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Small towns attractiveness for living, working and doing business. Case study the Czech Republic

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Introduction, aim and methodology

During the last years small towns problem has become not only in the Czech Republic a topic of many discussions where not only academics (sociologists, urban planners, geographers and economists), but also politicians take part in. The aim of this paper is to introduce international professional community with a sum up of results of the extensive empirical research of inhabitants of the Czech Republic which took place in a period 2007 – 2010 within the project “Competitiveness of small towns in the Czech Republic”, which is financed from the resources of the Ministry of regional development of the Czech Republic.

The paper results from a representative questionnaire investigation of the Czech Republic inhabitants, which took place in a year 2007, and where 1889 people were inquired.

Small town

What is a term “small town” all about? It is quite difficult to define the term. Usually it is defined as a settlement which is a transformation between a rural and an urban type of the settlement. The European conference about small rural towns which was organized in a year 2005 in Austrian Retz showed that a size determination of the small towns is different in particular European Union countries. The conference participants agreed only on an upper size limit of the small towns – 20 thousand inhabitants. E.g. Agnieszka Kwiatek-Soltys states that “a small town is a seat of the urban type with less than 20 thousand inhabitants; it forms a very heterogeneous set from a point of view of the size as well as from a point of view of demographic development and functions they hold in the settlement system”. Other precise

characteristics of the small towns can be minimum population density (70 inhabitants/ha) or maximum 15 % of economically active inhabitants in agriculture.

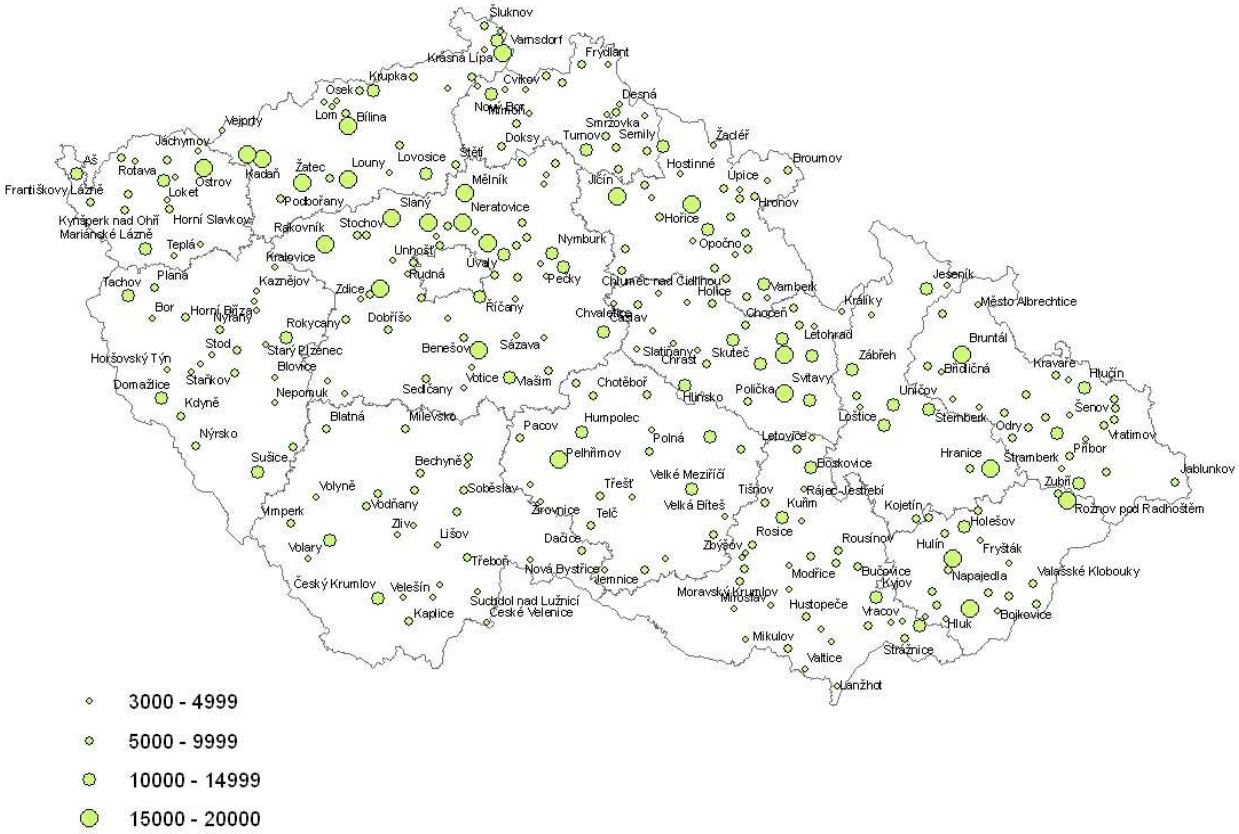
In the Czech Republic the small towns are considered the settlements with 3 – 20 thousand inhabitants. In 2010 there were 336 small towns in the Czech Republic with approximately 2,4 million inhabitants (23,2 % of inhabitants).

