

Vladimír SZÉKELY*

Changes in commuting patterns in the territories covered by LEADER Local Action Groups: Slovakia, 2001 and 2011

In the European Union's (EU) 2007–2013 programming period, 29 Local Action Groups (LAG) were registered in Slovakia. The rural regions covered by these LAGs have been selected for detailed time-space analysis of two specific aspects of commuting to work: (a) the share of intra-LAG, predominantly rural-to-rural commuting, from the total numbers of out- and in-commuters (indicator of intra-LAG entrepreneurial activity, economic networking, social capital and diffusion of codified and/or tacit knowledge); and (b) the share of individual LAG out-commuters abroad from the total number of out-commuters from territories of individual LAGs (indicator of 'openness' of rural communities towards new challenges which is aimed at improving their living standards). Two years have been selected for the comparison: 2001 (prior to the establishment of LAGs and the accession of Slovakia to the EU, its entry into the Schengen Area, and the opening of labour markets of the EU Member States to the citizens of the Slovak Republic) and 2011 (after the establishment of LAGs and the 'Europeanisation' of Slovakia). Statistical analysis showed the position and attractiveness of most LAGs as local labour markets has weakened during the period 2001-2011.

Keywords: commuting to work, territories of Local Action Groups

* Geografický ústav SAV, Štefánikova 49, 814 73 Bratislava, Slovakia. szekely@savba.sk

Introduction

The LEADER programme, as an integral part of the Rural Development Programme, is perceived as the most important spatially-oriented instrument of rural policy or 'as a pan-European Union (EU) laboratory of rural development' (Ray, 2000). The main objective of its implementation is improvement of the rural economy and the quality of life in rural areas through exploitation of their endogenous potential (territorial capital) and activating local inhabitants and public and private sector stakeholders. Ideally, active representatives from different socio-economic sectors in the rural territory cooperate in order to achieve the status 'Local Action Group' (LAG), which represents the institutional background for EU financial support for the local development strategy. LAGs, groups of public and private partners (public-private partnerships) from the rural territory, are the mainstay of the implementation of the LEADER approach – the place-based bottom-up approach to rural development.

Though the professional and scientific literature pays great attention to multiple general and national aspects of the LEADER programme and LAGs (implementation, functioning, evaluation and presentation in the mass media) in the context of rural development and rural policy (e.g. Kováč, 2000; Ray, 2000; Maurel, 2008; Furmankiewicz *et al.*, 2010; Esparcia, 2014; Dax *et al.*, 2016; Navarro *et al.*, 2016; Boukalová *et al.*, 2016), very little information is available about Slovakia (compared with Poland or the Czech Republic for example) and it remains rather a 'terra incognita' for the rest of rural Europe.

There are some quantitative and qualitative conditions for establishment of LAGs in Slovakia. The LAG area must be (from the geographical point of view) a coherent rural territory formed on the principle of common interests, with a total population in the range between 10,000 and 150,000, and boundaries which coincide with those of the municipalities that are partners in the LAG. Under the 2007–2013 Rural Development Programme of the Slovak Republic, invitations to submit integrated territorial development strategies and

the selection of LAGs have been published twice (in 2008 and 2009 – which was quite late). Based on the evaluation performed by the competent bodies and their Selection Committee, 29 entities were assigned the status of LAG (15+14, respectively, in each year) by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic. They were subsequently enabled to draw down funds from the allocated financial support to carry out projects that were part of the submitted territorial development strategies. When evaluating and approving the submitted projects which resulted in the ultimate selection of the LAGs, the geographical aspect, meaning equitable (administrative) regional distribution of LAGs, was also considered along with the quality of the projects.

The territories covered by these LAGs have been selected for detailed analysis of multidirectional commuting patterns and flows, and their temporal comparisons. Behind this research is the idea that the strength of commuting flows among rural municipalities (rural-to-rural commuting) on the territories covered by LAGs (intra-LAG commuting) can serve as a proxy for the degree of economic and social linkages between institutionally-networked rural local governments, entrepreneurs and representatives of civic society, or as an indicator of their economic sustainability (attractive local rural labour markets).

Commuting to work as a special case of spatial choice behaviour

Commuting is a significant process from the economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects, both for an individual and society as a whole (Pooley and Turnbull, 1999). In geographical, economic and sociological research, many studies (e.g. Bašovský, 1968; Bezák, 1990; Rouwendal, 1999; Pooley and Turnbull, 1999; van Ham *et al.*, 2001; Székely and Michniak, 2009; Sandow and Westin, 2010; Halás *et al.*, 2014; Michniak, 2016) have aimed to express the various aspects of commuting to work as one of the basic means of the spatial mobility of population.

