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The Implementation of European Union Regional Policies in Planning Documents: The Case of Macedonia

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Abstract

In the last twenty years, the spatial development of Macedonia has been strictly focused on one area - the capital city Skopje. Today, Skopje accommodates one-third of the total population of Macedonia, two-thirds of the total GDP and one-third of the total national profit leaving the rest of the country's territory spatially and economically underdeveloped. One of the main reasons for the unequal regional development of Macedonia is inconsistent urban and spatial planning in the past twenty years. In 2002, Macedonia started the process of decentralization, and adopted The Spatial plan of the Republic of Macedonia 2002-2020 which presented a long-term strategy for a balanced and equal regional and economic development of the country. In the years that followed, this plan failed to be accomplished, and consequentially, the spatial structure of Macedonia grew in the opposite direction, becoming even more centralized than ever before. In 2009, a new planning document was introduced in order to supplement the existing spatial plan with a solution for overcoming the alarming mono-centricity. But instead of offering a solid and clear agenda, the new plan presented a copy of the European Union policy for polycentric development without making any adaptation to the current spatial structure of Macedonia. This chapter will explore the implementation of European Union regional policies within The Strategy for the Regional Development of the Republic of Macedonia 2009-2019 in order to trace and predict the possible impact it could have on spatial planning practice and the development of the country.

Keywords: spatial planning, Macedonia, polycentricity.

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the impact of the latest planning document, the *Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Macedonia 2009-2019* on the spatial planning and development of Macedonia. This plan was made in order to adapt the already existing strategy from 2002 (presented in *The Spatial plan of Republic of Macedonia 2002-2020*) to the current development of a monocentric spatial situation. But instead of doing that, the document just presents a copy of the strategy for polycentric development taken from European Union regional policies. This research will analyze the implementation of the model for polycentric development in the *Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Macedonia 2009-2019*. Consequently, this chapter will point out the direct and subsequent influences of the plan on the planning system of Macedonia, and on the spatial development of the country. Part of this research was done for a paper entitled “The impact of Copy-Paste Planning: The Case of the Strategy for Regional Development of Macedonia 2009-2019,” which was presented at RESPAG, the Second Scientific Conference for Regional Development, Spatial Planning and Strategic development held in Belgrade in May 2013.

Spatial Planning and Development in Macedonia, 1991-2012

Macedonia declared independence in 1991 when Yugoslavia disintegrated, and alongside other socialist countries in Eastern and Central Europe, Macedonia started the transition from a socialist to a market-orientated democratic society. During this period the political system and legislature underwent a complete restructure. Along with the transformation of the country’s most important systems, the planning institutions were also reestablished, as well as municipal and regional structures.

But Macedonia did not begin the transition period with a comprehensive plan for future economic and spatial development. In the first five years, from 1991 to 1996, the country did not establish an institution that was responsible for urban and spatial planning. At the time, the network of municipalities was still the same as the one that had existed in Yugoslavia – there were thirty-two municipalities, each one governed by its own local

government (Fig. 1). In 1991, these municipal centers had their governing power withdrawn – they still existed, but no longer had any decision-making authority. The newly-formed management that was responsible for municipal governing was situated in Skopje. This centralization of power in Macedonia was the very opposite of what all the other post-socialist countries had been doing, which was the decentralization of power by establishing regional and municipal systems. Thus, there are two narratives that explain why these events took place. The first narrative has an ethnic background and as such, it was publicly disclosed years later when Kiro Gligorov, the first president of Macedonia, was interviewed for the then weekly newspaper *Fokus*. He stated that the 1991 government feared the possible separation of municipalities with Albanian majorities as autonomous territories (*Fokus*, 2000). The second theory was that Macedonia was not economically prepared enough to begin the process of decentralization. But, whatever the true reason was, the result was a five-year standstill.

The Macedonian government started the process of decentralization in 1996 after the 1995 Law of local self-governing was adopted (Bureau for Regional Development of Macedonia). The process of decentralization drastically transformed the spatial and economic organization of the territory: the then existing thirty-two municipalities were transformed into one hundred and thirty-four municipalities and one hundred and twenty-five centers of local government (Skopje had ten municipalities and one center for local government) (The Ministry of Local Government) (Fig. 2). Also, the same year, the Agency for Urban and Spatial planning of the Republic of Macedonia was established and the work on the first spatial plan began. The *Spatial Plan for the Republic of Macedonia 2002-2020* (later in the text the *2002 Plan*) was adopted six years later, in 2002, and it proposed a strategy for an “equitable and balanced spatial and economic development that would be achieved through interregional infrastructural integration” (Spatial Plan for the Republic of Macedonia 2002-2020, 2002). For the purpose of the plan, old statistical data from 1996 was used, as the first census in Macedonia was held in 2002 (The Census 2002 of the Republic of Macedonia, 2002).



