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Selected aspects of rural development in long-term vision of spatial development of Slovakia

Abstract: *A Long-term Vision of spatial (regional and territorial) development of Slovakia is an integral part of broader work about A Long-term vision of the Slovak society development (up to year 2030). The scientific authorities prepared this official material as a special product for Slovak government. The main aim of contribution is an attempt for critical assessment of understanding selected aspects of rural development and its position in broader context of spatial development of Slovakia. We describe, analyse, and compare the selected indicators of settlement and population structures in urban and rural municipalities aggregated into eight administrative regions with the aim to show not only the level of interregional, but also the intraregional (urban-rural) disparities. From the rural development point of view is cardinal question the scope of diffusion of growth impulses from towns throughout their zones of influence into rural surrounding. We are trying to highlight the interrelationship and interdependency between regional and rural socio-economic developments.*

Keywords: *Long-term Vision of spatial development of Slovakia, intraregional and interregional disparities, rural development, diffusion of growth impulses, Slovakia*

The contemporary Europe more frequently declares itself not as the Europe of individual states but as Europe of regions, which represent autonomous and very heterogeneous regional units. Europe and also individual European states are spatially differentiated and identification of regional disparities becomes the key role for planning different development strategies and application of different sectoral and spatial policies. The important aim of regional policy of the European Union is to stimulate the socio-economic growth and reduce the existing interregional disparities through various forms of direct or indirect intervention rules.

Population, settlement, and economic structure of every region represent generally accepted the polarized space. On the one side there is (are) attractive town(s) as the representative(s) of regional core(s) and pole(s) of growth, and on the other side, there are a lot of villages (rural municipalities) which represent “countryside” and (often) very closely interlinked geographical, economic, and social regional periphery with selective emigration of young and well educated people. A lot of studies have tried to show the great urban-rural differences in social-economic conditions for regional economic performance and regional quality of life. Existence of intraregional inequalities and intraregional rural periphery is reality also in Slovakia.

Socio-economic development of towns as growth poles by immigration of inhabitants and inflow of domestic and foreign investment is expected. From the rural development point of view is cardinal question the scope of diffusion of growth impulses throughout their zones of influence into rural surrounding, the scope of networking urban and rural firms and institutions through active co-operation in (industrial, tourism) clusters, and building of capacities for active using of rural places by tourists. The broader participation of rural people in regional economy will help to improve the quality of its life and reduce its social exclusion.

What are the future spatial perspectives of Slovakia and its individual regions? What position should play rural areas and what can we expect from their different potential development trajectories? *A Long-term Vision of spatial (regional and territorial) development of Slovakia* (Buček et al., 2008), which is an integral part of broader work about *A Long-term vision of the Slovak society development (up to year 2030)* (Šikula et al., 2008), is trying to find the answers on these questions. The scientific authorities prepared this official material as a special product for Slovak government.

Long-term Vision of spatial development of Slovakia

Long-term Vision of spatial development of Slovakia is relatively modest material, which formulates the future version of the spatial organization of Slovakia. In this material we concentrate only on selected parts of Vision that directly or indirectly portray the future image of regionally differentiated Slo-

vak countryside. Of course, the prepared Vision makes no ambition to cover all relevant aspects and dimensions of spatial and rural development. On the other side, the Vision represents a study material, which in compressed form offers us the basic ideas about influence of selected factors and processes on the future spatial form and organization of Slovakia. We are trying to give a critical assessment of selected claims, which represent some of the principal ideas of the future development of rural area in Slovakia in the context of its spatial development.

It is necessary to reduce and gradually eliminate mainly the deepening west-east spatial disparities (Buček et al., 2008, p.197).

