

QUALITY OF LIFE AND ATTRACTIVENESS OF SMALL TOWNS: A COMPARISON OF FRANCE AND POLAND

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ABSTRACT: Nowadays the issue of the quality of life tends to be more and more important for the attractiveness of spaces in the context of increasing commuting and social demand for a good living environment. Small towns are often seen as places where “the living is easy” and social ties are dense. They are therefore a good basis for analysing the quality of life. This is a transversal and complex notion which is not always easy to define. This paper is based on surveys conducted in small Polish and French towns in order to analyse perceptions of the quality of life by both their inhabitants and local leaders, and their potential place in the attractiveness of small towns.

KEY WORDS: small towns, quality of life, attractiveness of towns, Poland, France

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Introduction

In the context of a global economic crisis, place attractiveness is more topical than ever, but at the same time, actors must deal with citizen and scientist pressures about well-being of individuals. In this context of political and social demand for a better quality of life, linked with increasing impacts of sustainable development criteria, small towns seem to have an opportunity to take part in the competition between spaces, in promoting advantages such as good images, a ‘natural’ environment, better property prices, social solidarity, inter-acquaintance, etc. The issue of mobility is also important due to more extended commuting distances that can become a constraint or an opportunity for small

towns, depending on their location relative to bigger urban centres.

The quality of life has various aspects, such as the urban environment, social amenities, or commercial and service facilities from an objective point of view, but also the demand of inhabitants, especially newcomers, for standard and ‘urban’ facilities, and discourses and marketing. In fact, local stakeholders often use different positive aspects (good facilities and services, urban dynamism on the one hand; friendliness on the other) to promote their territory, leading to commonplace pictures (“a city where the living is easy”). Negative sides are minimised.

The question of the quality of life in Poland and France differs due to different levels of economic development and the quality of infrastructure and

building, together with differences in the functioning of services. However, it faces quite similar changes (like the role of the European policy for the development of a polycentric network and the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy focusing on competitiveness objectives), and for that reason a comparative approach seems to be interesting. The impact of issues like decentralisation, privatisation and liberalisation, but also the reform of public services (and then the role of the first levels of the urban hierarchy in their polarising influence) is therefore interesting to observe.

In this paper, the authors focus on subjective aspects and perceptions of the quality of life and attractiveness of small towns by their inhabitants and local actors. The same methodology based on common fieldwork is used to 'compare' small towns in Poland and France¹. The authors' objective is not to determine whether the quality of life is better in French or Polish small towns, but to identify criteria and components of the quality of life which can differ or be similar depending on local contexts.

Place attractiveness and quality of life issues

As pointed by Niedomysl (2010: 97), "The attractiveness of places is currently gaining a high policy salience in policymakers' efforts to draw mobile capital". In fact, many studies, either empirical or theoretical, have been conducted in order to estimate or evaluate place attractiveness. There is a frequent confusion between attractiveness and competitiveness as many researches are made from economic perspectives. The focus is often on production factors and space opportunities in order to attract firms, investors or qualified workforce. Studies on "creative cities" have shown the importance of space amenities and infrastructures in order to attract well-educated active people, the so-called "creative class" (Florida 2002). Urban performance currently depends not only on a city's endowment with hard infrastructure ('physical capital'), but also on the availabili-

ty and quality of knowledge communication and social infrastructure ('human and social capital').

In this changing context, with more commuting and demanding households and the appearance of sustainable development issues, the criteria of the quality of life, well-being and well-living are increasingly often used by stakeholders as attractiveness factors. It is important to differentiate between these notions. Well-being and well-living are linked with individual and personal aspects of life through elements of conditions and levels of living (material and objective criteria) combined with value systems of needs, demands and priorities of individuals and families. The notion of the quality of life is directly linked with material and objective patterns of the space environment even if it integrates a subjective dimension due to inhabitants' representations (Fleuret 2006, Rogerson 1999). "Indeed, if the quality of life is geographically distributed, it is also socially differentiated" (Borsdorf 1999: 83). The quality of life therefore refers to conditions of living depending on space quality and opportunities for the well-being of inhabitants. Public actors assign an increasing importance to the qualitative dimension of spaces. A space is not only considered in terms of functional opportunities, but also as a potential for well-being and well-living. It is questioned through its capacity to answer the needs and demands of inhabitants with high quality surroundings (functionality, social links, emotional links, etc.), suitable for a person and a family (well-being) as well as collective blossoming (togetherness).

Many indicators have been developed in order to classify and rank cities according to those new and more combined criteria, but also to evaluate implemented policies (McCann 2004). The role of sustainable development agendas and the implementation of European Union policies are important in the construction of the criteria and indicators (Musson 2010). Notions or labels are created to qualify those new dimensions of attractiveness, such as 'smart cities', 'green cities', 'quality cities', or 'slow cities', depending on social, environmental or technical aspects. They can

¹ Fieldwork conducted with the support of the affiliated Universities and of the Polonium PHC Programme (France/Poland).