Table 1: Size categories of the small towns in the Czech Republic

Size category	Number of towns
3 000 – 4 999	127
5 000 – 9 999	13
10 000 – 14 999	46
15 000 – 20 000	24

Source: Czech Statistical Office, Prague 2010

Figure 1: Small towns in the Czech Republic

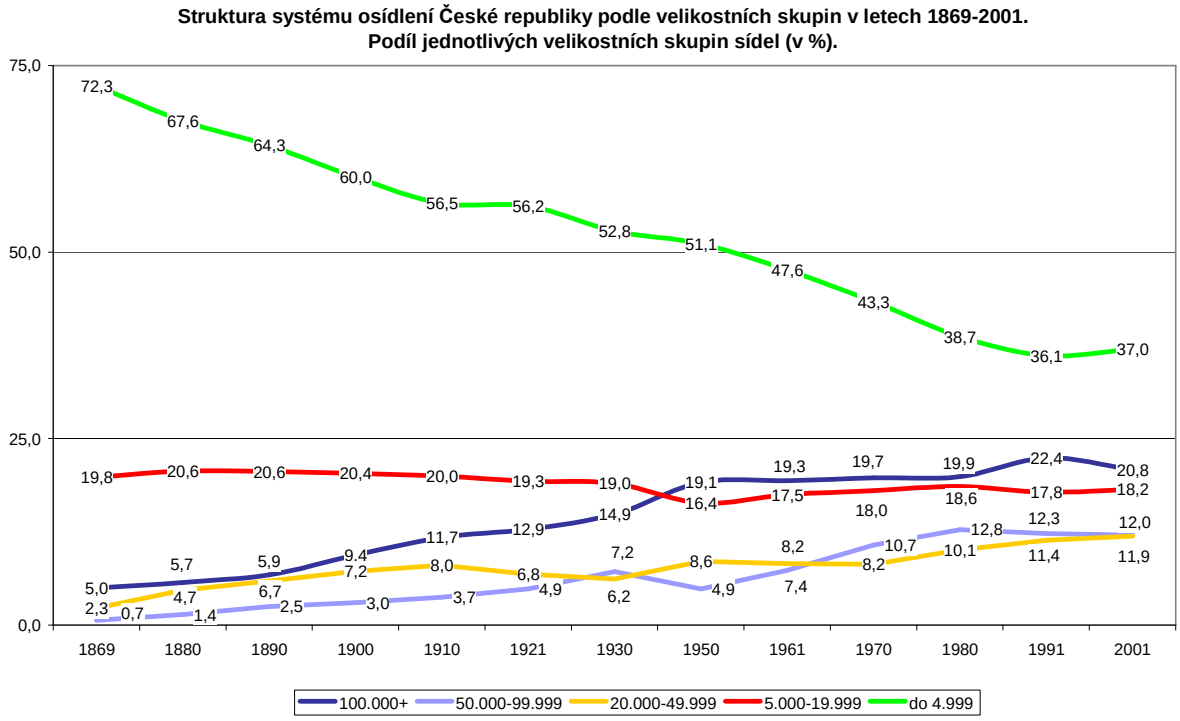


Source: Czech Statistical Office, Prague 2008

Development of the small towns in the Czech Republic from the long-term perspective number of the population development in a period 1869 – 2001

