

RECENT POPULATION DEVELOPMENT OF VERY SMALL MUNICIPALITIES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

ANDREA LEŠKOVÁ, ANTONÍN VAISHAR

Faculty of AgriSciences, Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology, Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT: The problem of municipalities under 200 inhabitants is discussed. There are 1,500 such municipalities (24%) in the Czech Republic. Many of them came to existence after 1989 when the independence of communes was considered part of the democratisation process regardless of the population number. This paper aims at a statistical evaluation of municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants and presents their geographical distribution, demographic development and analysis of their aging. In general, 70% of these very small municipalities have been growing since 2001. The smallest of them have the highest percentage of the population decline and are the most endangered by aging. Very small municipalities with the highest population growth are situated mainly in the vicinity of larger towns, the ones with the highest population decline are located mainly in peripheral areas at the border of regions.

KEY WORDS: very small municipalities, population development, aging, Czech Republic

Corresponding author: Andrea Lešková, Faculty of AgriSciences, Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology, Mendel university in Brno, Zemědělská 1, 613 00 Brno, Czech Republic; e-mail: andrea.leskova@mendelu.cz

Introduction

As compared with other European countries, the Czech Republic has an enormous amount of very small municipalities¹. Of the most developed European countries, only France has a similar fragmentation of municipalities and a high number of small municipalities (Kadeřábková, Jetmar 2010; Hampl, Müller 1998). The small municipality category in other countries relates mainly to communes with some thousand or

more inhabitants as a rule. The limit of 1,000 inhabitants is often used to define a small municipality in Europe. In the Czech Republic, there are 80% of municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, in France 77%, in Slovakia 68%, in Hungary 61% etc., whereas 16 EU countries do not have such municipalities at all (Swianiewicz 2002). Schnaubert (2016) uses this limit too, whereas Váchalová (2010) uses the limit of 100 inhabitants. Our paper deals with very small municipalities under 200 inhabitants, which are quite exceptional on a European scale. That is why any comparison with international literature can be misleading without understanding the Czech specifics.

¹ In this article, the terms village or settlement concern the physical entity whereas the terms municipality or commune relate to administrative units.

The dispersed settlement structure with a big number of small villages, especially in highland areas is the objective reason for the existence of the large number of very small municipalities. The erroneous identification of democracy with the separation of even the smallest settlements after 1989 is the subjective reason. Over a long time, however, the number of municipalities in the Czech lands decreases systematically and this decline is likely to continue. The contradictory development in the 1990s can be considered short-term in character, specific circumstances caused by this ideological deviation (Vajdová et al. 2006).

In the literature, the problem of small municipalities is seen as a danger of lower efficiency of local public services (e.g. Zafra-Gómez, Pérez Muñiz 2010). On the other hand, some authors argue that administrative savings are often devalued by higher costs in other spheres (Blom-Hansen et al. 2016 on a Danish case). Some way-out is looked for in collaboration among municipalities (Bel, Fageda 2013 or Blaeschke 2014). Klimovský et al. (2014) show that in countries with the extremely fragmented municipal structure like Slovakia, the inter-municipal collaboration is much better developed. However, the international literature considers small municipalities to be settlements much larger than the Czech reality shows. The literature suggests that municipalities between 25,000 and 250,000 inhabitants represent an optimum. Municipalities under 25,000 inhabitants are less efficient but specific conditions are important (Holzer et al. 2009). Investment demanding services (infrastructure) are more efficient in larger communities, whereas labour demanding services can be efficient also in smaller settlements (*ibid.*).

In the Czech Republic, the Municipal Act of 2000 remedied the problem of the further establishment of very small municipalities. Since then, a minimum of one thousand inhabitants has been one of the conditions necessary for establishing a new municipality. However, the municipalities which originated before the year 2000 with lower population numbers still exist. Disadvantages were visible relatively soon – very small municipalities are usually confronted with the lack of human and financial potential. The limited human potential makes it impossible to ensure basic municipal duties on a professional level, has limited possibilities to develop new ideas, which

sometimes is reflected in difficulties to create a candidate list for local elections.

The transformation process after 1989 was connected with a fiscal decentralisation. Some scholars criticise that many small-sized municipalities in the transition economies suffered from financial bottlenecks and were not able to receive sufficient financial support from the central government (Nam, Parsche 2001). According to the Ministry of Finance, in April 2019, the incomes of municipal budgets were 103 billion of CZK (57% of the Czech territorial budgets), the expenses were 91 billion of CZK (56% of the territorial budgets) and the current account of municipalities was 150 billion of CZK (82% of the territorial budgets).

Municipal incomes consist of tax revenues, income from capital, income from own business and subsidies. Except for some very special cases, rural communes depend on tax revenues as a rule. The tax revenues consist of the real estate tax and the relevant part of value added tax and personal and corporate income taxes. This part is determined by the Ministry of Finance on the basis of the municipality's share in the number of inhabitants, the area of the territory and the number of pupils attending a primary school established by the municipality. The basic amount is converted by a coefficient favouring larger municipalities which are expected to provide some services for smaller municipalities. Municipalities with fewer than 50 inhabitants have no bonus, municipalities with 50 to 2,000 inhabitants have a minimum bonus (currently 1.07), cities have even higher coefficients. The number of coefficients is a political struggle – not a subject of a scientific analysis. Moreover, according to Bryson et al. (2004), the Czech Republic made a substantial transfer to local governments, but the development of fiscal autonomy was stifled as transfers reduced the need for own-source local revenues.

The smallest municipalities have hardly any possibility of making additional money (except for a situation when a big company, able to pay a high real estate tax is situated on the territory; however this tax must be the same per area unit for all the entities in a municipality – it means also for local residents). These municipalities rarely have their own profitable businesses or capital. Some financial sources could be provided through the collaboration, e.g. LAGs of the

LEADER programme. Again, success in competition with other municipalities requires high-quality human capital, which is also very low in very small municipalities.

