

# URBAN NETWORK, CAPITAL REGIONS AND SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE BALKAN STATES<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The past two decades have brought basic changes in the whole Balkan Peninsula, where spatial structures and settlement network were not devoid of changes either. Due to the changes brought about by the economic, political and social regime and the new borders, spatial structures became differentiated along new factors. Cooperation programs of the Euro-Atlantic integration hold many new challenges and opportunities. Historical and political literature studying the single countries' transformation is large and far reaching, however, a settlement network and spatial structure focused overview has been, so far, missing from the range of research. The aim of this study is to examine the urban features and the spatial transition of the Balkan states.

**Key words:** political geography, regional development, urban network, urbanisation, Balkans

## Introduction – Spatial concepts of the Balkans

The concept of South East Europe as a separate region appeared on the maps in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, holding a different spatial content. In 1808 Zeune, a German geographer defined the peninsulas of Europe, including the Balkan Peninsula (*Zeune*, 1808). The physical geographical definition of the Balkan Peninsula was already a problem for Zeune (*Carter*, 1977). Physical geography has been struggling ever since to make a spatial designation acceptable for most of the academics (*Todorova*, 2009). There is no consensus on the designation of the Balkan Peninsula, because this peninsula is linked to the main body of the continent with a wide “neck”. The neck does not separate the peninsula from the continent; in fact, it opens it up to the Alpine, Carpathian areas. Designation of the Carpathian (Pannonian) Basin has also been a similarly difficult task, partly due to the basin-mountain dichotomy (*Gál*, 2000; *Hardi*, 2001; *Hajdú*, 2007; *Gál–Rác*, 2008; *Rác*, 2011).

The Balkan Peninsula is one of the largest physical geographical regions in Europe, whose northern borders are defined in different ways, Trieste-Odessa line, Sava and Danube Rivers etc. The region is heterogeneous from a physical geographical aspect; all geographical features of Europe appear here. Nevertheless it is not geography the aspect from which the region is most complicated. On the peninsula there has always coexisted a complicated mosaic of people, cultures, religions etc., therefore the intensity of historical events has always been high in this region.

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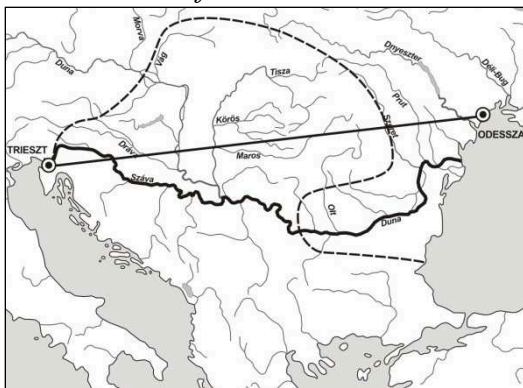
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In a European macro-regional view, several spatial categories appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century besides Southeast Europe, the Balkan Peninsula and the Balkans. With some territorial overlaps but bearing different meanings the concepts of Carpathian-Balkans Europe, Danubian Europe etc. were defined, involving considerable territories in the Balkan Peninsula (Figure 1).

The transnational cooperation spaces of the European Union are interesting in as much as the development and cooperation relations were formed around and within the Balkan Peninsula. Programming areas are only made for program periods, so they do not influence the long-term development of the structures (Gál, 2009). The program area of the EU strategy for the Danube Region covers a large part of the Peninsula. This may also mean, at the level of spatial view, that the dominant geographical and political element of the Balkan Peninsula is not the seas around it but the Danube River (Figure 1).