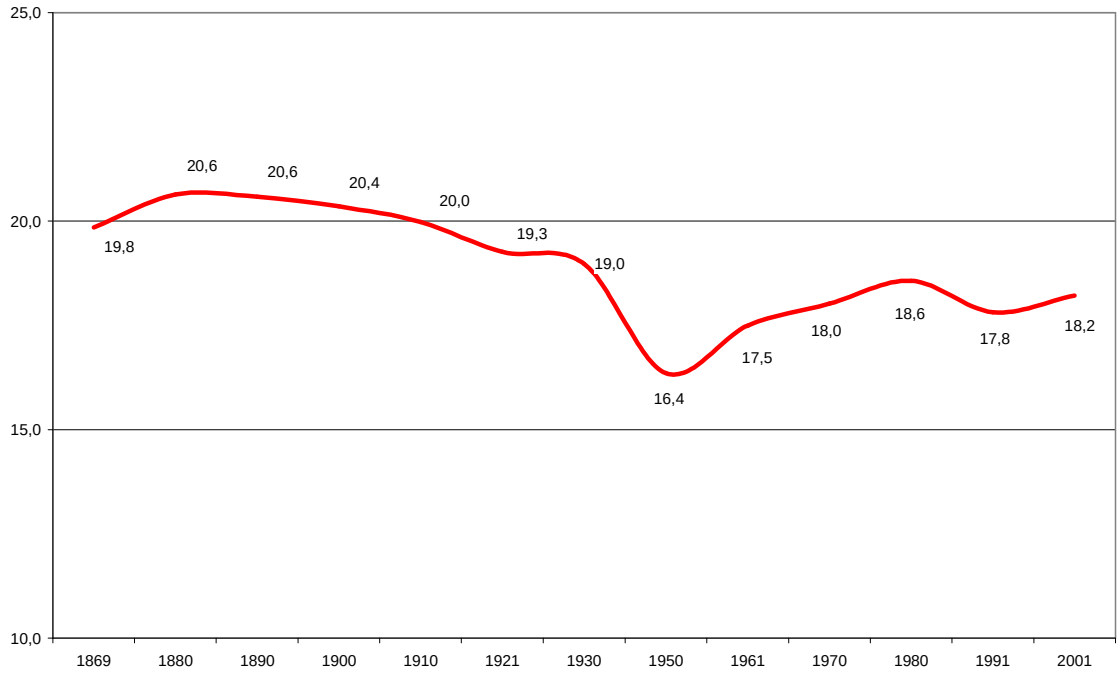
The long-term development of the settlement system of the Czech Republic is characterized by a decrease of the population in rural settlements and in the smallest towns; on the other hand the population in big cities (more than 100 thousands inhabitants) and in middle size towns (20 – 50 thousand inhabitants) has increased. If we have a look at the category of the small towns, it keeps a relatively stable position. A number of inhabitants living in this size category of the settlements have stayed almost constant, so the small towns can be specified as a stability element especially in a case of the rural settlement system.

Figure 2: Structure of the settlement system of the Czech Republic according to the size categories in years 1869 – 2001 (in %).



Source: Historical lexicon of municipalities of the Czech Republic 1869-2005.
Czech Statistical Office, Prague 2006

Figure 3: Development of a share of the small towns in a total number of inhabitants of the Czech Republic in a period 1869 – 2001 (in %)