The (macro) regional pattern of Slovakia's territory shows a strong northwestern-southeastern polarization, which has been conformed by multiple studies surveying regional disparities (Džupinová et al., 2008). Analyses focused on identification of regional disparities in Slovakia are, as a rule, linked with administrative region, which is the product of territorial-administrative division. In 1996, 8 administrative regions (with co-existence of urban and rural municipalities) and 79 districts were formed in the consequence of the new territorial-administrative division in Slovakia. They became automatically regional units from the regional statistics point of view with subsequent evidence and accessibility of spatially disaggregated statistical data (Figure 1). Such practices, however, was and remains exposed to relatively widespread criticism.



Figure1. Administrative division of Slovakia into 8 administrative regions

Geographer Bezák (2001) supposes that territorial-administrative units on principle cannot adopt the function of spatial or regional units as the establishment of the territorial-administrative division seldom takes into account scientific or any criteria other than political. Leaning on his analyses the author states that “as far as the number of administrative regions and the choice of their administrative centres and demarcation of their boundaries are concerned, there exists a serious

disproportion between the present regional structure and the new territorial-administrative division of Slovakia” (p.301). Even if we can agree with the above, the practical life shows that the regional statistics linked to the territorial-administrative units clearly determines the regional analyses. The study of literature and official governmental documents suggests the conclusion that the problem pointed to by Bezák is in spite of its rationale widely ignored. A few years later, the problem of impact of different spatial units on the size of regional disparities is highlighted by the group of regional economists. Buček et al. (2010) simulate different sizes and shapes of regions and illustrate how, depending on the delimitation of regional units, change the size of registered disparities, how change the position and power of rural areas in regional context.

The level of regional disparities is generally product of used socio-economic indicator. In the European Union the most frequent indicator used for expressing the level of economic performance and development of regions is the indicator GDP per capita (in PPS). Region is the lowest spatial unit for quotation of the GDP/capita value. It is the unit to which regional planning is applied. These are the principal reasons why division of Slovakia into regions, which represent the level NUTS III, became a certain standard in the study of spatial differentiation (mostly created and applied by economists). The results reached at the level of regions are presented in media in Slovakia and abroad what distinctly contributes to comprehension of spatial differentiation existing in Slovakia precisely by means of these comparatively big spatial units. However, Buček et al. (2010) repeatedly point to some serious faults in application of this index, which is decisive for the implementation of the EU cohesion policy. In the context of Slovakia when the country was divided into eight administrative units at the NUTS III (Regions) level, authors point to the existing inconsistency between the metropolitan region of Bratislava and other regions of Slovakia (Table 1, Figure 2.). The cause, apart from other, lies in the fact that the regional GDP/capita values are also determined by commuting. Commuters from one NUTS III (for instance Trnava region) increase as employees the GDP in the region, which is the commuting destination (for instance Bratislava region). On the other side, these commuters as residents of the region where they are domiciled (for instance Trnava region) contribute to the diminution of the region's GDP. It means that the GDP/capita of big regions that are destinations of commuting (Bratislava region) is overestimated and that of commuter/labour source regions is underestimated. Fig.2 shows how the above defined disparities increase in time. It is especially evident in case of the Bratislava region and Prešov region. The commuting data reveal that a comparatively numerous group of workers living in Prešov region commute to the capital of Slovakia and on the one side increase the Bratislava region's GDP and decrease of the GDP in the region of their residence on the other. Hence, it is necessary to realize when interpreting the results that the natural feature of the regional indicators of economic performance (GDP/capita) is being overlooked and leads to erroneous interpretations. The dramatic, artificially created disparity between Bratislava region and other regions of Slovakia, also affects the regionally differentiated potential possibilities for the exogenous development of the rural area (options to draw on finances under the EU cohesion policy).