Commuting flows connect labour and housing markets. The existing differences between the size and quality of the spatial units from the aspect of the existing employment opportunities generate commuting of a huge group of migrants, behaving (more or less) economically, to work. Their spatial choice behaviour (Golledge and Stimson, 1997) is determined by the information which they obtain partially from the environment in which they move every day. The internal information on local labour markets is generally codified and publicly available for any interested person who can acquire it at the Labour Offices, through the mass media, from the Internet and the like, on the one hand. On the other hand, a person who is interested in a job position also considers tacit information which he/she has acquired through his/her social contacts, making use of personal meetings and discussions or various types of sharing through social networks.

When gathering information on labour markets, a person really interested in finding a job, however, does not only confine him/herself to his/her immediate surroundings. He/she also actively gathers information coming to him/her from the external environment, as a rule from less-known milieu and from less-known people. Verification of the ‘interregional knowledge transfer’ requires more effort while his/her personal involvement in the decision-making process automatically means also a higher level of risk in terms of making a right decision. The volume, scope and quality of accepted information for highly differentiated levels of personal satisfaction during the search process depend on the personality characteristics of an individual and his/her willingness to try to find, gather and evaluate relevant information (the process is practically almost always strongly influenced by the time limits for the ‘rational’ final decision). The age of job applicants (in the context of their specific lifetime preferences) also influences the creation of a differentiated information background for the individual choice behaviour. When choosing the place of work, the minds of all job applicants make something approaching a cost-benefit analysis aimed at comparing potential profit and loss of multifarious, not only material, nature (often considering the acceptance by the job applicant’s closest people). Such an approach would be used when the number of job vacancies available exceeds the demand for job vacancies.

In the rural environment of Slovakia, which was long equated to the primary sector of the economy (i.e. agriculture, forestry and fishery), the situation is, however, much more complicated. First of all, the importance of the primary sector for Slovakia’s economy has markedly declined. It is not only its share of GDP creation which has continuously declined (currently reaching roughly 3 per cent), but also the number and share of the population working in this sector (as defined statistically) has experienced a dramatic fall since the 1990s. Chrastinová *et al.* (2015) report that, in the period 2002–2013, the number of agricultural workers has fallen by more than 61,000 (to 47,800, or less than 2.2 per cent of total employment in Slovakia) while the rate of decline was markedly lower than in the previous decade (according to Demo, 2001, p.271, agriculture which, through employing “rigid in terms of migration and with low level of flexibility regarding requalification possibilities” disadvantaged groups of population in the countryside “considerably substituted the social

roles of the State”, employed up to 336,000 people in 1990). The decrease in the employment rate in agriculture resulted in rural unemployment and simultaneously in coexistence of the issue of finding a suitable job, an issue which was strongly influenced by the governmental social policies and never-ending, rational and irrational at the same time, discussion on the advantageousness or on the contrary disadvantageousness of properly-remunerated work, social system misuse and amplified xenophobic moods within society. Buchta (2013) is of the opinion that in the socially and economically marginalised regions of Slovakia, part of the rural population, if taking into account the subjective perception of the objective situation (which is not simple), could start to believe in traditional ‘culture of dependence’ on supporting top-down policy.

In rural areas, and especially in rural municipalities, the demand for jobs outweighs the supply. Short-term or long-term labour migration is a typical phenomenon of the Slovak countryside. Obtaining, acceptance and selection of the relevant information on the job positions offered and the ability to process it rationally are limited by the opportunities in the labour markets in the special case of persons having low levels of education and being poorly qualified. Therefore, the subsequent choice of a job for this category of applicants is not an optimal (ideal) one; it is more a ‘feasible’ choice when taking into account all existing restrictions.

Methodology

The main aim of the study is to describe and analyse selected, very specific aspects of commuting to work in the 29 regions covered by registered LAGs in Slovakia. These LEADER territories (practically ‘artificial’ local rural labour markets, hereinafter termed simply ‘LAGs’) are rural spatial units with a declared interest for solving local labour market problems. They are representative of Slovakia in terms of their geographical distribution (Figure 1), although the results obtained from them are not necessarily applicable to other marginal rural areas in the country. These territories with a predicted negative commuting balance, i.e. the total number of out-commuters will probably be higher than total number of in-commuters, are analysed according to:

- the share of intra-LAG, predominantly rural-to-rural commuting (with zero commuting balance), from the total numbers of out-commuters and in-commuters (indicator of intra-LAG entrepreneurial activity, economic networking, social capital and diffusion of codified and/or tacit knowledge) – comparison between 2001 (before the official acceptance of LAG) and 2011 (after the official acceptance of LAG);
- and the share of individual LAG out-commuters abroad from total number of out-commuters from territories of individual LAGs (indicator of ‘openness’ of rural communities on the new challenges which is aimed to improving their living standards) – comparison between 2001 (before the accession of Slovakia to the EU, entry into the Schengen Area, and opening of labour markets of the Member States of the EU for the citizens of the Slovak Republic) and 2011 (after the ‘Europeanisation’ of Slovakia).

