

Cities in Evolution. Diachronic Transformations of Urban and Rural Settlements, II

VIII AACCP Symposium, Proceedings

Edited by Z. Ceylanlı, P. Günay and E. Çiçek

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**CITIES IN EVOLUTION
DIACHRONIC TRANSFORMATIONS OF URBAN AND RURAL
SETTLEMENTS
Proceedings Volume II**

VIII AACCP (Architecture, Archaeology and Contemporary City Planning)
symposium, Istanbul 2021

Edited by

Zeynep Ceylanlı, Pelin Günay and Ezgi Çiçek

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**VIII AACCP (Architecture, Archaeology and Contemporary City Planning) Symposium
CITIES IN EVOLUTION. DIACHRONIC TRANSFORMATIONS OF URBAN AND RURAL SETTLEMENTS**

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The Prospects of Towns in Serbia: Current Challenges and Policy Framework

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Keywords: town development, urban policy, urban shrinkage

Abstract

Serbia belongs to the European countries that had established a well-balanced network of urban settlements during the 19th and 20th century. This was almost an imperative in territorial policy during the socialist period, within the second Yugoslavia (1945-1991), when towns and small cities were specially supported as the main link in urban-rural cooperation network. However, this system has been critically broken since the beginnings of post-socialist transition. This period has brought a neoliberal market economy side by side with fading of the role of state institutions and the overall fragmentation of space in South-Eastern Europe. As a result, the paramount majority of towns in Serbia are shrinking today, as a sharp contrast to the rise of few big cities.

The aim of this paper is to research the official urban and territorial policy in Serbia regarding the development prospects of towns. Their challenging current state is not well defined in local context, because urban shrinkage as a critical indicator is a relatively new phenomenon in local urbanisation. In this situation, the examination how relevant Serbian legislative, planning, and strategic policy documents concern the issue of the development of (small) (big) towns vs. cities is very important and it is the backbone of this research. The guidance to examine them is the most relevant EU documents that are framed to comprehend and systemise the current role and future of (small) towns at European perspective. In line with this stance, this research presents the state of art in national urban policy in the matters of town development, as well as the possibilities how it can be modified and improved to better suits the future of Serbian towns.

Introduction

The National Population Census in 2011 was the first in the modern history of Serbia that showed peacetime urban shrinkage as a prevalent pattern in urbanisation at national level. The census revealed the domination of the macro-urban conurbation of two largest cities in Serbia: Belgrade and Novi Sad. The other urban settlements, especially smaller ones, were mainly shrinking by demographical terms (Petrić et al, 2012). This situation was also an unwanted novelty for the balanced network of cities and towns inherited from the previous periods. Finally, it has certainly opened new questions for the future of urban development in Serbia, but an adequate response to it is still pending.

First of all, the Serbian state does not precisely differentiate and categorise urban settlements by size though national urban policy. This is critical for the research of the development challenges of those urban settlements which are smaller ones – towns. There are several reasons for it. The first one is basic, linguistic one. Serbian language generally does not differentiate *city* and *town* as words. The second reason is more prominent because it shows one of the essential problems in national urban policy. There is no consensus about the term of city in Serbian legislation and official statistics. For example, the legislation designates cities as administrative units which roughly correspond to larger municipalities, while the official statistics makes only a functional distinction between urban and rural settlements, excluding, for instance, suburbs as a specific type (Djukić et al, 2017). Furthermore, both definitions have shortcomings regarding the suitable differentiation of the size of cities and towns; the first, administrative one, despite it treats the size of a self-government unit,

includes both urban and rural areas. The second definition by official statistics fully rejects the size of a settlement as a factor instead of its dominant function.