² The authors' translation of "En effet, si la qualité de vie est géographiquement distribuée, elle est aussi socialement différenciée".

be applied to large cities, but some also to small towns which tend to take part in the competition between spaces and cities.

Research area

In order to analyse interrelations between attractiveness and the quality of life, small towns of two provinces, Auvergne and Małopolska, are investigated in the paper. The provinces appear similar due to their location and accessibility in their respective national settlement networks and type of the natural environment, but also due to the settlement structure.

A very important issue is the definition of cities in Poland and France. In the Polish case,

a town (*miasto*) is a settlement that has city rights. Nowadays a village can become a city/be given city rights when its population number is around 3,000 (at least 2,000), when it has non-agricultural functions and urban infrastructure, but there are no strict rules to follow and the decision on city rights is given individually by the state government/ministry. Inhabitants of towns are generally familiar with the official status of their own settlement. In France, there are no city rights and a town (officially called ‘urban unit’) is every settlement with more than 2,000 inhabitants (the statistical limit of rural and urban spaces). Since the mid-1990s, the national statistics board (INSEE) has promoted the notion of ‘urban area’ to take into account peri-urbanisation and commuting processes. An urban area is made of an urban

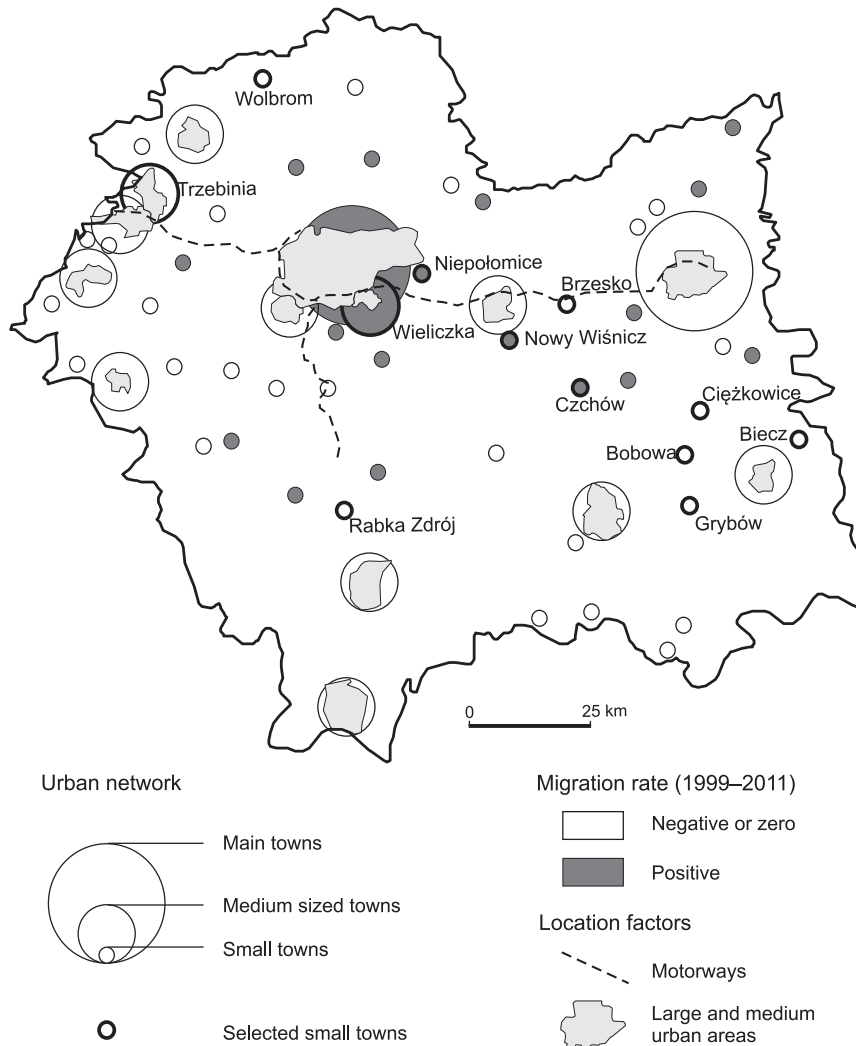


Fig. 1. Małopolska urban settlement structure and migration rates of urban units
 Source: Local Data Bank of the Central Statistical Office (GUS), Poland

unit with employment of at least 1,500 (the core city) surrounded by communes from which people commute (at least 40% of the working population). Urban areas are classified depending on their size. A 'small urban area' consists of 'small' urban units (from 1,500 to 5,000 employees) and the surrounding peri-urban communes.

