, regardless of their location, size, and administrative status (Barnick 2008).

In the context of the main subject of the research reported in this study, a very important element of the transformation of East Germany after 1990 was the complete restructuring of the local administration system, including the local political-administrative structures. Reforms in this sphere began even before the reunification treaty entered into force and were reflected in the elimination of 14 administrative districts (Bezirk) and the reconstitution of five large federal states (Bundesland), as well as the granting of the status of a separate federal state to Berlin. The second stage of these transformations involved reforms of the local administration at a local and supralocal level, which resulted in considerable strengthening of the local government and far-reaching modernization of territorial divisions at county (Landkreis) and city with county rights (Kreisfreie Stadt), as well as commune (Stadt, Gemeinde) level. Reforms at lower levels were carried out simultaneously, yet independently, being the sole prerogative of the authorities of individual states in certain regions (Dolata 2008; Dolata and Kaczmarek 2003).

### **3 The Berlin-Brandenburg Metropolitan Region — spatial coverage and determinants of local development after 1990**

The explanation of the term Berlin-Brandenburg Metropolitan Region — BBMR (Metropolregion Berlin-Brandenburg) needs to be preceded with remarks on the numerous spatial categories which were distinguished after 1990 with reference to Berlin’s range of influence in connection with the

2. [In the journal European practice of number notation is followed — for example, 36 333,33 (European style) = 36 333.33 (Canadian style) = 36,333.33 (US and British style). — Ed.]

problem of delimiting the functional area of Germany's capital and largest city. The first term that needs to be mentioned in this context is the vastly ambiguous term of the Berlin agglomeration (Agglomeration Berlin, Ballungsgebiet Berlin).

In modern times, Berlin has always been one of the largest cities not only of the German-speaking area, but of the entire European continent. At least since the beginning of the industrial era, the city has recorded rapid population growth and has been developing dynamically in the spatial sense through the substantial expansion of city boundaries in irregular leaps (Schwenk 2002). In the 1860s, Berlin could already boast a population of half a million, strongly influencing its surroundings through intensive and multidimensional urbanization processes. The contemporary boundaries of the German capital were generally established in 1920 and it was in the 1920s that the processes of shaping Berlin's urban complex in the current spatial scale were initiated (Dolata and Kaczmarek 2003). They kept progressing continually over the next century and their speed was not slowed down by either war damage or the population losses of the mid-1940s or the long-lasting political division of the city during the so-called Cold War (1945–1990).

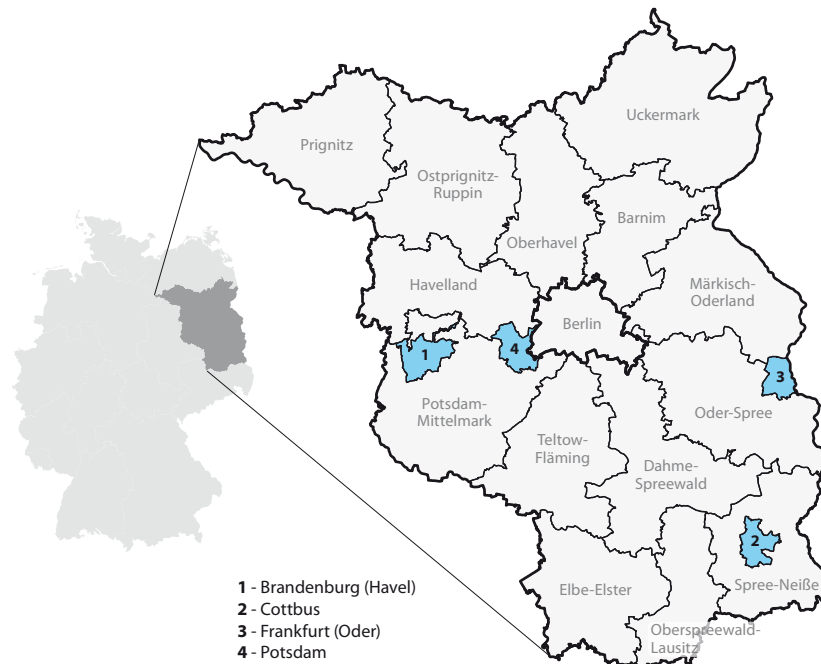
After the reunification of the city in 1990, numerous concepts appeared with reference to the issue of delimiting Berlin's broadly defined urban complex or the intensively developing metropolitan area. The issue of determining the spatial framework for Berlin's functional links with its surroundings was broadly discussed by the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt-, und Raumforschung). In various contexts, it defined at least four ranges of the area which may be interpreted as the Berlin agglomeration. Regardless of these findings, the 2009 joint National Development Plan for Berlin and Brandenburg (Landesentwicklungsplan Berlin–Brandenburg) specified and legally established two basic dimensions of the social functional area in the form of planning regions—i.e., the Berlin-Potsdam City-Surroundings Interconnection Area (Stadt-Umland-Zusammenhang Berlin–Potsdam—SUZ) and the Berlin-Brandenburg Metropolitan Region (Metropolregion Berlin Brandenburg). The first of the two dimensions should be equated with a relatively small area of direct, highly intensive influences at the level of basic functions and the medium level, taking place between Berlin and a group of several dozen nearest communes. The second dimension is equated with a much broader area including the entire federal state of Brandenburg, within which Berlin's influence at the level of metropolitan functions is analyzed. It should be noted that regardless of how great the scale of the delimitation aimed at specifying the outer spatial framework of Berlin's influence is, in light of the political-territorial structure of the Federal Republic of Germany, we are each time dealing here with a functional area stretching over two autonomous political units (i.e., separate federal states of Berlin and Brandenburg).