Financial insufficiency makes it impossible to invest into development (although insufficient investments were often the main reason for the initial separation of very small villages from their centres). Moreover, there are difficulties with ensuring basic municipal functions (maintenance of local roads, schools, waste disposal etc.), especially when the territory of a municipality is large or complicated which is quite usual in mountain areas. Very small municipalities can hardly achieve subsidies including the EU support because they are not able to ensure the co-participation (Lorvi 2013).

In the condition of political non-acceptance of re-amalgamation of municipalities, there are attempts to resolve the situation (Matějová et al. 2016). At the state administration level, a system of municipal authorities with extended powers was introduced. These authorities (mostly situated in small towns) perform administrative duties for very small municipalities in their surroundings on the professional level. At the self-government level, voluntary associations of municipalities, which can pool funds for investment actions, are created. Moreover, very small municipalities want to increase their share in tax revenues at the expense of large municipalities. However, all these measures are not systematic and create new problems. On the other hand, there is no political will to reunite the municipalities. Besides, possible reunification would require the agreement of all participating municipalities. However, the duty of larger municipalities to adopt very small municipalities back is not provided by law.

The mean size of a Czech municipality is 1,700 inhabitants. A very small municipality is defined as a municipality with fewer than 200 residents. There are almost 1,500 municipalities (24%) of this size category in the Czech Republic (ČSÚ – Czech Statistical Office 2016a) 2016a). The paper aims at a statistical evaluation of municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants. Our intention is to perform a basic analysis of the situation for the later deeper investigation.

The main research questions are as follows:

1. How are very small municipalities geographically distributed on the Czech territory?
2. What is their share in the number of municipalities and population in relation to larger municipalities?
3. What is the recent demographic development of very small municipalities in the Czech Republic?
4. To what extent are very small communities at risk of aging compared to larger municipalities?
5. Are, therefore, very small communities at risk of depopulation?

Very small municipalities in the Czech Republic, their characteristics and development

Rural communes in the Czech Republic are defined most frequently as municipalities up to 2,000 residents. There are over 5,500 municipalities with the population under 2,000. They represent 90% of all municipalities in the country where 30% of the population lives (ČSÚ 2017). In 2000–2017, the share of the rural population increased by 1.2 percentage points. We

Table 1. Number of rural municipalities and inhabitants by the size of municipalities in the Czech Republic in selected years.

Population size		2000		2017	
		municipalities	inhabitants	municipalities	inhabitants
Very small municipality	up to 199	1,736	212,229	1,432	178,327
Small municipality	200–499	1,99	646,195	1,992	650,76
Medium-sized municipality	500–999	1,249	874,812	1,379	974,837
Large municipality	1 000–1 999	651	902,359	755	1,052,794
Countryside		5,626	2,635,595	5,558	2,856,718
Municipalities in the Czech Republic - Total		6,251	10,266,546	6,258	10,610,055
Share of the countryside (%)		90.0	25.7	88.8	26.9

Source: ČSÚ 2017.

can consider the rural municipalities with up to 200 inhabitants as very small, municipalities with more than 200 and fewer than 500 inhabitants as small, municipalities over 500 and under 1,000 inhabitants as medium-sized, and municipalities over 1,000 and under 2,000 inhabitants as large.

Municipalities and their history in Czechia

Municipalities in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire came to existence in connection with the demise of noble domains in 1850. The cadastral municipalities established earlier by the emperor Joseph II for tax purposes were taken as a basis for the administrative reform. The law from 1849 defined municipalities as a basic unit of the public administration in the country. The law has been more or less accepted in all later legal acts until the present time.

Although the communist regime officially kept the municipal establishment, self-governance was limited at that time. Municipalities fulfilled duties of the state administration and/or organised the “voluntary” work of their inhabitants within so-called Action Z². The real power was much more centralised. At the local level, it was represented predominantly by representatives of the Communist Party and agricultural cooperatives. In the 1970s and 1980s, the process of merging municipalities was developed. The system of central places reflected the reality of that time, especially the ongoing migration of people to cities and the associated depopulation of the smallest settlements, as well as the need to provide services for rural settlements and to streamline the state administration through centralisation. The problem was the central decision on the future role of individual settlements in the settlement system, which gave no chance to the municipalities defined as “settlements without permanent significance”. The number of municipalities decreased and was the lowest in the history: 4,100 in 1989 (ČSÚ 2016a).

After 1989, the function of self-government was given back to municipalities, which became

² Action “Z” – *zvelebení* (improvement) was a voluntary unpaid work of citizens aimed at the improvement of their villages, later also at investments like the construction of social infrastructure (kindergartens, cultural houses etc.) and/or technical infrastructure (e.g. water supplies) in the socialist period.

standard legal persons with all duties and rights. The number of municipalities increased again to 6,258 in 2016 (ČSÚ 2016a), which represented 7% of all municipalities in the European Union (Provazníková 2007).

Geographical concentration of very small municipalities

Fig. 1 shows the geographical concentration of about 1,440 very small municipalities in the Czech Republic’s regions in 2016. The highest concentration of very small municipalities can be found in the Vysočina Region with 331 municipalities of that size, which is almost a half of all municipalities in the region and 23% of all very small municipalities in the Czech Republic. It is the only predominantly rural region according to the OECD typology (more than 50% of the population lives in municipalities with a density of up to 150 inhabitants per km²). This dispersed settlement structure is given by the historical context associated with the existence of highland areas, their less fertile soils and worse climatic conditions. This region failed in achieving high industrial growth; the main source of livelihood for local people was for a long time agriculture and this is why the region is still rural in character.

The second highest concentration of very small municipalities is in the South Bohemian Region, where 232 of them are situated, which is 37% of all municipalities in this region and 16% of all such municipalities in the country. It is a specific region with the lowest population density in the country (62 inhabitants per km² as compared with 134 inhabitants per km² in the Czech Republic) (ČSÚ 2016a).