What is also important is the difference in municipality size. In France, communes are numerous and small compared with those in Poland (and most European countries). An 'urban unit', even a small one, can be composed of sev-

eral communes whereas in Poland communes (*gmina*) are large and embrace urban and rural parts.

For comparative reasons, the top limit of 20,000 inhabitants was chosen (the classical limit between small and medium-sized towns); in France, small towns are urban units from 2,000 to 20,000 inhabitants; in Poland, those with fewer than 20,000 (Kwiatk-Soltys 2011; Konecka-Szydłowska, Hauke 2012; Zuzanska-Zyško 2006).

The urban settlement structure of Małopolska consists of 61 communes among which there

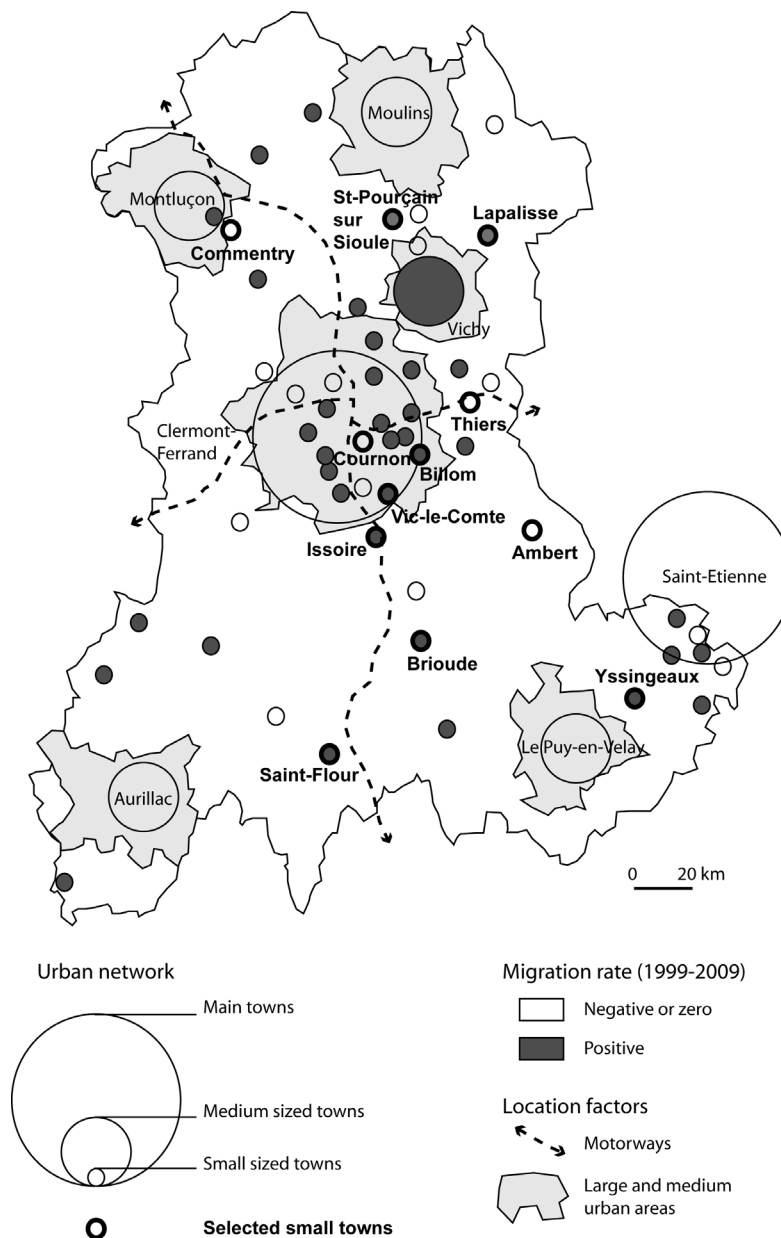


Fig. 2. Auvergne urban settlement structure and migration rates of urban units
Source: INSEE 2012, France

are only two big cities: Cracow, the second city of the country with a population of 759,000, and Tarnów, which is 7 times smaller (113,000). There are 12 medium-sized towns with populations between 20,000 and 84,000 (Nowy Sącz). 47 small towns with a population number smaller than 20,000 clearly dominate in this collection of all cities as they make up 77% of the total figure (Kwiatk-Soltys 2004). The size structure of the province is adequate to the country network.

The urban network of Auvergne is dominated by the Clermont-Ferrand urban area (450,000), followed by a network of five medium-sized urban areas with 60,000 to 80,000 inhabitants (Vichy, Montluçon, Le Puy-en-Velay, Aurillac and Moulins). There are 50 urban units below 20,000 inhabitants (19 of them are considered to be 'small urban areas', the other ones have fewer than 1,500 employees or are peri-urban and therefore integrated into bigger urban areas). They represent 87% of all cities and 32% of the urban population in Auvergne (89% of urban units and 22% of the urban population in France).