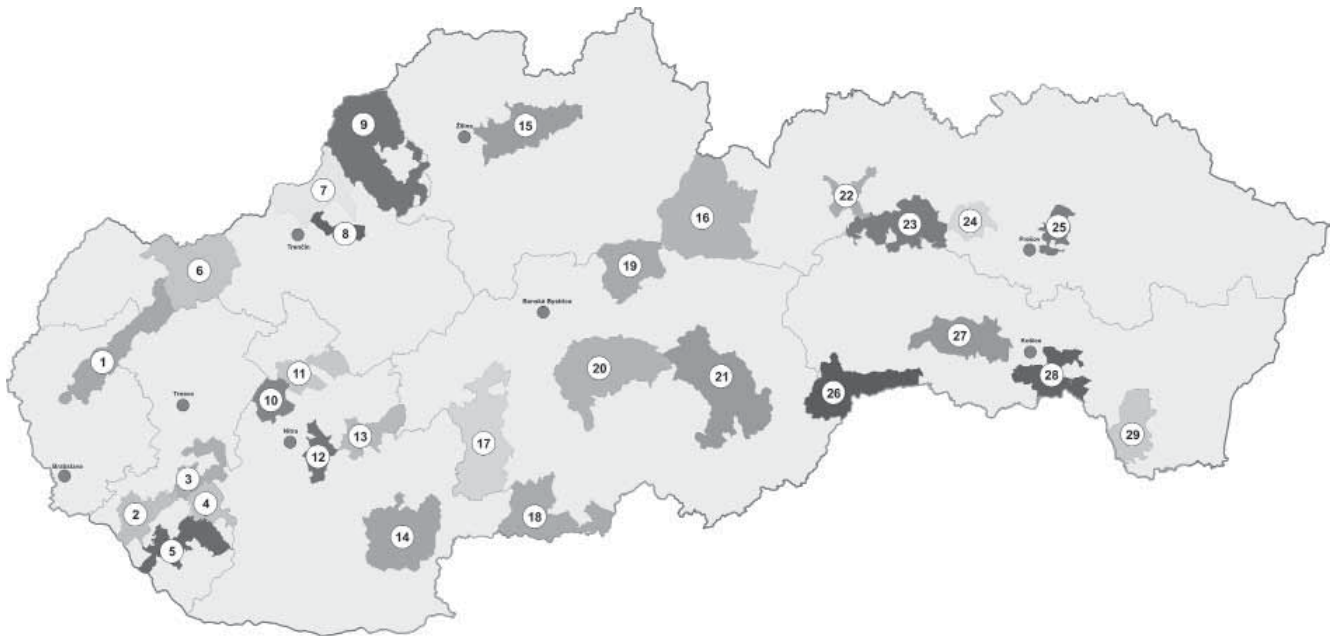


Figure 1: Registered Local Action Groups in Slovakia in the 2007-2013 programming period.

1: Civic association Podhoran; 2: Agroprameň; 3: LAG Dudvák; 4: LAG Stará Čierna voda; 5: LAG Aqua Paradise – Aquaparadiso – Viziparadicsom; 6: Kopaničiarsky region – LAG; 7: LAG Vršatec; 8: LAG of microregion Teplička; 9: Naše Považie; 10: Civic Association of microregion Radošinka; 11: Association of microregion Svornosť; 12: Regional association Dolná Nitra c.a.; 13: The civic association for development of microregion 'Požitavie – Širočina'; 14: Dolnohronske development partnership; 15: Civic association 'Partnership for LAG Terchovská dolina'; 16: LAG Horný Liptov; 17: Civic Association Zlatá cesta; 18: Partnership Krtíšske Poiplie; 19: LAG Chopok juh; 20: Podpoľanie; 21: LAG Malohont; 22: Civic association for regional development Spiš; 23: Civic Association LAG LEV, c.a.; 24: Partnership Bachureň; 25: LAG Šafran; 26: Civic Association Kras; 27: LAG Rudohorie, c.a.; 28: LAG Hornád – Slanské Vrchy, c.a.; 29: LAG Tokaj – Rovina, c.a.