*Figure 1*  
Designation of the Balkans

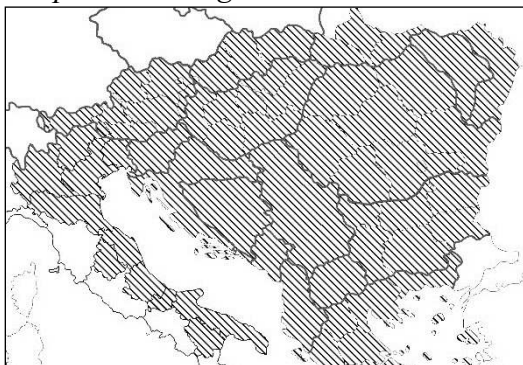
*Delimitations of the Balkan Peninsula*



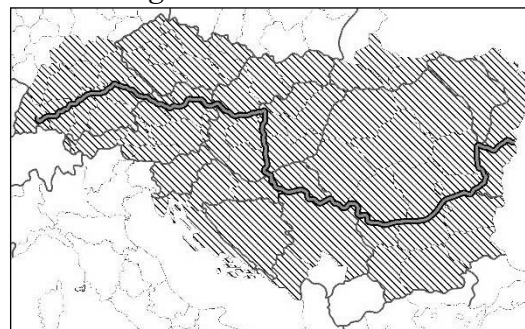
*New state borders, 1991–2008*



*South East Europe Transnational Cooperation Programme*



*EU Strategy for the Danube Region*



*Sources: Author's own elaboration.*

The above-mentioned spatial categories are themselves components of a historically conflict-laden process and the designated areas have specific meanings for almost everyone. Inner acceptance of the specifically defined territories was and is still problematic in most cases.

After the fall of the regime new spatial categories were born. The concept post-socialist covered the major part of the Peninsula except Greece and the European part of Turkey. The concept post-Yugoslav includes countries gaining sovereignty in the territory of the Former Yugoslavia.

The Western Balkans have already appeared as a topographical category previously, but as a political category it is a new formation created by the European Union in 1998. A decisive element in the birth of this political spatial concept was to differentiate post-Yugoslavian countries along with Albania from Bulgaria and Romania (Eastern Balkans), the two states that were given an accession chance. Slovenia was considered as part of the Western Balkans and after its EU accession it was only exceptionally mentioned as a country of this spatial category. It became more and more understood that the concept of Western Balkans was created for the extra-EU countries. The content of this spatial category has been modified several times since then and presumably it will not last for long.

### **Systemic changes in the Balkan Peninsula**

Since the end of the 1980s the unfolding processes in Southern and Eastern Europe may also be considered colourful. An ethnic element appeared, stated or not. The Balkan Peninsula, both at the time of Cold War Era and at the time of the later co-existence of the bipolar world, represented the whole Europe in miniature. Prior to the radical transition in 1990, the Socialist and Western state systems existed over a relatively small territory, as well as the conservatively communist Bulgaria, the non-aligned Yugoslavia, and the nationally communist Albania, and two NATO members (Greece, Turkey), one of which was a European Community member (Greece). Systemic changes of the socialist states in the Balkan Peninsula are in line with the major tendencies. Rearrangements between 1989 and 1991 took place in at least three different ways: negotiations; smaller or greater oppositions, social conflicts; and finally in tragic civil war (*Anderson, 1995; Hadži-Jovančić, 1995; Johnsen, 1995; Melčić, 2007; Nikić, 1994; Woodward, 1995*).

Countries of the Balkan Peninsula experienced historical development processes that were similar in several aspects, but also very complicated and different in some other ways. By the end of the cold war period it was rather heterogeneity than homogeneity that became a typical development characteristic and a result in the countries of the Balkans. The respective countries of the region arrived at the starting line of the “new world order” with a variety of historical heritages and specific economic, social and political experience. The large-scale rearrangement of national territories taking place in this region was thus, not a “Balkan feature”, not a peculiar and unique phenomenon of this period, but in civil war circumstances, it did have individual and unique characteristics (*Hajdú-Rácz, 2011*).

The social, economic and political systemic changes occurring in the Balkan Peninsula necessarily and fundamentally involved the issue of Yugoslavia and almost all neighbouring countries in some way. The crisis of Yugoslavia – a country with large territory and population and a country that was actually a regional power with a leading role among the non-aligned countries – generated spill over effects (*Hajdú, 2010; Jovic, 2001; Trbovich, 2008*).

There were also considerable differences across the respective states regarding whether radical transformation took place within the “old national frameworks” (Albania, Bulgaria, Romania), or new states were born. In the newly created states (which make up the majority in the region examined) the issues coming from the disintegration of the old state structures and the problems of the new arrangements of the state had to be handled simultaneously. During the state formation, new nation and state concepts were made, new capital cities were designated and the relation of the new elites to the territory of the state also changed.

In the Yugoslav area, systemic change coincided with the strengthening of nationalism, as both the old and the new political elite expected to find their “real” roots in this nationalism, which became a political “calling” for a while. The need for dealing with multi-ethnicity arose during the development of the new constitutional arrangement and also with the creation of the administrative systems and spatial divisions. The new state majorities were usually

unwilling to offer territorial autonomy to ethnic minority areas. The approach to the ethnic minority areas has become a significant and peculiar issue of decentralisation and regionalisation (*Hajdú*, 2010).