The Berlin-Brandenburg Metropolitan Region (BBMR), constituting the spatial scope of analyses carried out for the purpose of this study, is also called the Capital Region (Hauptstadtregion). With a total surface area of 30 400 km<sup>2</sup> towards the end of 2015, it had a population of 6 million (fig. 1). Following the provisions of the 2009 joint National Development Plan for Berlin and Brandenburg concerning the spatial-functional structure of the metropolitan region, two main zones can be distinguished within the area, that is:

- the above-mentioned Berlin–Potsdam City-Surroundings Interconnection Area, which can be equated with the proper Berlin agglomeration in the precise sense of the term, and
- the so-called Further Metropolitan Area (Weiterer Metropolraum—WM) identified as the outer zone of the metropolitan region.

The Berlin-Potsdam City-Surroundings Interconnection Area (SUZ) has a total surface of 3 744 km<sup>2</sup>. According to data from the end of 2015, nearly 4,5 million people lived there (fig. 2). At a lower level of divisions within SUZ (Berlin agglomeration) two subzones can be found, that is:

- the SUZ core subzone in the form of the state-city of Berlin (892 km<sup>2</sup>, 3,5 million inhabitants in 2015), and
- the outer agglomeration ring subzone (Berliner Umland), including 50 communes comprising the Brandenburg state with Potsdam—a city with county rights (Kreisfreie Stadt Potsdam)—and 49 urban and rural communes which belong to eight rural counties (Landkreis). Berlin's Umland stretches over the area of 2 852 km<sup>2</sup>. In 2015, the area had a population of 950 000.



**Fig. 1.** Territorial-administrative structure of the Berlin–Brandenburg Metropolitan Region



**Fig. 2.** Berlin-Potsdam City-Surroundings Interconnection Area (SUZ)

In the years 1990–2015, the highly urbanized and densely populated SUZ area (1 194 inhabitants per 1 km<sup>2</sup> in 2015) was characterized by a clearly gentler course of the transformation processes compared with the less urbanized peripheral areas located closer to the outer boundaries of Brandenburg. This difference manifested itself above all in the prevalence of positive effects of the changes over their negative consequences. The economies of scale and agglomeration, very advantageous location within the transport network, and the growing significance of the spatially integrated Berlin as a metropolitan center became the direct cause of the polarization of economic development not only on a regional scale, but on the scale of the entire East Germany. None of the negative transformation-related phenomena, such as recession in the manufacturing sector, unemployment or outflow of population, ever emerged in the Berlin agglomeration as clearly as in the poorly urbanized peripheral areas. As the largest city and the capital of Germany with a constantly expanding, diverse economic base and metropolitan functions, Berlin created very favorable

conditions for the local development of cities and communes situated within the outer ring of the urban complex. This “privileged” zone quickly gained an unofficial, but very telling nickname of a “Fat Belt” (Speckgürtel), which accurately reflects its social and economic situation.