The last probable reason is external, linked to European level. It seems that the absence of the consensus about *city/town* differentiation and the categorisation of urban settlements based on their size in many relevant documents of the European Union (EU) have influenced confusing Serbian urban policy. For example, the most suitable term to compare urban entities between different European nations is a well-defined functional urban area, which is far from the primary meaning of a city or, even more, a town (Danciu et al, 2019). In accordance with this, this research acquires the proper definition of town in the most relevant EU document in the matters of the development prospect of small urban settlements – “Small and medium sized towns in their functional territorial context” interim report from 2013. This report outlines towns as “urban settlements with a population ranging from 5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants”, which are also shaped as a “multi-cell polygon ... with a density of population of more than 300/m² inhabitants” (Servillo et al, 2013, p. 2).

This demographic scope proposed at the EU level is determining for the presented research of the official urban and territorial policy in Serbia regarding the challenging development prospects of local towns. Although a few national research has been done within this topic, it has not made a visible impact on national policy to adequately create the elements that will promote towns as a unique entity for customised legal, planning, and strategic matters. The aforementioned recent challenge with the widespread urban shrinkage of Serbian towns has just emphasised a necessity for these interconnections. The aim of this research is to bridge this gap by making the first step in this direction; to examine how relevant Serbian legislative, planning, and strategic policy documents concern the development challenges of towns, directly or indirectly referring them as an entity. In line with this aim, this research presents the state of art in national policy in the matters of town development, as well as the possibilities how to modify and improve it. The contribution of the paper can be also extended to regional level, because the other countries in South-Eastern Europe face the similar challenges of over-present urban shrinkage and city-town polarisation (Restrepo Cadavid et al, 2017).

Methodology

This paper is tailored as a policy review on the topic of town development in Serbia. This approach conditions the structure of the paper in several steps. The first step is the study the documents relevant at regional level (European and East-European/post-socialist), to extract appropriate criteria for Serbian case. Second one is to examine the most important legislative, planning, and strategic Serbian documents by these criteria, allowing two approaches; to analyse the elements that directly refer to towns by the adopted demographic scope or indirectly target smaller settlements (including towns) and the municipalities where towns are their administrative seats. Before the examination of the documents, a short insight in the historic development of Serbian towns in last two centuries is settled, for the better understanding of local context. The selection of the policy documents that are researched in both steps are further clarified before their analysis. The last step is to systematise and compare the research findings for final conclusions and recommendations.

Towns in the current European context

Several EU documents important for urban and territorial policy in Europe were selected for analysis. It seems that the newer documents are more focused on the issue of European (small) towns. Their revitalisation is often seen as a precondition for the further prosperity of the whole Europe (SMEALT, 2013).

EUROPEAN SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE (ESDP), enacted by European Commission in 1999, was the first comprehensive territorial policy framework of the EU, created to enable the sustainable spatial development of European continent. One of its main policy guidelines is the establishment of a polycentric and balanced urban system with strong urban-rural partnership. Towns are named as crucial in this constellation, for improving “spatial balance in Europe” (EC, 1999, p. 20). This is then detailed through the following action sets (EC, 1999):

- Formation of networks of smaller towns in less densely settled and economically weaker regions (p. 21);
- Balance between economic activities and socio-cultural welfare in towns as service centres ('hubs') for their (rural) surrounding (p. 21, 23);
- Control of the physical expansion of towns – compact-city model (p. 22);

- Better accessibility by different types of transport and integrated (inter-town) public transport systems (p. 23);
- Preservation and sustainable promotion of heritage (especially cultural) in towns and their vicinity (p. 34).

In brief, it can be concluded that the ESDP endorsed the significance of (small) towns for European future. However, some newer documents emphasise that the ESDP did not embrace a clear policy towards towns (Servillo et al, 2013).

LEIPZIG CHARTER ON SUSTAINABLE EUROPEAN CITIES is document adopted by EU ministers in 2007. This charter recognises towns as an equally important type of urban settlement in the continent almost in its first paragraph. Nevertheless, this relatively short document does not elaborate the actions specially dedicated for towns. Some actions proposed by Leipzig Charter are, despite this obstacle, more than applicable at town level, such as (EC, 2007):

- Creation of high-quality public spaces as the reflection of urban environment; or
- Promotion of education and training to straighten and advance local community.