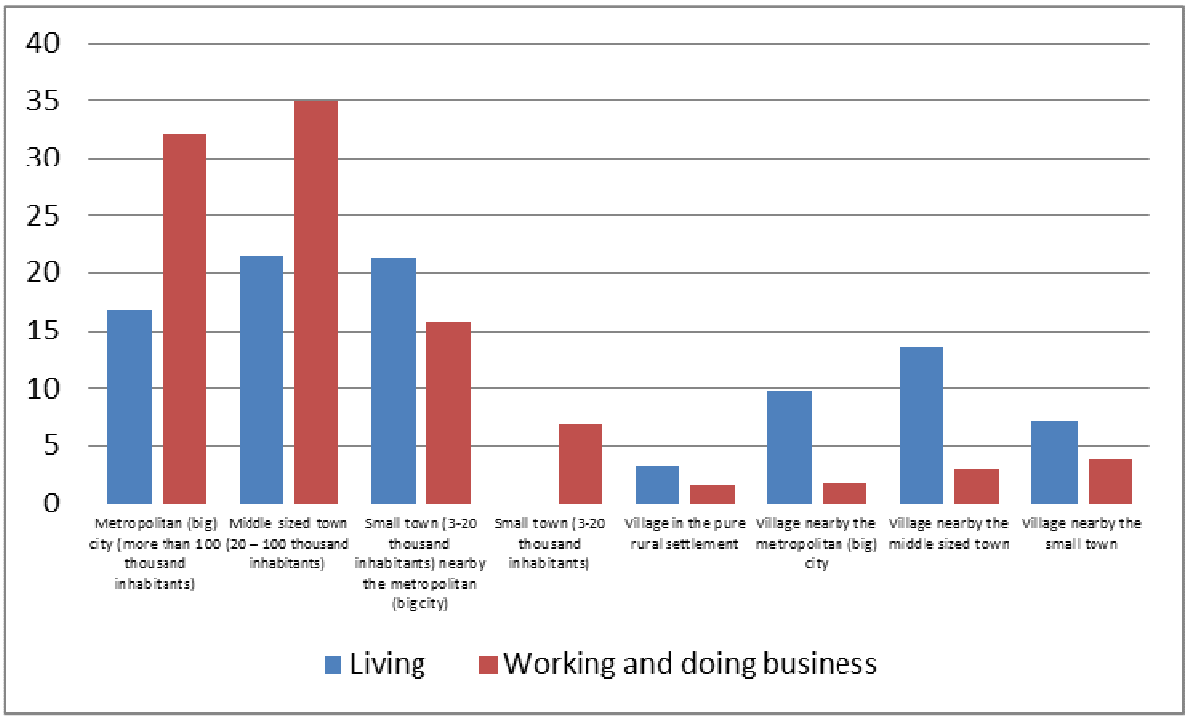
Source: Historical lexicon of municipalities of the Czech Republic 1869-2005. Czech Statistical Office, Prague 2006

Ideal place for living, working and doing business on the basis of a questionnaire investigation of the Czech Republic inhabitants

Ideal place for living

What are the Czech Republic inhabitants´ ideas about the ideal place for living and working? The most preferred places for living (in a case of the interviewees´ free decision possibility) are the settlements of a rural character (villages). That were the answers of more than 1/3 people inquired (33,7 %). At the same time most of them would prefer the village nearby the middle sized town (13,5 %) or the metropolitan (big) city (9,8 %). Only 7,1 % of people inquired mentioned a village nearby the small town as the ideal place for living, and only 3,3 % mentioned the village in the pure rural settlement.

Figure 4: Ideal place for living, working and doing business from the point of view of the Czech Republic inhabitants. Ratio of answers is in %.



Source: Own survey, 2008, n = 1889 people inquired

21,5 % of the inhabitants of the Czech Republic prefers as the ideal place for living the middle sized town (20 – 100 thousand inhabitants) and 16,7 % prefers metropolitan (big) city. The small towns as the ideal places for living are preferred by 28 % of inhabitants of the Czech Republic.