Twelve small towns were chosen in each province (Figs 1 and 2). The choice was not an accidental one, they were chosen because of their geographical location in terms of the influence of a bigger city and communication location. The selected towns are peripheral/ isolated or integrated into an agglomeration system. They differ in size from 2,400 (Czchów in Małopolska) to slightly more than 20,000 nowadays for two Małopolska units which have reached the formal level of medium-sized towns only recently (Wieliczka 20,800 and Trzebinia 20,400). The towns are representative also because of a leading function: those integrated with the agglomeration system of Clermont-Ferrand (Cournon d' Auvergne, Vic-le-Comte) and Cracow (Wieliczka, Niepołomice), those with important industrial functions (Wolbrom/ Thiers, Commentry), those that are important centres for their rural surroundings (Biecz, Bobowa, Czchów / Ambert, Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule), health resorts (Rabka Zdrój), and multi-functional towns (Brzesko/ Issoire, Brioude).

Our hypothesis is that all those mentioned elements can have a significant impact on the quality of life both at the statistical level and in the inhabitants' perception.

Migration attractiveness

Migration inflows and the net migration figure can be treated to some extent as an index of the demographic attractiveness of towns. The towns under study differ a lot in this respect. On the one hand, there are growing towns, especially those placed closer to bigger cities, with very high net in-migration indices: a thirteen years average (1999–2011) for Niepołomice is 17.4‰ and for Wieliczka 9.4‰; while Billom has

Table 1. Population dynamics in selected small towns

Town	Population of urban units 2009 (France) 2012 (Poland)	Average annual rate per thousand 1999–2009 (France); 1999–2011 (Poland)		
		due to natural growth	due to net migration	Total
Cournon Municipality*	19,494	3.0	0.0	3.0
Issoire	14,771	1.0	1.0	2.0
Thiers	13,607	0.0	-12.0	-12.0
Commentry	7,562	-4.0	-2.0	-6.0
Ambert	7,509	-4.0	-1.0	-5.0
Brioude	7,326	-2.0	1.0	t.0
Yssingaux	6,946	1.0	6.0	7.0
Saint-Flour	6,689	-1.0	2.0	1.0
Saint-Pourçain	5,030	-6.0	1.0	-5.0
Vic-le-comte	4,737	4.0	3.0	7.0
Billom	4,637	-9.0	18.0	9.0
Lapalisse	3,162	-13.0	8.0	-5.0
Auvergne	1,343,964	0.0	3.0	3.0
Wieliczka	20,988	0.3	9.4	9.7
Trzebinia	20,309	-1.9	-1.9	-3.8
Brzesko	17,193	3.1	-5.7	-2.5
Rabka-Zdrój	13,212	-0.1	-0.8	-0.9
Niepołomice	10,482	2.0	17.4	19.4
Wolbrom	8,926	-0.9	-3.3	-4.2
Grybów	6,175	0.6	-5.9	-5.3
Biecz	4,704	-1.2	-2.9	-4.1
Bobowa	2,996	7.2	-0.4	6.7
Nowy Wiśnicz	2,768	2.6	2.5	5.1
Ciężkowice	2,480	0.6	0.0	0.6
Czechów	2,364	5.1	2.2	7.3
Małopolska	3,354,077	1.6	0.9	2.5

* Cournon is integrated in the Clermont-Ferrand urban unit.

Source: own compilation based on INSEE 2010 and the Local Data Bank of the Central Statistical Office (GUS), Poland

a 1999–2009 average annual migration rate of 18‰ (Table 1). Those are attractive small towns with a good location for commuting and a developed labour market, which is also characteristic of other regions (Parysek 2008). Local authorities seem to be very active in those towns. On the other hand, there are towns with a net out-migration, such as Grybów, Wolbrom or Brzesko in Poland and Thiers or Commentry in Auvergne. In Małopolska, for the majority of towns the indices are close to zero. With a natural decrease or stagnation of the population, this causes the towns to lose their inhabitants, but it must be stressed that the entire region has rather positive figures (both in terms of migration and natural growth). The data show that for industrial towns like Wolbrom population dynamic is very low (its population decreased by 309 inhabitants between 2000 and 2012). It is interesting to check whether the

local authority is aware of the need to promote the town to new inhabitants. As the process of depopulation of Auvergne towns has been visible since the 1975 census, it seems that the local authorities of small French towns are much more aware of the need for successful promotion.