In the Central Bohemian Region, there are 228 very small municipalities, which is also 16% of all such municipalities in the Czech Republic, however it is only 20% of all municipalities in this region. The very small villages are situated mainly on the border with the regions of Vysočina, South Bohemia and Pilsen, which are the most distant from Prague.

The lowest concentration of very small municipalities is in the regions of Moravia-Silesia and Zlín. Moravia as a traditional rural region with extensive lowlands and fertile soils has mostly vigorous and larger villages. Another region with the lowest concentration of very small communes

is the Karlovy Vary Region in the western part of the country on the border with Germany.

Overall, the concentration of very small municipalities reflects different historical development and settlement structures in Bohemia and Moravia. Very small municipalities are rather the

domain of the Bohemian territory. Another important phenomenon of the concentration of very small villages is their distance from regional centres and peripheral or marginal geographical locations. These territories are concentrated mainly at the borders of administrative regions (formed

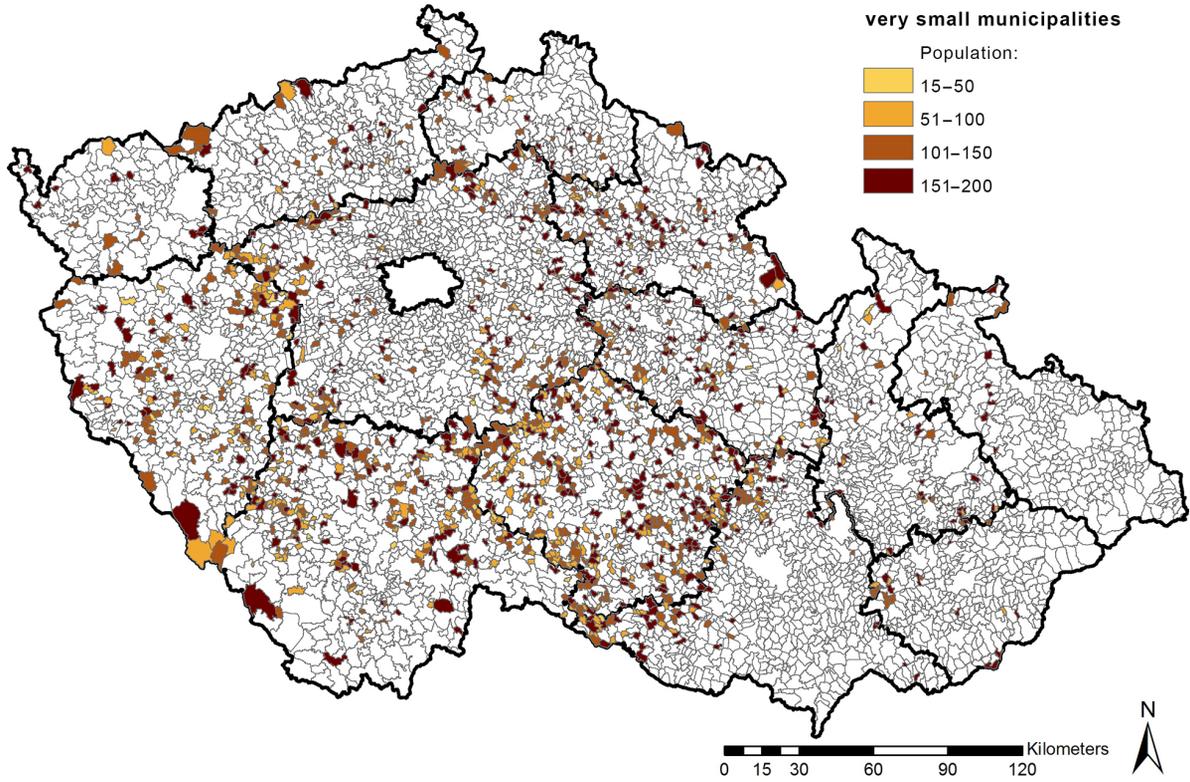


Fig. 1. Very small municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants in the Czech Republic as at 1 January 2016. Source: © ArcČR ARCDATA PRAHA, ZÚ, ČSÚ, 2016, own elaboration.

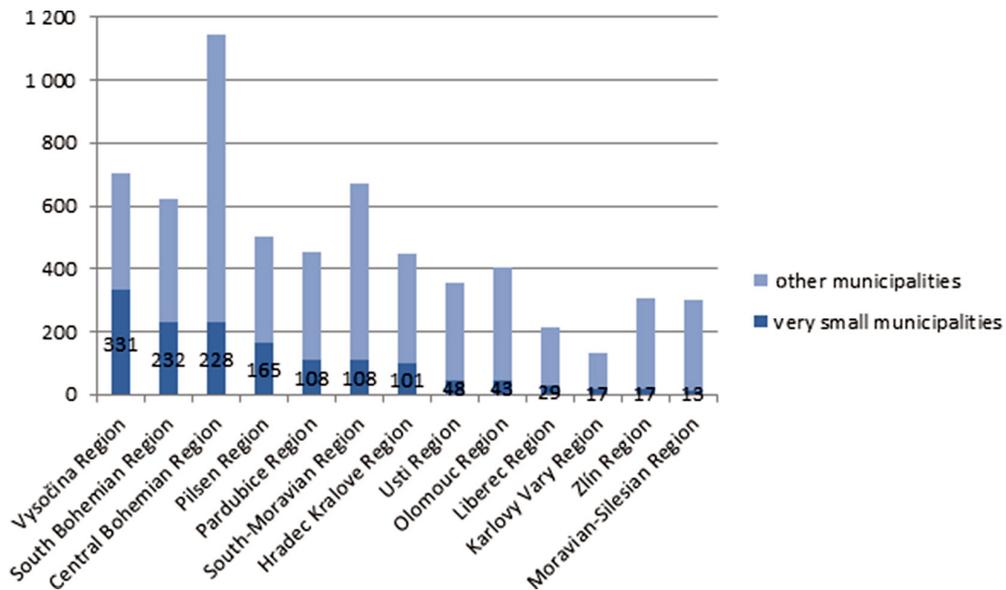


Fig. 2. All very small municipalities and all other municipalities in the Czech Republic's regions as at 31 December 2016. Source: ČSÚ 2016b, own elaboration.

