



City profile

City profile: Wrocław[☆]Sławomir Książek^{*}, Michał Suszczewicz

Institute of Geography and Regional Development, University of Wrocław, Plac Uniwersytecki 1, 50 – 137 Wrocław, Poland

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ABSTRACT

The present profile describes Wrocław, one of the largest Polish cities. Wrocław currently has 636,000 inhabitants and covers an area of 293 km² – forming the most important urban center in the southwest part of Poland. It is also the capital of Lower Silesia and the hub of Wrocław's agglomeration with around 1 million inhabitants. Several socio – economic processes can be perceived in contemporary Wrocław, that are also taking place in other major Polish cities. On the other hand, historical past and several changes in national affiliation affected development of Wrocław's certain distinctive qualities. The authors focused primarily on identifying the major alterations taking place in the city in recent decades, such as: new phenomena in the economy of the city, the transformation of the functional–spatial structure or evolving demographic situation.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary Wrocław, with the population of over 635,000 people (2015), is the 4th most populated city in Poland after Warsaw, Krakow and Łódź. The city is the capital of the Lower Silesia Province, which was created in 1999 after the administrative reform. Wrocław is also the historical capital of Silesia, one of the regions in the Central Europe, which played an important role in the history of Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic. Currently Silesia, as a historical region, belongs mainly to Poland; it consists of the lands of Lower and Upper Silesia. However, Lower Silesia as a province has a different spatial range than the historical region.

After numerous changes of national affiliation, Wrocław was incorporated to Poland in 1945 after World War II. Strong connections to Czech and Germany can still be noticed in both cultural and architectural sphere, which is caused by the historical affiliation of Wrocław to the aforementioned countries, as well as its close vicinity to those countries. After World War II the city underwent a process of an almost total population exchange and, as a result, became a greatly mono-national city. Such a population exchange is a unique phenomenon, as it is the only instance in Europe. The city is the focal center of the Wrocław agglomeration with the population of about 1 million inhabitants and one of the main economic, cultural or scientific centers of the country. A straight-line distance between Wrocław and the capital city of

Poland – Warsaw is 301 km. As a result of the location of the city in the vicinity of the Czech Republic and Germany, it is closer to Prague (217 km) and Berlin (295 km) than the capital of Poland (Fig. 1). Through the city flows the River Odra, the second longest river in Poland. Wrocław is located in the Silesian Lowland at a height of 107–148 m above sea level in the temperate climate zone.

The main aim of this manuscript is to present Wrocław's history, its spatial development and changes in the social and economic sphere which took place in the city as a result of the political transformation after 1989. The authors examine Wrocław's important processes affecting the current situation, such as: aging of society, demographical structure, development of the service sector, together with deindustrialization and urban spread. Because of its recent dynamic real estate market and, business services, similar to other cities of Poland and East-Central Europe, Wrocław constitutes an interesting example of changes which occur after post-communist political and economic transformation. On the other hand, Wrocław stands out among other big Polish cities because of numerous changes of national affiliation, multicultural past of the city and its location near the borders with the Czech Republic and Germany. What is more, as mentioned above, after 1945 the city was a witness of an almost entire exchange of population, which is an unusual phenomenon in Europe. The process of suburbanization underwent there differently than in other big Polish cities. Despite war damages and change of the economic system after 1945, Wrocław became one of the most thriving agglomerations of Western Poland.

The article is divided into 9 sections. Right after the introduction, Section 2 presents a historical outline of the city from its inception to the present. Subsequently the authors discuss the functional and spatial structure of Wrocław with particular emphasis on specific areas

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^{*} Corresponding author at: Plac Uniwersytecki 1, 50 – 137 Wrocław, Poland

E-mail addresses: slawomir.ksiazek@uwr.edu.pl (S. Książek), michal.suszczewicz@uwr.edu.pl (M. Suszczewicz).