Elements of attractiveness on towns' web pages: potential choice opportunities

Internet sites are undoubtedly among the most important ways for promotion nowadays. The description of a town, the pictures used, sort of information included, and investment offers reveal the character and activity of the town's local actors. A study of the introductory pages of the

Table 2. Elements of attractiveness – a study of introductory words and location description on official web pages of the towns

Towns	Physical location		Good communication	Investment attractiveness	Good place for living	no specification
	generally	for tourists				
Polish towns	10	9	4	2	2	1
French towns	7	9	8	4	5	1
Total	17	18	12	6	7	2
Niepołomice	x	x	x	x	x	
Wieliczka	x	x	x	x	x	
Rabka Zdrój	x	x	x			
Biecz	x	x				
Bobowa	x	x				
Ciężkowice	x	x				
Grybów	x	x				
Nowy Wiśnicz	x	x				
Wolbrom	x	x				
Czchów	x					
Trzebinia			x			
Brzesko						x
Thiers	x	x	x	x	x	
Billom	x	x	x		x	
Commentry		x	x	x	x	
Yssingaux	x	x	x		x	
Brioude	x		x	x		
Cournon	x	x	x			
Issoire	x	x	x			
St-Pourçain	x	x			x	
Lapalisse			x	x		
Saint-Flour		x				
Vic-le-Comte		x				
Ambert						x

Source: own compilation based on official websites of each town

towns shows a variety of characteristics used for their promotion; commonly used is the attractiveness of the natural/ physical location (Table 2).

It is worth mentioning that for only two investigated Malopolska towns the local authors stress that they are good places for living; what's more, those are the only towns with a high net in-migration index. For French towns the need to emphasise good living standards in a town seems to be more obvious.

Inhabitants' perception of chosen elements of the quality of life and attractiveness

The survey was conducted in small towns in France and Poland in 2012. The same questionnaire was used and administered to pupils (data were collected on line in France and through schools in Poland). This method was chosen in order to address families and potential recent inhabitants. The work on the questions used in the questionnaire was an interesting one as differences arose at the very beginning. Most similar researches in Poland ask about the equipment/furnishings of flats/houses, such as the presence of e.g. a bathroom, central heating, the Internet, etc., while in France such questions would not be of any use in differentiating the respondents.

Table 3. Structure of respondents (%)

	Small Auvergne towns	Small Malopolska towns
Sex: women	76.6	71.1
men	23.4	28.9
Age: under 18	-	7.4
18-35	34.4	31.5
36-64	62.5	57.7
65 and more	3.1	3.4
Socio-economic status		
pupil/student	20.3	14.7
employed	48.4	53.2
own business	12.5	10.3
farmer	1.6	3.9
pensioner/retired	3.1	6.4
unemployed	14.1	11.5

Source: authors' survey results

The structure of our respondents (Table 3) shows the dominance of women and employed people of the working age. This is interesting because the questionnaires were given to families and not addressed specifically to women. It seems that quality-of-life issues are more interesting to women (or do not interest men!).

Niedomysl (2010) shows how a life-course perspective needs to be integrated in quality-of-life analyses since it is not only migrants' needs, demands and preferences that depend upon their current situation; their resources and constraints are also likely to correlate with their life-course. The time of residence in a town can strongly influ-

