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Depopulation Processes in the Rural Areas in East-central Europe (1950–1990)*

Studies on the phenomenon of migration and depopulation processes in the rural areas were being carried out at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, Polish Academy of Sciences, since the beginning of the eighties. The wide scope of the research conducted on a regional scale has enabled the attainment of comprehensive information on demographic phenomena and processes occurring in rural areas in Poland. The studies were limited — regarding their territorial aspect — to this country. Consequently, our knowledge of what is going on beyond its boundaries has been fragmentary and, as such, precludes comparative analyses.

It was due to the formation — under Professor Andrzej Stasiak's direction — of the International Research Centre for Country to Town Migration that institutional possibilities have been created for undertaking international studies in that field. The first stage of the research project is to deal with East-central Europe. The decision on taking up research on a supra-national scale was necessary since the integration processes now under way in Europe called for a more universal approach to the socio-demographic problems of our continent. Embarking on scientific analyses on an international scale is significant from the cognitive point of view because it creates possibilities for the demographic processes which occur in rural areas in Poland to be compared with analogical processes in other European countries. The international studies are liable to show whether the phenomena and processes recorded in Poland are universal and common or whether they occur in this country in a unique, rather atypical way.

What is important in the case of comparative analysis of this kind is the determination of the territorial range of the research. This applies in par-

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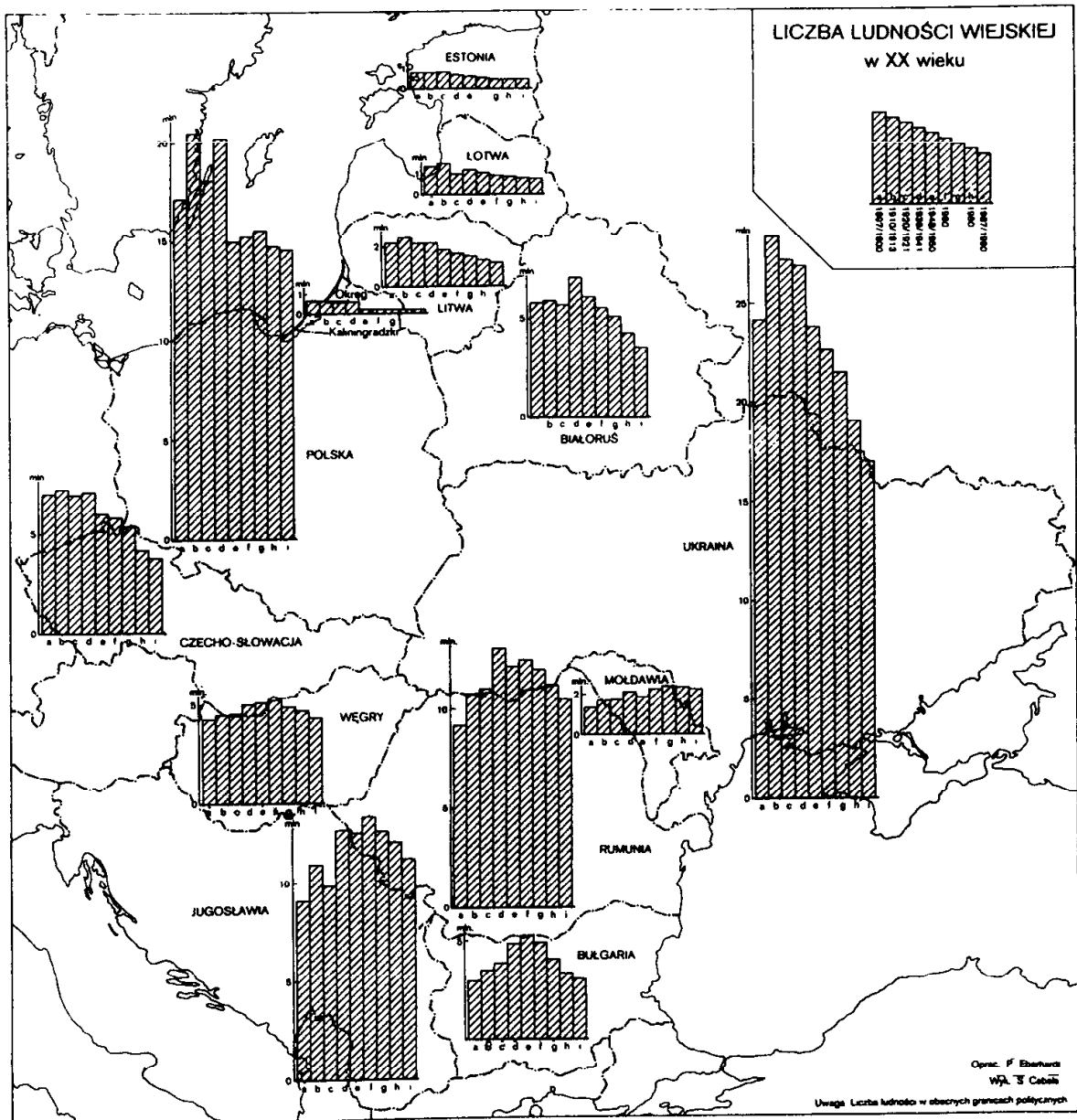