Table 1. Changes of regional GDP per capita in Slovakia

NUTS 3	GDP per capita in PPS, 2000	GDP per capita in PPS, 2008	Relative regional comparisons with Slovakia	
			GDP per capita in PPS, 2000	GDP per capita in PPS, 2008
Slovak Republic (1)	9 552	18 135	100,00	100,00
Bratislava region	20 730	41 807	217,02	230,53
Trnava region	10 052	20 799	105,23	114,69
Trenčín region	9 007	16 457	94,29	90,75
Nitra region	8 291	15 374	86,80	84,78
Žilina region	7 824	15 792	81,91	87,08
Banská Bystrica region	7 941	13 672	83,13	75,39
Prešov region	5 819	10 646	60,92	58,59
Košice region	8 580	14 913	89,82	82,23

Source: RegDat – databáza regionálnej štatistiky, Štatistický úrad SR, Bratislava (www.statistics.sk) + own calculations.

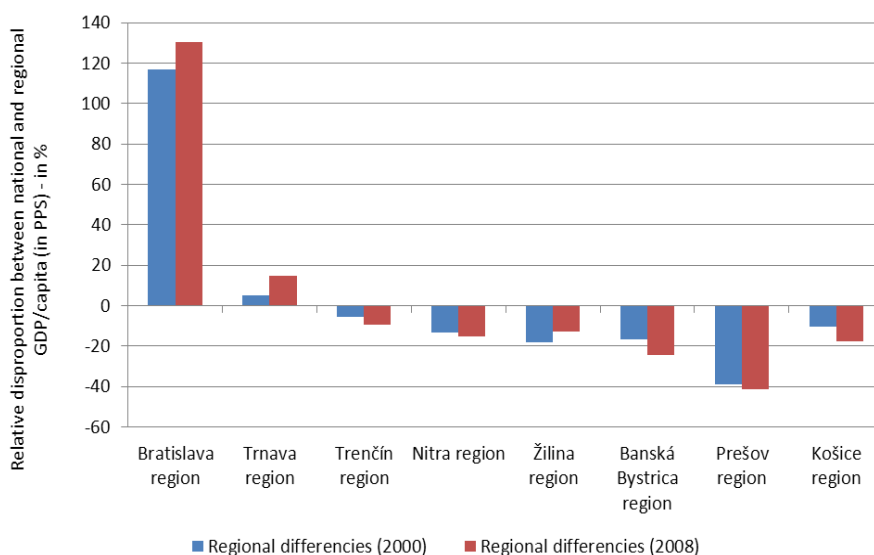


Figure 2. Changes of regional GDP per capita in Slovakia

Disparities between regions are relatively small while the decrease of values GDP/capita is obvious in the direction from the west to the east. But a sharp contrast appears if the smallest and also most advanced region of Bratislava, formed administratively around the Capital of Slovakia, is compared to the rest of Slovakia. Bratislava is indeed an exception in the regional structure of Slovakia from the point of view of the GDP/capita indicator. The difference between the region of Bratislava and the rest of Slovakia is huge in terms of economic performance. And this difference is deepening. Slovakia is practically divided into a small economically advanced western part of the country represented by the region of Bratislava with high inner differentiation (town districts of Bratislava city contra

districts with urban and rural population) and a substantially larger less developed rest of Slovakia with a considerably lower inner differentiation among administrative regions.

Regions consist of a set of urban and rural municipalities. Confession of the town status by the National Council of the Slovak Republic is now the decisive criterion for delimitation of urban municipalities. All other municipalities are rural. In 2001, i.e. in time of the most recent census, there were 2,883 municipalities in Slovakia (Figure 2), including 138 urban municipalities (4.8%) and 2,745 rural municipalities (95.2 %).