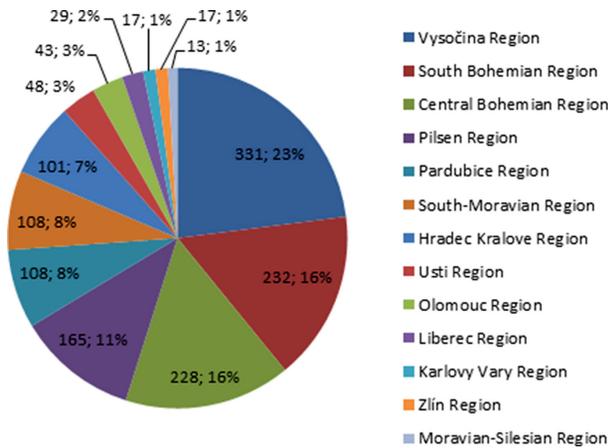


Fig. 3. Percentage of very small municipalities in the Czech Republic's regions as at 31 December 2016. Source: ČSÚ 2016b, own elaboration.

often by mountain ranges) in a so-called Czech inner periphery (Musil, Müller 2008; Jakešová, Vaishar 2012). Both the borderland and the inner periphery of Czechia were studied by a number of authors, who point not only to the negative socio-economic situation of these areas (Vaishar, Zapletalová 2010), but also highlight the periphery as a space for preserving specific elements of regional identity and rural values, such as tradition, identity and culture (Reinöhlová 2005; Fialová 2001).

Demographic situation of very small municipalities

Almost 180,000 people live in very small municipalities, which is almost 2% of the Czech population. The average population of these very small villages is 125 residents. Municipalities with the population from 100 to 149 are the most frequent size category among very small municipalities, representing 36% of such municipalities

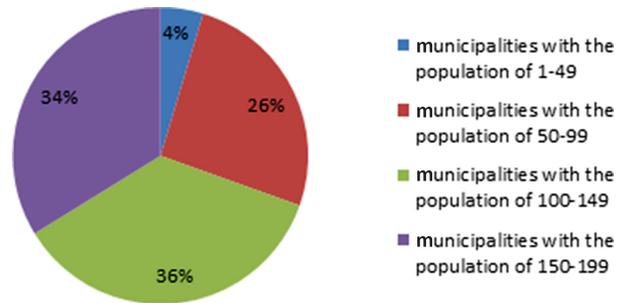


Fig. 4. Size categories of very small municipalities according to the population as at 1 January 2017. Source: ČSÚ 2017, own elaboration.

in the Czech Republic. There are also 34% of municipalities in the category with the population number from 150 to 199. The smallest municipalities with fewer than 50 residents total 67, which is only 4% of all the very small municipalities in the Czech Republic.

Demographic development of very small municipalities

The number of very small municipalities has decreased by approximately 300 municipalities since the year 2000, while their merging and disappearing has not occurred to great extent and the total number of municipalities in the country has not changed very much (± 3). The total population in the Czech Republic has shown an increasing trend since 2000 by approximately 300,000 while the population in the municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants has decreased because of the reduced number of such municipalities (Table 2). In general, very small municipalities are not disappearing but growing, thus about 300 of them have become municipalities with more than 200 inhabitants since 2000.

The average population growth of municipalities classified as very small in 2001 has been

Table 2. Development of all very small municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants, all the municipalities in the Czech Republic since 1990 and the population development.

Year	All municipalities	Municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants	Total population	Population in the municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants
1990	5,768	1,328	10,304,607	168,208
1995	6,232	1,723	10,321,344	211,927
2000	6,251	1,736	10,266,546	212,229
2005	6,248	1,614	10,251,079	197,865
2010	6,250	1,524	10,532,770	189,334
2015	6,253	1,444	10,553,843	179,810

Source: ČSÚ 2016a, own elaboration.

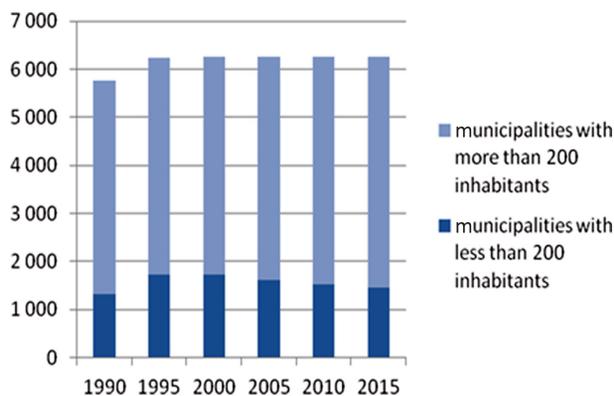


Fig. 5. Population number development in very small municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants and other municipalities in the Czech Republic since 1990. Source: ČSÚ 2016a, own elaboration.

18% since then, which is by a half more than the average population growth of all other municipalities in the Czech Republic (12%). In the period from 2001–2015, the number of inhabitants in very small municipalities increased by 33,500. It represents 16 newcomers per 100 residents in very small municipalities, while there were only 3 newcomers per 100 residents in all other municipalities in the Czech Republic in the same period.