The collapse of SFRY and the formation of the new states affected not only the citizens of former Yugoslavia, but also all the states on the Balkan Peninsula. It is no accident that Greece had serious concerns over the establishment of the Republic of Macedonia, since it saw the latter's mere existence as a historical, political and national security threat. The breakup of SFRY also fundamentally affected Albanians living in former Yugoslavia and Albania. It was evident that with the collapse of SFRY, in some Yugoslav successor states the significance of the proportion of Albanian inhabitants and their economic and political importance would grow. The Albanian settlement area – in part in its homogenous coverage – embraced a number of national border regions, especially in Macedonia, Serbia but also in Greece (*Hajdú–Rác*, 2011).

New state borders were established in place of the old internal administrative borders. Some of the new state borders turned into closed ones, practically giving the appearance of classical military borders. International borders and crossing facilities divided special state units in the former unitary political geographical space. The second question within the “separation process” was: “Who has the right to self-determination?” Within the complicated political situations (between 1991-1995, and in 2008) identity issues arose and “people”, “nations”, republics, “the majority settlement areas” all had a right to and opportunity for self-determination. Others considered that such ambitions only related to those areas which previously had their own constitutional mandate (republic level).

### **Development of the urban network**

The past two decades have brought basic changes in the whole Balkan Peninsula, especially on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, where spatial structures and settlement network were not devoid of changes either (*Petrakos–Economou*, 2002; *Dimou–Schaffar*, 2009). War destruction (*Coward*, 2004; *Graham*, 2004; *Riedelmayer*, 2002; *Nation*, 2003) affected the transformation of regions and towns just like changes of demographical, migration and ethnic circumstances (*Hammel*, 1993; *Ramet*, 2005, 2006; *Đurđev et al.* 2009). Due to the change of the economic, political and social regime and the new borders spatial structures became differentiated along new factors (*Koči–Pavlaković–Pejnović*, 2005; *Hardi*, 2008; *Zeković*, 2009). Cooperation programs of the Euro-Atlantic integration hold many new challenges and opportunities (*BBR*, 2006; *ÖIR*, 2006; *RePUS*, 2007; *Papadaskalopoulos–Karaganis–Christofakis*, 2005; *Hardi*, 2012).

In order to understand the present town network and future potential development directions we need to get acquainted with its genesis. Three main groups of factors have influenced the formation of the town system: physical geographical conditions, prevalent changes of state borders and ethnical-cultural divergences.

Natural features have facilitated, or in other cases blocked, inter-settlement interaction. The Dinaric Alps hinder links between the coast and the northern territories, whilst the Adriatic sustains pre-ordained relationships among the coastal settlements and maritime trade. Mountain valleys, safe harbours along the coast are, necessarily, meeting points of socio-economic relationships, and this means advantageous local conditions for town development. However, those coastal settlements, which were located on a road or on a railway could maintain their good development potential. Among the towns on the mainland located in valleys, it was mainly those situated at the junction of several roads which were able to maintain their positions over time. The Danube and its tributaries, as well as the roads running parallel with these facilitated the formation of towns. Securing access to the sea and the

development of a national port was a crucial consideration in the new Yugoslavian states.

The Balkans has been a periphery throughout the centuries; it has never been in the developmental centre of any major regions. The ever-changing political structure played a special role in the structure of the city network. After being part of a major empire the territory then had its independent countries. Political instability led to rapid demographic, economic and administrative changes, and the urban network was constantly forced to adapt to these, whilst the settlements had to adjust their own functions to their changing roles. From these constant changes, it follows that not even one town in the Balkans area had the opportunity for uninterrupted development: there was no dominant city formed and the actors changed – even at the different levels of the urban hierarchy.

Changes of regime, the influence of other cultures, as well as their diverse usage of space all had a great impact on towns and their relationships in different ways. As is widely known, the Balkans' ethnic and regional composition is very diverse; its level of multiculturalism is unique in Europe. Different types of towns were formed in different cultural zones of the Balkans.

### **Urbanization and city growth in the Balkans**

Urbanization happened late on the Balkans and it has developed slowly in comparison with Central Europe, as the Balkan's town network was less dense. Urbanization level of the Western Balkans is still under the European average; it is related to the general underdevelopment based on historic reasons. Another specificity of the region is the fact that no city was formed that could have had durable and significant influence on the whole region. Socialist industrialization, establishment of new factories and other projects linked to these accelerated migration. Population growth and change of the settlements' character were followed by the change of administrative classifications.

