Challenges and solutions for the development of small and medium sized cities within the European Union

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During the 80's, towns with at least 500.000 citizens used to be listed in one or more categories as followed:

- ***Relatively big cities***, large enough to not be disadvantaged in comparison with towns with over 500.000 people regarding services, collective equipments and potential external economies.

- ***Cities next to a very populated area,*** which take advantage of the flows of activities and population outside it and the services and equipments that it offers.

- ***Cities situated in an attractive area,*** which could offer a better way of living and could represent a very pleasant holiday place for the elderly or as an activity point for small enterprises not influenced by direct accessibility to a large consumption market or wide expanded infrastructures. These firms could be, for example, specialized in high tech activities, primarily influenced by very well prepared employees and not the geographical position.

- ***Towns placed in the center of rural areas***, which have increased their population due to the lack of jobs in agriculture.

- ***Cities which have managed to develop a particular characteristic***, being able to offer technical support or any other kind of important support, as well as competent labor power like in the large towns.

- ***Cities part of urban areas which include towns similar as size, cities that can offer infrastructures and equipments just as well as the large cities.***

- ***Cities that have good communication connections with big urban areas***, situated at large distances

Practically, middle sized towns developed in the 80's are those characterized by at least two of those mentioned up above. These include:

- ***Breccias, Verona, Parma, Padova[1]*** in Italy. These urban areas not only do they form a competitive network, but they are also specialized in certain activities, such as food and textile industry. Also they are important regional educational centers and that is why they have: (a) access to the researcher's expertise and highly qualified labor power; (b) connections with the big centers (for example Milan and Bologna) and they sustain efficiently rural activities.

- City networks found on the ***Cote d'Azur*** and in the ***Ron-Alps region*** in southern France, in ***Bade-Württemberg and Hessa in south of Germany***. All these have developed specialized activities and have created in independent identity, exploiting the nearness to a large city –Lyon, Frankfurt or Stuttgart- and the access to a large variety of services those offer.

- ***Rennes (France) and Cambridge (England)*** which have become centers for the high technologies, keeping strong connections with Paris and London. In the same successful manner they

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[1] These cities are part of the "Third Italy"

have sustained the activities in the surrounding rural areas. The two cities are also research centers, the first one holding the first tehnopol (scientific and technological park), and the other one owns a science park and a world wide famous university.

- Specialized cities in industrial and services activities from: (a) *Germany (Ingolstadt, Fribourg, Ulm, Paderborn and Tübingen)* these beeing placed in the neighboring of a large city or in the center of a rural area; (b) *Souther Europe* in: *Greece (Volos, Ioaninna, Patras, Heraklion and Rhodos*) where the population had a spectacular boost, out growing Athens and in *Portugal (Braga, Albufeira, Portimao, Aveiro, Faro, Leiria şi Setubal).*

Exemple

Rennes (Brittany) has developed quickly as a center of innovative services, sustained by the university and numerous research and development institutions that have settled there. The town succeeded in establishing connections with the neighboring cities and also with Centre and Pay de Loire regions. This was the first step in creating the tehnopol Rennes Atlante (2.500 wok places have been created with this opportunity) and in launching many research projects, which are managed in association with laboratories all over the surrounding areas. The presence of 40.000 students and 30.000 scientists has drawn high-tech companies, specialized in electronics and bio-technologies.

An international airport and TGV network called forth the settlement in this region of many international companies.

1. Problems of small and medium sized cities

Studies[2] using comparative data have shown that there is a *long term trend of: growth of the inequities between European cities systems and a relative decline of the small and medium sized towns.* **The reason** for this trend is the *decreasing distances that influence directly the dynamic of the communication speed.* Small and medium cities which had the role of a communication channel are shortcut and their clients are drawn by the big cities that increase their area of influence.

Under these conditions, during the past years, many of these cities have lost residents and jobs over to the large city and the economical, technological and sociological dynamic has had a negative trend, which could not be overcome by the developing problems of the great metropolis.

The various **problems** of the medium sized cities in comparison to the larger ones have to do with the followings:

a. **First of all,** those placed close to a big city **have to reach a minimum ability in offering a wide area of services** – both for public and company's needs, and **social and cultural equipments** required by the citizens and companies, that allow the town to be competitive.

b. Second of all, cities that do not benefit of the neighborhood of a large town or aren't developed enough, *can either form a local network of towns, or develop connections with one or more large cities placed further away,* but which offer a reliable communication channel. For a city network to be efficient, the space between them has to be small, allowing these to share their resources and equipments –such as a local airport or different types of services for the companies in the area. For a good connection with a large distance city it is a must for the town to renewal its relations, or better said its local companies, in order to offer something special, which can't be found easily somewhere else. In other words, it has to *develop a special feature which gives it a competitive advantage.*

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[2] Bairoch, Batou, Chèvre, 1985

c. **A third issue** is connected to the second one, because it is precisely the lack of special features that causes to many small towns big problems. These *cities have to be specialized in something in particular*, *to develop the infrastructures and the services that can bring together both technology and qualified labor power*. There is also a negative side of the specialization. Any forced specialization, due to accelerated technological progress and economic development, can be faced with the danger of being overdue, as it happened with the textile industry or naval constructions. Unlike large cities, smaller urban centers can not maintain easily the wide area of economic activities necessary for the restructured domains.