In fact, the population development of very small municipalities is diversified. About 30% of them show a population decline and 70% of them show population growth (Table 3). The same rate of population growth and a population decline is recorded in the rest of municipalities in the Czech Republic; thus, very small villages do not differ from the rest of the Czech Republic in this respect. The highest population growth is in the smallest municipalities with fewer than 50 inhabitants, where 20% of them show population growth by more than 50%. There are only about 8% of municipalities with more than 150 and fewer than 200 inhabitants with population

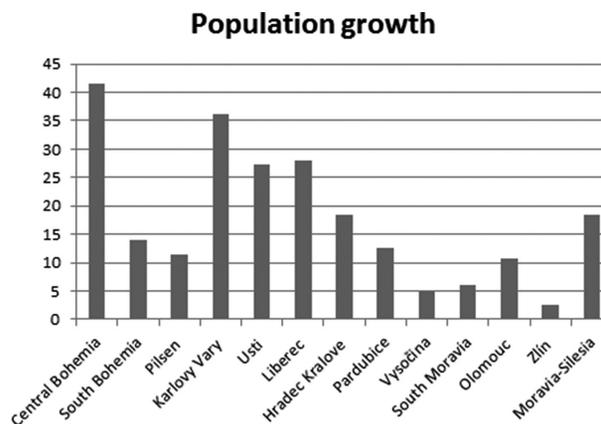


Fig. 6. Population growth of very small municipalities in the Czech Republic's regions – Population growth is calculated for all very small municipalities with the population under 200 in 2001. Source: ČSÚ 2017, own elaboration.

growth greater than 50%. The highest share of municipalities with a population decline (34%) is in municipalities with more than 50 and fewer than 100 inhabitants.

Geographically, the average population growth in very small municipalities is positive in all regions. The largest average population growth in very small villages is in the Central Bohemian Region (42%) due to the central core of the capital city of Prague, which provides background to the suburbanisation trend of Prague spreading into the rural environment. Other regions with the largest average population growth are those of Karlovy Vary, Ústí and Liberec, with very small municipalities situated on the north-west border of Bohemia with Germany.

The smallest average population growth in very small villages is in the Zlín Region (2%) with no very small village with an increase of more than 25%. This might be related to the change in their geo-political position after the split of Czechoslovakia. Other regions with the smallest

Table 3. Population growth of very small municipalities in different size categories – Population growth is calculated for all very small municipalities with the population under 200 in 2001.

Population growth	≤ 0%		> 0% ≤ 50%		> 50%	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
1–49 inhabitants	17	24	39	56	14	20
50–99 inhabitants	161	34	259	55	50	11
100–149 inhabitants	172	31	335	60	50	9
150–199 inhabitants	159	29	354	64	44	8
fewer than 200 inhabitants	509	30	987	60	158	10

Source: ČSÚ 2017, own elaboration.

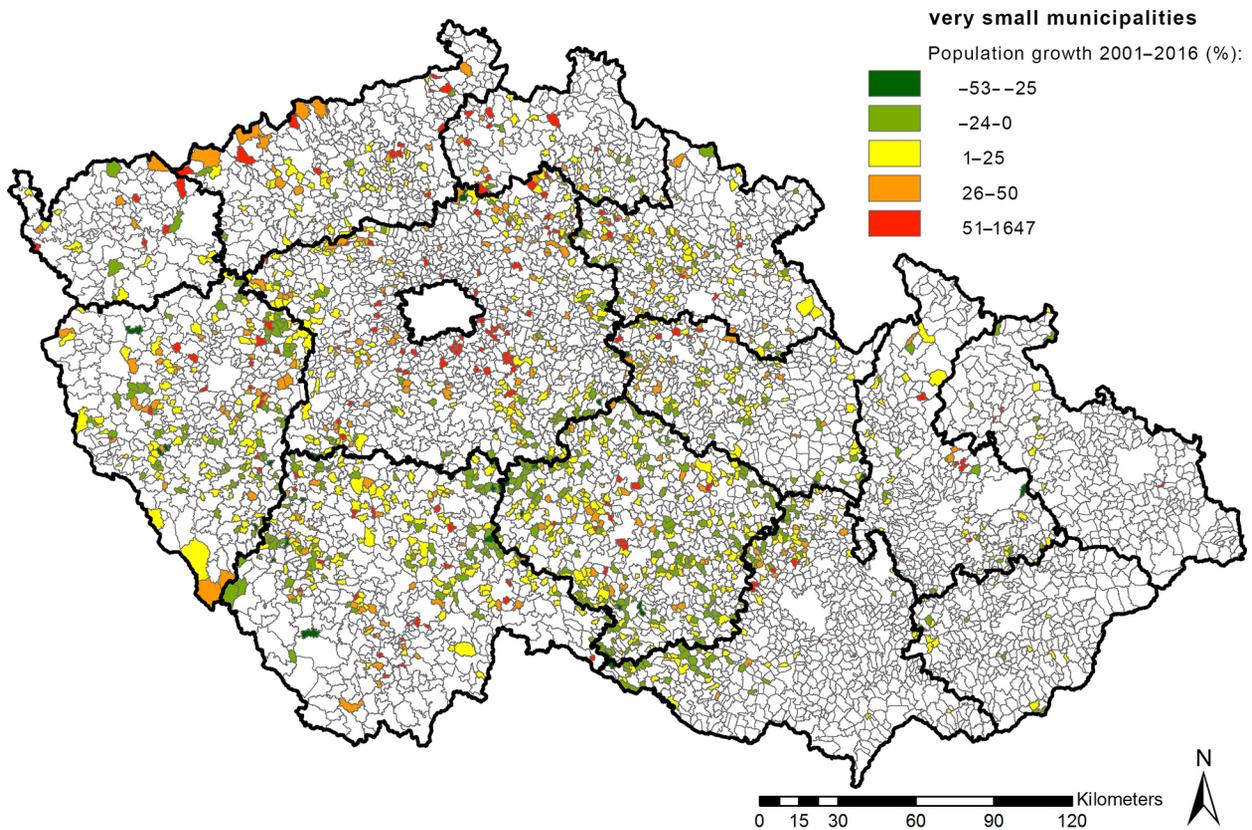


Fig. 7. Population growth of very small municipalities from 2001 to 2016. The map presents all very small municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants in 2001.