The development of Belgrade, the capital, was not disproportionate in multi-ethnic Yugoslavia. The centres of other regions (Zagreb, Ljubljana etc.) were also developing, and thus, the urban network was relatively developing proportionately. Every part of the country or region had its own centre. This was true for small, medium and large towns, as well as for the network's geographical location. Belgrade's growth declined due to the fact that the country's government was decentralised in several respects.

Migration stopped in the 1990s, and in some places, its direction changed as well. Industrial jobs disappeared and thus, many who had found themselves in a hostile ethnic environment moved back to their former homes which ensured both ethnic security and a living. Not only was internal migration significant, but many town-dwellers left the area and moved abroad.

In spite of perpetual urbanization Yugoslavia was lagging behind the European average urbanization level even before its breakup, and its different parts, later on, the different member states were urbanized on very different levels. The Yugoslav wars meant a drawback for several towns. Towns were devastated and abandoned; a significant ethnical migration took place (*Lukic et al.* 2012). Urbanization did not keep its former pace of growth in the successor states; a few new town statuses were granted based on administrative concerns, mainly because the former centres became part of other states.

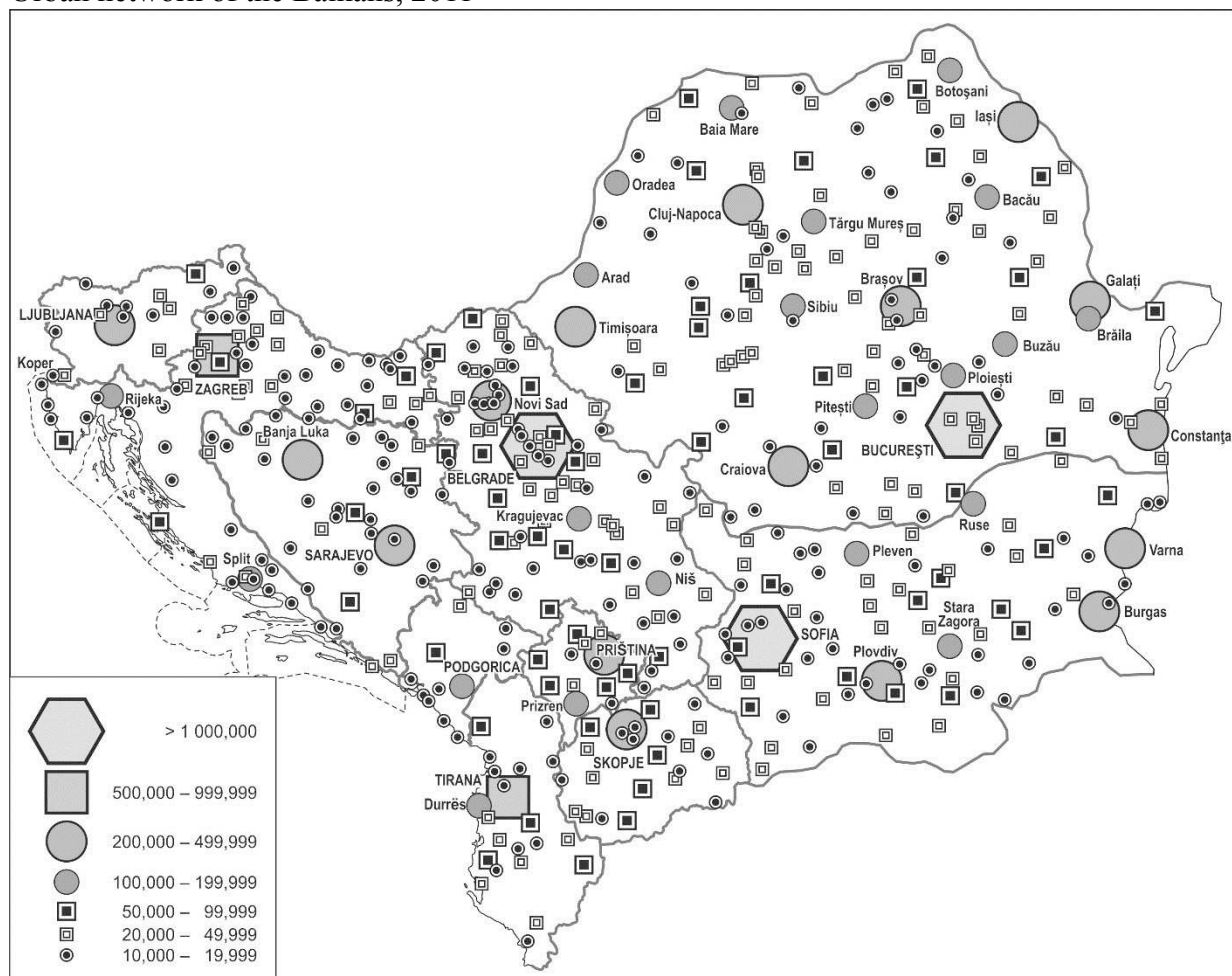
After the break-up of Yugoslavia, the new countries aimed principally at strengthening their integrated state territory and establishing their own administration. This meant the development of national capital cities and new administrative centres. The population growth in the capitals changed the formal ethnic proportions, that of the majority nation being increased. Political change had also changed the status of several settlements in the settlement network.