Source: <http://nsrv.sk/index.php?pl=18&article=34>

Definition of commuting and the character of available statistical data

The notion 'commuting to work' means travelling between the place of residence and the work place (Székely and Michniak, 2009) and represents one of the basic types of spatial mobility. The regularly-held censuses organised by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (Štatistický úrad SR, 2003, 2014) – in this paper the results from the years 2001 and 2011 are compared – provide extensive statistical material, part of which are specific and quite detailed data about the declared movement of the economically-active population between the place of residence and the work place (including in- and out-commuting data) when the commuter's municipality of residence and that of work are not the same. It means that distance and time are not decisive for the qualification of commuting. In turn, the decisive and indispensable criterion is crossing the administrative boundary of the municipality of the commuter's residence. This condition, of course, makes registering of commuters very dependent on the size of the smallest territorial-administrative units, which are the urban or rural municipalities (LAU 2). The assumption that in the territory of bigger (urban) municipalities people have to overcome a fairly long distance on their way to work at certain time and financial cost is quite justified.

Unfortunately, the mobility of this group of persons that takes place in the territory of a single municipality is not reflected in the statistical data (except the biggest towns Bratislava and Košice). There is another important restriction for the available data on municipality-to-municipality commuting – the data about the size and directions of in- and out-commuters are only available for municipalities where

total number of commuters to work and school is at least ten. Based on fieldwork experience it can be assumed that when investigating the rural-to-rural commuting at the lowest spatial level (just as when analysing intra-LAG commuting between municipalities), it is impossible to catch all movements of in- and out-commuters exactly. In-commuting and out-commuting between municipalities does exist also for values of fewer than ten persons. This is the reason why the data on intra-LAG commuting, which have been calculated, are underestimated. Despite these shortcomings, it is felt that censuses are practically the only source of data about commuting at the national level provided by the individual municipalities and that they are valuable and very useful for the objective of the study. The existence of and access to these data is '*condition sine qua non*' for the research.

Database creation

For each of 29 LAGs it was necessary to create special matrices for 2001 and 2011; the lines and columns in the matrices represented the municipalities creating them. The size of the matrices varied from 4x4 (LAG no. 8) to 44x44 (LAG no. 9), but not all of the cells of the matrices, expressing the number of in- and out-commuters, had numerical value. Sometimes, commuting between municipalities did not exist and sometimes it was not explicitly expressed as a consequence of the applied limit of the movement extent expressed. Subsequently, the numbers of intra-LAG in-commuters and out-commuters were summed and compared with the overall numbers of in-commuters to and out-commuters from territories covered by individual LAGs. This resulted in the differentiated shares in intra-LAG commuting (with zero commuting balance) of the total numbers of out-commuters

and in-commuters. As mentioned above, the calculated differences are, due to the nature of the applied statistical data, partially underestimated, whereas the rate of the underestimation depends on the spatial heterogeneity of small commuting flows. What is, however, essential from the aspect of the goal pursued, time-space comparison of changes in commuting, identical methodological procedure and identical practice in publishing the outcomes of commuting to work, enable to express smartly differences evoked in the individual LAG territories by both the internal and external developmental trajectories and of the responses from the local residents.

Data gathering on out-commuters abroad was simpler. Numerical values of the declared out-commuting to work abroad of the local residents existed for all municipalities and in both censuses. Therefore, the values for the individual municipalities of 29 LAGs were summed and the share of out-commuters in the total number of out-commuters was expressed (note: the values for in-commuters from abroad to Slovak municipalities are not available).

Results

The period between the two censuses 2001 and 2011 was very dynamic in Slovakia. ‘Europeanisation’ of Slovakia (Michniak, 2016) is considered to be the most important change influencing the labour market. Here, the term is used in the sense that the process started in 2004 with the accession of the Slovak Republic to the EU and continued in 2007 through the accession of the Slovak Republic to the Schengen Area and opening of labour markets of the EU’s Member States to citizens of the Slovak Republic. The Government of the Slovak Republic started to take extensive measures with a view to kick-starting economic growth and reducing unemployment with the assistance of investors from abroad. Their consent, being a response to the direct financial subsidies and indirect support provided through tax holidays, was often evaluated in the mass media uncritically and exclusively positively as a sign of Slovakia’s ‘competitiveness’.