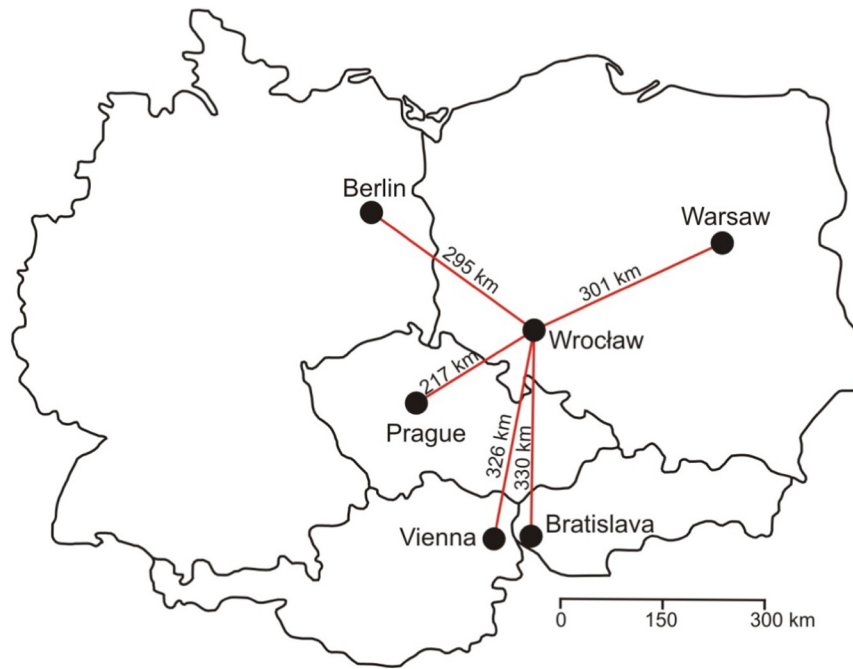


Fig. 1. Distance from Wrocław to selected capital cities of Central Europe.
Source: own research.

(districts) of the city. [Section 4](#) contains the most important data on demography, and [Section 5](#) describes the economy of Wrocław. The main focus was on presenting the most important economic processes taking place after 1989, such as deindustrialization, the growing importance of the service sector and foreign investment. [Section 6](#) concerns the development of the real estate market, whereas in [Section 7](#) authors show the changes taking place in the transportation system of the city. The next sections describe the most important investments and local government policy in recent years. The final [Section 10](#) presents the conclusions of the paper.

2. Historical outline of Wrocław

The first traces of human presence in the area of contemporary Wrocław come from the Stone Age and are dated at over 300,000 years. The permanent settlement was established there in the 8th century BCE at a convenient passage across the Odra, which forks near Wrocław, creating several islands (an anastomosing river) ([Davies & Moorhouse, 2011](#)). Wrocław was at that time one of the main strongholds of tribes settled in the Odra valley.

The main gord was a castle on Ostrów Tumski, whose origins date back to 10th century ([Fig. 2](#)). Its strategic importance was due to the proximity of the amber route passing through the settlement since the time of the Roman Empire, which connected the Baltic coast with Italy. Another important trade route was the Via Regia which ran from Western Europe to Russia.

After the death of the Duke Bolesław Krzywousty in year 1138, Poland was divided into districts, which were ruled over by his sons. At the time Wrocław was the second, after Cracow, economic center of the country. In the first half of the 13th century, Wrocław was settled with Magdeburg Law ([Kulak, 2006](#)). Henceforth, the center of the settlement was moved to its current location – the Old Town, while the islands, where the aforementioned medieval castle was located, was passed on to the church.

The ethnic structure of inhabitants of Wrocław also changed with time, mainly due to the influx of settlers from the German Empire. New residents were an important part of the Wrocław patriciate as they occupied key positions in the city. In 1327, Prince Henry VI the

Good signed an agreement with the Czech king John of Luxembourg, pursuant to which the duchy of Wrocław was incorporated into the Crown of Bohemia after his death. In the 14th century, because of its commercial importance, the city became a member of the Hanseatic League.

Rapid development of Reformation in Breslau (former German name of the city before 1945) resulted in the dominance of evangelists in the analyzed area. Religious unrest in the Habsburg's country became one of the causes of the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), which resulted in immense human and material losses in Silesia. Breslau itself was not destroyed, however its region was ravaged by war, and problems associated with the reduction of trade have contributed to the economic decline of the city. Several thousands of people died in Breslau during the war, and many residents decided to emigrate to the nearby Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth, settling in new urban centers emerging on the border ([Suszczewicz, 2015](#)).



Fig. 2. Current view of Ostrów Tumski – the location of a former castle.
Source: Sławomir Książek.

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