Fig. 1, Thirty-two municipalities



Fig. 2, One hundred thirty-four municipalities

Later on, in 2004 the municipal network was changed again: the hundred and thirty-four municipalities were reduced to eighty-four (The Ministry of Local Government) (Fig. 3). This decision was executed as part of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in attempt to answer certain ethnically orientated questions at that time in Macedonia. The new municipal network was created by restructuring of the existing municipalities according to ethnic affiliation, which not only led to more ethnically homogenous territories, but also to huge negative reaction and massive protests in many Macedonian

towns. In order to resolve this situation, a referendum was held on a national level, the second one ever in Macedonia, which further was passed as negative due insufficient number of voters.



Fig. 3, Eighty-four municipalities



Fig. 4, Eight regions and eighty-four municipalities

The last territorial transformation happened in 2009, when the European Commission report suggested that it would be of great significance were Macedonia to overcome the regional and economic disparities between Skopje and the other regions through the implementation of European Union

regional policy. In other words, the policy for polycentric spatial development. The Macedonian government at once sprung into action: the Law for the Urban and Regional Development of the Republic of Macedonia was passed, a new development strategy was elaborated, called the *Strategy for Regional Development of Macedonia 2009-2019* (later referred to in this text as, *Plan 2009*), and a regional structure was added to the existing municipal one - now the eighty-four municipalities were grouped into eight administrative regions (Fig. 4) (The eight regions are: Skopje Region, Northeastern Region, Eastern Region, Southeastern Region, Pelagonia Region, Vardar Region, Southwestern Region and the Polog Region). The introduction of the regions was anticipated to be a positive event that would set the grounds for a more functional system of municipal-regional governing. The former mayor of Kochani and the president of the Regional center of the Eastern Region, Ljubomir Janev stated: "We can say that this project is of great value for us because it will promote regional integration. I think that this and the Law for Regional Development is a good foundation for successful regional development" (DW Academy, 2009). But today, the spatial development has remained unchanged - Skopje is still a growing center with 48.5% of the total GDP of the country and a population made up of half of the inhabitants of the country. Further in the text I will discuss the plan proposed in *Plan 2009*, which uses the model for polycentric development from European Union regional policy without adapting it to the existing regional structure of the country.

The Strategy for Polycentric Development and its Implementation within the Plan 2009

Plan 2009 was adopted in 2009 in addition to the already existing *Plan 2002*. Apart from introducing a new strategy for development, it also had the aim of adapting the planning agenda from 2002 to the recently changed territorial organization, as well as progressing the process of centralization in the country. The significance of this document is stated in its hierarchical ranking in the system of plans. The Macedonian planning system shows a clear scheme that states interdependence between spatial and urban plans (Fig. 5). Fig. 1 shows how the spatial plan of Macedonia along with supplementary elaborations such as strategies and action plans which are the paramount documents from which all other smaller-scale plans are to be generated. Out of this rational, capital plans such as *Plan 2009* and *Plan 2002* could either strengthen or block the planning system.

