

THE NETWORK OF SETTLEMENTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF URBANIZATION IN SLOVENIA AT THE START OF THE 21ST CENTURY

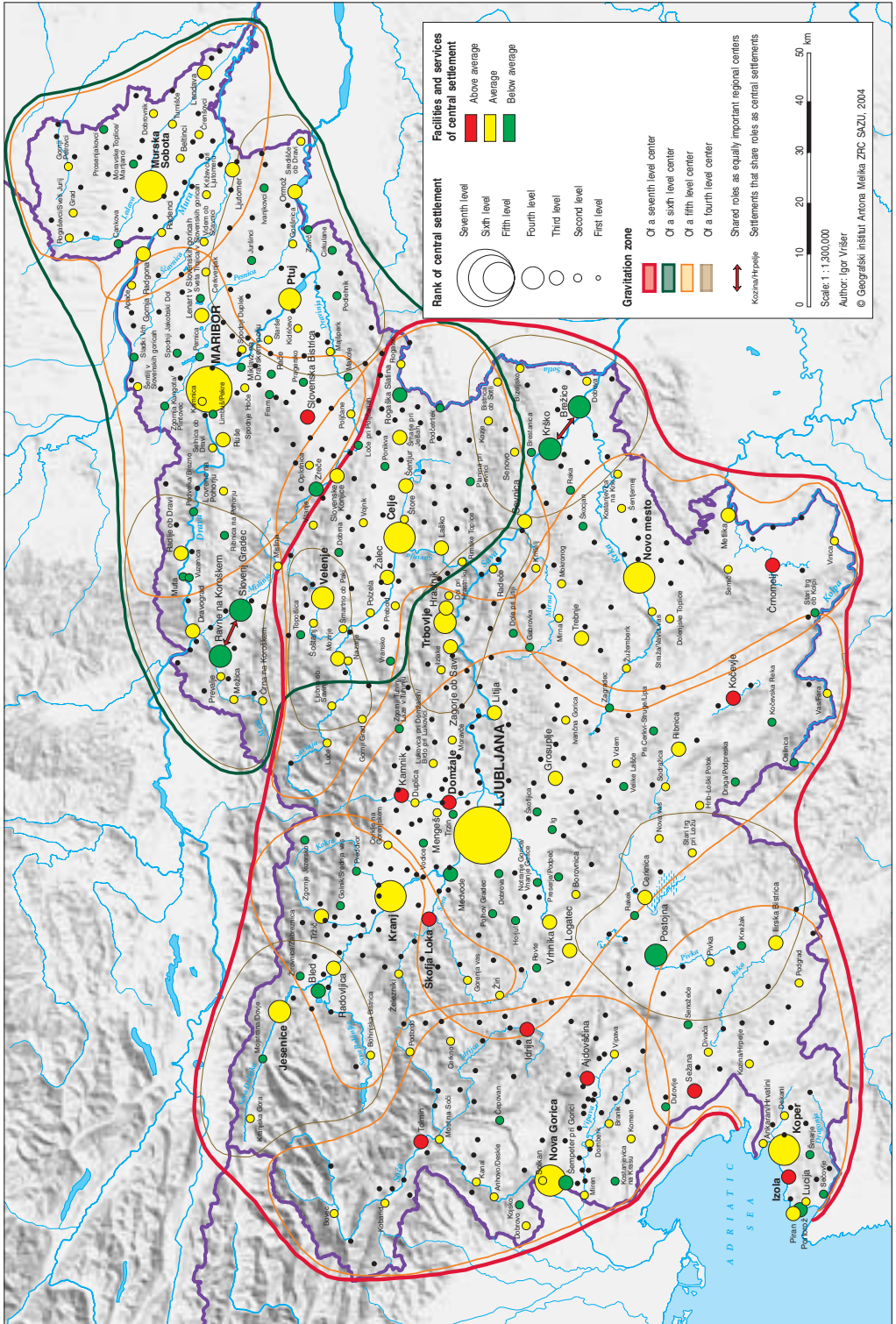
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A look at the map below shows that according to European »standards« Slovenia's urban system is relatively unrecognizable as such since only the Ljubljana region exceeds half a million inhabitants, the Maribor region is smaller by half, the Celje region is smaller by half than Maribor, the conglomeration of coastal cities is again smaller by half than Celje, and the remaining urban areas number less than 50,000 people. In spite of this, a change in the spatial relationships with the neighbouring countries of the European Union, especially with cities in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Italy) and Carinthia and Styria (Austria) is to be expected in the coming decades when borders will no longer present an obstacle. In accordance with its geopolitical position, Slovenia's urban network will become a part of globalization trends, which are marked by (propulsive) production and service activities that have an increasingly supra-national character, even though they usually have an »individualist« approach relative to spatial planning. Globalization will increase competition between large economic regions, especially between the cities or urban regions that are the »motors« of regional development. The position, development, and role of the cities in the hierarchy will change in conditions of world competition. Development will increasingly depend on inclusion in the network of European economies. It is important for the Slovene urban system that it lies relatively close to European development axes or their development focal points, so it can be connected via the so-called »quick connections.« Since an appropriate infrastructure is one of the more important modern location factors, swiftness of decision is just as important. In this role, cities as development generators are important because of the development of public functions. These centers develop new network forms of economic, financial, research, educational, social, public, and service activities, etc., which thus became the bearers of development impulses. In global processes, network forms usually appear in the flexibility of production (for example by forming »technology parks«), the labour market (for example, in the polarization and hierarchization of employment centers), the mobility of capital, the deregulation of inherited political, institutional, and tax mechanisms, and the injection of equity capital in the spectrum of public and social spheres.