Out-commuting to work

Differences in the absolute numbers of out-commuters from the individual territories covered by LAGs reflect their different sizes and being mainly suitable to form the basis for expressing the scope of specific movements: out-commuting abroad and commuting to work within the LAG territory. In 2001, the fewest number of people (more than 1,300) abandoning the municipalities in which they lived was in LAG no. 24 (high share of Roma population having significantly limited possibilities to be successful in the labour market), while the highest number was in LAG no. 9 (more than 14,000), where important and traditional commuting (mainly industrial) centres – Púchov and Považská Bystrica – are located in the LAG territory itself and in its immediate surroundings. The position of these two LAGs – the first and the last – remained unchanged in 2011. The absolute values have changed only slightly, which indicates, especially in the case of LAG no. 24 from eastern Slovakia, that the challenge of

integrating the Roma population into the labour market still persists.

Out-commuting abroad

Data on the scope and changes in the cross-border out-commuting to work, where the relative geographical position is a preeminent factor, provide more interesting results. People living in the territories of LAGs at the state border, or situated very close to the border, are hypothetically expected to find work abroad more frequently. While the share of out-commuters abroad varied from only 0.51 (LAG no. 28) to 8.77 per cent (LAG no. 15) in 2001, in 2011, i.e. after having opportunities to gain employment legally in the labour markets of other EU Member States, the interval limits have changed substantially (Figure 2), varying from 3.95 (LAG no. 10) to 25.48 per cent (LAG no. 18).

These extreme differences can be explained if the hypothetical assumption on the crucial influence of relative geographical position is applied thereon, in terms of both the closeness of the state border and closeness of significant centres of economic growth and commuting to work. While for the population living in the boundary territory of LAG no. 18, there is no such centre in their closest Slovak surroundings (Veľký Krtíš with a population of 13,000 is classified as a small town in Slovakia), the inhabitants of the relatively centrally situated LAG no. 10, when choosing their place of work, are under the strong influence of Nitra (80,000 inhabitants), situated nearby.

Another reason for the high commuting abroad of people living in LAG no. 18 is the ethnic structure of the local population. The territory borders Hungary and is characterised by a high share of declared Hungarians for whom there is no language barrier to commuting abroad. The residents, gathering and comparing information about the local labour markets available, answer to the existing cross-border disparities in salary levels and quality of the work offered, behaving in an economically rational manner. Their decisions are also markedly supported through special transport links, inno-

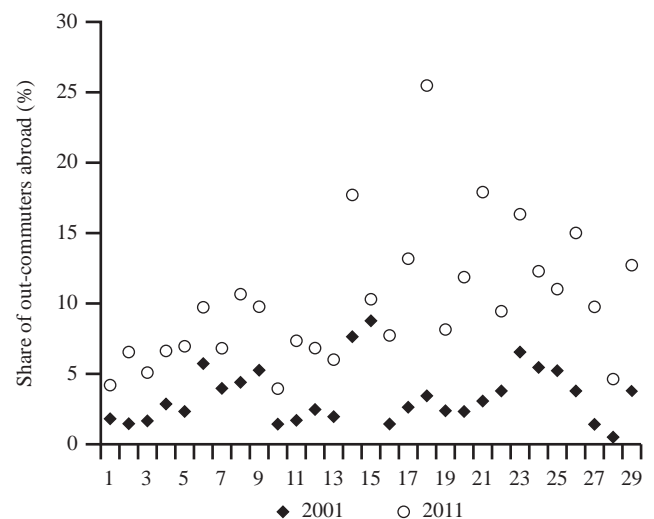


Figure 2: Changes in the share of individual LAG’s out-commuters abroad, 2001 and 2011.

See Figure 1 for identities of LAGs

Data sources: Štatistický úrad SR (2003, 2014) and author’s own database

vatively organised by the Hungarian employers, crossing Slovakia's territory and collecting workers for their production plants (Bleha *et al.*, 2007). This illustrates the typical simultaneous influence of 'pull' and 'push' factors of commuting and a short-term win-win strategy which is beneficial for both parties involved.

Out-commuting directed to LAG's territory

Did the acquisition of LAG status, despite its short existence, have a positive influence on the local rural labour market and increase the movements between the intra-LAG (predominantly) rural municipalities? Given the size and means of demarcation of the territorial units being compared (the absence of the cores of functional urban regions as natural centres of commuting, together with the limited number of small rural municipalities), it was supposed that the shares of out-commuters travelling to municipalities located in a LAG territory will be markedly differentiated and relatively low. The numerical values calculated (which, as mentioned above, are partially underestimated) confirmed this assumption. The lowest values, 2.33 (2001) and 1.32 per cent (2011) for LAG no. 22, are not only an extreme example of evidently limited opportunities in the local labour market, but also of the attractiveness of the cities (Kežmarok and Poprad) situated in the immediate hinterland of this rural territory. On the other hand, the values calculated for the territory of LAG no. 6, which includes three urban municipalities, are 44.6 (2001) and 41.1 per cent (2011).