The last document from European level that is analysed is specifically created as a study of towns in Europe. This is "TOWN: SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED TOWNS IN THEIR FUNCTIONAL TERRITORIAL CONTEXT" Report from 2013, developed by European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion – ESPON. The aim of this report is both the present and future of European towns, with particular respect to form their categorisation. For the current state of towns in wider context, the report underlines the richness and variety of towns and town networks (clusters, linear structures, clouds, diverse densities, etc.) throughout Europe (Servillo et al, 2013). The report is extensive in the spatial analysis of towns in European space, as well as in the state of art relating contemporary literature and research. Despite this, it is not concrete in policy recommendations. For instance, the possible development scenarios for towns are scrutinised in three possible profiles of town developments (Servillo et al, 2013)

1. Residential economy – town development based on circulation, accessibility and mobility of population;
2. Productive economy – town development based on production of commodities and services mostly consumed outside a town;
3. Knowledge economy – town development based on the inclusion of innovation and knowledge, as well as related institutional dynamics as a prerequisite for modern life.

These three scenarios more and less encompass the previously pointed action sets in the ESDP but developing them into different development trajectories. This can be perceived as a major contribution of this report.

The "TOWN" Report scientifically confirms something that has been already known in European urban studies. The report states that the town network is weaker, and the average size of towns is smaller in the eastern half of Europe than in its western half (Servillo et al, 2013). Knowing that this is a post-socialist space, a common thought is that these features for East-European towns are mainly a socialist legacy. However, urban development in Eastern Europe is a more complex story. Generally, the eastern half of Europe was characterised by postponed early urbanisation, market economy, modern citizenry, and industrialisation in centuries before socialist period (Musil, 2005). Filling the development gap by mass-industrialisation and the rapid urbanisation of many old towns in this region was one of the main goals during socialism (Stanilov, 2007). Additionally, many new socialist mono-functional towns were built next to huge new state industry plants or mining enterprises (Fig. 1). This urban experiment eventually failed with the collapse of socialist system in the early 1990s. In field of urbanisation, this has been reflected in the sharp increase of the number of shrinking cities and, in particular, towns across post-socialist space. At start of the 2000s, more than 80% of bigger cities in this part of Europe were shrinking (Turok & Mykhnenko, 2007). The frequency and uniqueness of shrinking cities in post-socialist countries has led to the formulation of regional type of urban shrinkage, with specific (post-)socialist characteristics (Haase et al, 2016).

The most recent policy document that concerns the current urban development in post-socialist Europe and possible ways to facilitate is the Report "CITIES IN EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA: A STORY OF URBAN GROWTH AND DECLINE", made by the experts of the World Bank (WB) in 2017. The main findings in the WB Report relating towns in this region are (Restrepo Cadavid et al, 2017):

- The majority of both cities and towns are shrinking – the percentage of shrinking cities is 53-95% for post-socialist European countries. This ratio is even worse in the case of small towns;
- The size of city/town matters greatly; smaller urban settlements are more prone to urban shrinkage;
- So-called “single” cities and towns, i.e., urban settlements outside of even far away from the main conurbations and transport corridors, are more prone to urban shrinkage;
- Population and economic activities have extremely concentrated in few biggest cities (capitals and secondary cities). This has left the rests of the countries (including the bulk of towns) in a very vulnerable position;
- The towns that are very close to bigger and relatively prosperous cities have been transformed into their suburbs, with a lot of pressure regarding rapid population growth vs. housing, infrastructure, and service development;
- The towns that are in the vicinity of bigger and relatively prosperous cities, but not very close to become their suburbs, are usually losing population to them;
- The towns purposely built during socialist period are usually mono-functional towns with many economic challenges and rapid population decline;
- Coastal towns and towns with warmer climate (which often concurs) have better prospects for development than the other towns.