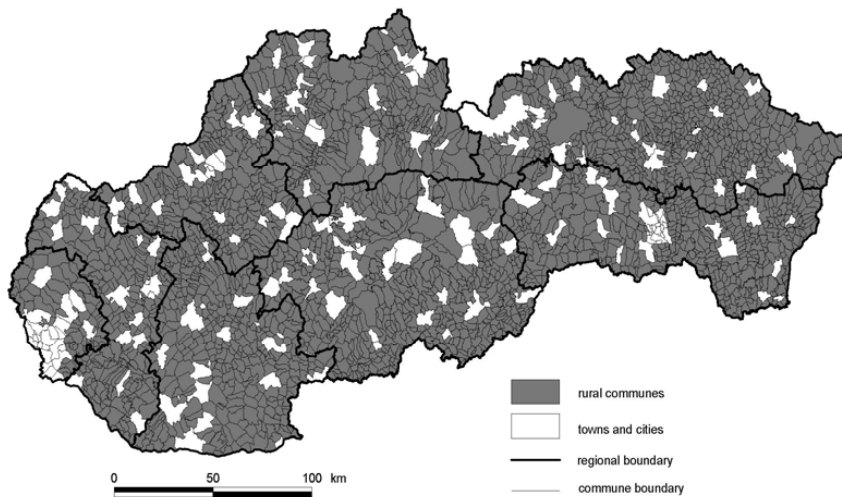


Figure 3. Urban communes (municipalities) versus rural communes (municipalities) in Slovakia

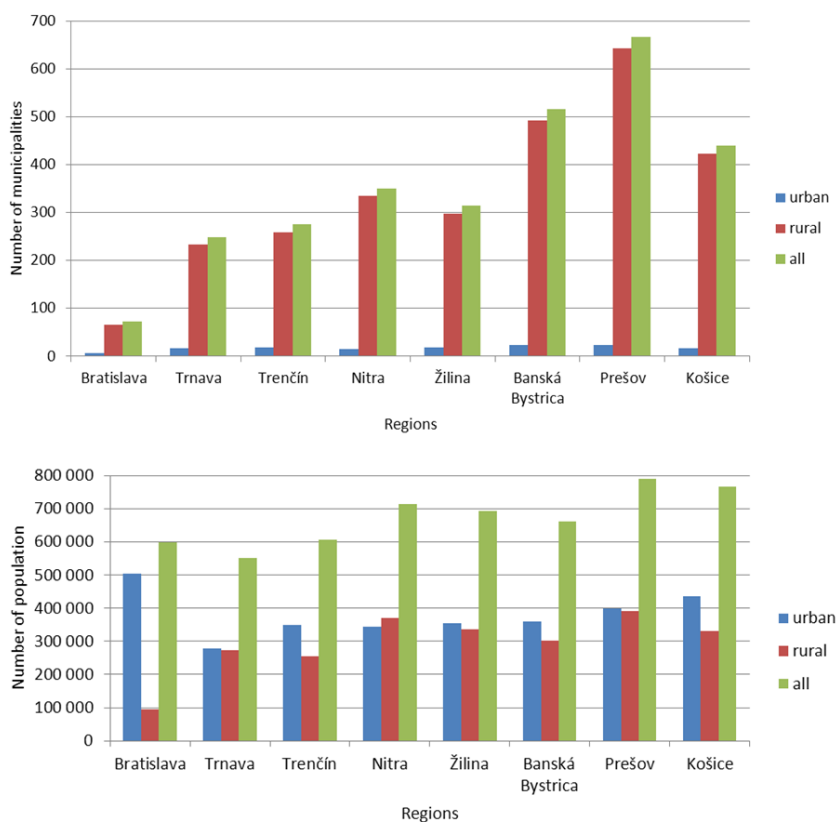
We present differences between urban and rural municipalities at the level of region in Table 2 and Figure 4. We use the basic data about number of municipalities of both urban and rural character in the individual regions and about population with permanent residence in these municipalities.

Differences in surface area are interlinked with those in number of municipalities. Both data may demonstrate disproportion of the new administrative division of Slovakia. The territory of extremely small region Bratislava consists only of 65 rural municipalities and 7 urban municipalities. On the other side, the territory of region Prešov (the largest in Slovakia) is composed by as many as 643 rural municipalities and 23 urban municipalities. Region Bratislava represents only 2.5% in the total number of both types of municipalities in Slovakia compared to region Prešov with 23.1%. Comparison of these two limit values shows that the difference between the first and the last region is more than 9-fold.