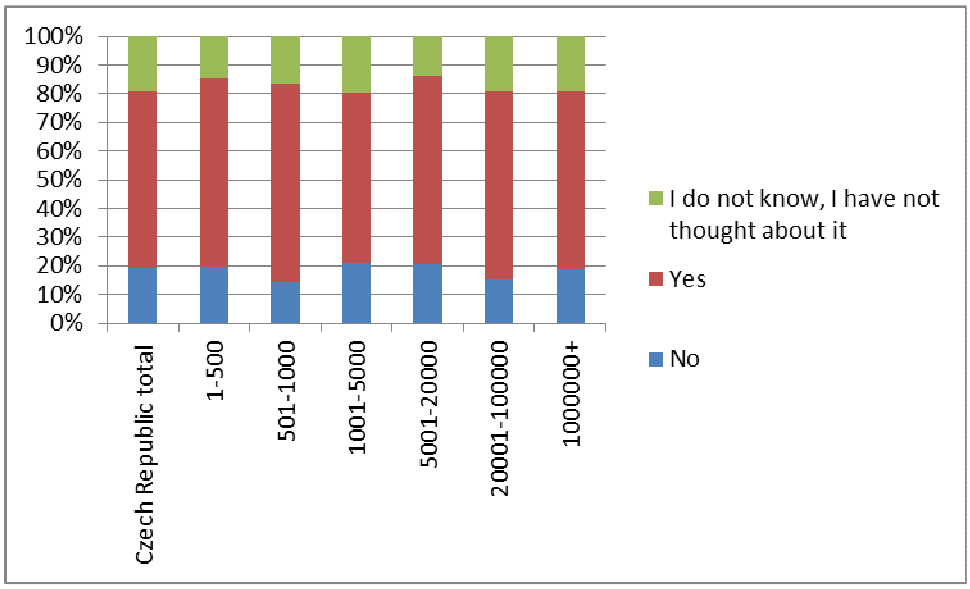
The empirical research destroyed a hypothesis that the people in the case of their free decision possibility would prefer rather metropolitan (big) cities or the middle sized tows and that the small towns will not have the perspective in the future. On the contrary, the research showed that the Czech Republic inhabitants have significantly different ideas about their ideal place for living and that the small places play the significant and doubtless role.

Settlement system stability – do the inhabitants want to stay in the place of the current permanent residence?

The research also showed that almost 2/3 of people inquired – the Czech Republic inhabitants are satisfied with their current permanent residence, so they do not suppose that they would remove to the other place. It was the opinion of 61,7 % of people inquired. Approximately every fifth inquired person thinks that he will not enthrone in his town. Approximately the same ratio of the people inquired stated that they had not thought about such the question or they did not know the answer. The most unsatisfied people were the young people. As it is showed in the figure 5, the size of the place of their current permanent residence does not influence a lot their readiness for migration. It is a proof of not only generally indicated low

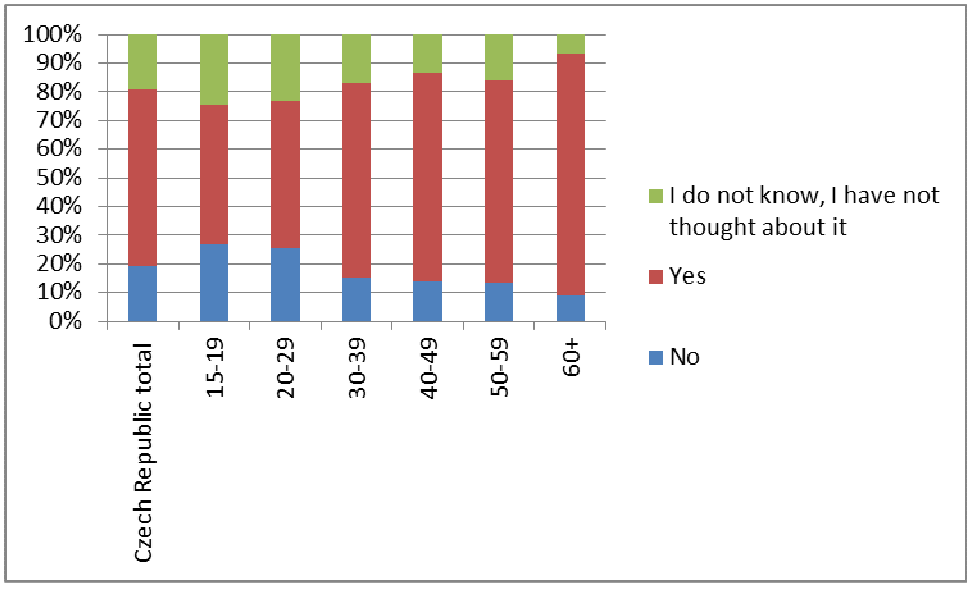
migration measure of the Czech Republic inhabitants, but also a relative stability of the current settlement system.

Figure 5: Answers responses: Would you like to enthrone in the place of your current permanent residence? According to the size of the place of their current permanent residence (in %)



Source: Own survey, 2008, n = 1889 people inquired

Figure 6: Answers responses: Would you like to enthrone in the place of your current permanent residence? According to the inquired persons´ age reached (in %)



Source: Own survey, 2008, n = 1889 people inquired

Ideal place for working and doing business

The results of the empirical research show that almost 2/3 of inhabitants of the Czech Republic have the idea of the ideal place for working and doing business connected with the middle sized town (20 – 100 thousand inhabitants) or the metropolitan (big) city. The small town would prefer "only" 22,6 % of inquired people (mostly the small town nearby the big city).

