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THIRTY YEARS OF RETAIL TRANSFORMATION IN V4 COUNTRIES  
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The socio-economic and cultural changes that have taken place in the Visegrad countries over the last 30 years have led to significant transformations in all areas of trade, and thus provide a timely topic for researchers, professionals, teachers, students and even lay readers dealing with economic and spatial issues of trade. Among them, I recommend reading the volume especially to those interested in the characteristics of retail trade and its territorial and temporal developments in Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland that have taken place after the regime change. The number of retail outlets, their capacity, quality and networks have evolved considerably, meeting the challenges of the market economy and removing the barriers of the centrally and state-controlled economy. Internationalisation was also a new feature. The international traders in the Visegrad Four countries had an urgent need to adapt to the new challenges. Complex and changing relationships with customers, manufacturers and trading companies (many of which were foreign) also constituted a challenge for them. Like all transformations, this one showed different patterns, with many trading companies adapting successfully to the new conditions, showing rapid growth and development, achieving considerable success, while others were less able to meet the challenges.

The joint work of the authors from the 4 Visegrad countries has considerable advantages, not only in providing a detailed description of the characteristics and features of each country, but also in providing a better understanding of the local context and the processes in the Visegrad region. The authors are professors, researchers and lecturers at Masaryk University, Comenius University in Bratislava, the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the University of Miskolc and the University of Wrocław.

The presentation of the retail sector in each country follows a similar structure, with a historical overview going back up to 100 years, followed by a focus on changes and typical developments in the decades since the change of regime. This is followed by a typology, a division of the development of retailing into stages, national characteristics and, in some cases, case studies. In each chapter, illustrative maps and diagrams are used to help understanding, showing changes over time and typical processes.

This structure is also evident in the chapter on changes in Czechia by Josef Kunc and Markéta Novotná. In Czechia, as in the other three countries, after the socialist era of top-down regulation, market conditions and customer needs played an increasingly important role in retailing. Compared with Western Europe before 1989, the large number of grocery stores and the very limited presence of non-food retail outlets are noticeable. In the last decades of socialism, despite concentration and modernisation, and the emergence of larger units, many features of Czech retailing lagged far behind those of Western European countries. The chapter describes the consequences of privatisation and the transformation of the cooperative sector in the identified stages:

- The stage of Atomisation (1990-95);
- The stage of Internationalisation (1996-2004);
- The stage of Consolidation (2005 – the present);
- The stage of Diversification (2013/14 – until now).

Illustrative diagrams help to understand the transformation of the commercial regional structure, the network development of the different chains, the different characteristics of shopping centre construction (localisation, area, brownfield and greenfield).

Frantisek Krizan and Kristina Bilková identify 3 phases in the process of Slovak retail transformation since the change of regime, namely:

- Stage of communism;
- Stage of transition;
- Stage of globalization.

This chapter provides a historical overview of the extremely rapid state take-up after 1948 and the stable networks of commercial cooperatives that emerged alongside the centralised state model, with 17,000 to 18,000 units. Here too, we see low-density retail networks and a situation, typical of other countries, where only the big cities had a truly diverse range of shops, while at

the same time there were often retail outlets in small towns with a low population density, which was not the case in Western Europe.

The chapter also mentions the former networks of shops that played a special role, with the Prior shops being mentioned here, and the currency shop network that was a curious feature of the former socialist countries, some of which had a different stock from the usual, with Tuzex in Czechoslovakia, Intertourist in Hungary and Pewex in Poland. Foreign-owned firms became dominant players in Slovakia in the 1990s and 2000s, and this period is broken down by the authors into the following phases:

- Dynamic development of supermarkets from 1996;
- Dynamic development of hypermarkets from 1999;
- Dynamic development of shopping centres from 2000;
- Dynamic development of discount stores from 2004.

In the chapter on Slovakia, a very interesting part is the presentation of spatial differences, West-East temporal differences (belatedness), hierarchical definition and diffusion. The prominent role of shopping centres in Slovak commerce is highlighted, which also implies the emergence of smaller shopping centres (under 20,000 m<sup>2</sup>) in smaller towns.