Conditions and modern problems in the development of cities: urban development between the rise and decline of the importance of urban centers

Social developments in recent decades contributed to the fact that cities as a spatial phenomenon can no longer be defined as a separate process because their boundaries with the countryside are increasingly blurred and the cities are increasingly being transformed into unified urban regions. Furthermore, a hierarchical urban system is gradually replacing the horizontally planned network of cities. Polarization and specialization are the main characteristics of the current and future structure of cities. Continuing transformation, primarily in cities within the borders of the European Union, is to be expected, while areas outside the so-called »interior« boundaries are expected to lose their importance.

Regardless of their insignificance in comparison with the size of other European cities, it is indisputable that along with their economic influence, important cultural and social impulses emanate from Slovene cities. Two contradictory processes are characteristic of their further spatial development: demographic and settlement growth »outward« with the transformation of predominantly agrarian land into mixed (agricultural-urban) land use areas and growth »inward« with the change of income-extensive



◀ *Figure 1: Urbanization in 1996.*

uses to income-intensive uses. In market economies, activities in city centers that do not create enough income per surface unit to cover all expenses, including city costs cannot survive. On abandoned (pre-dominantly) industrial surfaces close to city centers, new commercial and business centers are developing that can cover the increasing urban costs through more intensive land use. Non-profit public (including administrative) activities that remain in central locations in contradiction to market laws must be subsidized by the state if they wish to remain in the more accessible locations.

The continuation of current urbanization trends is undoubtedly an unavoidable law of development that in spite of everything still demands the re-evaluation of the characteristics and comparable advantages of the existing urban system. This system is the fruit of a long policy of stimulating polycentric development and its continuation for directing the mixed use of land in terms of dispersed concentrations and modern forms of urbanization with assessments of the available »reurbanization« potential. In this sense, the following strategies for directing the development of cities often apply:

- »consolidation« of cities as a strategy of preserving and protecting usable buildings with the possibility of renovating the city fabric and preserving quality city neighbourhoods, suburban centers, newly suburbanized surrounding areas, village centers, etc.;
- revitalization as a strategy of urban renewal and the further construction of cities based on this concept linked to the gradual restructuring of areas where the new use is also based on a denser structure of housing and employment possibilities;
- sanitation as a strategy of introducing the new use of deteriorating industrial areas and areas of public infrastructure primarily for the construction of residential neighbourhoods;
- expansion of the cities and suburbs by more consolidated building (concentrations within already built-up areas) in otherwise limited potential building land (Koželj 2001) employing concepts of mixed land use (Ravbar 2002).