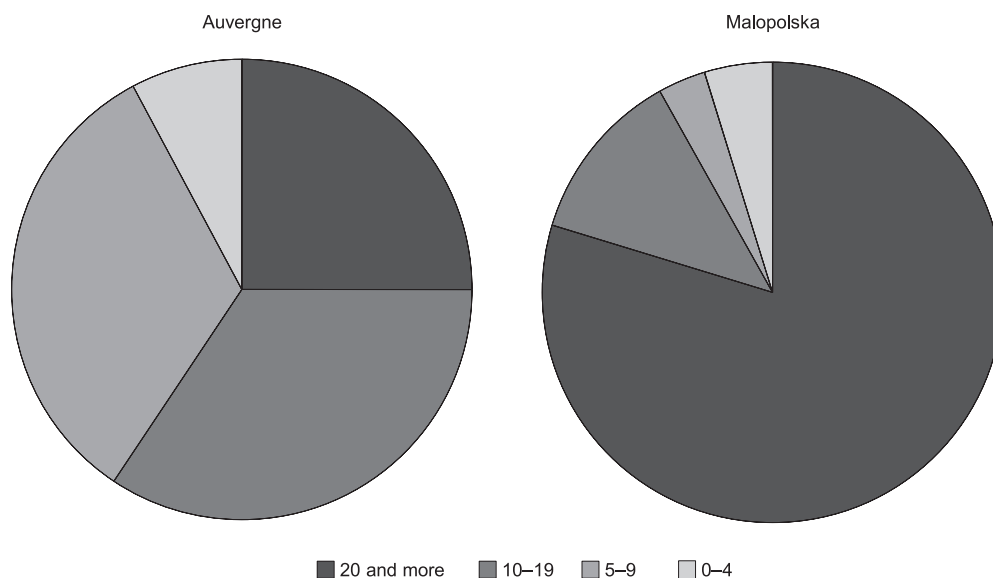


Fig. 3. Time of residence (years)
Source: authors' survey results

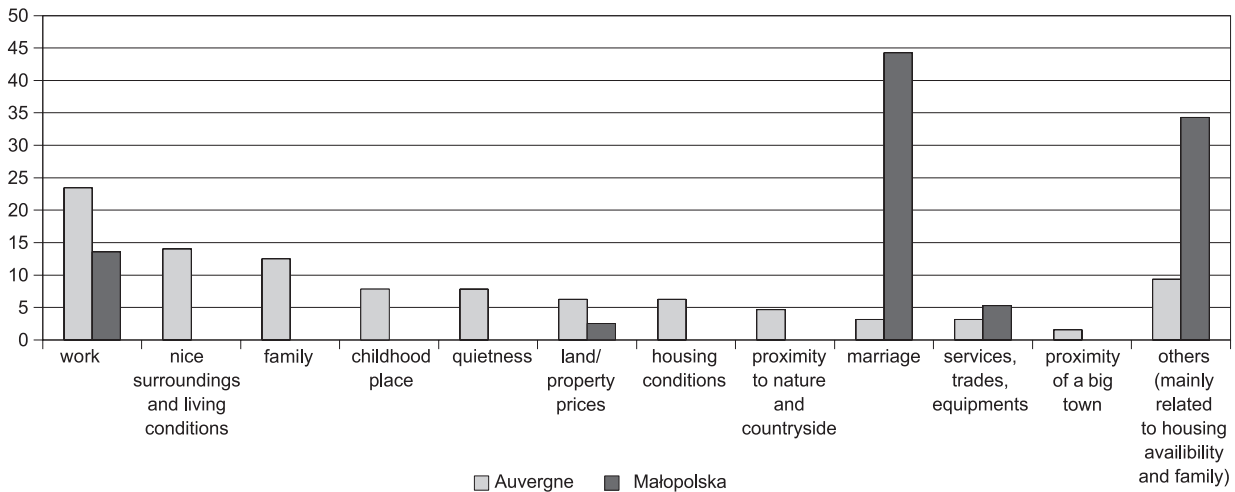


Fig. 4. Reasons for settling in the town
Source: authors' survey results

ence the answers. In the case of French towns, the structure of respondents is much more balanced, while in Polish cases most residents have lived in their towns from birth, or longer than 20 years (Fig. 3). The question of residential mobility and the differences are an important issue. It can be assumed that the perception of newcomers can be different, especially if they move from rural areas to a town (the Polish case) where service accessibility or infrastructure is not so well developed.

Closely linked with the time of residence are reasons for settlement. While for French towns work, nice surroundings and good living conditions are among the most important, for Polish towns it is still clearly "marriage" and other family reasons associated with housing (Fig. 4).

When analysing the perception of a town, it can be stated that inhabitants of the biggest among the small towns in both countries are satisfied with their place of residence, while for smaller ones the answer "can be improved" was the most common (Fig. 5).

Accessibility to services is an important issue. The perception of inhabitants reflects the level of the development of infrastructure in their towns. The percentage of satisfied and rather satisfied ones reaches 95% in the case of pharmacies in France and 91% in the case of food trade in Poland (Table 4). In turn, people are dissatisfied with medical services (34% reveals what is an unsolved problem in Poland) and the activity of cultural centres in French towns (40%). Many Polish small towns face very basic infrastructural problems, like building a sewage system, road

infrastructure, parking places, pavements etc., while cultural development is somehow placed behind. Closing cinemas in small Polish towns can be an example here.

Satisfaction with the quality of life differs a lot. In answering this question the respondents could choose among: excellent, good, reasonable and bad. Readily visible were the few "excellent" answers in Polish cases while in France they accounted for almost 60% of the total, and for towns