Comparison of the values calculated for both years and for all LAGs reveals that, while the number of out-commuters has increased in territories of 24 LAGs, an increase of out-commuters directed to LAGs territory is only evident (Figure 3) in five LAGs (numbers 2, 3, 7, 10 and 15). It is evident that the position and attractiveness of most of the LAGs as local labour markets has weakened in spite of the declared benefits from general knowledge transfer and the existence of public-private partnerships established also for the purpose of rural economic development.

LAG no. 15, on which territory one of the most influential foreign investments in Slovakia was made in between the two censuses using government stimuli, deserves special attention. The South Korean car manufacturer Kia-Hyundai, along with its co-located suppliers, have created thousands of relatively attractive jobs, and in doing so have completely reorganised the commuting behaviour in the region. The 'green field' investment offered those living in surrounding rural municipalities short-distance commuting, thereby saving their time and finance. Kia-Hyundai (an example of a traditional, top-down development strategy with an impact on a rural area) has concurrently become, as a place of work, a magnet for the population from almost the entire territory of Slovakia (see section on in-commuting).

In-commuting to work

Since the LAG territories are rural, it would be expected – considering the persisting rural-to-urban commuting in Slovakia – that the numbers of in-commuters would be lower than those of out-commuters. Through calculating the com-

muting balance these assumptions have also been confirmed (Figure 4), except for LAG no. 19, the location of one of the 'flagships' of Slovakia's economy, the labour-intensive steel factory in Podbrezová, where the number of in-commuters is higher than that of out-commuters. In 23 LAGs, the differences between the numbers of out- and in-commuters have increased over the period 2001–2011, which indicates that the potential of the rural territories, with regard to their creating job opportunities, has decreased. The numbers of out-commuters and in-commuters even in LAG no. 19 are converging as a result of economic recession and a subsequent dramatic reduction in the headcount at the Podbrezová steelworks.

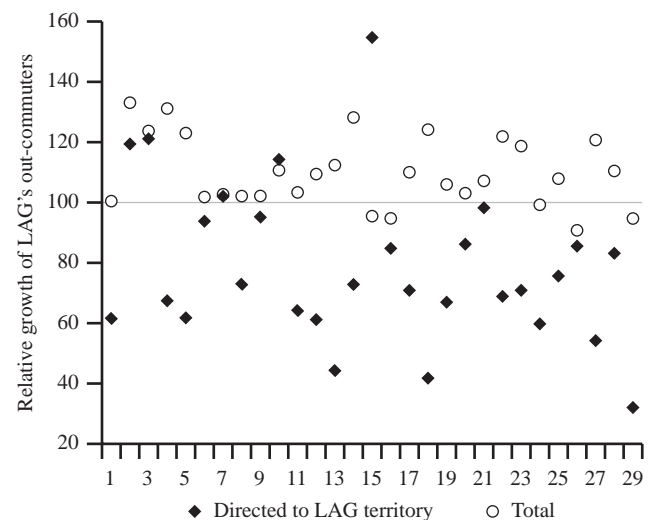


Figure 3: Comparison of relative growth of total LAG's out-commuters and LAG's out-commuters directed to LAG territory, 2011/2001.

See Figure 1 for identities of LAGs

Data sources: Štatistický úrad SR (2003, 2014) and author's own database

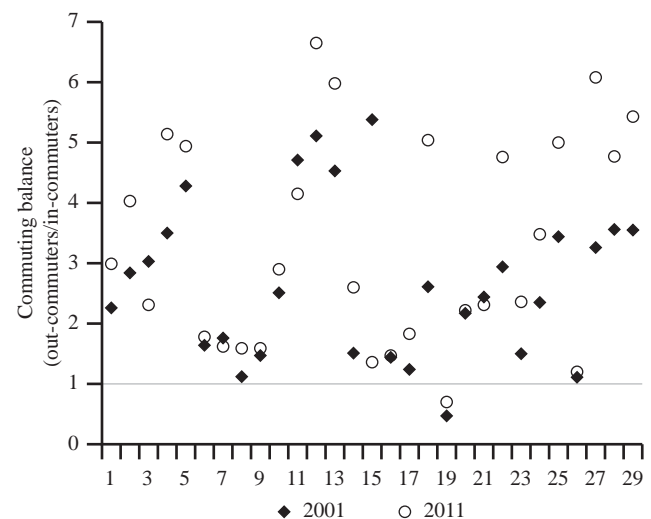


Figure 4: Temporal comparison of commuting balance (out- / in-flows between municipalities) for individual LAGs: 2001 and 2011.