The WB Report recommends several policy options for urban policy in post-socialist countries (Restrepo Cadavid et al, 2017, p. 34-35). They are further supported by the best practice from Western countries. The most of these actions target shrinking cities and towns:

- Adapting land use – focus on the neighbourhoods with higher population densities and the planned full depopulation of more vacant ones;
- “Smart decline” urban policy – focus on demolition of unnecessary buildings through public-private partnerships;
- Densification and transit-oriented development – focus on the settlements and locations with higher densities and along the main transport corridors;
- New city competitiveness – focus on the emerging economic opportunities that included knowledge and creative sector than the regeneration of the previous economy, mainly manufacturing industry;
- Revitalising centres – focus on the service and tourism sector and functional diversification;
- Flexible planning – flexible procedures and decision making.

Summing the previous insights from the analysed policy documents from European and post-socialist perspective, the main criteria to evaluate policy towards town development in Serbia is derived:

- C1 Town networks – the formation of town networks and partnerships at regional level;
- C2 Small hubs – towns as socio-economic centres for rural surrounding;
- C3 Town cores – the revitalisation of inner town cores with economic diversification and the improvement of the quality of open public space;
- C4 Town categorisation – categorisation of towns at national level, to better define the actions per a town category;
- C5 Town economy – the different models of the economic development of towns, such as the approaches of residential, productive or knowledge economy;
- C6 Anti-shrinkage actions – the creation of the actions targeting the challenges for the predominant group of shrinking towns, such as the problems of vacant buildings or underused urban land;
- C7 Town specialisation – the better specialisation of the towns with exceptional local advantages, such as a location on sea or big river, with warmer climate, high-value heritage, extraordinary tourism potential, advanced location, etc.

The timeline of the modern development of towns in Serbia

The history of modern urbanisation in the space of present-day Serbia began lately for European context, in the 18th-19th century. The first modern towns and small cities have emerged in the north, the part of the former Habsburg Empire. Although they had roots in the previous Ottoman towns with oriental, organic structure, they were rapidly and radically transformed in the modern settlements with regular, mainly orthogonal matrix with developing market economy and early industry (Djukić et al, 2018). However, none of these settlements outgrew into sizable cities till the end of the Empire; the centrist politics of Hungarian half of the Empire from Budapest successfully prevented any significant decentralisation (Pušić, 1987).

Serbia southern of the Danube River became an Ottoman-dependent principality in early 19th century and then an independent kingdom (1882). This area was even more underdeveloped and without real urban centres. Therefore, a young state was concentrated on the development of both urban life and economy and the proper networks of urban centres. During the whole 19th century, an imperative was on the formation of the dense network of small marketplaces, known as a *varošica*, which character (market+crafts) was more urban than its size; they usually were smaller than nearby villages, while the towns noticeably bigger that rural surrounding were extremely rare (Kojić, 1970). Many of *varošica* settlements have eventually become bigger towns or small cities during the 20th century, while some of them stagnated, preserving the role of small marketplaces for nearby villages (Fig. 2).

Urban policy in the Republic of Serbia within socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1991) has not been changed relating to towns despite completely different political circumstances. Socialist leadership also supported the development of towns and small cities as municipal seats due to their role as the centres of industrialisation and proletariat. Towns grew fast on the account of population exodus from dependent villages. Many of them were further densified, to look more 'modern', particularly in their centres (Fig. 3). This was known as an 'urbanocentric policy' in Yugoslavia (Petovar, 2003). As a result of this policy, the number of officially declared towns rose, too. For example, the number of small towns in Central Serbia increases from 16 in the Census in 1948 to 87 in the Census in 1991 (Spasić et al, 2007). However, last two decades of socialism were marked with the slowing down of this trend, which was a sort of overture for the urban shrinkage of many towns in Serbia after the beginnings of post-socialist transition.

