

Regional disproportion encapsulated – Case studies of Južno pomoravlje and Timočka krajina regions of Serbia

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Abstract

Present discourses consider regionalisation as an inevitable strategic action in guiding development processes that have the spatial implications. In Serbia, where regional disproportions have been growing larger during the last two decades, some of the major issues that brought to the relative lagging back of the country in comparison to its surroundings can be summed up as: extremely uneven regional development which exceeds the ratio 1:10 between its most and least developed regions; weak territorial cohesion; insufficiently used, underused or wrongly used territorial capital; and the issue of competitiveness. In the paper we especially focus on the most lagging back regions in Serbia, i.e. Južno pomoravlje – in the south, and Timočka krajina – in the east part of the country. Južno pomoravlje is featured by territorial fragmentation (intra-regional differences) and insufficient integration in Serbia as a whole, as well as by unfavourable socio-economic conditions which get worse in the period of transition. Timočka krajina is a region with prolonged economic stagnation, which is, above all, manifested in the constant depopulation and emptying-out of its settlements, especially in the mountain, remote, and border parts of the region. Both regions have recently been prioritised in elaboration by the Regional spatial plans, and some of the findings will be presented here.

Key words: region, depopulation, Južno pomoravlje, Timočka krajina, Regional spatial plan.

JEL Classification: R58 – Regional Development Policy

1 Introduction

It has been more than a decade now that regionalisation, i.e. the process of creating regions as a way of managing national development policy by taking in account specific needs of certain regions and providing their harmonised development, has been in the focus of attention of Serbian planners, economists, politicians, etc. having both opponents and advocates. On the one hand, regionalisation is assumed to cause federalisation, and federalisation can potentially induce (further) disintegration of the country. However, on the other hand, there are much more arguments in favour of regionalisation, e.g. to support the idea of subsidiarity, according to which central authority should perform only those tasks which cannot be effectively accomplished at a more immediate or local level.

The key motive for present engagement of state in regionalisation of Serbia lies in the existing huge intra- and inter-regional imbalances, which restrain development and initiate the migration flows and depopulation of the country's large territories [1]. The circumstances of Serbia still being in the transition phase, quite familiar to all other former communist/socialist countries after the fall of the Berlin wall, were here prolonged by additional economic and

other development constraints caused by wars in former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, when Serbia greatly suffered from isolated position at the European and global scene. Overall societal retrogression in Serbia in this early transition period, in contrast to the integration in other countries that drew on cultural identities, political regimes, and modes of production lasted until the year 2000, after which a dynamic but still insufficient recovery of Serbia started taking place [2]. At the same time, the incorporated strong, centralised power pursued with broadening the division of the country's territory between the centre (capital city, and especially the wider Belgrade – Novi Sad metropolitan area) on the one hand and the periphery on the other - the situation which is typical for all countries governed by the political idea that people, assets and territory could be efficiently controlled by methods and techniques of strict centralisation [3]. The investments, which for a long time have been directed to Belgrade, embody the stagnation of the rest of the Serbian territory. Followed by the country's overall demographic retrogression which has been quite accelerated (e.g. ageing, depopulation, out-migration to other countries) the regional disproportions in Serbia have only been engraved [4].

A particular focus of this paper is on the two most lagging back regions in Serbia – Južno pomoravlje, which is a part of the South region (*Južni region*), and Timočka krajina which represents a part of the East region (*Istočni region*) according to the latest Serbian *Law on regional development* [5]. It should be noted that these regions, recognised by the law in Serbia, are statistical functional territorial units which are substantiated for the purposes of planning and implementation of the regional development policy according to the NUTS 2 classification, and that they are not administrative territorial units with a legal position.

Južno pomoravlje is the prime example of a territory which has been faced with a several decade long underdevelopment as well as with the latest poverty of 'transition'. This region's future prospects are challenged by cumulated economic problems (lack of industrial capacities, major system's collapse, lack of entrepreneurship, slow process of privatisation), structural problems (huge unemployment), and social and demographic issues. On top of all that, the region of Južno pomoravlje has a problem of disintegration and fragmentation of its territory and of insufficient integration in Serbia as a whole.

Timočka krajina is a region, which in certain aspects falls even behind the Južno pomoravlje region of Serbia. Apart from its structural economic problems in the process of transition which stroke the former industrial (growth) centres of Timočka krajina the most, underperformance of this region is especially coloured by tremendous depopulation, which may lead to complete demographic emptying-out of Timočka krajina's settlements, especially in the mountain, remote and border parts of this region.

