

# The Czech countryside 30 years after the political change

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the state of the Czech countryside – in which extent it is European, globalized, market-oriented, post-productive, sub and counter-urbanized, under the impact of the second demographic transition. It comes to the conclusion that besides of general trends, the Czech countryside undergoes an economic, social and environmental differentiation. It is possible to earmark at least three types of rural regions: suburbanized, intermediate and peripheral with possible sub-types. Each of these countryside records specific problems. From the viewpoint of threats like depopulation, extreme aging, low economic development, it is necessary to pay an attention especially to the peripheral rural regions. Nevertheless, with the decreasing role of the productive sectors in the economy and employment, and the increasing importance of services, including tourism, the image of rich fertile and poor marginal regions is changing.

**Key words:** countryside, development, differentiation, Czechia

## 1. Introduction and the aim

In 1989, Czechia changed its political and economic systems substantially. The country has opened to European and World culture, market, consumption and also competition. Further changes as the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1993 and the accession to the European Union in 2004 followed. The contemporary Czech agricultural and rural development evolved under conditions of EU Common Agricultural Policy (Pěluha et al., 2017).

Many scholars perceive Czechia as a post-socialist country. However, these changes have taken place 15 – 30 years ago. How the Czech countryside looks like at the present time? In which extent it is European, globalized, post-productive? Were the changes and results only outcomes of the alternation of the system or are they based on a force of technological and social development to which changes only adjusted? Were the changes homogenous or was their occurrence differentiated in various parts of the Czech countryside?

The article aims at general evaluation of the state of the Czech countryside, its settlement system, population, economy and landscape. It attempts to explain a differentiation of the Czech countryside and to characterize individual types of rural areas.

## 2. The Czech countryside

The Czech countryside covers 79% of the area of the country with 30% of inhabitants, taking into account municipalities under 2,000 inhabitants. The division of population according to the share of population by the last population census is presented in table 1. Taking into account not only rural settlements but also small towns (population 2,000 to 20,000) which are extremely important for the sustainability of the rural settlement in Czechia. Villages and small cities together accommodate 56.6% of Czech population.

Tab. 1 Division of the Czech population according to the size of municipalities

Size of the municipality	Population total	Share [%]
0 - 1,999	2,786,110	26.7
2,000 - 19,999	3,117,653	29.9
20,000 - 99,999	2,207,785	21.2
100,000 and more	2,325,012	22.3

Source: Population census 2011. Czech Statistical Office Prague. Own elaboration

## 3. Demographic development and urbanization processes

Between population censuses 1991 and 2001, municipalities under 2,000 inhabitants gained 116,000 inhabitants. Between censuses 2001 and 2011, the municipalities of the same size gained 116,000 inhabitants. It means that the trend is slow but steady. The Figure 1 shows a rapid depopulation of the smallest municipalities. This trend has turned at the beginning of 1990s when the mass construction of prefabs has stopped. About  $\frac{2}{3}$  of rural municipalities are growing. The same is true also for about a half of the smallest municipalities under 200 inhabitants.