The first phase of post-socialist transition in the 1990s was turbulent in the space of the former Yugoslavia. It was marked, inter alia, by the forced migrations and the huge refugee population. For many cities and towns in Serbia, this forced immigration preserved their demographic increase and somehow shadowed local socio-economic problems due to the collapse of socialist economy (Antonić & Djukić, 2018). Hence, the demographic consequences of post-socialist transition have been observable only after the consolidation of situation, after 2000. The most important fact for the current state is that Serbian towns have taken the role of rural areas, already exhausted by the demographic exodus in the second half of the 20th century, as the main demographic feeder of few major cities, mainly Belgrade and Novi Sad (Petrić et al, 2012). Furthermore, the dichotomy between cities and towns within national territorial context is also linked with the other factors for urban growth/shrinkage. Djukić et al (2017) concluded that the proximity of national borders in one of the main denominators for urban shrinkage for Serbian cities and towns. This location is also opposite to the main development axis of Serbia, comprising the areas of four largest cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac), is centrally positioned (Fig. 4).

Policy framework for towns in Serbia

Although the Republic of Serbia is not a full member of the EU, the country is the process of full integration into the union. Therefore, urban and territorial policy in Serbia, as well as the other sector policies, has been customised to the EU since the start of negotiations 10 year ago. The issue of (small) town development is not covered by a specific policy document. This topic is included in the several legislative, planning, and strategic documents at state level. The most important ones will be analysed by the settled criteria for town development. They are:

1. LAW ON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT (Serb. *Закон о регионалном развоју*, 2009-2015): This law was enacted in 2009, with two harmonisation processes in 2010 and 2015. This is a basic law for the field of regional and local organisation and development in Serbia. It, inter alia, defines the postulates to sort regions and local self-government units (municipalities and cities) by the level of development. All cities and municipalities are then sorted into five groups by the Bylaw on determination of the list of the development of regions and local self-government units.
2. SPATIAL PLAN OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA 2010-2020 (Serb. *Закон о просторном плану Републике Србије*, 2010): This is the main territorial planning document for the whole country and a law at the same time. The currently operative plan is enacted in 2010 and a new plan will be delivered in the forthcoming year. The plan from 2010 also has a role of an umbrella policy document and all regional, municipal and urban plans in Serbia must follow in essence its aims, actions and instructions.

3. STRATEGY OF SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA 2030 (Serb. *Стратегија одрживог урбаног развоја Републике Србије до 2030. године*, 2019): This is the newest policy document, enacted in 2019. As a strategy, it especially concerns links between proposed actions and their implementation in situ. All three selected policy documents are examined by the criteria of town development derived from European level, which is scrutinised in the following table:

Table 1: The inclusion of the derived criteria of town development in the content of three selected Serbian policy documents:

DOCUMENT CRITERIA	REGIONAL LAW (+ BYLAW)	SPATIAL PLAN	URBAN STRATEGY
C1 Town networks	+ Inter-municipality cooperation (Art. 2, 45)	++ Network and interest links between cities and towns (Art. 2.2)	+ Network-based development (p. 39);
C2 Small hubs	+ better local infrastructure (Art. 45)	+++ From-city-to-town decentralisation (Art. 2.2) Towns as nodes for rural areas (Art. 2.4)	++ urban-rural public transport (p. 40)
C3 Town cores	-	+ Preservation of open and green areas in towns (Art. 2.3)	++ Mixed-use development, densification (p. 39)
C4 Town categorisation	+ Five levels of local development (Art. 10-11)	++ Categorisation of municipalities by urban-rural ratio (Art. 2.2)	-
C5 Town economy	+ Innovation economy (Arc. 2), promotion of research in development (Art. 45)	+ Economic revitalisation of small towns (Art. 1)	+ Innovation economy, new commercial zones, entrepreneur environment (p. 39-39)
C6 Anti-shrinkage actions	+ Specific actions for devastated areas (Art. 2), five levels of municipal development (Art. 10-11)	++ Specific actions for devastated areas; free-land and brownfield data bases (Art. 2.3)	++ brownfield site redevelopment (p. 16) Specific actions for devastated areas (p. 39)
C7 town specialisation	-	+ Use of town identity for development (Art. 2.3); Town tourism (Art. 3.1);	+ Identity and tourism (p. 38); Preservation of cultural diversity (p. 39)
EXPLANATIONS: + Criterion content mentioned in a document is indirectly related to town development ++ Criterion content mentioned in a document is directly relating (small) town development, but without any elaboration +++ Criterion content mentioned in a document is directly relating (small) town development, with a profound elaboration			