Having in view that both Južno pomoravlje and Timočka krajina regions have recently been prioritised in elaboration by the Regional spatial plans, these two case studies are in the focus of attention of empirical analyses which are supported by theoretic background on regional disproportion issue in Serbia. Lagging back in development of rural, tourist, mountain and cross-border areas, as well as of some urban settlements brings the major drawbacks for the south and east parts of Serbia. Transition process is neither simple nor the linear one. It calls for root and comprehensive changes, which imply abandonment of administrative and utopian thinking about the spatial/territorial organisation, latter having the implication in current backwardness of Timočka krajina and Južno pomoravlje. With sound scientific and empirical grounds for research on these two regions in Serbia it is expected that new regional policy

guidelines could be outlined, illustrating the change of how the state should refer to the insufficiently developed or neglected regions.

2 Regional differentiation and disproportion in Serbian regional development

The territory of Serbia is dominated by two major regional-geographic units: Vojvodina-Panonia-Danubian macro-region, which is qualified by relatively large homogeneity, and the Central Serbian - Balkan macro-region with a much more complex regional structure [6]. However, it is the model of administrative-territorial organisation of Serbia rather than its morphological structure that influences the regional disproportions in the country. In reference to this, the issue of polycentricity (referring to the network of settlements in morphological sense) can be discussed against polycentrism (the policy which sustains polycentricity as a functioning system for urban centres within decentralised state), latter not been incorporated by the Serbian policy at the national level [7]. Here, one should notice that before the 1980s, the former country (Yugoslavia) was practising for several decades one of the most decentralised systems of planning and policy. However, with radical re-centralisation of the system which happened in the 1990s, the entitlement of local authorities was quite reduced.



Figure 1: Regions of NUTS 2 level in Serbia

In reference to the latest *Law on regional development* [5], there are 7 regions in Serbia which are discerned with aim to encourage regional development. They consist of counties (*okruzi*) – 29 in total in Serbia, which were formerly constituted by the ratio of ‘gerrymandering’, representing rather the ‘field/territorial offices’ of the republican sectoral ministries [8].

Within this background, regional disproportions in Serbia have been growing larger especially during the last two decades. Some of the major issues that brought to the relative lagging back of Serbia in comparison to its surroundings are:

- **Extremely uneven regional development**, which exceeds the ratio of 1:10 between its most and least developed regions. The backward regions in the east, west, and, above all, in the south of Serbia, face the real demographic and economic collapse with significant damage to the country as a whole. On the other hand, the ‘economic backbone’ of Serbian development is represented by regions along its three major rivers: Dunav, Sava, and Morava, and by all means it is the territory of wider Belgrade – Novi Sad metropolitan region which further concentrates people and activities, mainly on the account of decanted population from other regions of Serbia.
- **Weak territorial cohesion**, with centralised power at the state level following the ‘Centralist French Model’, and the sequence of autarchy exercised by centralised municipalities which, under the circumstances of underdevelopment and the lack of policy (strategy) for Serbian regional development, bring to weakening of sense and responsibility for the whole, on the one hand, and incapability of the state to successfully deal with the piled-up problems of regional development, on the other.
- **Insufficiently used, underused or wrongly used territorial capital**, i.e. inadequate use of natural, human and material assets and potentials, with lack of attention especially to the soft territorial capital, i.e. institutional, planning, cultural and social values, which should be the Serbian platform for gaining comparative advantages in the international economic and political scene.
- **The issue of competitiveness**, which implies the level of economic ability of a region/state to enter the open and sometimes quite restrictive competition at the European market with its own resources and products.

The key task for the state is to promptly and adequately address huge intra- and inter- regional differences, which on the one hand prevent from future development, and on the other, they intensify negative population trends.