Fig.1. Number of the rural population in the 20th century (within the present-day political boundaries), designed by Piotr Eberhardt

particular to such an inexact geographical notion as the so-called 'East-central Europe'. A precise demarcation, on the map of Europe, of the region thus determined is a complex and controversial problem. Nevertheless, scientific studies dealing with the problems of East-central European countries require a sound determination of the territorial range of that important region.

The present comparative analysis depicts demographic transformations in the rural areas of that part of Europe where the processes of urbanization and industrialization appeared later than in Western Europe. Moreover, a significant task is also the examination of the demographic processes in the territories which found themselves under the socialist system. In the countries ranking among those of the socialist camp, the rural areas

had been subject to collectivization proceedings of various kinds, inclusive of complete or partial collectivization which infringed upon evolutionary agrarian transformations. All that qualified a certain group of countries to be classed among those of East-central Europe. Without delving into any more detailed deliberations, six independent states have ultimately been included into the region, namely: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and six former Soviet republics, i.e. the Ukraine, Moldavia, Belorussia, the Baltic republics — Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as well as the District of Kaliningrad making an enclave situated between Poland and Lithuania and actually belonging to the Russian Republic.

Finally, the research project has embraced the territory between ethnic Russia in the East and the united Germany in the West, the Baltic Sea in the North and the Black Sea and the Adriatic in the South.

The following question demanding a resolution was that of the adoption of an adequate period to be covered by the research. In that case one started from the assumption that it was only a long span of time embraced by a retrospective analysis that ensured the revealing of permanent tendencies and also their discrimination from those of but short-term character in demographic processes. A thorough analysis, carried by the author previously, covered the period of almost one hundred years. In the present paper the period was reduced to four decades (1950–1990) and the statistical data given pertain to five selected years: 1950, 1960, 1980 and 1990.

The most difficult task, involving a big outlay of work, was the collection of reliable statistical materials. Prior to commencement of empirical analysis, and presentation of figures, the fact of their heterogeneity had to be taken into consideration. The statistical data had been drawn from entirely different sources and materials. Nevertheless, after due verification their comparability was duly ensured.