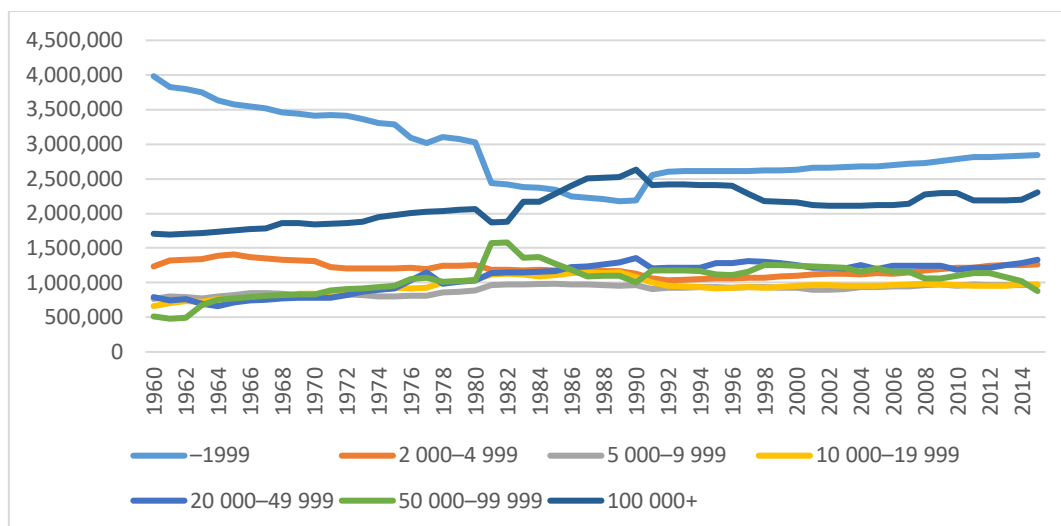


Fig. 1 Population development in individual size categories of Czech municipalities 1960 - 2014

Recently, urban to rural migration prevails over the rural to urban migration. It is connected with topical processes of the urbanization. Young and educated people move from the countryside to the cities searching for a career, well-paid and prestigious job, rich social life and escape from too high social control in the countryside.

The suburbanization is developing since 1990s in the surroundings of Prague and after 2000 in remaining territory (e.g. Bolek et al., 2017). In the counter-urbanization in a wider sense participate seniors who are looking for cheaper rural life after finishing their economic activity. Sometimes, second houses are changing to permanent buildings. Also young pairs are looking for dwelling in rural areas because to acquire a flat is difficult in big cities. The naturbanization is a favoured habit for nature lovers, artist and similar groups of people.

#### 4. Agriculture, tourism and employment

During the socialist period, more than 99% of agricultural land was collectivized and industrialized. Rural houses lost their productive function, countrymen lost their relation to the soil. After 1989, the interest in returning to the smallholder agricultural activities –demanding and not very prestigious- was limited. The land owners preferred to lend their fields to big companies. As a result, the land is mostly not operated by its owners but subjects with purely commercial relation to the soil and to rural communities (Eretová and Jančák, 2017). The structure of businesses operating on the agricultural soil in Czechia is visible in table 2. Average size of an agricultural business is 152 ha which is far the largest among the EU countries.

Table 2 The structure of businesses operating on the agricultural soil in Czechia

Business	Subjects	Area [ha]	Ha per an subject
Individuals	19,781	1,013,303	51
Limited liability companies	1,751	802,631	458
Joint-stock companies	649	891,479	174
Limited partnership	6	4,935	823
Public commercial companies	278	7,219	278
Transformed Cooperatives	527	733,798	1,392
State enterprises	6	8,991	1,499

The share of economically active people engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishery is 2.8%. In rural areas, the same share is 5.5%. Many of those people are employees in big agricultural companies, many times highly specialized. The agriculture tends to a multi-functionality (Hrabák and Konečný, 2018). The Czech countryside is the most industrialized within the EU. However, the majority of rural people are employed in services. No more a farmer, but an employee in services is a typical countryman in Czechia. Of course, many of jobs are situated in towns and cities. The commuting for work is very common since the last century.

In relation to the increasing post-productive character of the Czech countryside (Věžník et al., 2013), the tourism development can be observed (Konečný, 2014). The Czech countryside is considered to be attractive, combining natural, historical and spiritual values. However, the second-housing is the most frequent way of this kind of activities. The tourism development is limited with its seasonal character, lower tradition, insufficient interconnection of different activities in regions. In the case of mass tourism resorts, the landscape can be overloaded and financial benefits often leave the region because investments are made mostly by distant subjects due to insufficient financial capital in the countryside. Consequently, rural development can be hardly based on the tourist industry. It seems that in this field, the countryside sometimes serves for the well-being of urban population rather than for its own development.