Table 2. Number and population of urban municipalities versus number and population of rural municipalities in administrative regions of Slovakia (2001)

Administrative region	Number of municipalities			Number of population in municipalities		
	urban	rural	all	urban	rural	all
Bratislava	7	65	72	503 413	95 602	599 015
Trnava	16	233	249	277 403	273 600	551 003
Trenčín	18	258	276	350 456	255 126	605 582
Nitra	15	335	350	343 157	370 265	713 422
Žilina	18	297	315	354 957	337 375	692 332
Banská Bystrica	24	492	516	359 889	302 232	662 121
Prešov	23	643	666	398 181	391 787	789 968
Košice	17	422	439	434 650	331 362	766 012
Slovakia	138	2745	2883	3 022 106	2 357 349	5 379 455

Source: Štatistický úrad SR (2003). Výsledky sčítania obyvateľov, domov a bytov 2001. Bratislava (Štatistický úrad SR), CD ROM.

**Figure 4. Number and population of urban municipalities versus number and population of rural municipalities in administrative regions of Slovakia (2001)**

Source: Štatistický úrad SR (2003). Výsledky sčítania obyvateľov, domov a bytov 2001. Bratislava (Štatistický úrad SR), CD ROM.

In case of population number, the proportionality of administrative units looks completely different. The concentration of 11.1 % of total population of Slovakia lives in the territory of region Bratislava (population number of region Trnava is lower), prevailing in urban municipalities (84.0 %). Distinct disproportion in representation of urban and rural population in Bratislava region contradicts the most populated region Prešov (14.7% of total population), where the shares of population living in urban and rural municipalities are practically the same. Repeated comparison of two limit values of regions Trnava and Prešov reveals that in case of population number the difference between the first and the last region dropped to 1.4-fold what practically proves balanced administrative units as far as the population number is concerned but also extreme differences in size of municipalities and population density. While the average size of municipality in region Bratislava is population 8,320 that in region Prešov is only 1,186.

Such great size differences involve many consequences concerning differences not only at the level of various socio-economic indicators, but also at regional rural development potential and competitiveness of individual rural municipalities. It turns out that one of the most important problems of rural development in Slovakia is the fragmentation of its settlement structure, which is a barrier to obtaining the economic advantages from agglomeration together with higher rate of economic growth in regions with low level of urbanization (Buček et al., 2008, p.216) (Figure 5).

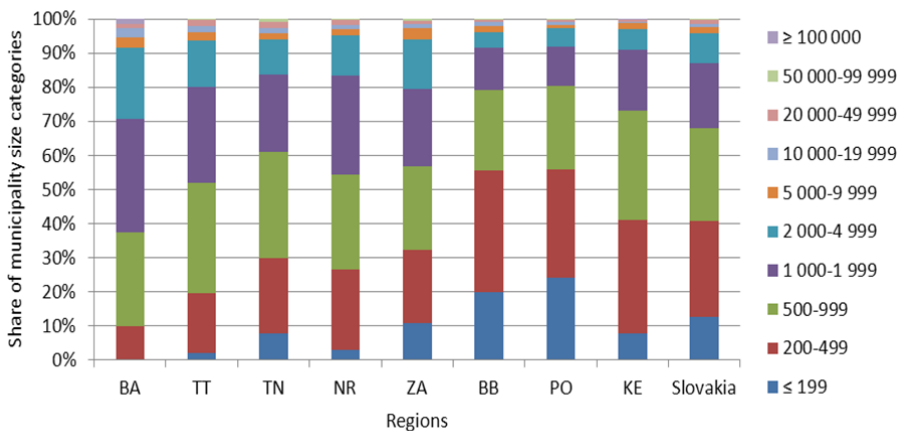


Figure 5. Regional structures of settlements in Slovakia – share of municipality size categories (2011)

Source: Census 2001, Bratislava, Štatistický úrad SR.