The middle sized towns and metropolitan (big) towns are preferred mostly by young people, people with higher education and the inhabitants of the middle sized towns and metropolitan (big) cities. Especially the inhabitants of the metropolitan (big) cities and middle sized towns can not imagine to work or do business in the smaller sized town.

The small towns as the places for working and doing business are preferred mainly by the inhabitants who live there, older people and seniors and people more often than not with primary or secondary education.

The research showed that the imagination about the ideal place for working and doing business is much more crystallized and is to the benefit of rather bigger towns.

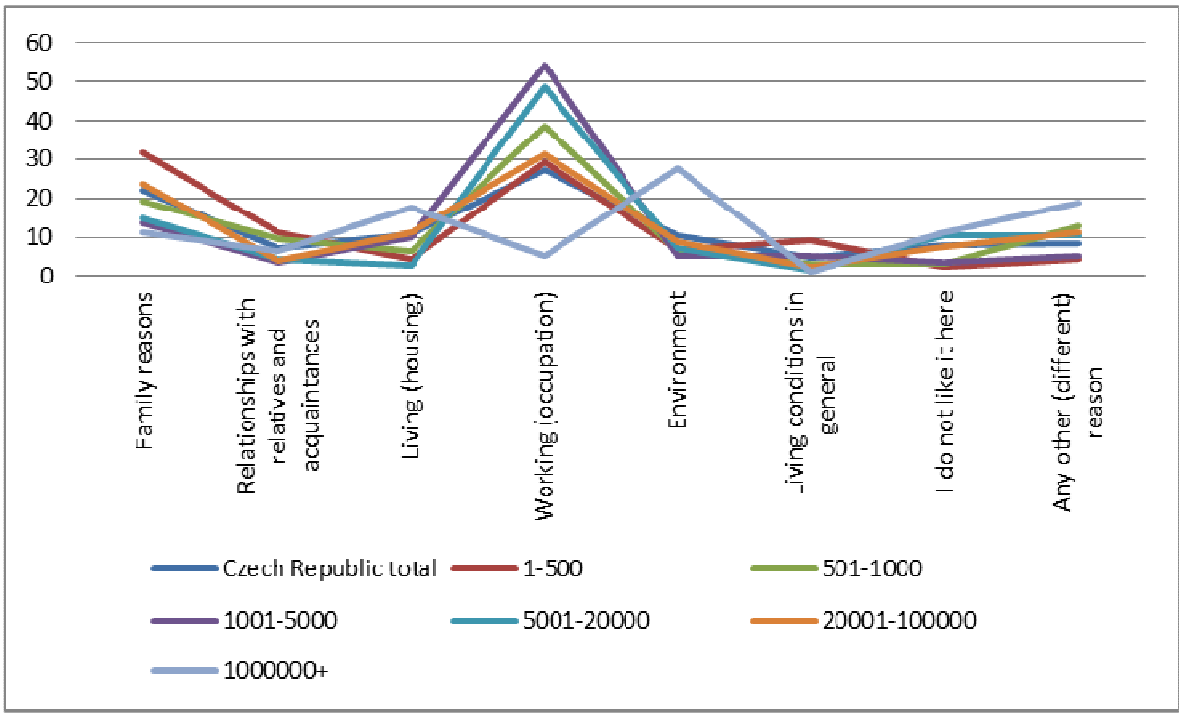
Migration motives

The research showed that the Czech Republic inhabitants have different reasons for a potential removal or a change of their permanent residence. The most important role between them plays a place of work factor (occupation) – 27,5 % answers. The next are family reasons (22,3 %), quality of living (10,7 %) and environmental quality (10,5 %). These factors form approximately 3/4 of the factors.

The place of work (occupation) as the most significant incentive of the removal was stated by the inhabitants of bigger municipalities and the small towns. The inhabitants of the small municipalities and the small towns mentioned the place of work as the most important incentive of their potential removal.