## 5. Municipal government and administration

After 1989, the municipal self-government returned. At the same time the process of separation of small municipalities started and continued until 2000 when the lower limit of 1,000 inhabitants for new municipalities was applied. As a result, the Czech Republic has 80% of municipalities under 1,000 inhabitants, of it 1,500 municipalities under 200 inhabitants. It manifests the most fractured administrative structure in Europe. These small municipalities (often responsible for large areas) spend their total budget for their operation without possibilities to invest, their human capital is limited. Collaboration of municipalities is necessary. However, a political will to amalgamation of municipalities is missing.

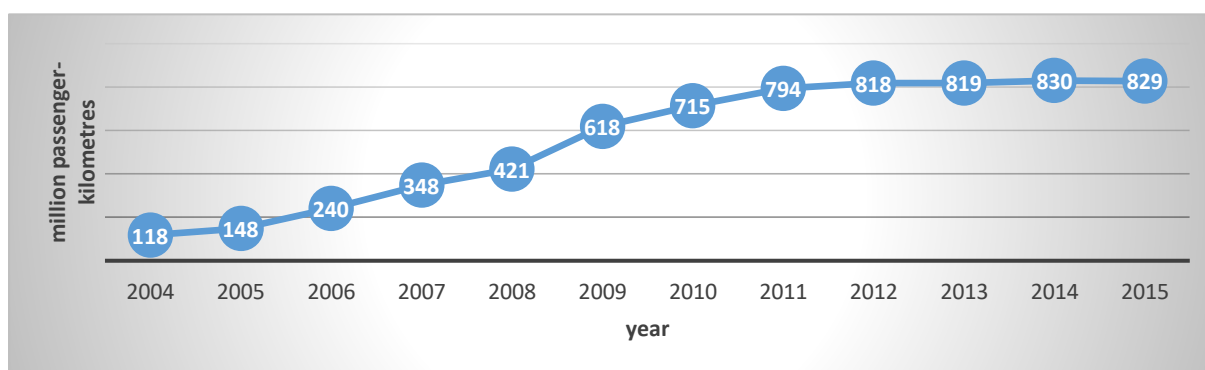
## 6. Human and social capital, rural exclusion

Lower level of formal education is probably the most significant difference between urban and rural population. E.g. share of people with complete secondary education was 35.2% in rural areas against 43.2% in cities. The qualification of countrymen is still adapted to the productive economy; the strong side is in the sphere of vocational training. It limits mass use of ICT for purposes of work, infrastructure management, defending from social exclusion etc. Social capital could be a strong point.

Local and micro-regional identities in rural space can be based on traditions among others. The level of tradition can be messed by a share of believers which is the highest in Bohemian-Moravian and Moravian-Slovak borderland. In some Czech rural areas (especially in eastern Moravia), the traditional folk culture lives on. There are some places under the UNESCO World Heritage related to the Czech countryside, both tangible (Holasovice historical village, Lednice-Valtice cultural landscape) and intangible (recruit Verbuňk dance, Ride of the Kings in Eastern Moravia etc.).

A defence to rural exclusion seems to be one of the most important roles of the state and regions in the countryside. Accessible and frequent rural public transport is the solution (Šťastná and Vaishar, 2017). An example is the Integrated Transport System of the South-Moravian Region. The system connects 24 state-owned, municipal and private companies, operating according the same tariff and schedule. The system covers 729 municipalities in the region and outside. It represents 8,037 km<sup>2</sup> and 1,242,000 inhabitants. The system contains 321 lines (24 train, 11 tramways, 13 trolleybuses, 79 urban burs and 194 regional bus lines). Each inhabited place of the region should be served at least six times in working days and three times on weekdays. The Figure 2 shows the increase of the public transport during the loading of the system. Approximately a half of the operation cost is paid from public budgets. Nevertheless, it is better than to solve problems of rural unemployment, aging, exclusion or abandonment.

Fig. 2 The performance of the Integrated Transport Enterprise of the South-Moravian Region during its introduction into the operation



Source: KORDIS Co.

## 7. Rural landscape

The land use of Czechia is in the Figure 3. Although the primary sector is not more responsible for jobs and social system, it covers 87% of the Czech landscape. The collectivization brought the formation of large plots accessible to agrarian machineries and ploughing up bounds. Thus, the field got open to high water and wind erosion, a biodiversity has decreased. Much of the area was drained off and the water regime was disrupted (Bičík et al., 2015). The territory has become more vulnerable to floods and droughts. Present widening of settlements and infrastructure inserts new barriers into the landscape micro-structure.