It is worth mentioning, by way of preliminary information, that the territory marked out for research purposes, covering a total of 2,171,900 square kilometers (20.6 per cent of European's total area) and embracing six fully independent countries, six former Soviet republics and one Russian district, experienced tempestuous demographic transformations in the first half of the 20th century. They were a consequence, among other things, of two successive World Wars. Instability of political frontiers, losses due to the War and mass-scale resettlement processes exerted a serious impact on population density in the respective parts of the region. Without going into details it is worth presenting here the data regarding the general demographic potential of the region and the population of the rural areas in the years 1900–1950 (in millions):

Year	Total population	of which the rural population
1897/1900	111.2	86.2
1910/1913	131.8	99.0
1920/1921	128.2	94.2
1939/1941	153.7	103.9
1950	138.2	91.6

Prior to an empirical analysis pertaining to the forty year period (1950–1990), the fact should be taken into account that the territory of East–central Europe sustained serious losses in population as a result of the Second World War.

A telling illustration of these losses is the comparison of the post-war number of the population (1950) with the corresponding index for the year 1939. Suffice it to mention that in the territory covered by the research the total population decreased by more than 15,000,000 with a drop in the number of inhabitants of one of the rural areas amounting to 12,200,000. The demographic decrease of the rural population was very uneven. It was the greatest, however, in Poland where it amounted to a total of 5,200,000 persons. It was caused not only by the losses due to the War, but also by migrations evoked by the shifting of political frontiers.

Table 1. Changes in the number of rural population in East–central Europe 1950–1990

Country	Number of rural population (in thousands)					Changes in years 1950–1990	
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1987/ /1990	in number	1950 = 100
Estonia	581	518	475	441	449	– 132	77.3
Latvia	1063	922	887	784	74	– 287	72.8
Lithuania	1844	1673	1557	1314	1174	– 670	63.7
District of Kaliningrad	200	215	194	183	183	– 17	85.0
Belorussia	6090	5542	5094	4213	3447	– 2643	56.6
Ukraine	23811	22618	21438	18981	16970	– 6841	71.3
Poland	15009	15249	15578	14756	14623	– 386	97.4
Czechoslovakia	6045	5836	5408	4183	3814	– 2231	63.1
Hungary	5107	5229	4892	4665	4326	– 781	84.7
Rumania	12159	12491	11994	11186	10476	– 1683	86.1
Moldavia	1902	2298	2439	2382	2293	+ 391	120.5
Bulgaria	5281	4947	4047	3355	3063	– 2218	58.0
Yugoslavia	12552	13302	12609	12088	11237	– 1315	89.5
Total	91644	90840	86612	78531	72829	– 18815	79.5

In the Ukraine the number of the rural population decreased by 3,000,000. A serious drop was also recorded in Czechoslovakia (by more than 1,000,000), the reason being the post-war transfer of the German population from the so-called borderland. A similar decrease of the rural population was noted in Belorussia and Rumania. In the remaining countries included in the analysis, the relevant indices were somewhat lower. In two countries, namely, in Hungary and Bulgaria, the number of the rural population grew in comparison with that before the outbreak of the Second World War (see Tables 1 and 2).

In moving to a corresponding analysis of the post-war years, the fact should be borne in mind that, initially, the whole period concerned was characterized by a big natural increase of population. Its highest rate was recorded in the Ukraine, Poland, Yugoslavia and Rumania. In the remaining countries in the territory examined it amounted to some 10 per cent *per annum* over the first dozen or so years.

In the decade 1950-1960 the population in the territory discussed increased by some 20,000,000 persons (from 138,200,000 to 158,500,000). The post-war increase of the birth rate was of essential significance to population dynamics in the rural areas. Following the conclusion of World War II, the East-central European countries embarked upon the road of great transformations, and then, purposefully induced by changes in the socio-

Table 2. Changes in the rate of rural population in East-central Europe 1950-1990