For the balanced spatial development of the cities, it is important from the national viewpoint that economic development increases the attractiveness of the functional area and consequently improves the quality of life. Along with this, in spite of the heterogeneity of function areas and their size, it is necessary to strive for the decentralized basis of the network of cities with a complementary activity structure. Last but not least, cities will continue to develop beyond their existing boundaries even though their further spatial expansion is unjustified for environmental and economic reasons. In future, it will be necessary to exploit the existing potentials for building concentrations within existing settlement areas. From the prospective viewpoint, two possible models confront each other:

- the classic model of a centralized urban network based on the consolidation of the polycentric and hierarchical based system of central places, and
- the model of a decentralized network of various development focal points in a region based on modern principles of a »shallow« hierarchical network of relations or dispersed development poles around infrastructural focal points (Ravbar et al. 2001).

Three decades of endeavours to apply the polycentric system of a network of settlements and modern socioeconomic processes exclude the realization of a centralized urban network of settlements in Slovenia. The origins of the formation of urban regions offer diverse developmental challenges that are the consequence of various complementary reciprocal forms and developmental levels of urbanization. The model of a »shallow« and decentralized network of satellite cities within functionally and gravitationally linked urban regions, which is based on modern principles of the network connection of developmental poles, is therefore more realistic for Slovenia and in harmony with modern aspirations for its socioeconomic and demographic development. This dictates the re-evaluation of the existing development strategies that should be based on the consideration of the specific needs of urban areas in the framework of national development orientations, accelerating the horizontal and vertical connections between national, regional, and local administrations, and closer links with the network of

cities in the European Union, which requires the establishment of a system of information on the special features of Slovenia's urban system and its vulnerabilities.

Modern cities are therefore gradually changing from a hierarchical system of settlements into a more equalized network of focal points according to the principal of dispersed decentralization or into urban regions. Their further development places in the foreground a policy of regional development based on the following general objectives:

- the balanced polycentric development of the network of cities by forming new relations with the countryside in a unified urban system;
- the formation of networks in accordance with the increasing specialization and division of labour that together create conditions for the elimination of too large structural differences on the margins of urban areas and between regions;
- the connection of networks of different levels by combining national, regional, and local connectivity with effective traffic connections among otherwise autonomous units;
- settlement development oriented »inward«;
- equitable access to goods and services of common importance through a modern infrastructure and the reduction of dependence on the automobile by encouraging the use of public transport and alternative forms of individual transport (e. g., bicycling);
- the improvement of environmental conditions by decreasing traffic flows, encouragement of intermodal systems of all types, and coordinated construction of the transportation and information infrastructure.

Modern postindustrial cities can only be successfully restructured on the regional scale, and they must have a suitable (economically-justifiable) gravitational hinterland. The principal characteristic of an urban region is its »internal« polycentricity. In multi-pole urban regions, individual centers specialize according to local advantages and potentials, although there is not a precisely determined hierarchy among them. Thus the importance or the role of individual centers in a region changes over time. The more diverse and complementary the structure of its work places is, the more connected its economic activities are. It is worth pointing out that potentially fewer risks appear in urbanized areas that are spatially linked in a network than with activities that are only connected functionally. In the case of Slovenia, this concerns the network of cities that are (too) small and not linked in a uniform urban system. Another »weakness« of Slovenia's small cities is that their number is high relative to their total population and that they are located relatively close to each other. We believe that modern location conditions will trigger further differentiation in the hierarchical level of centers based on the activation of modern development potentials.

Given that settlement structures reflect the diversity of historical, social, cultural, and economic functions and that on this basis crystallization cores formed in certain areas, a five-level scheme of a network of centers as the basis for polycentric regional development is optimal in Slovene conditions, based on the achieved level of economic development: (1) international level of functions, (2) national level of functions, (3) regional level of functions, (4) intermunicipal level of functions, and (5) local level of functions.

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