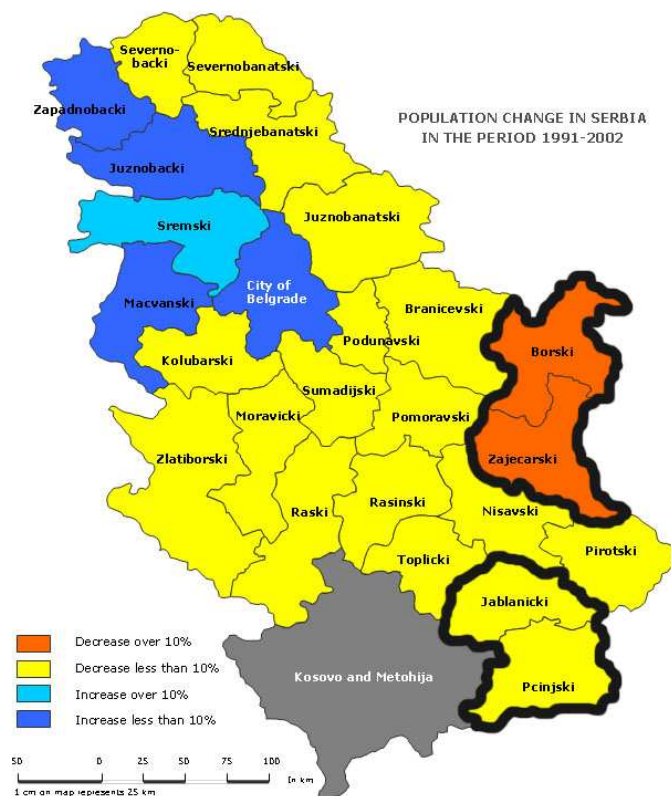


Figure 2: Population trends in the counties of Serbia for the period 1991-2002

With the knowledge base on lagging back of certain regions in Serbia, it is of particular significance to grasp into more detailed analysis of such situation encapsulated by two case-studies: Južno pomoravlje and Timočka krajina (see the emphasised borders on Figure 2).

2.1 Južno pomoravlje

Territorial cover of Južno pomoravlje is 6,289 km² (approximately 7% of the territory of the Republic of Serbia), which encompasses two counties: Jablanički (with 6 municipalities – Leskovac, Lebane, Crna Trava, Vlasotince, Bojnik and Medveđa) and Pčinjski (with 7 municipalities – Vranje, Bosilegrad, Trgovište, Surdulica, Vladičin Han, Bujanovac and Preševo). In the *Strategy of regional development for the Republic of Serbia* [9] it has been emphasized that the most unfavourable situation in the Republic is experienced by the two counties that form Južno pomoravlje region, because out of 13 municipalities within the two counties, 10 are undeveloped since their national income per capita is less than 50% of the Republic's average.

Južno pomoravlje is the region with more than 468,500 inhabitants (6% of the total population in Serbia) that are distributed in 699 settlements. The region is situated in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula, between Niški, Toplički and Pirotski counties in the north, Republic of Macedonia in the south, Autonomous Province Kosovo and Metohija in the west and Republic of Bulgaria in the east.

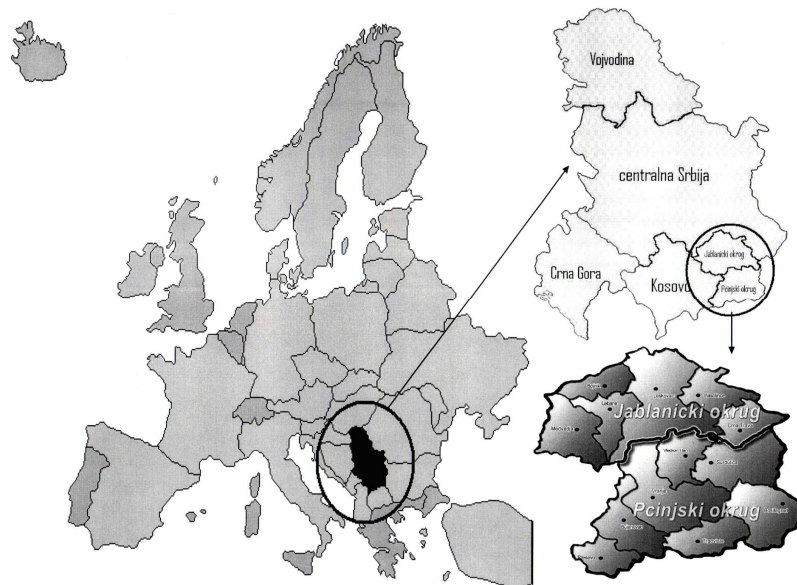


Figure 3: Location of Južno pomoravlje region in a wider context (Source: *Integrativni plan društveno-ekonomskog razvoja Južna Srbija 2005-2007*)

The region is insufficiently developed in socio-economic terms and is characterized by general depopulation with just one of its municipalities (Vranje) that managed to increase its population in the period 1991-2002.

Južno pomoravlje's comparative advantage is an excellent traffic potential which gives this region the prime role for connecting the north and south part of Balkan Peninsula. This potential is valorised through development of the European multimodal corridor X, which links Južno pomoravlje with cities of Niš and Beograd in the north, and Skoplje in the south.

In a wider context, this corridor's extensions relatively coincide with the secondary corridors and highways of the region, which provide connection with the major centres in the surroundings, e.g. Sofia, Thessaloniki and Priština [10, 11].