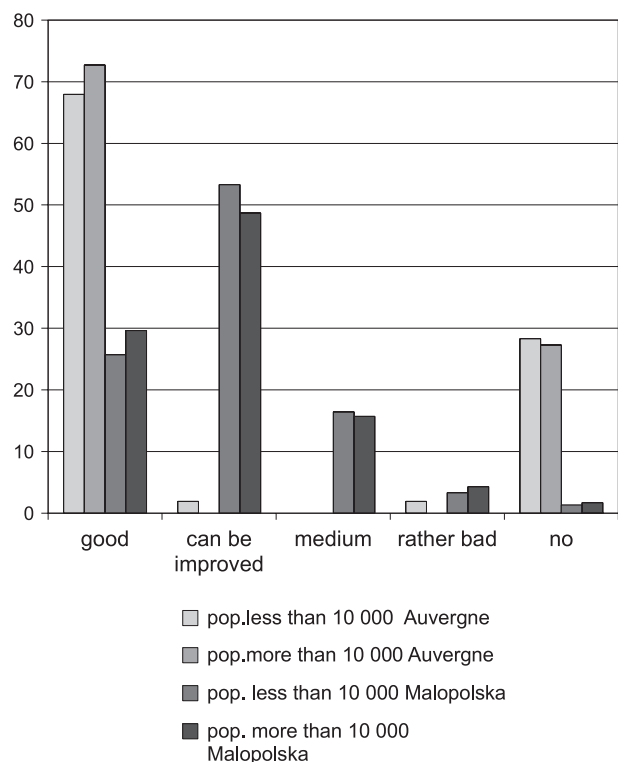


Fig. 5. Image of the towns of residence
Source: authors' survey results

Table 4. Accessibility of services

Services:	good and rather good		bad and rather bad		no opinion		don't use / not available	
	France	Poland	France	Poland	France	Poland	France	Poland
food trade	85	91	9	2	4	1	2	0
public transport	45	68	29	17	7	3	18	6
medical services	65	54	33	34	0	4	2	2
pharmacy	95	89	2	3	2	0	2	0
primary school	93	84	5	5	0	2	2	3
secondary school	82	73	15	10	4	5	0	6
welfare	62	41	13	17	22	11	4	24
cultural centre	53	49	40	17	7	12	0	14
public administration	80	51	16	22	4	13	0	4

Source: authors' survey results

integrated in metropolitan areas even 100% respondents found their quality of life excellent (Fig. 6). It turned out that the bigger the small town, the higher the satisfaction with the quality of life. In Polish towns the answers "good" and "reasonable" were the most common. Fewer than

10% of the respondents were not satisfied with their living standards in both Polish and French small towns.

Among the components of the quality of life, the importance of "place" and "personal aspects" should be mentioned (Table 5). While for Polish inhabitants personal aspects (related to well-being) such as children, personal life and family seem to be the most important, for the French it is the place with its quietness, nice surroundings, shops and services. It can be correlated with residential mobility and the fact that the place is much more a chosen one.

The respondents differed in their satisfaction with the welfare level. It is interesting to note that the differences could be seen in the extremes (Table 6). While no respondent in France chose the "very bad" situation, 4% gave this answer in Poland, but surprisingly there were also more people here who could afford everything they wanted.

Table 5. The importance of "place" and "personal aspects"

Importance level	France	Poland
I	Place	Personal aspects
	quietness	children
	natural surroundings	personal life
	nice surroundings	friends
	shops and services	mental health
	no pollution	health
		spending of leisure time
		wealth level
		amount of leisure time
II	Personal aspects	Place
	well-being	housing
	family life and children	place of settlement
		town's cleanliness
III	Social aspects	Social aspects
	sense of security	education
	neighbours	social position
	human-size town	neighbours
	proximity to bigger town	sense of security
IV	Job	Job
	proximity to work	job

Source: authors' survey results

Table 6. Wealth level

Wealth level	France %	Poland %
Money is not enough even for the food products	0.0	4.0
Money is enough but only for the food products	12.7	8.3
We have to save money for major purchases	43.2	43.8
We have to save money but we can afford basically everything	42.3	34.6
We can afford everything we want	2.8	9.2