2. Possible solutions

In lack of an active policy and strategy of development, carefully conceived and followed, it's impossible to imagine that a great number of European cities will not loose more residents and jobs in the nearby feature. This will surely have a negative impact on the territorial equilibrium. It is a problem for:

a) the cities situated in less favorable places, such as rural areas – far from a large town.

b) towns, too small to offer a various range of services and sufficient collective equipments and which are also placed in such manner that a connection to a city network is difficult or inexistent.

The **solutions** for a competitive activity of the small cities in relation with the larger ones include:

- *Development of particular features* due to the exploitation of natural or historical resources (for example local resources, research centers, universities, attractive natural surroundings). One of the most important features of a medium sized city is the quality of living offered versus a big town.

- *Development of infrastructures and necessary services to support the growth of local companies and the number of jobs offered in their field of activity*

- *Improvement of collective equipments, cultural sites and recreation centers* to enhance the attractiveness of the city.

- *Development of proper communicational channels* – phone lines and means of transportation – with middle sized and large cities from the same region and also from other parts of the country and the European Union.

- *A stronger bond with the nearby cities* in order to reach a medium point of the demand to justify the development of services and shared equipments, including high speed transportation.

- *Invigoration of local capacity of planning and practicing urban development strategies.*

There can also be taken measures regarding urban services such as:

A. Health services

Accessible and quality health services, social and job improvement services, retail commerce and public administration are vital for the urban competition and a high quality of life. In addition, the quality of health services (especially preventive medicine) should be able to improve the physical status of the population and its capacity to work.

When dealing with an older population the quality of the infrastructure of a service system is very important. The elders have constant, specific needs regarding the health system and other social services. Thus, it is necessary to place certain services closer to their beneficiary due to reduced mobility in the case of elderly persons.

Certain services operate at a local level, while others are served to an entire region.

In both cases, bad famed neighborhoods lose: first of all because of the lack of quality services in the area and second of all due to the absence of means of transport.

An unconventional and easy solution is creating a vacation land in one of those damaged area. The first consequence would be the burst of social services, then the abridgment of isolation and the image improvement of the area on higher urban level. Another solution is the access to on-line public services, such as: e-Health, e-Government, e-Learning.

B. Cultural services

Culture and diversity are key areas in the competition between cities. For social and economic development, the solution is a long term vision of culture – as essential liaison between the city's strategies. Thus, cultural activities and unites should be part of an integrated solution of the urban planning and revival.

Just like the environment, cultural facilities represent a key factor in the attractiveness of the city. A vibrant and various cultures is an important focus point for the professional interest of labor force and also for the creative industries. Besides, the local pride, identity and image of the city are influenced by the quality of the local cultural scene.

Culture is important to all cities, but especially in changing the image of a decadent city.

Universities have a huge impact on forming the "branding" image of a city. Music festivals and show exhibits, events and major actions – such as appointing a city as European Capital of Culture, can favor a good image.

"European cultural capital" program

The program "European Cultural Capital" was initiated by the EU Minister's Council of Culture in 1985. This program was conceived in order to "bring closer the European people" and to celebrate the contribution of the towns to cultural development.

Since 1985 until now, every year, one capital was named. The procedures of appointing are following a rotation scheme, meaning that each of the member countries can propose one or more cultural capitals in the year settled for each of them. The nominees are closely examined by a group of experts in the cultural field.

Across the time the popularity of this program has increased, the cultural, social and economical influence of it has augmented and the number of tourists attracted has grown. In the picture no. 1 it is presented the map of all the cultural capitals since 1985 until 2006[3].

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[3] In 2007, the cultural capitals are Luxemburg and Sibiu and in 2008 – Stavanger and Liverpool.

Picture no. 1. The European Cultural Capitals (1985-2006)[4]

Culture can be a valuable instrument for intercultural dialogue: a cultural centre where communities meet or cooperating projects between various neighboring areas offer the space for a real interplay between different cultures. Virtual cultural places and on-line culture can contribute to this kind of social and cultural exchange. Cultural diversity is a source of innovation and entrepreneurship, which could become a positive source for the development of the towns.

Cultural industries represent also a development sector, due to their great potential for export and professional learning in the media, for example. Also, cultural tourism can improve the economical growth by creating working places and services. An important element of this estate is conserving and repairing of the rich cultural inheritance of Europe's cities.

If these measures ensure a better equilibrium of the system of cities, there is also –all over Europe, a need to manage the whole process of urban development. More and more, the member states take measures to guide the growth of the population towards existing urban places, in order to protect open spaces. However, these measures must be accompanied by actions that will avoid uncontrolled suburbanizing, the taking over of rural areas by the great metropolis and in some cases, of the smaller towns- which have a great importance because of the ecological potential.

Besides, from the point of view of the economical, social and technological agents which tend to favor the growth of large towns and metropolis in the disadvantage of smaller and medium size towns, it is now probably the time to think of adopting a European to balance the urban system and to define the part and position of these towns.

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