The initial look at Figure 5 shows that small rural municipalities up to 1000 inhabitants are dominated in all regions of Slovakia (except Bratislava region). The largest share of small municipalities is in the regions that show more signs of economic backwardness and spatial, economic and social peripherality - Banská Bystrica region, Prešov region, and Košice region. According to

Tichý (2005) above all the smallest rural municipalities are unable financially to support their own development and their possibility to obtain the external funds (from regional government, state, and/or EU) is also very reduced and limited. The total number of population is decreasing in most of them, proportion of post-productive population is increasing, and socio-demographic indicators are characterized by non-optimistic values from the future socio-economic development point of view. The smallest rural municipalities are almost without economic power and their ability to produce significant tax revenues is significantly reduced. The current situation has a great impact on their very reduced fiscal independence. This is a serious problem and it is not surprising that in Slovakia broad discussion about the effective size of basic self-governing entities and the subsequent possibilities of spatial integration is in the centre of interest of regional experts. Reason: small rural municipalities with population under 1,000 account for 70% of the total number of municipalities in Slovakia albeit only about 20% of total population live in these municipalities.

Tourism development in rural areas will allow full use of rural natural potential and will replace development impulses of manufacturing companies with low added value (particularly in the sphere of employment), (Buček et al., 2008, p.199).

Slovakia is the country with unusually appropriate conditions for development of tourism which represents one of the important industries in Slovakia. It is estimated that it represents an about 4 % share in gross domestic products while the partial shares of urban and rural tourism are not known. The governmental programmes with economic development of rural area as one of their priorities emphasise diversification of economic activities including creation of new work opportunities in the sphere of tourism (Székely, 2010). Tourism as a labour intensive industry is generally perceived as some kind of universal solution to all problems of rural area. However, the long years experience showed that reality is often very different from idealistic imaginations. In order to improve the existing situation it is inevitable to understand rural area as the space that is distinctly differentiated from the point of view of tourism potential. It is also necessary to view Slovakia in the context of European implications, i.e. in the context of competition on international tourism market. It is necessary to map (and internationally compare) not only the tourist offer of Slovakia but also domestic and foreign demand for rural tourism in Slovakia.

The need to develop rural tourism is based in the current complicated socio-economic situation of rural population mainly in peripheral regions. It is generally accepted tourism can be activated also in regions not favourable for other branches of the economy. The lack of industry and intensive agriculture (which are typical for peripheral regions) makes a region even more suited for tourism. Tourism also helps to improve the technical infrastructure of rural areas (roads, transport facilities, telecommunication network, canalization, etc.) in this way improving the living conditions of the local population.

The multiplier effect of tourism development is evident from the establishment of service facilities like shops, restaurants or entertainment facilities available also for the local population.

Of course, currently there are numerous studies which point to the possibilities of improvement of living conditions of rural population through development of tourism (jobs and creation of new capital potentially reinvested into all branches of rural economy, multiplier effect of tourism development, catalyst of social change, etc.). On the other side, there are numerous studies which also mention the danger of overexpansion of tourism. It may comprise a high degree of seasonality in tourism, which supports instability of employment and leads to time-limited emigration, or the problem of negative impacts on the environment.

The Government declares its support to the development of (sustainable) tourism as one of the economic policy priorities and consequently it adopted different supporting programmes which should help the process co-financing of investment (e.g. construction of new accommodation or catering facilities) and/or non-investment projects (e.g. presentation of tourist offer and promotion of territory by means of websites). It is (only) the technical assistance which can improve the potential possibilities of rural tourism development. But for the total and real entrepreneurial success in rural tourism is necessary to increase assertiveness of rural population, its trust in own capacities and to motivate it to overcome problems, acquire education, and to change its thinking.