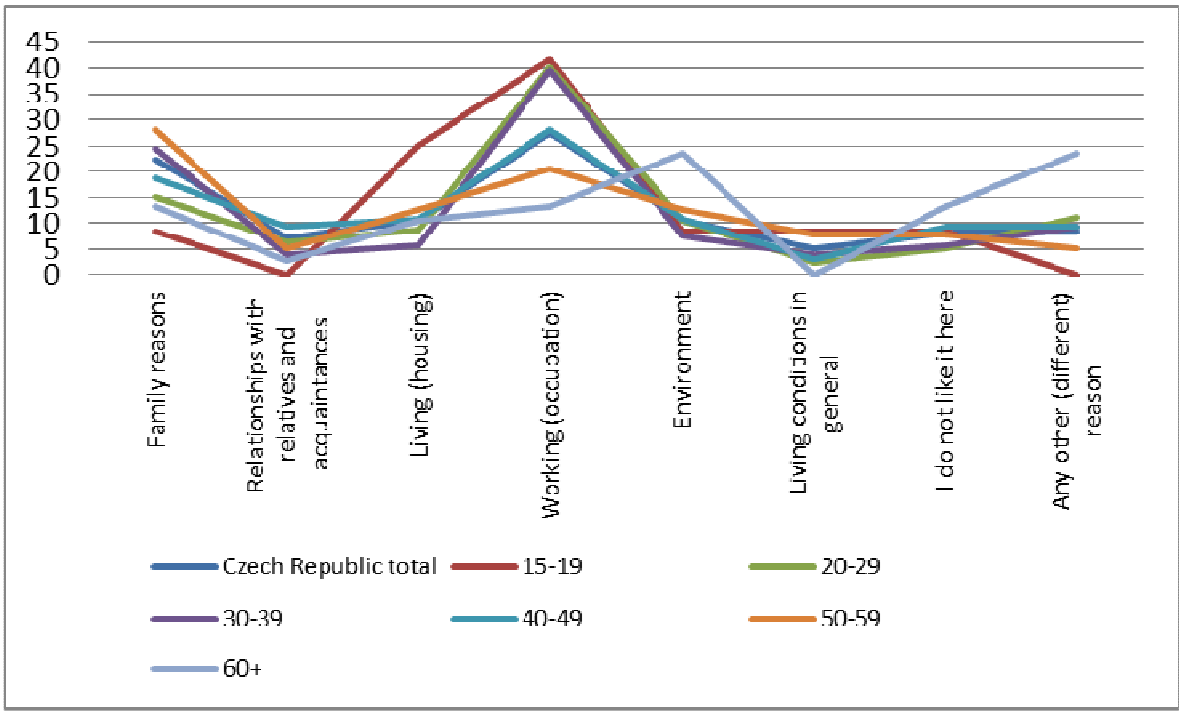
The work is the most important reason to remove especially in a case of young people and the people of the middle age (middle age generation). After the 40-ties this reason significantly comes down. On the other hand the age is the reason why the family factor, environmental factor and the "do not like it here" factor come up.

Figure 7: Reasons for the potential removal depending on the size of the place of the permanent residence. Ratio of answers is in %.



Source: Own survey, 2008, n = 1889 people inquired

Figure 8: Reasons for the potential removal depending on the age of the people inquired. Ratio of answers is in %.



Source: Own survey, 2008, n = 1889 people inquired

Summary and conclusion

The empirical research showed that the inhabitants in the Czech Republic perceive the small towns relatively in a positive way, mostly from a point of view of their living. The small towns are frequently labelled as “pleasantly small”, “scenic”, “suburban” and “attractive for living”. On the contrary they are perceived as “more often than not stagnant”, “far-off”, “living their own lives” and also “less attractive for working and doing business”. The research proved that the small towns keep their unsubstitutable place in the Czech Republic settlement system and that it is possible to expect their more likely positive development. The most significant problems can be expected in the small towns, which are situated in peripheral locations, especially in so called internal peripheries on the boundaries between single regions, which have been confronted with emigration since 80-ties of the last century. In despite of the mentioned above, it is necessary to deal with the topic of the small towns also in the future, and to help them to provide their future. Not only because they make up the significant part of the Czech identity.

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