Note that the spatial share balance between out-commuters and in-commuters is 1; values below 1 mean that the number of in-commuters exceeds that of out-commuters. Zero is a purely theoretical value.

See Figure 1 for identities of LAGs

Data sources: Štatistický úrad SR (2003, 2014) and author's own database

Conversely, in the territories of LAGs no. 3, 7, 11, 15 and 21, the differences between the numbers of out- and in-commuters have decreased; in most cases only slightly, but in LAG no. 15, where Kia-Hyundai is located, the change is huge. It must be again highlighted, however, that besides the investor's macro-locational interest, decisions made by the relevant decision-making authorities from Bratislava took a prominent role in the reorganisation of the entire regional space. The municipalities constituting the LAG were obliged to provide land for the production lines; the sale of the land (in the public interest) and price negotiations held between the landowners and the State also had to be conducted via a top-down approach.

In-commuting directed to LAG territory

There is zero balance between the numbers of out-commuters and in-commuters who are moving within the LAG municipalities (LAG as an internal, closed, spatial unit), but the LAG territory is also visited by job seekers from municipalities situated outside the border of the institutionally-delimited cooperating territory that constitute major or minor shares depending on the particular territory (Figure 5). In spite of the fact that those values have also been partially underestimated for the above-mentioned methodological reasons, they show a marked differentiation among the individual LAGs. While some of them are in-commuting centres for people living in the surrounding area (LAG nos. 2 and 22), in others, which thanks to their size, internal structure and functional relations seem to comply with the idea of an urban functional region (Bezák, 1990), the intra-LAG in-commuting can create (just as in the case of the intra-LAG out-commuting mentioned previously) a significant share of the regional commuting to work (LAG nos. 6 and 20). What counts, along with the above-said, is the fact that the share of intra-LAG in-commuters decreased in up to 21 LAGs in between the two censuses, which again indicates a worsening of the rural labour market situation (Figure 5).

What changes happened in the rural territories being examined? While seven LAGs reported an increase in the total number of in-commuters, an increase in the number of in-commuters from specific LAG territories was only identified in five LAGs (Figure 6). Decreases in the numbers of in-commuters to rural territories were quite dramatic in some cases (LAG nos. 29 and 18), mainly in the light of the fact that a more dramatic decrease has been calculated for the local residents from LAGs. All outcomes suggest the identification of the rural residents with the LAG, the developmental activities of which they should participate in, can be hindered considerably when they belong to a different 'place of work' territory.

In Figure 6, however, the territory of LAG no. 15, mentioned several times before as the origin of the automotive industry cluster, attracts most attention as it experienced a marked demand of the employers for workforce. With the relatively small territory of the rural partnership and the age structure and educational levels of the local residents, it definitely was not able to meet the demand for workforce, which resulted in in-commuting of persons meeting the specific qualification criteria to its territory from the nearer, but

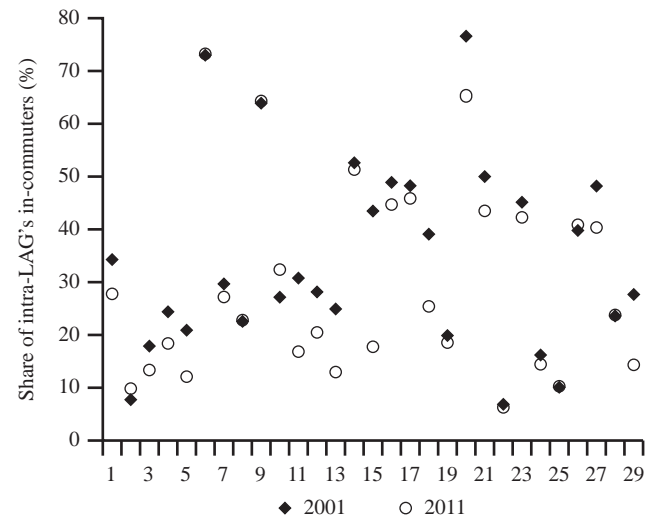


Figure 5: Changes of shares of intra-LAG's in-commuters from total number of LAG's in-commuters: 2001 and 2011.

