

## SMALL TOWNS IN BORDERLAND REGIONS OF THE BELARUS REPUBLIC

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**Abstract.** Towns constitute the urban heritage of borderland regions. This heritage has been shaped in a context shared with Western and Central European traditions. It has also been written into the nature of Belarusian borderland regions: the wilderness of Grodzienszczyzna, Polesie – the Brzesc area, the azure lakes of Witebszczyzna, the forests and rivers of Homelszczyzna and Mohylowszczyzna. The historical progress of small towns has endowed them with expressive examples of architectural monuments – railway stations and church buildings (Mir, Rozany, Nieswiz) – giving them their own image – an urban environment constructed over centuries. Many of those towns are situated along the most important communication lines of trans-European importance, connecting countries of the EU (European Union) and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) (Dobrusz, Kostiukowici, Klimowici, Grodek, Wierchniedwinsk, Oszmiany, Szczucin, Skidel, Zabinka). The most important task facing today's urban planners and architects is the preservation and, in many cases, reconstruction of the image of small borderland towns. Their uniqueness serves not only as a criterion of the quality of the urban environment, but also as an index of competitiveness.

**Key words:** urban planning, small towns, trans-border regions of Belarus

### STATEMENT ONE

Small towns are of special importance to the process of sustainable spatial development of borderland regions. The special character of trans-border towns inheres in two facts: on the one hand, they are independent entities operating on different sides of the border and forming part of different countries; on the other hand, together with adjacent areas, they carry out functions related to mutual responsibility and cooperation between both sides of the border.

### Key problems

The most important problems hindering mutual development and requiring joint actions and solutions include:

- lack of joint procedures and regulations on the use of towns and borderland regions that could guarantee their sustainable, safe, mutually beneficial and effective functioning;
- lack of a joint mechanism for the management, control and monitoring of urban activities in the mutual interest zones, as well as a lack of common accountability (possible actions and limitations, common system of standards and indicators, etc.);
- low level of tourist infrastructure and a lack of coordination of the mutually beneficial use of the tourist and recreation-related potential of small borderland towns;
- lack of a joint programme for the mutually beneficial use of the investment potential of borderland towns based on partnership, coordination, and specialisation principles.

### **Opportunities**

The long history of the development of small borderland towns shows that they have managed to maintain shared traditions, spiritual culture, and mutual socio-economic impact, which have largely been lost in large borderland cities due to their involvement in general globalisation processes.

Many small towns are situated on major transport routes of trans-European and international importance, which link EU and CIS countries (Dorbusz, Kostiukowici, Klimowici, Grodek, Wierchniedwinsk, Oszmiany, Szczucin, Skidel, Zabinka). Borderland settlements, in particular those located immediately on the border, are an image of the whole of Belarus. Therefore, it is highly important to develop access roads to these towns and to preserve the architecture of their railway stations, public and church buildings, as well as other architectural facilities marking the national architectural style and the distinctive image of Belarusian towns.

Most small borderland towns feature a rather healthy living environment. The relatively good ecological conditions of such towns help maintain and balance the natural complex of the entire borderland region.

Many small borderland towns are located directly in areas with unique natural characteristics. Rivers, lakes, large woods next to towns and a scenic landscape have formed a basis for creating recreational centres of regional or national importance.

Most such small borderland towns boast a long history: Disna (1080), Miadel (11<sup>th</sup> century), Braslav (1068), Mstislavl (1135), Bragin (1147), Kamienic (1287), Werzhniodvinsk (1386), David-Grodek (12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century). Despite numerous wars and devastation, many precious architectural and urban monuments from different historical periods have been preserved. There exists a potential for developing the type of tourism which has become quite popular in Europe, that is cultural, ethnic, ecological, agricultural tourism and individual

trips. Experts in history and former emigrants might be drawn by historic mansions and garden or park complexes preserved around small towns.

One of the most important elements of the structure of trans-border regions is the rather tight network of border crossing points located in very small towns or in their immediate vicinity. In relation to the above, the significance of such towns as special facilities increases as, on the one hand, they neutralise negative international relations and, on the other hand, they encourage international bonds that are beneficial to the country.

A typical phenomenon for small towns in the trans-border zone is the presence of 'parallel' towns, i.e., the parallel location of linked towns on both sides of the border in adjacent zones (10-15 km): Raduń-Ejszyszkies, Woronowo-Szalczinikaj, Lyntupy-Szwianczionis, Liozno-Rudnia, Kostiukowiczi-Suraż, Dobrusz-Złynki, Malorita-Zabłocie. In the past, these towns used to be bound by close exchange ties and it seems that favourable conditions could stimulate their mutual development.