Source: © ArcČR ARCDATA PRAHA, ZÚ, ČSÚ, 2016, data ČSÚ 2017, own elaboration.

average population growth are the Vysočina Region (5%) and the South Moravian Region (6%). In the South Moravian Region, there is a high contrast between very small villages located in the hinterland of Brno and very small villages on the south-western border with Austria in the district of Znojmo. While very small villages in the Brno surroundings are predominantly growing under the influence of suburbanisation, the population in very small villages on the southwestern edge of the region is significantly decreasing. In the Vysočina Region, very small villages with the smallest average population

growth (decline) are found mostly in its wide marginal parts, peripheral areas remote from the cities.

Aging index of very small municipalities

The index of aging was used to analyse the number of old and young people living in very small villages. It was calculated as a ratio of the number of elderly persons (65 and more – usually pensioners) and the number of young persons (0–14), expressed in percentage.

The average aging index of very small villages is 166%, which means that the number of

Table 4. Aging index of very small municipalities by four population size factors as at 1 January 2017.

Ageing index	≤ 100%		> 100% ≤ 200%		> 200%	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
1–49 inhabitants	16	27	21	35	23	38
50–99 inhabitants	87	24	167	45	116	31
100–149 inhabitants	147	29	260	51	107	21
150–199 inhabitants	148	31	275	57	62	13
fewer than 200 inhabitants	398	28	723	51	308	22

Source: ČSÚ 2017, own elaboration.

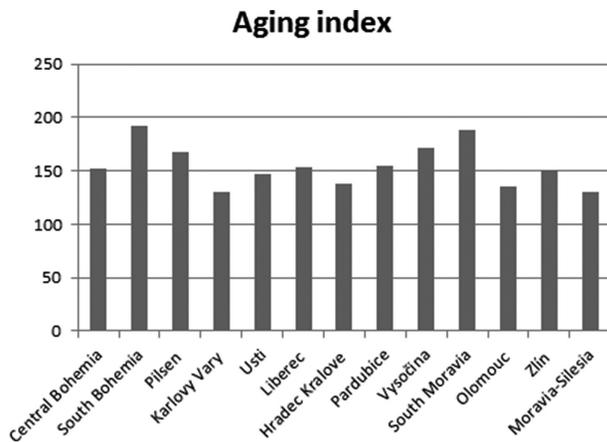


Fig. 8. Aging index of very small municipalities in the Czech Republic regions as at 1 January 2017.
Source: ČSÚ 2017, own elaboration.

older people in very small villages exceeds the number of young people by more than 2/3. In short, very small municipalities are threatened by extinction from this point of view. Comparing to the average aging index of all other municipalities with more than 200 inhabitants, which is 117%, the situation of aging in very small villages is much more alarming. However, very small

municipalities with a various population size are highly diversified. The smallest ones are highly endangered by aging while in the larger ones, the danger is not so high. This is also illustrated in Table 4. While the aging index is higher than 200% in the municipalities with fewer than 50 inhabitants, in the category of municipalities with more than 150 and fewer than 200 inhabitants, only 13% of municipalities exhibit such a high aging index.

Geographically, the average aging index in very small villages is higher than 100% in all regions, which indicates that an older population predominates. The highest average aging index in very small villages is in the South Bohemian Region (192%). Another region with the largest average aging index is the South Moravian Region (188%), where these very small municipalities with the highest index of aging are located mainly on the south-western border of the region with Austria around Znojmo. Another region with a similarly high average aging index is the Vysočina Region (172%), where very small