Country	Rate of rural population (Per cent of total)					Changes in the rate of rural population from 1950 (points)
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1987/ /1990	
Estonia	52.9	42.8	35.0	29.9	28.4	- 24.5
Latvia	54.7	43.6	37.5	31.0	28.8	- 25.9
Lithuania	71.6	60.7	49.7	39.4	31.5	- 40.1
District of Kaliningrad	43.9	33.0	26.2	22.3	20.8	- 23.1
Belorussia	78.9	68.0	56.5	43.8	33.6	- 45.3
Ukraine	65.0	53.2	45.5	38.0	32.7	- 32.3
Poland	60.0	51.3	47.7	41.3	38.4	- 21.6
Czechoslovakia	48.8	42.7	37.7	27.3	24.4	- 24.4
Hungary	55.5	52.5	47.4	43.6	40.8	- 14.7
Rumania	76.6	67.9	59.2	50.4	45.6	- 31.0
Moldavia	83.0	77.4	68.3	60.0	52.6	- 30.4
Bulgaria	72.6	62.6	47.5	37.8	34.1	- 38.5
Yugoslavia	79.2	71.7	61.4	53.9	48.0	- 31.2
Total	66.3	57.3	49.8	41.9	37.3	- 29.0

-political system, mass migration of the inhabitants of the rural areas to the town followed. Due to the new economic conditions, vast numbers of work-places were available to the non-farming population. At the same time, the life of the rural communities changed as well. It was for that reason that, in spite of a high birth rate, the natural increase of population was not in a position to make up for the large-scale migration from country to town. In terms of the whole region, stabilization of the population of the rural areas followed, but only in the fifties (its general decrease in the decade 1950-1960 did not exceed 1 per cent). With regard to the spatial distribution of the population, notable differences were, however, to be observed. In the western Soviet republics (except for Moldavia) the number of inhabitants of the rural areas dropped, and a similar phenomenon was recorded in Czechoslovakia. In the remaining countries, a small demographic growth took place at that time.

The observed tendencies of population transformations in the fifties testified to the approaching end of a certain historical period, characterized by notable demographic activities and resources of the rural communities in the discussed territory between the Baltic, the Black Sea the Adriatic.

The transition period in the fifties was followed by a decade with a clearly manifest demographic tendency (1960-1970). Its characteristic trait was the intensification of depopulation processes in the countryside. The rural population in the depicted territory decreased at the time by more than 4,000,000 persons. Except for Poland and Moldavia, all the remaining countries encompassed in the analysis saw a demographic set-back of different magnitudes. In Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary the decade was a period of complete collectivization of agriculture. Elimination of peasant property, and the introduction of the system of collective farming, acted as a stimulus to migration from the rural areas to the town. The collectivization process in those countries was not carried out in such a dramatic form as in the USSR. In principle, there were no victims among the peasant population and its repercussions of a demographic nature were more favorably spaced in time. Nevertheless, the attractiveness of the village as a place of residence was diminishing and the depopulation processes were becoming permanent and growing in intensity.

The next decade (1970-1980) was a time of the conspicuous process of the depopulation of the countryside. The process embraced the entire analyzed territory. The number of the rural population fell there by more than 8,000,000, i.e. in absolute figures by more than two times in comparison with the preceding ten years. One can say that the decrease amounted to almost 10 per cent.

The demographic setback in the rural areas was taking place at a time of the growth of population in the territory subject to analysis. The number of the rural population increased by more than 13,200,000 in the years 1970-1980 and that of the urban by 21,200,000. This could not but cause

an enhancement of the disproportions and a lessening of the demographic significance of the rural areas.

In Poland the said areas were characterized by a notable diminishing of the population. In spite of the fact that the demographic setback was delayed and slower in Poland in comparison with other countries, nevertheless, the decrease of the number of inhabitants of the rural areas by more than 800,000 persons testified to the country's having entered into a stage of depopulation typical of other countries of the region. The ones where the process was most advanced (e.g. Belorussia and Bulgaria) have experienced such a rapid pace of depopulation of the rural areas that it meant the threat of a demographic disaster. This was manifest in deformations in the make-up of population according to age and sex, which, in turn, was connected to the selective character of migration usually involving persons entering into an active working age.