Conclusion: The development prospects of towns in Serbia

The previous findings clearly show that the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia 2010-2020 best responds on the settled criteria of town development. It is the only selected policy document that respects all elements of

town development by the criteria. The other two documents have observable shortages. In the case of the regional law, there is no distinct stance on the issues of town cores and town specialisation, which is expected from the regional viewpoint that it primarily addresses. Unexpectedly, the national urban strategy, which is also the newest selected policy document, has noticeable flaws, too, because it does not offer any kind of categorisation of urban settlements by different features (for example, their size) and the related sets of actions for their more directed (re)development.

The most observable problem in these findings is that many explained elements of town development behind the settled criteria are just mentioned in them, without their precise elaboration and interconnection. This inconsistency is even more problematic taking in account that such policy documents are not implemented thoroughly. In the case of the recent state of towns in Serbia, this can be argued by the latest population estimations, presented by the national statistical office – even more cities and towns are shrinking in 2020 than at the last census in 2011.

This challenge is not related just to national level. Towns as a policy topic are not examined as a separate entity in both Serbian urban and territorial policy documents. The role of towns in Serbian documents is mainly to be “mediators” between major cities/urban regions and rural hinterland as the main and mutually opposite “protagonists” in the policy. Nevertheless, they are in the shadow of both of them. Repeating the fact about the widespread shrinkage of towns throughout Serbia, the main conclusion of this review research is that a national policy document that specifically concern towns in Serbia and its future prospects is a necessity for its sustainable territorial and urban development of the country. This document should be more focused on the elements that are missing or poorly explained in the analysed policy documents, such as: (1) town categorisation and specialisation, with the supplementary sets of actions and their relation to the approaches of economic (re)development; (2) anti-shrinkage actions as a whole, not partially (just for the most devastated areas or brownfields); and (3) actions for towns cores with central facilities and open public space, as focal points for local communities and the reflection of the quality of town life.

The contribution of this research can be also reflected at regional level, for South-Eastern Europe or, eventually, for post-socialist European countries. It is questionable if the best practice from Western countries and the actions based on them can properly work in many post-socialist countries. For instance, the WB report uses mainly the best practice from, and highlights implemented actions in Western countries with high standards and well-organised governance. On the other side, both elements are underperforming in the case of post-socialist countries (Hirt & Stanilov, 2009). Therefore, this research also recommends the wider investigation of town development that would be ‘regionally sensitive’ and cover specific regions, such as post-socialist Europe or Southern-Eastern Europe.

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Fig. 1. Eisenhüttenstadt in (Eastern) Germany was a model for the new socialist towns built next to huge state industrial and mining enterprises. Today, their mono-functional character makes them prone to extreme urban shrinkage (author: B. AntoniĆ).



Fig. 2. With just 230 inhabitants in 2011, Varda is one of the showcases of an old day *varošica* (small market place), frozen in the size typical for their early phase in 19th-century (author: B. AntoniĆ).



Fig. 3. The main square in Golubac Town was formed during socialism, to present it as a modern urban settlement (author: B. Antonić).