The Further Metropolitan Area (WM) has a surface area of 26 800 km<sup>2</sup>, which constitutes 88% of the entire region under discussion. Towards the end of 2015, the zone had only 1,5 million inhabitants. It is therefore a poorly urbanized area, characterized by low population density at the level of 57 people per 1 km<sup>2</sup>. The Further Metropolitan Area comprises 367 communes, including 3 cities with county rights (Kreisfreie Stadt)—Brandenburg an der Havel, Cottbus, and Frankfurt an der Oder, as well as 364 communes belonging to all 14 Brandenburg’s rural counties (fig. 1).

The structure of the BBMR outlined above—i.e., its dichotomous division into the Berlin–Potsdam City-Surroundings Interconnection Area and the Further Metropolitan Area, constitutes the key to the identification of spatial diversifications within the existing development determinants and factors at a local level, including the development of small cities.

#### **4 Development of small cities in the Berlin-Brandenburg Metropolitan Region in the years 1990–2015<sup>(3)</sup>**

In 1989, at the decline of the German Democratic Republic, the current area of the BBMR generally comprised: the politically divided Berlin—i.e., the so-called West Berlin (Westberlin) and East Berlin—capital of the GDR (Berlin—Hauptstadt der DDR), districts (Bezirke)—Potsdam, Frankfurt an der Oder, and Cottbus, as well as parts of the Schwerin and Neubrandenburg districts. Within this area (excluding Berlin), apart from 2 large cities (Potsdam and Cottbus) and 23 medium-sized cities, there were 91 small cities.

The large community of small cities within the BBMR was very diverse in many respects. They differed mainly in terms of their population size, but also their location relative to the Berlin agglomeration and the main transport routes, their administrative functions, and the size and diversity of the economic base. The cities that stood out among them were mainly county capitals with a population of 10 000–20 000, ranked as socio-economic centers of supralocal significance. A different category included cities – local centers with specialized functions and advantageous location along important transport corridors, with about 5 000–10 000 inhabitants. Cities of various sizes located in the immediate vicinity of Berlin in the highly urbanized suburban zone constituted a class of their own. The last subgroup of small cities within the analyzed area were the smallest (“miniature”) centers with a population of up to 5 000. They were towns with a very long history, whose development stopped even before the era of the 19th-century industrialization. Up until 1990, they did not demonstrate almost any symptoms of modern urban development processes and were characterized by all the features of socio-economic stagnation.

The first 25 years of East German transformation turned out to be a time of significant changes in the settlement system within the BBMR area, including important changes in the arrangement of small cities. These were manifested in the change in the number of small cities itself, change in the population size of individual centers, and their spatial development. These transformations were particularly clear in the outer zone of the Berlin agglomeration and were conditioned, among other aspects, by positive demographic trends within the area of Berliner Umland (SUZ), above all due to intensive suburbanization. In the years 1990–2015, in 49 out of 50 communes of the outer ring of the Berlin agglomeration, a generally high positive balance of migration, exceeding 300 people per 1 000 inhabitants, was recorded. The balance of vital statistics was admittedly not as advantageous, but made it possible to conclude that there was a relatively high demographic balance in this respect compared with the more peripheral areas of Brandenburg. In the years 1990–2015, as many as nine communes of the agglomeration recorded more births than deaths. It is worth noting here that at the time, in the entire state of Brandenburg, only 20 out of 417 communes had a positive birth rate. As a result of such a course of development of the components of the demographic

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3. In this section the author resigns from the presentation of detailed statistical data, reflecting the changes in the population size, economic structure, and administrative status of the examined cities. Expanding the article in this respect is impossible due to the quantitative limitations imposed by the publisher.

processes over the 25 years of East German transformation, only four communes of the Berlin agglomeration recorded a decrease in the general population size (a dozen or so% at the most). The remaining communes were characterized by a clear positive population growth rate. As many as 42 communes within the SUZ area increased their population by at least 20%.

The transformations of the settlement system both in the Berlin agglomeration and in the Further Metropolitan Area zone, including significant changes in the arrangement of small cities, were, however, considerably conditioned by another important factor, namely the large-scale reforms of the territorial-administrative structure of Brandenburg, particularly the changes in the territorial division at commune level. The first stage of these reforms was the county reform implemented in 1993, which led to a radical reduction in the number of counties (and cities with county rights), turning them into relatively large administrative units, almost like small regions. Even more significant in the aspect of the development of the arrangement of cities in the region and their size classification were the permanent modernizations of the commune arrangement within the individual counties. They culminated in 2003 and consisted above all in combining relatively small, so-called single-village communes into larger units and incorporating the surrounding rural communes into cities.