The eighties (1980-1990) saw, in principle, the persistence of the tendencies consolidated in the previous decade. In barely ten years the total number of the rural population dropped by 5,700,000 (from 78,500,000 to 72,500,000) thus having reached the lowest level in the 20th century. The total rural population in the territory under research diminished — in the forty year period discussed — by 18,800,000. The highest decrease (in absolute figures) was recorded in the Ukraine (6,800,000), followed by Belorussia (2,600,000), Czechoslovakia (2,200,000), and Bulgaria (2,200,000). Against that background, the demographic setback of the rural areas in Poland was moderate: barely 386,000 persons in 1950-1990. Hence the grounds for the statement that, on an the international scale, the depopulation processes in the Polish countryside are less intensive. It is worth noting, however, that it was only on a the regional scale that the said processes were manifest in Poland in a more pronounced way and with more serious demographic consequences.

As follows from the data quoted above, the depopulation processes in the rural areas in East-central Europe were those of a wide range and great quantitative intensity. They have been under way for almost 40 years. Consequently, they are a permanent phenomenon. And this is an indication of the persistence and unchanging character of the recorded downward tendencies. From the demographic information presented in this article, a picture emerges of the topical situation of the rural areas in a vast part of East-central Europe. The decrease in the number of the rural population points, on the one hand, to a notable structural transformation striving for modernity and, on the other — in view of the unresolved problems of broadly conceived regional economy, inclusive of the effectiveness of agriculture and the extensive character of urbanization — to the appearance of spontaneous processes of depopulation which eventually bring about economic devastation and infringement of the demographic equilibrium of the rural community.

The depopulation processes were more pronounced in the western republics of the USSR than in Poland, Yugoslavia, Rumania and Hungary. They have resulted in notable changes in the distribution of the rural population. That process, which manifested itself with great intensity, points out the shifting demographic potential of the rural population in the territory covered by the research from North to South and from East to West.

The Polish rural areas had noticeable specific features, and the depopulation processes occurring in its territory were different — in terms of time and quantitative aspects — from those in other analyzed countries. As compared to the ones in her neighboring countries to the East (the Ukraine, Belorussia and Lithuania) and to the South (Czechoslovakia), the said processes were less intensive in Poland, and the demographic potential