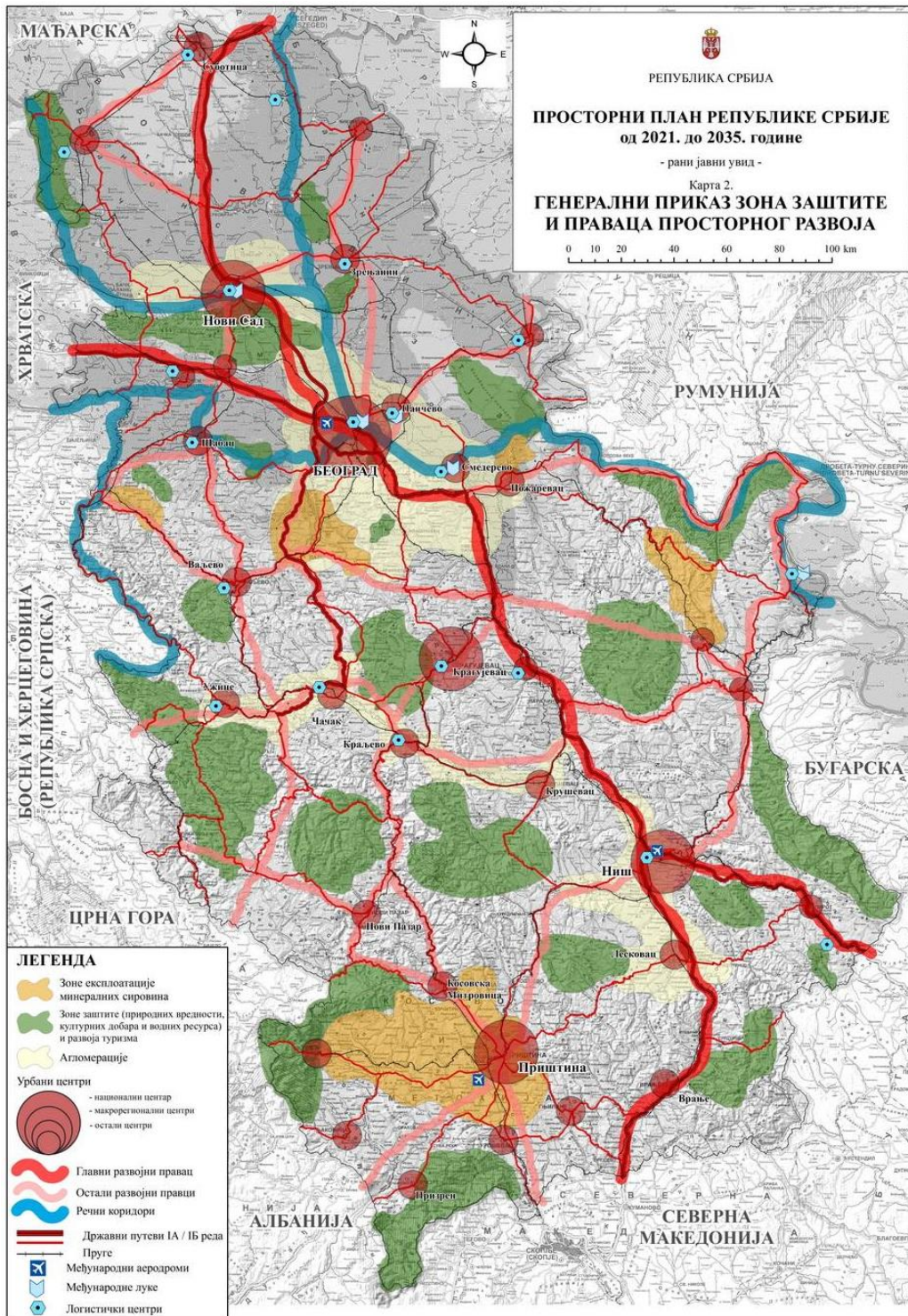


Fig. 4. The dominance of the main, “north-south” development axis of Serbia that connects four major cities. The Draft of New Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia: Map of Zones of Protection and Development Axes (Source: Ministry of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure, 2021).

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