#### **The most important objectives**

The analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats connected with the development of small towns in borderland zones allows one to set the most important objectives:

- establishment of conditions for achieving a sustainable situation in the social, ecological and economic aspects (ecological uniformity, economic vitality, social welfare) in small towns located in trans-border regions of Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia;
- definition of a common strategy for joint, mutually beneficial development of small borderland towns in the conditions of the new geo-political and economic reality; preparation of initiatives for the purpose of reviving and developing these towns;
- effective and mutually beneficial use of the natural, historical and cultural potential of small towns;
- prevention of possible negative effects and the neutralisation thereof;
- improvement of local relations in the process of inter-regional trans-border information and knowledge exchange, as well as cooperation and task coordination in national and regional planning.

#### **STATEMENT TWO**

Small towns constitute a special phenomenon in the material culture of the Belarusian nation.

A small town is a specific urban layout that is not always understandable even to experts. This article contains several views on the unique phenomenon referred to as a 'small town'.

### **View 1. Town and time**

Small towns in Belarus preserve elements of urban structure and buildings from the richest periods in the country's history. Towns and settlements provide us with information from the Gothic period (11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> c.), the Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> c.), and Baroque culture (late 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> c.).

Depending on the importance of the preserved values, small towns are classified into several categories reflecting the historical cultural and style periods.

The urban heritage in Belarus has been shaped in a common context with the traditions of the Western-European and Central-European culture. It has also been influenced by achievements of Russian architecture, but has preserved its individual distinctive features.

### **View 2. Town and nature**

Towns were usually established and developed on major trade routes and in the close vicinity of natural resources. Nature in Belarus is outstandingly varied and beautiful. Its landmarks include Grodzienszczyzna, Polesie – near Brzesc – a region of primeval forests, Witebszczyzna – the blue lake district, and Homelszczyzna and Mohylowszczyzna – a land of forests and rivers.

Despite periods of large-scale active rebuilding and reconstructing, small towns have preserved their functional and visual urban unity, featuring elements of natural complexes. The landscape has had an impact on the semantics of the urban environment. Together with historic monuments, it has formed the basis for naming streets and squares, which today should still be an element determining each town's distinctiveness.

### **View 3. Town and architecture**

History has left small towns with expressive examples of architectural monuments – beginning with railway station complexes (Mir, Rozany, Nieswiz), through church buildings, to apartment blocks.

The construction of five-storey apartment blocks in some small towns in 1960-1970, the search for a new 'capital' scale, and generation of large open spaces of administrative squares led to the distortion of the form of the small towns and the loss of the human-scale urban environment. Modern architecture should enter small towns, but it must do so mildly, finding its place within the historical context of the urban environment, enriching it with new modern shapes.

### **View 4. The Town and its image**

Small towns are guardians of history as reflected in their urban structure (streets and squares), historic complexes, buildings, and even individual preserved elements, as well as traditional methods of spatial management. It is this unique urban environment, created throughout the centuries using architectural

and urban resources and linked with the natural environment that determines the town's memorable image.

The most important task for urban planners and architects these days is to preserve and, in some cases restore, the image of each small town. The town's unique character does not only serve as a touchstone of the quality of the urban environment, but also as an indicator of the town's competitiveness.

#### MAŁE MIASTA W REGIONACH PRZYGRANICZNYCH REPUBLIKI BIAŁORUSI

**Streszczenie.** Małe miasta w regionach przygranicznych – są bogatym dziedzictwem urbanistycznym tego regionu, które zostało ukształtowane we wspólnym kontekście z tradycjami kultury Europy Zachodniej i Środkowej oraz wpisane w przyrodę Białorusi. Rozwój historyczny pozostawił w małych miastach pełne wyrazu przykłady zabytków architektury – zespołów dworcowych i obiektów sakralnych. Wiele miast posiadających własny wizerunek – środowisko miejskie tworzone na przestrzeni wieków leży na najważniejszych ciągach komunikacyjnych o znaczeniu transeuropejskim łączących kraje UE i WNP. Najważniejszym zadaniem dla urbanistów i architektów jest dzisiaj zachowanie, a w niektórych przypadkach odtwarzanie wizerunku każdego małego miasta regionów przygranicznych. Niepowtarzalność ta służy nie tylko jako kryterium jakości środowiska miejskiego, ale również jako wskaźnik konkurencyjności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** urbanistyka, małe miasta, regiony transgraniczne Białorusi