The chapter of Professor Tamás Sikos on Hungarian trade begins with a description of the historical past, the period between the two world wars and the post-war period. The author describes the impact of the positive changes after 1968, the construction of larger shops and shopping centres, and the strengthening of cooperative retailing, which remained important until the change of regime and even afterwards. Naturally, Hungary also witnessed a strengthening of the private sector, and a major expansion of retail chains and the creation of large-scale networks took place in the 1990s and 2000s. The chapter argues that a large-scale expansion of networks has also occurred here in the 2010s, for example in the case of Aldi or Lidl, which have by now become dominant players. A very interesting part of the chapter is the identification of 7 generations of shopping centres with very apt names from 1976 to the present:

Generation 1: “The dawn of opening”, 1976; Generation 2: “Early golden age”, 1980; Generation 3: “Western style” 1993-1996; Generation 4: “The age of dynamic development” 1997-2000; Generation 5: “The age of rivalry”; Generation 6: “The age of stabilisation” 2004-2008; Generation 7: “The period of hope” 2009-2021.

The chapter presents a very detailed analysis of the development of the various chains and shopping centres, their spatial distribution and patterns, with the help of spectacular diagrams and maps.

The chapter by Dariusz Ilnicki and Ryan Wyeth, which covers the last decades of retailing in Poland, identifies 4 phases. According to the authors, during the period of the centrally controlled economy from 1989 to 1990, the number of shops increased steadily, and contrary to the other countries presented, privately owned retail outlets also emerged here.

In the period 1989-1998, the number of shops in Poland also increased more in the central and large cities than in rural areas. Spatial patterns of growth and spatial development are depicted by large, expressive maps. They also show the faster development of metropolitan areas from the aspect of economic, social and income characteristics and differences. In stage 3, the number of shops decreased considerably in the 2000s, but their area increased, a process of concentration was observed, and this has in fact continued in the 2010s. The distribution of hypermarkets and shopping centres between 2010 and 2020 is also illustrated by spectacular maps, highlighting development trends, regional differences and patterns, and case studies on the main foreign chains (Tesco, Kaufland, Lidl, Dino, etc.).

The volume also includes a chapter on the similarities and differences in retailing in the Visegrad countries. Many of the processes in the four countries under review have been similar, but there are also differences. The privatisation of retail trade and the decline and disappearance of state ownership have occurred in all countries. In the 1990s, supermarkets and hypermarkets became the most popular stores, followed by large shopping centres as the main places of consumption. Shopping malls have often taken on a new cultural content, becoming spaces where, in addition to shopping, shoppers can meet each other, spend their leisure time, and in fact experience part of their social and community life. A similar feature is that the role of cities and large towns as hubs has increased, while spatial structures have also changed, with the commercial role of suburbs and suburbs increasing alongside city centres, and polycentric patterns and decentralisation processes have been observed. These similarities are reinforced by the steady increase in consumer demand, notably for foreign products, which were difficult to obtain in socialist times and were a novelty in the market economy. This also contributed to the internationalisation of retailing and the rapid expansion of foreign retail chains. A notable difference is that Slovakia has a smaller market size, with a smaller proportion of international chains and more foreign companies that are not present in the Slovak market. However, a similar phenomenon is that in the Visegrad countries, after the regime change, shopping centres were typically built on the outskirts of urban areas as part of greenfield investments, shifting

the focus of the flow of shoppers and spatial relationships from the inner city to the outer areas, suburbs. Later, with the commercialisation of brownfield sites, shopping centres were built in many places on previously used sites, often in city centres and historic city cores, thus redefining commercial transport links. Similarities also include a certain west-eastward lag in the opening of shops by international trading companies.

Expected trends in future retailing are also reflected in the volume, such as the timeliness of the changes in consumer spending patterns that can be expected in times of economic downturns and recessions, similar to the global financial crisis of 2008. Sustainability issues are also becoming more and more prominent in all areas of commerce, including hybrid commerce concepts, offline vs. online commerce, the development of technologies based on the use of virtual reality, and the potential for biometrics and other innovations. Digital technology, new business models and demographic and cultural changes are likely to transform the retail sector again and, in fact, continuously, and with the further spread and growth of online shopping, some shops could be at risk of closure. At the same time, there is also a chance to develop and use big data databases, using new technologies, to create personalised and individualised shopping experiences, providing attractive conditions and solutions for younger generations. Another emerging trend in the Visegrad countries is that, alongside the popularity of global brands, more and more consumers are looking for regional, local products, thus supporting local producers. Recognising this, not only retail chains, but often also international retail chains, are increasingly working with producers, even small producers, to offer unique products and meet the needs of these customers.

The timeliness of the book is demonstrated by the analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on trade, showing the changes in shopping habits and the changes in the operation of different types of shops. In addition, the volume contains a brief discussion of the energy crisis, which is likely to lead to a certain reorganisation and concentration of retail networks, as small units may be significantly affected by inflationary pressures and, in some cases, the establishment of maximum prices.