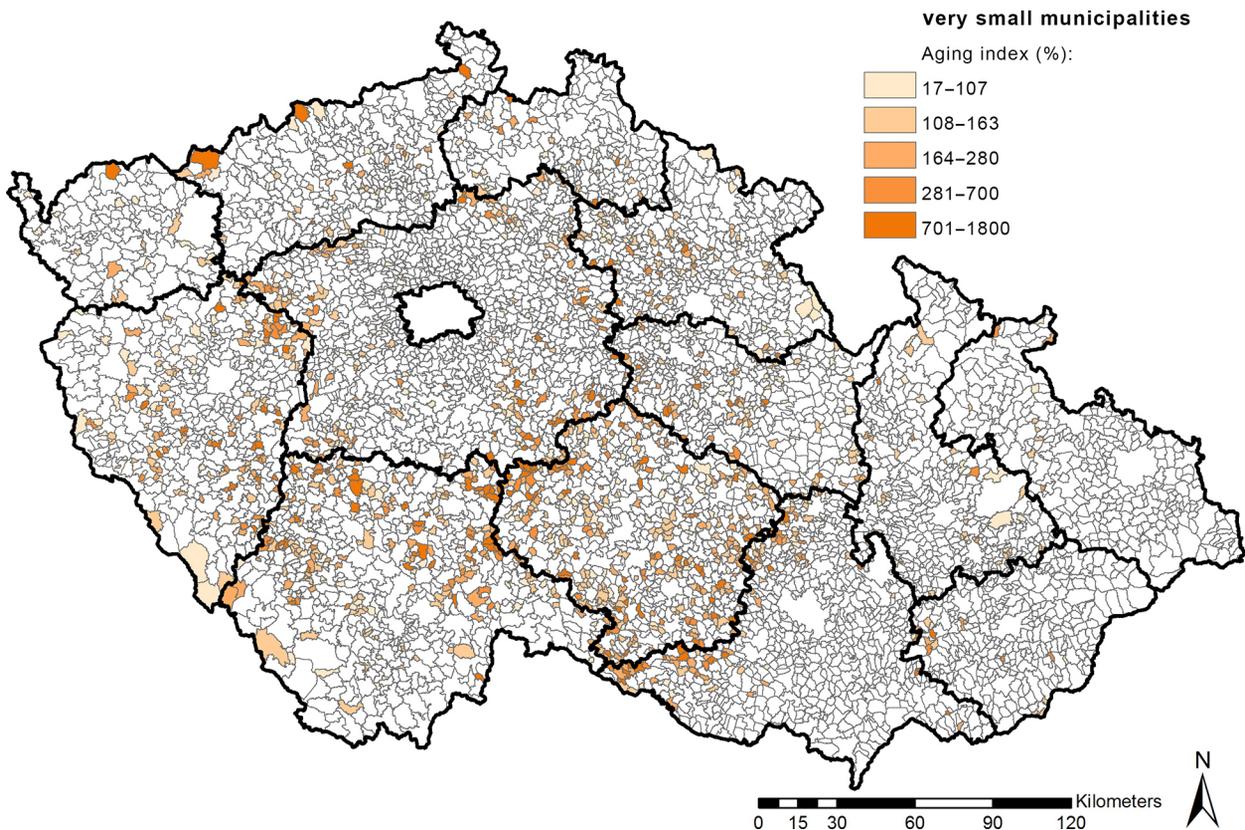


Fig. 9. Aging index of very small municipalities in the Czech Republic as at 1 January 2017.
Source: © ArcČR ARCDATA PRAHA, ZÚ, ČSÚ, 2016, data ČSÚ 2017, own elaboration.

villages with a high aging index are located predominantly on the region's periphery.

The lowest average aging index in very small villages is in the Karlovy Vary and Moravian-Silesian Regions (130%). These regions belong to those with the lowest number of very small villages. Both regions are characterised by the highest migration turnover. Other regions with the lowest average aging index in very small villages are those of Olomouc (136%) and Hradec Kralove (138%), which also belong to regions with a below-average number of very small villages.

Geographical differences in the demographic situation of very small municipalities

The analysis of geographical differences of diverse development in very small municipalities is illustrated in Table 5, using two indicators, which are population growth from 2001 to 2016 and the aging index. Regions, in which both indicators of very small municipalities are significant, i.e. very high or very low as compared with the very small municipalities in other regions, are marked as regions with significant development, either positive or negative.

The development of very small municipalities located in the south-west of Moravia is definitely one of the worst in the Czech Republic. In this area, more negative features met: a long distance from regional centres both on the Czech and

Table 5. Development of very small municipalities in the Czech Republic regions based on the comparison of the level of two indicators.

Region	Population growth from 2001 to 2016		Aging index	
	%	Level	%	Level
Central Bohemia	42	very high	153	
South Bohemia	14		192	very high
Pilsen	12		168	
Karlovy Vary	36	high	130	very low
Usti	27	slightly high	147	
Liberec	28	slightly high	153	
Hradec Kralove	18		138	low
Pardubice	13		155	
Vysočina	5	low	172	slightly high
South Moravia	6	slightly low	188	high
Olomouc	11		136	low
Zlín	3	very low	151	
Moravia-Silesia	18		131	very low

Development: ■ - positive, ■ - negative.

Source: ČSÚ 2017, ČSÚ 2016, own elaboration.

Austrian sides of the border, long-term development close to the iron curtain, poor industrialisation and consequences of the post-war ethnically-based population exchange.

Another region with the worst development of very small municipalities is the Vysočina Region. Very small municipalities in the Vysočina Region have a high aging index and low population growth in comparison with very small municipalities in other regions of the Czech Republic. The Vysočina Region is situated on the historical Bohemian-Moravian border and thus it represents a typical inner periphery of Czechia. In terms of the endangered development of very small municipalities, it is therefore legitimate to speak about municipalities on the historical Bohemian-Moravian border.

Karlovy Vary is a region with the best development of very small municipalities. They have a significantly low aging index and high population growth, which can result from the past immigration connected with the ethnically-based population exchange and industrialisation. However, the number of these very small municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants in this region is relatively small.

Discussion: What is the future of very small municipalities?

The issue of the optimal municipality size as a basic self-government unit has been discussed since utopia towns. Such a basic self-government unit should offer at least basic professional public services to its inhabitants. The limit usually varies by a thousand, sometimes dozens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of inhabitants according to different authors and services to be provided.

The amalgamation of municipalities has occurred in many countries in Europe and worldwide (e.g. Reingewertz 2012). For example, Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2016) explain certain resistance of the local population against this process resulting from the fear of loss of public services and autonomy, but also from a strong emotional identification with the original settlement. It could be a reason why no political will exists to realise such a step in Czech conditions. Municipalities treasure the independence more than economic operation and development. They

rather fight for increasing support from the state budget by way of changing the redistribution of tax revenues. Nevertheless, it is possible that some amalgamation will gradually occur under the pressure of reality. The system of municipal offices with extended powers seems to be a suitable base for such a development.

Karder (2014) found that the population development of small municipalities in Germany incorporated into larger units proved to be more favourable than that of municipalities which became independent. However, it results probably from the geographical position of such municipalities rather than the amalgamation. Similarly, in our case, very small villages with the highest population growth since 2001 are situated mainly close to larger cities, the highest concentration being recorded around the capital of Prague and at the northwestern border with Germany. The ones with the highest population decline are located mainly in peripheral areas at regional borders. The most significant of them are the south-western border of the South Moravian Region and the borders of the Vysočina Region with the highest concentration of very small villages. The South-Bohemian Region as the second region with the highest number of very small municipalities remains a markedly specific region for their development.