Source: authors' survey results

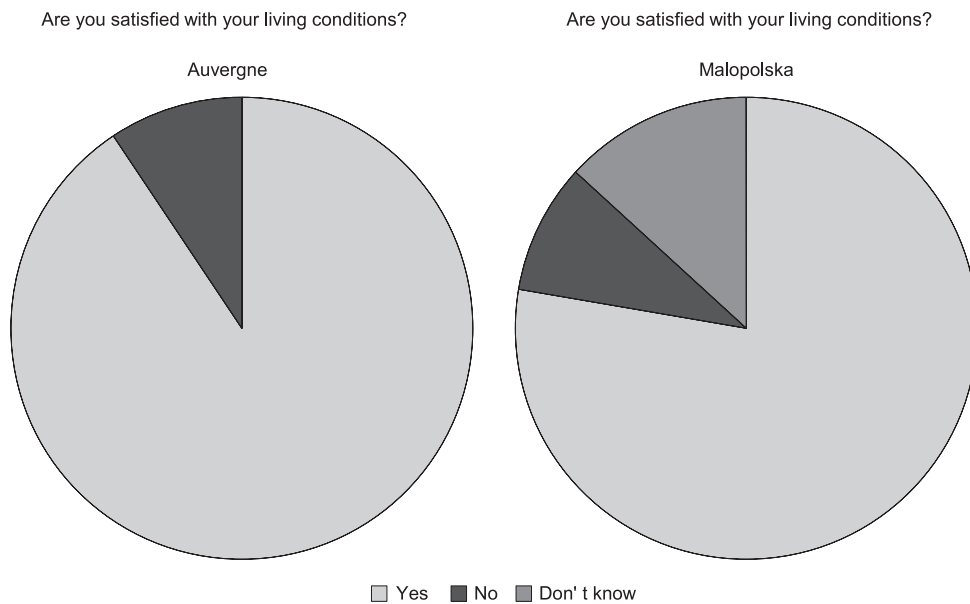
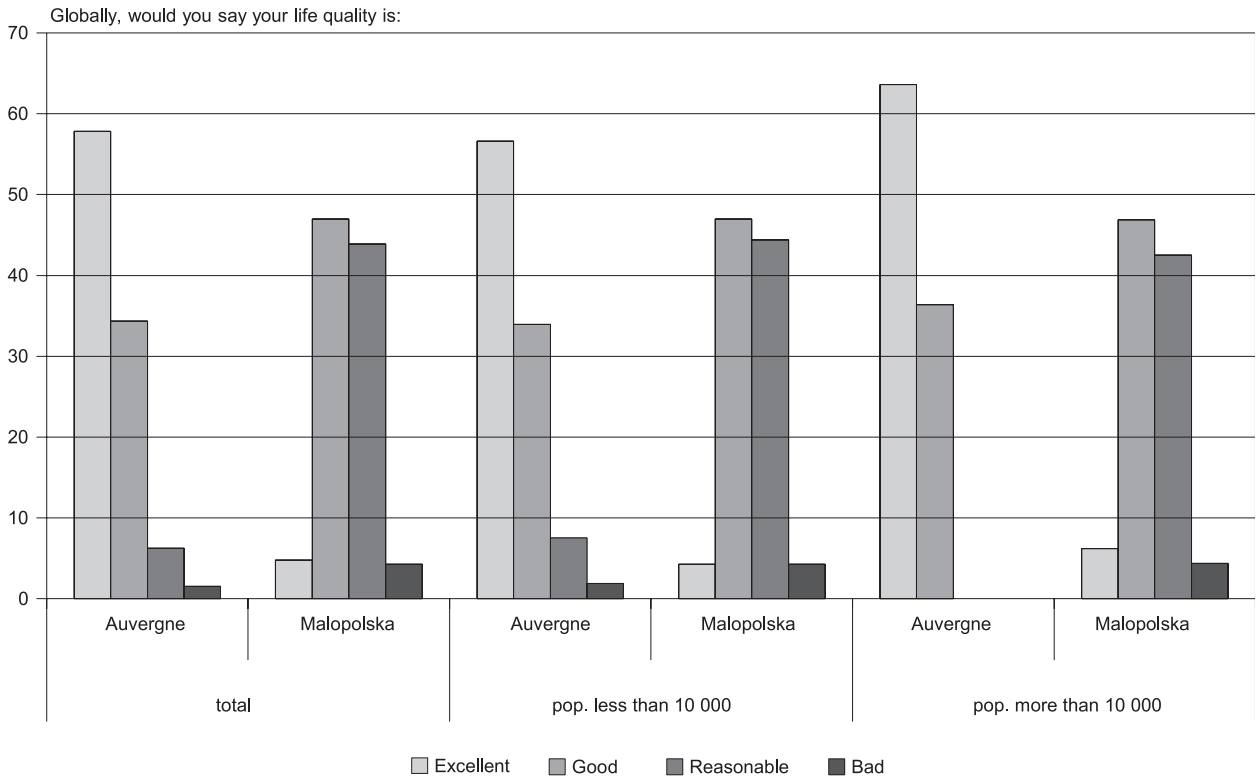


Fig. 6. Satisfaction with the quality of life and living standards
Source: authors' survey results

Conclusions

The context of Polish and French towns is different. Their inhabitants' perceptions of the quality of life differ, but in both cases a combination of personal and collective aspects are stressed. The biggest differences can be seen in the attitude

of the local authority towards inhabitants. Polish local leaders do not always see the need to attract potential new inhabitants to the town, while in French towns it seems to be obvious, as residential-based development is seen as an alternative to productive development (or at least the need to combine them). In declining industrial small

towns where it is difficult to attract firms in times of a crisis, or in integrated small towns where commuting families are a potential for local services, residential attractiveness is a priority. For this reason, the quality of life is already a tool for local actors in France, but is still not treated as a clear factor in the promotion of small towns in Poland.

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