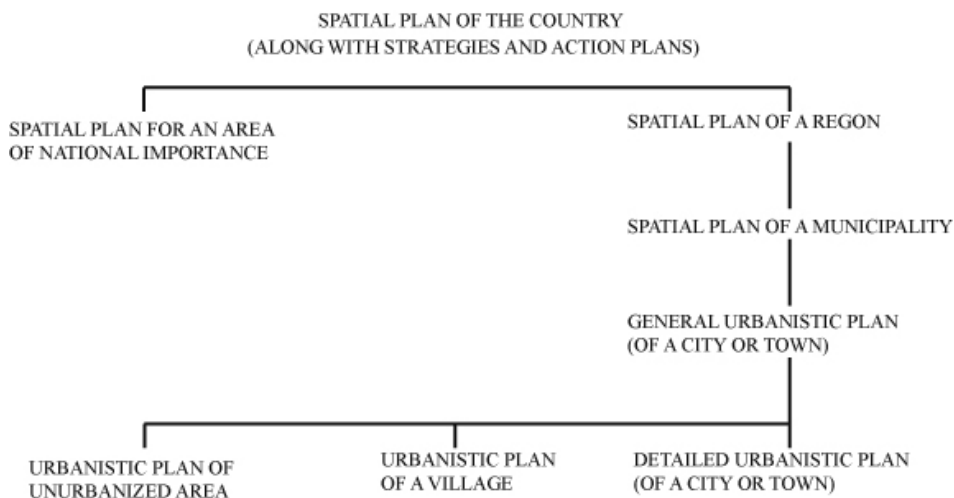


Fig. 5, Hierarchy of plans in the planning system of Macedonia

The main goal in *Plan 2009* is to introduce the model for polycentric development into the spatial development of Macedonia, thereby advancing planning practice by using European Union-orientated regional agendas. The concept of polycentric development was first introduced as part of the spatial development policies of the European Union with the *European Spatial Development Perspective* (ESDP) in Potsdam in 1999 as an answer to the regional disparities that emerged after the first enlargement of the Union (European Spatial Development Perspective, 1999). The model of polycentric development is a comprehensive and complicated system that can be described as a system of several equally or semi-equally developed centers that are strongly interrelated to each other and to other centers. The centers could be different kinds of actors such as inhabited areas, firms, industries or people, and the link could be different connections between these actors such as infrastructure, telephone calls or the Internet. In the introduction to *Plan 2009* it is stated that: "Macedonia will achieve an equal and balanced spatial growth of the regions based on the model for polycentric development" (Strategy, 2009). Although the polycentric model is taken as a key model for the future development of Macedonia, its mention in the opening statement of the document is not supported by any additional explanations.

Furthermore, in the pages that follow the term polycentricity is only randomly referred to in the text.

Indeed, the model for polycentric development is discussed in the section where all the statistical data is presented. Here, a solution for the discrepancy in development between Skopje and the other regions is proposed through a plan for the redistribution of the national budget spent on regional development (Strategy, 2009). The budget idea, one of the most important parts of the strategy, is illustrated by a diagram with numbers and percentages to which there is no additional commentary. Details on how the finances are calculated, or how this huge step could be realized are not revealed to the reader.

The implementation of the model for polycentric development could again be discovered in the second and main chapter where the objectives of the strategy are listed. The goals of the strategy which are presented are vast and general to the point where any proposed future development cannot be connected to the previously stated statistical data. What the given objectives state, does not follow any particular pattern for polycentric regional development (which is founded on the existence and creation of interconnected centers), but instead, everything that could be done in the regions is enumerated. As Macedonia's rural regions are highly underdeveloped, stating everything that could and should be done for more distributed regional development is quite a lot. For example, the proposed ten-year agenda for the prospective development of the infrastructure includes the reconstruction of all the transport networks (roads, highway and railways) including additional transport links such as the highway and railroad connections to Albania and Bulgaria (the neighboring countries to which Macedonia does not currently have any highway and rail connections), such as Corridor X and Corridor VIII, the building of three cargo airports, and the renewal of the existing airports in Skopje and Ohrid (Strategy, 2009). The objectives of each section for instance, Economy, Agriculture, or Industry were carried out in a similar manner.

The implementation of the model for polycentric development within *Plan 2009* has been carried out on a very vague and superficial level. The model has just been taken from European Union regional policies and has been placed within the strategy without any adjustments, thus rendering the document rather unclear, confusing and at the end of the day, rather difficult to use. Moreover, the agenda that has been presented, which was supposed to supplement and upgrade *Plan 2002* has barely been coordinated with the

previous plan, even the years to which the documents extend are different (2019 for *Plan 2009* and 2020 for *Plan 2002*). It seems as though the only purpose of *Plan 2009* was to fulfill the requirements of the European Commission by presenting some written material about spatial planning that includes polycentric development as its key strategy.

The Planning System in Macedonia

Taking over existing strategies, especially successful ones, has always been a practice employed among developed and developing countries. In one of the few books that discusses the urban transformations of post-socialist countries, *Transformation of Cities in Central and Eastern Europe* it is stated that socialist countries embedded most of the industrialization tactics from the capitalistic west into socialist planning agendas (Hamilton, 1995). Today, the regional policies of the European Union are supposed to be implemented in the planning agendas of all the countries in the region. When an already existing plan is taken to be implemented, it is crucial to adapt the strategy to the social, political, economic, environmental, and regional landscape of the chosen country. When a plan is just straightforwardly copied without further adaptation the impact can only be negative. *Plan 2009* is such an example.