The key natural resources of the region are: agricultural land, geothermal and mineral water resources, hydro-potential, forests, and mineral resources. These features of the natural environment are accompanied with cultural-historic heritage, thus forming a base for development of the whole year round tourism which is seen as an important initiator of the region's socio-economic regeneration, especially in the border areas.

Development of Južno pomoravlje is presently limited by a number of factors: unresolved status of neighbouring Kosovo and Metohija, which especially affects those parts of the region that are located within the Land Security Zone (municipalities: Medveđa, Vranje, Bujanovac and Preševo); peripheral geographic position of certain parts of the region in relation to the rest of the Serbian territory; bad condition of the local infrastructure, especially of the local roads, as well as insufficient number of national border crossings with the Republic of Bulgaria and Republic of Macedonia; large depopulation in the rural and border parts of the region on the one hand and local concentration of people in the county – regional or municipal centres on the other; young and educated population's fled from this region to the country's urban centres with more developed functions of production, e.g. Belgrade, Niš, Kragujevac, Kruševac; fragmentation of agricultural land; undeveloped tourist offer; economic underdevelopment due to less investment activity in this region when compared to the rest of Serbia and the problem of industrial capacities' technological backwardness followed by insufficient regional cooperation of present companies as well as the lack of qualified working force for high-tech industries.

Like it was identified in the *Strategy* [10] which is the first phase in elaboration of the Regional spatial plan for Južno pomoravlje, guiding principles for development of this region should include:

- **Activation of the region's territorial capital**, starting from the planned priorities and activities, as well as from the region's activation especially in terms of IPA instrument for pre-accession assistance.
- **Environmental protection** by prevention from natural resources' degradation, presuming the protection of agricultural and forest land from unplanned development and sprawl in the valleys, at the peripheries of larger urban settlements and within infrastructure corridors.
- **Decentralised concentration as a model of development**, i.e. more balanced sub-regional development and distribution of population, economy and other activities. This presumes slowing down the concentration of people and activities in the areas of intensive growth (infrastructure corridor X) and stimulation of territorial dispersal of small and medium-sized production capacities wherever the resources, technologies and location allow. Also, the stimulation of regional functions in sub-regional centres of Leskovac and Vranje is needed, whereas other functions should be decentralised to the municipal and micro-development centres for the rural areas.
- **Adequate addressing of depopulation issues** with implementation of measures which could influence economy recovery, rural development initiatives and development of infrastructure as well as of other communal services in smaller settlements.

- **Adaptability** to the market economy, with increase of innovations, efficiency, larger support to entrepreneurship, integration and synchronisation of business programs with the market demands, etc.

2.2 Timočka krajina

The region of Timočka krajina is located in the eastern part of the Republic of Serbia covering the area of 7,130 km² (which represents approximately 8% of the territory of Serbia). It consists of two counties: Zaječarski (with 4 municipalities – Zaječar, Knjaževac, Sokobanja and Boljevac), and Borski (with 4 municipalities as well – Bor, Negotin, Kladovo and Majdanpek). The number of inhabitants in 263 settlements of the region was 284,112 according to the last Census (2002) and this represents slightly less than 4% of the Republic's population. The key problem of this region is growing depopulation, which has encompassed all municipalities of the region after the 1990s. *Figure 2* illustrates that Timočka krajina marked the most intensive depopulation in Serbia in the period 1991-2002 when its population loss exceeded 10%.

Timočka krajina belongs to undeveloped and both economically and demographically backward regions of Serbia. With the latest prioritisation of this region which is currently being elaborated by the *Strategy* as a first phase in development of the appropriate Regional spatial plan [12], the key advantages and limitations of this region have been identified.

The advantages are: 1) relatively favourable geo-strategic position of the region which recently acquired a new role of trans-border region with the EU countries (Romania and Bulgaria); it is a contact area between the pan-European infrastructure corridors, e.g. corridor X in west and in south, corridor IV in east, and corridor VII in north, as well as the area of potential crossing of the energy corridor/ pipeline – South Stream; 2) region's natural resources: hydro-potential of the river Danube with the largest hydro-energy system in Europe (Đerdap 1 and 2 hydro-power plants), agricultural land (for animal pastures, growth of fruit and vegetables, as well as for wine production), mineral resources (copper, gold, coal, building materials, etc.), thermal and mineral water resources, forests, etc.; 3) favourable natural conditions (river Dunav, Stara planina mountain) and preserved natural environment in the larger part of the region, rich natural and cultural-historic heritage (especially from the pre-historic and roman period), multicultural environment, etc., which jointly offer great potentials for tourism development especially in the border and mountain parts of the region; 4) institutional organising and association of towns and municipalities of the region as well as the part of international programs and donations (Euroregions: “Danube 21”, “Eurobalkans”, “Stara Planina”, “Middle Danube-Iron Gate”, etc.).