See Figure 1 for identities of LAGs

Data sources: Štatistický úrad SR (2003, 2014) and author's own database

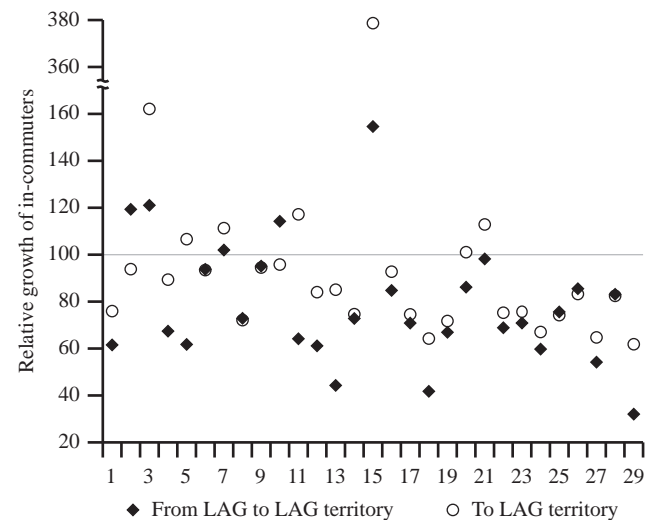


Figure 6: Comparison of relative growth of total LAG's in-commuters and LAG's in-commuters directed to LAG territory, 2011/2001.

See Figure 1 for identities of LAGs

Data sources: Štatistický úrad SR (2003, 2014) and author's own database

also farther surroundings. An almost four-fold increase in the number of people coming to the rural territory using public or individual transportation is logically closely interlinked mainly with the increase in the burden on transport in the territory.

Discussion

The outcomes presented, documenting mainly the continuing decrease in the importance of rural areas as attractive places of work, prompt a number of questions, mainly regarding the ability and possibility of rural stakeholders to carry out large-scale developmental projects built on fair benchmarking of the territory they control, which opens discussion on expectedly limited possibilities of exclusive (neo) endogenous development of rural areas, and in turn of their

potentially incorrect understanding and interpretation of this key term.

What was and still is essential from the viewpoint of the changes in the commuting to work analysed, the unemployment rate of 2001 was successfully reduced by 2011 (in spite of the impacts of the global financial and economic crisis) from 18.6 to 13.6 per cent (Švecová and Rajčáková, 2013). The reduction in the unemployment rate and creation of new employment opportunities were not spatially equitable. The existing regional (and inner-intraregional and/or urban-rural) disparities in the spatial labour markets, deepening over time, reflected differentiated and multidimensional territorial potential (relative geographical position, transport infrastructure and spatial accessibility, structure of population and economy, or the like), historically inherited, the value of which influenced the location-related decisions of investors and concurrently the viability of the existing state and private enterprises. Some territories and locations have become more attractive from the aspect of employment opportunities than others where limited or less attractive job opportunities can exist. Therefore, economically-active individuals who do not want to change their places of residence perceive undesired commuting as the only theoretically potential solution and free decision on the spatial mismatch between the location of places of residence and places of the (more attractive) work.

Territories (often missing functional linkages) spontaneously formed based on the interest of their representatives to join forces and prepare integrated plans of territorial development have been selected as basic spatial units for time-space comparisons. When making decisions, mainly aimed at obtaining LAG status, they could be motivated by multifarious factors, but the possibility to draw down EU funds is a fundamental motivation. It is, however, important to highlight that in relation with the implementation of the LEADER programme and creation of the LAGs from the group of public, voluntary and business stakeholders at the local level, misinterpretation of the importance of their existence, sometimes intentional, happens quite often. When the LAGs were established at the beginning of the 1990s, their essential purpose was to activate the local people to participate in the activities and in the decision-making regarding the development of the territory where they live. The LAG is currently perceived more pragmatically and in the mass media is presented almost exclusively as the regional subsidy agency redistributing the funds (Boukalová *et al.*, 2016).

There is, however, much more to come. The creation of LAGs in Slovakia has been initiated predominantly by local government representatives (mayors of municipalities); in some cases, the necessary share of private and civic sectors required is often a result of their social networking (relatives or friends). This type of partnership can theoretically produce a specific group of persons that are separated from the wider community of local residents, showing little loyalty to the developmental priorities of the existing partnerships presented. This idea, which infringes the fundamental principle of the LEADER initiative, namely accentuating the participation of all strata of the local population in rural development, is not only a theoretical speculation specific for Slovakia. Critical studies dealing with the LEADER ini-

tiative assessment (for example, Furmankiewicz *et al.*, 2010 and Navarro *et al.*, 2016) are also focused on the ability to select the right participating members for LAGs, emphasising the negatively-perceived exclusion of some marginalised population strata. On the other hand, invocation of interest in active involvement and acceptance of the opinions of all groups of the population in creating rural developmental programmes will require a change in the way of thinking of not only the local stakeholders, but of all those who have a cordial interest in rural development. This should result in building of the social capital of the rural territory where its residents will try to stop building barriers between each other and start building bridges of understanding whereby they could join together in a consensual vision for conducting their developmental programme.

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