

## Classification of Small Towns: Three Methodological Approaches and Their Results

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**Abstract :** Small towns represent a key element of settlement structure and serve a number of important functions associated with the servicing of rural areas that surround them. It is in light of this that scientific studies have paid considerable attention to the functional structure of centers of this kind, as well as the relationships with both surrounding rural areas and other urban centers. But a preliminary to such research has typically involved attempts at classifying the urban centers themselves, with this also assisting with the planning and shaping of development policy on different spatial scales. The purpose of the work is to test out the methods underpinning three different classifications of small urban centers, as well as to offer a preliminary interpretation of the outcomes obtained. Research took in 722 settlement units in Poland, granted town rights and populated by fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. A morphologically-based classification making reference to the database of topographic objects as regards land cover within the administrative boundaries of towns and cities was carried out, and it proved possible to distinguish the categories of "housing-estate", industrial and R&R towns, as well as towns characterized by dichotomy. Equally, a functional/morphological approach taken with the same database allowed for the identification - via an alternative method - of three main categories of small towns (i.e., the monofunctional, multifunctional or oligo functional), which could then be described in far greater detail. A third, multi-criterion classification made simultaneous reference to the conditioning of a structural, a location-related, and an administrative hierarchy-related nature, allowing for distinctions to be drawn between small towns in 9 different categories. The results obtained allow for multifaceted analysis and interpretation of the geographical differentiation characterizing the distribution of Poland's urban centers across space in the country.

**Keywords :** small towns, classification, local planning, Poland

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