On the other hand, the limitations for development of Timočka krajina are: 1) traditionally peripheral position in relation to the rest of the territory of Serbia (the gap which was deepened during the “cold war” and even worsened in the period of isolation and sanctions by international community), which resulted in bad infrastructure conditions (especially roads), insufficient number of border crossings, and the lower level of investments in this region when compared to the rest of Serbia; 2) negative demographic trends (depopulation, ageing, especially in the rural and border parts of the region), which get worse because of the negative migration balance in almost all municipalities of the region; 3) economic underdevelopment where the two former largest industrial centres of the region – Bor and Majdanpek presently achieve less than 1/3rd of the average national income per capita in the Republic of Serbia [9], and technological lagging back, absence of clusters and of regional cooperation; 4) land erosion, which features hilly and mountain parts of the region in particular, changeable water

regimes and lower quality of surface waters; 5) large proportion of abandoned agricultural land; 6) insufficient development of road and other physical infrastructure, and the lack of accessible public facilities and services especially in the mountain parts of the region; 7) inadequate presentation of tourist attractions; 8) a great level of environmental degradation caused by exploitation and processing of mineral resources (especially at the territories of Bor and Majdanpek municipalities, and at the lower part of river Timok).

Guiding strategic principles for development of Timočka krajina region should include its higher level of functional integration in the following contexts:

- **Reduction of sub-regional disparities** between its constituent counties, i.e. qualitative improvements in their spatial, traffic, economic and social infrastructure (especially in the mountain and border areas with exhibited dysfunctions in social and economic development).
- **Functional integration in the Republic of Serbia** – firstly with the neighbouring functional regions (neighbouring counties, macro-regional area of Niš, municipalities of Central and South Serbia, Autonomus Province of Vojvodina) which requires better connections via corridors X and VII and accomplishment of other infrastructure systems' development.
- **Functional integration in international surroundings** (neighbouring border municipalities and regions in Republic of Bulgaria and Republic of Romania), which necessitates preparation and implementation of trans-border programs mainly in the spheres of infrastructure, energy, tourism, ecology, education, etc.)

3 Conclusion

As an inevitable strategic action in guiding development processes that are of spatial implication, regionalisation has a goal to bring in harmony the economic, demographic and social development processes. With this in view, it could be said that the key task of regionalisation is to offer conceptually elaborated solutions that are viable in practice with aim to achieve optimal spatial/territorial organisation.

It can be asserted with great certainty that regionalisation in Serbia could not be seen as panacea to all inherited problems, on top of which the issue of “transitional poverty” has recently piled up. However, forming of regions could bring to realisation of pragmatic goals, which may ultimately bring to considerable benefit for the whole country and society, under the condition that it is not hastily performed or without any connection to the prior territorial organisation of a country.

One should acknowledge the fact that as a consequence of stagnation in development during the 1980s and subsequent ‘collapse’ (followed by the sanctions and international isolation of Serbia) in the 1990s, even if there has been a dynamic but insufficient recovery in the period after the year 2000, Serbia is presently faced with a situation of being labelled as “inner periphery of Europe”, i.e. it is in the group of countries in which the differences are huge between the developed and undeveloped regions.

Based on the two examples of un(der)developed regions in Serbia, i.e. Južno pomoravlje and Timočka krajina, certain priorities could be identified as common denominators for new regional policy:

- Reduction of regional (territorial) differences between the most and least developed areas, latter being particularly those which face demographic and development recession.

- Neutralisation of the negative demographic processes on the long-run, which should initiate with creation of better conditions to keep the most qualified people from further out-migration.
- Polycentric territorial development (stronger ties between rural and urban settlements in particular).
- Priority and targeted support to certain most propulsive areas, and most of all, a targeted support to undeveloped regions in order to stop disintegration and further fragmentation of Serbian territory, especially for those parts that are left aside the main courses of spatial integration.
- Spatial-functional integration of regions and trans-border communication.
- Better accessibility in terms of traffic improvements and general flow of information.
- Priority cleaning and rehabilitation of areas which are most contaminated by various sources of pollution.
- Greater protection of the most valued and most fragile areas with natural and cultural assets.
- Major improvements in management over water resources and agricultural land as two of the most valuable natural resources.
- Protection of public interest and public goods.

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