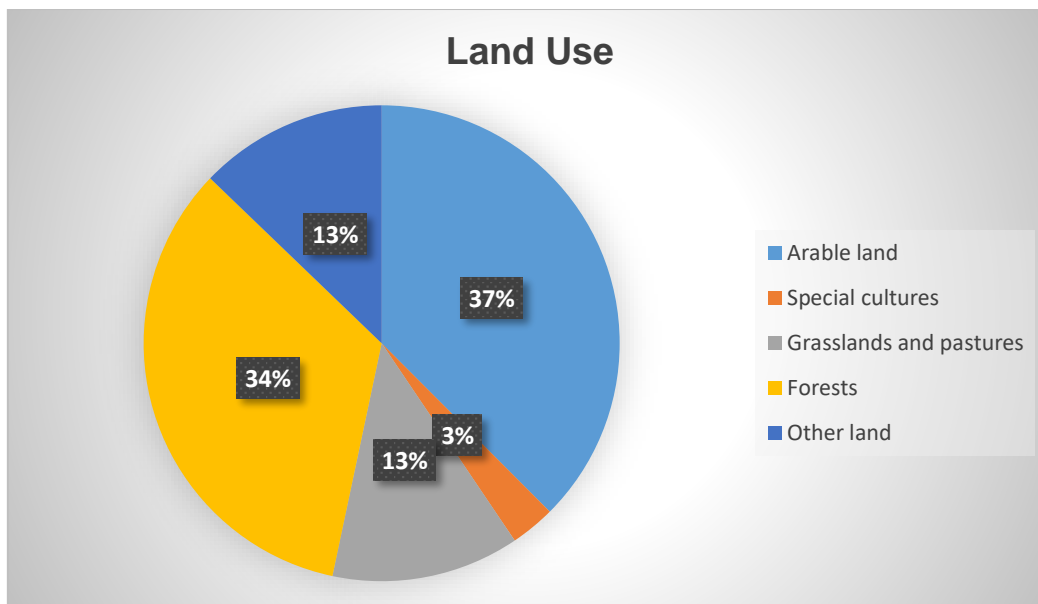


Fig. 3 Land use in Czechia (2017). Source: Public database. Czech Statistical Office Prague.

## 8. Rural differentiation and the periphery

Many attempts were made to create a suitable typology of the Czech countryside covering the whole country, e.g. Perlin et al. (2010), Klufová (2016), or Stonawská and Vaishar (2018). Czech countryside is possible to divide to at least three types, with typical pros and cons: The *suburban countryside* with a good accessibility, high human capital but a threat of losing the rural character. *Intermediate fertile countryside* is situated in floodplains being perceived as rich area with large villages. However, the agriculture is not more decisive for the creation of wealth. The *peripheral countryside* is situated in the mountains and the borderland. It is typical with small villages – badly accessible but with better conditions for tourism. Many of villages have insufficient local market, a lack of infrastructure, aged and low skilled population, outmigration of young people. A relatively dense network of small towns has to play their role ensuring jobs, services, social contacts, micro-regional identity. However, the most peripheral countryside dispose with a nature of higher quality as a rule and thus it changes for a leisure territory within the transition to the post-productive society. The human and social capital seems to be decisive for their further development (Marada et al., 2019).

## 9. Conclusion

The Czech countryside is an attractive and prospective area. Its individual parts and types have their own potentials, challenges, threats and solutions. The rurality of Czechia increases from the West to the East and from the North to the South. The life of the Czech countryside is pre-conditioned by a dense network of small towns (Steinführer et al., 2016) and a frequent operation of public transport. It enables to the countrymen to connect the life in the countryside with the work and services in towns and cities. The traditional view on the countryside as a backward, agricultural, depopulation territory should be re-evaluated (Majerová et al., 2017).

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