The effects of the copying could deeply affect the functioning of the planning system of Macedonia, and consequently the overall regional development of the country. Although there is a spatial plan (*Plan 2002*), for years the planning institutions have been focused on the elaboration and execution of small-scale urban plans such as the General Urban Plans (GUPs, a plan of a city) and Detailed Urban Plans (DUPs, a plan of a city district). Most of the Macedonian municipalities do not have a long-term development agenda; on a regional scale, only the Skopje region had a separate spatial plan specially elaborated. There is a clear gap between the large-scale and the smaller-scale plans. The main reasons for this are the inconsistent planning agendas in the core plans which are a direct consequence of institutional inefficiency and the lack of qualified planners. For now, *Plan 2002* can hardly be put into action, mostly because its supplementary document – *Plan 2009*, does not provide any clearly explained directions for the development of the country. And consequently, all the other urban and spatial plans referring to the regions, municipalities, cities, towns and villages cannot be produced in concordance with either *Plan 2002*, or *Plan 2009*. This communication breakdown between

macro and micro plans largely contributes to the over-grown territorial monocentricity of Macedonia.

On another level, the lack of clarity of the plan has sabotaged some genuinely valid ideas such as the use of the polycentric model or the redistribution of the budget for regional development. In one of the most detailed studies on spatial polycentricity, *The Polycentric Metropolis: Learning from Mega-City Regions in Europe* discusses how the polycentric model could be applied to any spatial structure if adapted to its main characteristics (Hall, 2006). Therefore, hypothetically, Macedonia could achieve certain polycentricity if a solidly-structured, long-term plan is presented and put into execution.

However, it is fair to state that *Plan 2009* is not the only document of this kind to be elaborated in Macedonia. The country has a long tradition of adopting plans made on 'the back of an envelope.' Just in the last six years the Detailed Urban Plan for Skopje city centre was changed eleven times. This was done without any proper public presentation or planning documentation (the public presentations were usually scheduled during the summer holidays). On the same note, there are many territories whose spatial plans have not been updated since the period when Macedonia was part of Yugoslavia (many areas of Skopje still have Detailed Urban Plans dated from the 1960s). This constant disorganization has its roots in the processes of reestablishing the political system and institutions during the post-socialist transition. The institutional chaos and inefficiency were typical of all post-socialist countries at the beginning of the transition (Stanilov, 2007). The 2012 report of the European Commission for Macedonia states that there has only been slight progress in the institutional integration (European Commission, 2012).

As with all the other planning documents, *Plan 2009* was adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia after public discussion. In order to discover what architectural and urbanism professionals in Macedonia think of the new plan, interviews were made with fifteen professors of Architecture and Planning from both the state and private universities in Macedonia. This survey indicated that four out of fifteen professors knew of the existence of *Strategy 2009*; whilst seven thought that the document was a fake when it was shown to them; and none of them had read it, or attended its public presentation.

Conclusion

When a crucial part of a system breaks down, the whole system either stops working or it operates in rather a slow and weak manner. In the planning system of Macedonia that part is *Plan 2009*. This document presents a plan that is inconsistent and unclear, therefore unusable. Since *Plan 2009* is one of the key large-scale plans that dictate the elaboration of all small-scale plans, its unusability blocks the whole planning system from functioning, which furthermore enables free-style planning and monocentric spatial growth.

The weak elaboration of *Plan 2009* is not the only reason for the monocentricity of the country, but nevertheless, it supports the future unproductiveness of the planning system. In order to move forward and change the spatial and economic situation from monocentric to polycentric, it is crucial for the planning system to start working. This could be done through “hard-core” reconstruction of the working methods of the planning institutions; the supplementing of the legislation concerning urban and spatial planning; the employing of highly-educated professionals from the field of urbanism and strategic planning; and the involvement of citizens in planning processes by increasing their transparency and inclusivity. It is important to revive and follow the hierarchy of plans, and most of all, it is essential for Macedonia to develop a new spatial plan that would stem from the regional, economic, political, social and cultural structure of the eight regions.

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