Even though only 2% of all Czechs live in very small municipalities, these communes represent 10% of the Czech territory, which is a relatively large part of the country's area. This is also why they are highly responsible for ensuring sustainable development of these areas. Sustainable development of rural and peripheral areas is also a priority of the Czech Republic 2030 Strategic Framework, which is a result of the update of the Strategic Sustainable Development Framework adopted by the Czech Government in 2010 and which defines the vision for improving the quality of life of the Czech population in six key areas. In the key area "Municipalities and Regions", the objective of reducing regional inequalities is defined in terms of stopping the depopulation of peripheral areas.

As far as this tendency for the development of very small municipalities continues, it is possible that about a half of the smallest municipalities located in the most peripheral areas will be threatened by depopulation in the future. On the other

hand, there are very small municipalities situated predominantly in the area of suburbanisation of larger cities whose development is too rapid to preserve their traditional cultural values and which are threatened by the loss of their identity and landscape character.

The future demographic development in Czechia is another issue. It should be taken into account that the relatively high birth rate in the period after 2000 had its roots in the strong population cohort born in the 1970s, i.e. in the period of massive pro-natality measures adopted by the then Czechoslovak government. This source seems to be exhausted, though. On the other hand, the fertility rate which reached its minimum in 1999 (1.13), increased again to 1.69 in 2017. In very small rural municipalities, the fertility rate moves around 2.1³. It seems that Czechia has more or less overcome a bottom of the second demographic transition. The international migration is the great unknown. Czechia has been an immigration country since 2003 and the trend is likely to continue. However, the extent of this process varies from year to year and it is hardly possible to estimate the future development in detail. Although the immigration processes are a predominantly urban phenomenon, one cannot say how and when this phenomenon touches the countryside.

Our paper is based mostly on the analysis of population development and the population structure. However, the main problem of very small municipalities consists in the lack of both public and market services which depend on the minimum number of customers. The customers disappear not only because of the small population number but also due to the increasing mobility of the remaining population that is able to commute to better equipped centres for jobs and services. Inhabitants of very small municipalities who cannot commute due to their inability to drive or because they do not own a car can be excluded. It is partly possible to solve the problem with the developed system of public transport, which is also unprofitable in very small municipalities and has to be subsidised. Additionally,

³ The fertility rate correlates among other things with the educational structure of females. The level of education is indirectly dependent on the population size of the commune. That is why the fertility of rural females increases with the decreasing population number of settlements.

Martins (1995) highlights that the municipality size has a significant impact on the efficiency of local public services or on the level of the participation of citizens in local public life.

The lack of both human and financial resources is another big problem of very small municipalities. They usually expend the largest part of their budget for the functioning of their municipal offices and have hardly any spare money for investments. Neither are they able to achieve a financial support from the centre that usually requires co-participation. This problem can be solved by the collaboration of municipalities (e.g. Bolgherini 2011) – in the Czech conditions most frequently by means of the voluntary associations of communes or LAGs of the LEADER programme. However, the collaboration entails renouncing some rights in favour of the whole, i.e. the same why the small municipalities broke away from larger communes. The collaboration seems to be voluntary but in fact, it is enforced by circumstances.

In the 1990s, local authorities tried to attract their villages by creating industrial zones with job opportunities. Such efforts were not successful as a rule because it was not jobs in general that were missing in the countryside, but rather attractive and well-paid jobs as well as rich cultural and social life (Vaishar, Pavlů 2018). Haarsten and Venhorst (2010) suggest the application of smart aging and declining when rural settlements are not prospective, which consists in changing the quantitative approach to the qualitative one.

What will happen with the part of very small municipalities that will depopulate? They are most likely to change for settlements of the second housing. The future demographic and social development including its consequences for the housing stock and the landscape of very small villages is a task for a follow-up investigation. The abandonment of villages is often connected with the need for the conservation of the landscape and historical heritage (Filipe, Mascarenhas 2011). Of course, villages that are not able to offer good prospects would perish anyhow, even when they are parts of larger units. However, in such a case the care for the territory and for the remaining population would be ensured by the respective central place.

Conclusions

In general, some published resources inform that a more significant long-term population decrease is recorded in municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants (Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic 2016). However, it is important to mention, that the decreasing population in these communes is caused by the decreasing number of municipalities with fewer than 200 inhabitants. This is not due to their disappearance or amalgamation with other municipalities, but rather due to an increase in the number of inhabitants in some of them, which results in their shifting to the category of municipalities with more than 200 inhabitants. There are about 300 of 1,700 very small municipalities below 200 inhabitants, which have become municipalities with more than 200 inhabitants since 2001. In fact, 70% of very small municipalities have recorded population growth since 2001 and only 30% of them have shown a population decline. The same rate of the population growth and decline is in the other municipalities with more than 200 inhabitants in the Czech Republic.

The smallest municipalities with fewer than 50 residents exhibit the highest population growth of more than 50% (in 20% of cases); however, a similar percentage of these municipalities show a population decline. The highest population decline is in the municipalities with more than 50 and fewer than 100 residents. The fact can be based on a simple statistical rule that whenever there is a very small population number, each change can signal a big difference – negative or positive.

In general, very small villages with the highest population growth since 2001 are situated mainly in the vicinity of larger cities, the highest concentration of them being around the capital of Prague. Another area with the highest population growth of very small municipalities can be found on the border with Germany. Very small municipalities with the highest population decline are located mainly in peripheral areas at regional borders. The most significant of these are the borders of the Vysočina Region with the greatest concentration of very small villages.

As to population aging in very small municipalities, these communes, especially the smallest ones with the population fewer than 50, have a

significantly higher aging index than the other municipalities with more than 200 inhabitants in the Czech Republic, hence they are endangered by extinction from this point of view.

To sum up, the general idea about depopulation proves to be a myth. Very small municipalities are highly diversified. It is worth paying attention especially to small municipalities in peripheral regions in western Moravia and southern Bohemia. Otherwise, a big part of the supporting funds would be spent unnecessarily for very small municipalities which are healthy and capable of development.

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