In the years 1990–2015, the main direction of changes observed with reference to the community of small cities within the BBMR was their population growth. This growth was largely of apparent nature, because it was a consequence of the considerable increase in the surface area of the individual urban communes due to the above-mentioned territorial reforms to a much larger extent than an effect of an actual inflow of people or higher birth rates. On the one hand, the transformations of territorial-administrative structures, which led to the increase in the surface area of small cities, made it possible for them to go up in the size classification, or alternatively, guaranteed the enhancement of their position in terms of the population size, yet on the other, they resulted in a far-reaching dispersion of the spatial structure of these units, *de facto* giving them an urban-rural or even entirely rural character in physiographical and functional terms. In the years 1990–2015, changes in the arrangement of the region's small cities were also related to the emergence of new urban communes due to city status being granted to relatively large and highly urbanized rural communes. Chronologically, the first such case was the Erkner commune, adjacent to Berlin from the south-east.

Up until 2015, the number of cities in the BBMR comprised 113 units (excluding Berlin), including 90 communes belonging to the small city class. Among small rural communes, those with a population of up to 10 000 (68 cities) were prevalent, with the average population size for the entire community of 7 400. Based on the available data, the most basic profile of a “statistical” small city functioning within the BBMR can be specified. Its average surface area was as large as 116 km<sup>2</sup>, which is a relatively large value compared with that of Polish small cities. Wittstock/Dosse has the largest surface area among the small cities of the region. With only 14 400 inhabitants, the commune stretches across a surface area of 420,2 km<sup>2</sup>. The size of the territory exceeds the surface area of all the large cities in Poland, except for Warsaw. At the same time, in terms of the population size, the region's city—Märkisch Buchholz (770 inhabitants)—has a surface area as large as 24,9 km<sup>2</sup>.

The above observations suggest that within the boundaries of the BBMR, small cities are usually very poorly urbanized communes, with low population density, and a highly dispersed spatial-functional structure. Such characteristics *de facto* make them similar to Polish urban-rural communes, although—as noted above—in the territorial-administrative structures of the German federal states, such category (Stadt-Land-Gemeinde type) formally (*i.e.*, in legal-administrative terms, does not exist).

## Conclusions

As a result of the attempt at identifying the socio-economic determinants of the development of small urban centers in the Berlin–Brandenburg Metropolitan Region in the years 1990–2015, it was found that there is a high complexity of determinants and factors influencing the development



of this category of entities. During the 25 years of East German transformation, certain universal determinants of the development of cities, which did not diversify spatially, undoubtedly occurred within the entire region. In this group, primarily political-administrative factors come to the fore, whose influence was manifested in the large-scale, dynamic reforms of territorial-administrative structures at supralocal and local level. Purely socio-economic determinants connected with the transformations of the East German economy occurring after the so-called reunification of Germany were also largely of a universal nature. Structural changes in the economy, which caused violent fluctuations in the job market, and as a result—unfavorable demographic phenomena and the related city shrinking had a universal character as well. However, their intensity diversified spatially, growing as the distance from the center of the metropolitan region (the Berlin agglomeration) became bigger.

The years 1990–2015 brought a number of important changes in the arrangement of small cities within the metropolitan region. Above all, the number of small urban communes alone decreased slightly. Numerous centers gained new positions in the spatial-functional structure of the region. Some communes, which in 1990 belonged to the group of small cities, considerably increased their population, rising to the category of medium-sized cities. At the same time, the category of small cities was “replenished” by new rural communes which were granted city status. Due to new political and socio-economic conditions, also the role of the smallest small cities (“miniature” cities) increased—they did remain within their category, but significantly expanded their boundaries, thus recording population growth. Along with the changes in the number of small cities and their population size, the dispersion of the spatial structure of urban territorial units progressed. However, a decided majority of the region’s small cities kept their role of important components of the huge metropolizing region. In spite of the significant transformations of the spatial-functional structure, the progressing processes of metropolization of space, and the consolidation of local settlement systems in the political-administrative dimension, small urban communes retained their identity and distinct character.

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