Support of rural and peripheral regions will concentrate on the development of potential clusters (Buček et al., 2008, p.200)

The term “cluster” was introduced by the American economist M. Porter who described it not only as an analytical concept but also as a political tool for achieving the competitiveness of various economical branches (particularly in manufacturing) and spatial units. However, the genesis, existence, functioning and influences of spatial clusters on the economic performance and competitiveness of companies as well as on the regional/local economic growth is accompanied by many obscurities, which have an impact on an unsatisfactory situation in creation of the theoretical constructions regarding this phenomenon. On the other side, the reality is that the concept of clusters as an avenue to the economic prosperity and well being gained (because of extremely successful marketing strategy) popularity among the decision makers on all hierarchical levels (national, regional, local). The result is the dichotomy of opinion between scientists and politicians. It also is the cause that unconventional terms appear in literature involved with clusters. Martin and Sunley (2003) talk about the “cluster brand”, or the “Porter brand” built in connection with positive associations. These positive associations markedly help promotion of the cluster concept as the developmental strategy in competition with other theoretical and applied constructions.

The aim of industrial and/or tourism cluster in rural areas is to make use of very special endogenous territorial potential based not only on the natural potential (locality's character together with natural sources and relative geographic position) but also on the capabilities of local population (human and social capital), and presence and quality of locally based supporting industries related to main economic activity.

No critical debate about clusters exists in Slovakia. Studies that warn against the numerous potential dangers (e.g. Nemcová, 2004) are rather rare. Politicians did not take into account that the economic development built on clusters is based in local and regional specializations that in the consequence of empirically and theoretically justified alternation of economic prosperity and decline represent a very risky strategy of regional development (especially in rural regions with limited potential for successful re-building of local and regional economy). The present global financial and economic crisis is the period of economic decline with all consequences for the existing cluster initiatives.

There is also another danger of overestimated cluster initiatives and their misunderstanding for rural economic prosperity. The real industrial and/or tourism cluster should not be only represented by a common brand and trademark for the organization that introduces the word "cluster" in its name and sells the (rural) regional material and non-material products. Existed (rural) clusters should be a phenomenon based on existence and gradual perfection of horizontal and vertical relationships between the participating actors with the aim to use the exogenous local and regional potential. The result in time of economic prosperity should then be not only an adequate profit of the whole and the individual members but also a functioning successful regional and rural economy.

Conclusion

Political and economic changes in Czechoslovakia, which triggered transformation of the whole society at the beginning of the 1990s, represented an incentive for a more distinct spatial differentiation of the rural areas. Under the effects of neo-liberal conception of economic development, the rural area is not perceived any more as a homogeneous spatial unit formed and maintained by the State's paternalism with ambivalent development impacts. Spatial redistribution of population, a product of suburbanization, and economic restructuring accompanied by spatial dispersion of economic entities, has also created a chance for the selective revitalization of the Slovakian country (Falt'an, 2010).

For decades, the development of rural area in Slovakia has been associated with the exogenous form of development. It meant that developmental incentives and indispensable means came from central managing and planning bodies. The rural area was in a position of total dependence on decisions made in other than rural environment and in heads of people who lost the immediate

contact with the rural life. Results of their location decisions is for instance the existing spatial distribution of industry which reflects the process of socialist industrialization and creates the regional structure that influences further investment and entrepreneurial decisions.

The top-down model of rural development is now supplementing by bottom-up model, or model of endogenous rural development. Exploitation of multidimensional local and regional rural potential (location and the following relative geographical position, natural resources, cultural heritage values, economic level and characteristics of local communities) by stimulation and initiation of local and regional rural communities and their leaders is characteristic for such model. In spite of the fact that endogenous development is not and does not aspire to be a universal remedy (panacea) to all problems, notable efforts exist in economically advanced Europe to pursue the bottom-up planning mode of rural development. It means transfer of many and appropriate competencies and responsibilities in the sphere of development to local and regional self-governments. The aim is clear: spatial “success”, which in the neoliberal sense is connected with the adjective of “economic”. But, as we know, there is a relatively small group of rural localities with extremely sustainable developmental strategy and with a totally different understanding of rural “success”. Therefore, the question of optimal rural development strategy for individual rural municipalities and areas is still open.

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