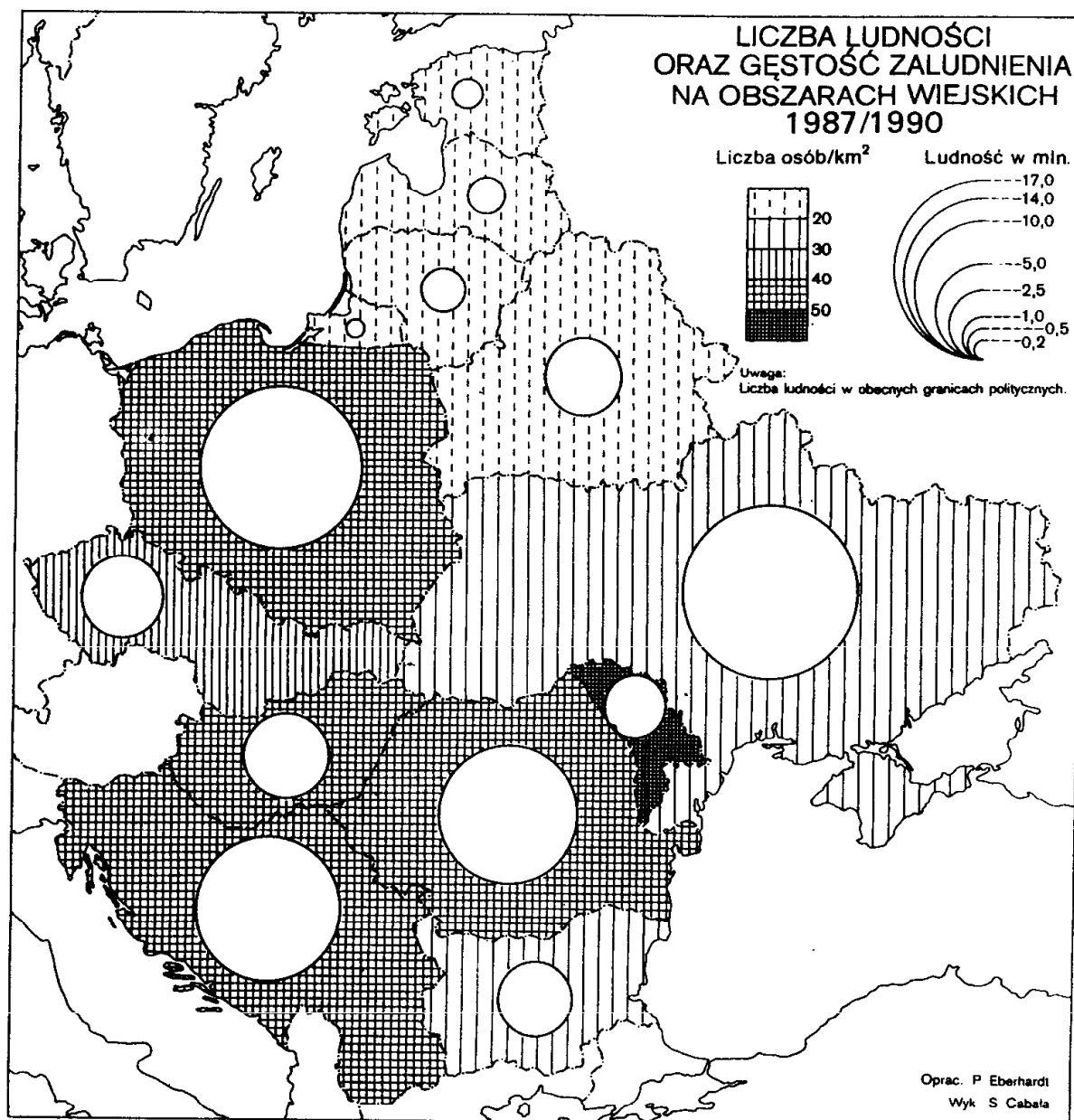


Fig.2. Number and density of population in the rural areas 1987–1990 (within the present-day political boundaries), designed by Piotr Eberhardt

of her rural community is relatively much greater than in the surrounding countries.

The fact of the simultaneous appearance in East-central Europe of three processes of demographic transformation, namely, of a general increase of population, the rapid growth of the number of the urban population and a relative and, in most cases also absolute, diminishing of the inhabitants of the rural areas has caused not only a radical change in the distribution of the population but also in its socio-demographic make-up.

There is every reason for the statement that the years 1950–1990 saw revolutionary demographic transformations in East-central Europe. In the mid-twenties that part of Europe (except for Czechoslovakia) was a poorly urbanized region of rural character. Today it is one with a high degree of

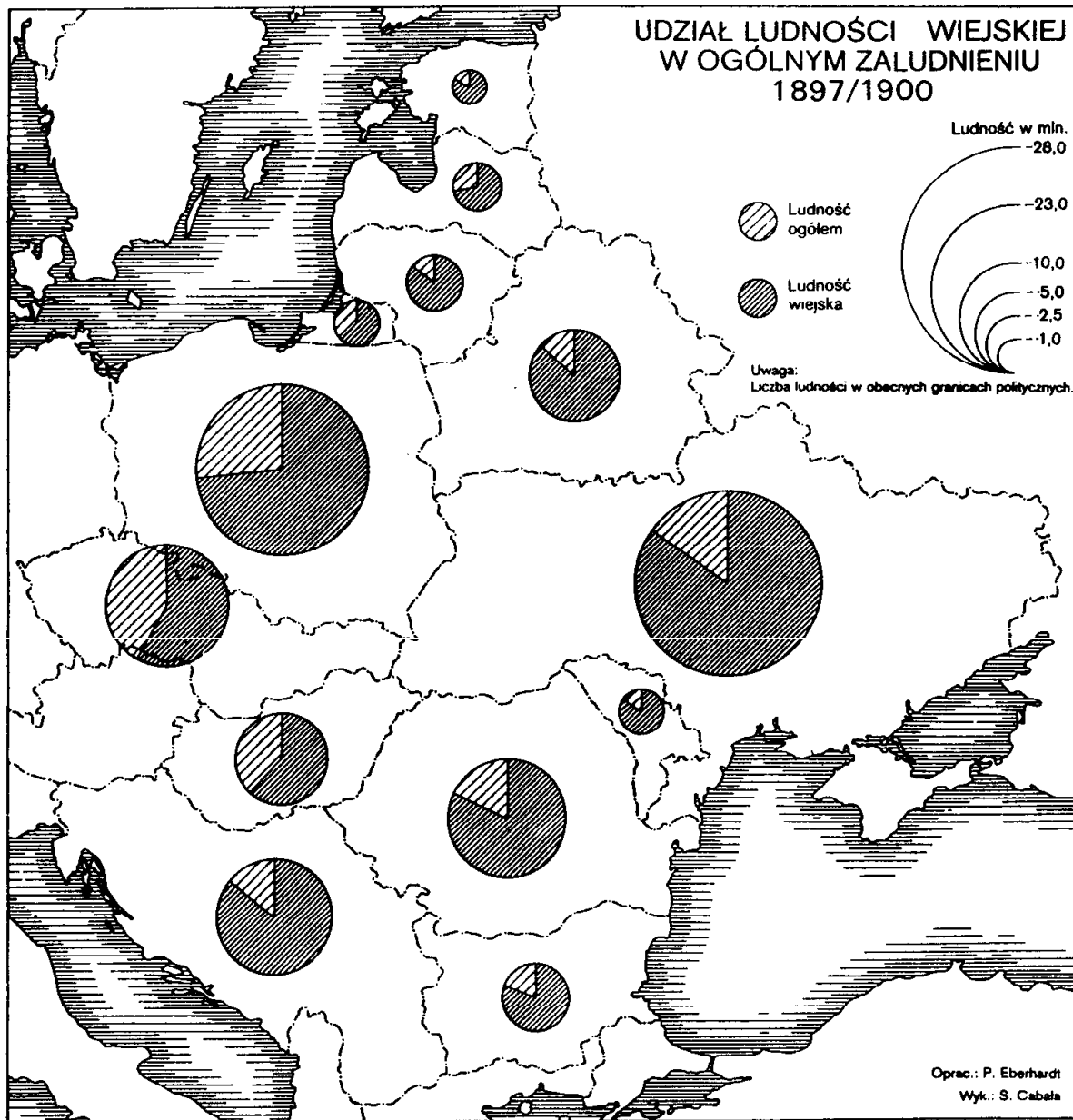


Fig.3. Rate of the rural population in the total 1897–1900 (within the present-day political boundaries), designed by Piotr Eberhardt

urban population. While in the year 1950 the inhabitants of the rural areas accounted for 2/3 of the rural population of the region, after 40 years of urbanization processes combined with those of depopulation of the countryside, almost 2/3 of its population live in the town. And so, the rate of urbanization is relatively high, but not always correlated with the level and up-to-date development of the national economy. Without going into the question of whether the pace of urbanization was advantageous or whether it has brought about more negative than positive consequences, one cannot ignore the fact of the resultant enormous transformation of a demographic nature. Concentration of inhabitants and their spatial polarization evoked strong processes of depopulation of the rural areas and lowering of their population potential. The observed tendencies of demographic transformations show that further complex processes of that kind will be going on in the decades to come. The processes, evading univocal assessment, will exert a serious impact on the socio-economic situation in that part of the European continent.