The recently created nation states consider developing their capital cities and town network as a top priority. These efforts are banned by several problems. Natural population growth is low in towns (except the Albanian cities), and so any increase can only result from migration. It is difficult to trace migration, since many consider the move as temporary and do not register at their new domicile. Ethnic conflict produced ethnic segregation in many multi-ethnic towns. Beside ethnic segregation, property-based segregation has also increased.

Urban network of the Western Balkans might take a new direction in the light of European integration. Towns, regions of bigger cities and coastal settlements having more attractive features are the target for migration. The development of state and administrative functions can be expected in the new administrative capitals; this induces further development. There are ethnic centres, which play a significant role in the ethnicity based development policy.

Figure 2

Urban network of the Balkans, 2011



Source: Author's own elaboration based on census and statistical yearbook dates.

### Role of capital cities and their regions

The economic and political changes opened new possibilities for the post-socialist states. The region has had a very dynamic period in the last two decades, which continues today. In these countries foreign direct investment has been unknown before. In these years, investors discovered these countries as profitable fields of investment (Illés, 2002; Lux-Mezei, 2012). Not all counties were simultaneously discovered. It was, however, a general trend that foreigners invested first in capital cities, in ports and in regions bordering EU member states

(Rácz, 2011). It means that investments were concentrated in a few cities and regions, and most regions remained without FDI for several years, in many cases until now (Gál-Sass, 2009). Consequently, economic growth also concentrated in capital regions (Hardi-Hajdú-Mezei, 2009). In some cases, the capital city region was the only carrier of economic growth. This result can be interpreted also in a wider context. In the period 1995–2000, peripheral countries and especially the capital cities of peripheral countries grew more rapidly than other regions and cities of the EU.

With the global financial and economic crisis this trend somewhat changed but the long term trends did not change, regional disparities are showing an increase between centres and peripheries. Capital city regions have lower unemployment; the decrease of the growth rate is less than in the other regions. The main driving force of economic growth continues to be the service sector which is concentrated in the capital cities (Faragó-Rácz, 2011). At the same time, however, national and EU policies have a strong influence on the territorial development of countries, cities and regions. The unambiguous winners of the process are capital regions, exploiting their role as metropolitan growth areas. All of these regions have improved their relative positions, some substantially (Bucureşti–Ilfov) while a decline in relative development level has taken place in a number of non-central regions (Lux, 2011, 2013). No region outside capital regions has experienced a significant improvement in development ranking (Hajdú-Rácz, 2011). This process highlights the heavily metropolitan character of high-technology manufacturing and knowledge-intensive high-technology services, as well as the functions of economic, financial and political control, where the higher tiers of the globally organised urban network predominate, and the competitive positions of functional urban areas, lacking a critical mass, are much less advantageous. The concentration of advanced business services corresponds to the urban network: it exceeds 50% in the capital regions of Slovenia, Bulgaria and Croatia, it is below 40% in Romania, where a more polycentric urban network is present (Erdősi et al. 2013).

It is a general phenomenon in the Balkan states that the vast majority of economic activities are concentrated in the capital cities; services, finance, banking, trading, research, higher education are highly present. The capital cities are by far the most important centres of transport; the other cities are much more difficult to reach and can be accessed slowly by means of transport. There are decisive differences between capital cities and other large cities.

*Table 1*  
Proportion of capital regions (in percentage of the country)

	Bulgaria	Croatia	Macedonia	Montenegro	Romania	Serbia	Slovenia
Population	18	18	30	23	11	22	25
Employed persons	33	19	34	33	12	31	36
GDP	36	31	48	N/A	21	35	36
Students higher education	in 47	53	37	67	35	52	60

*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on latest data of statistical yearbooks.

## **Spatial development of the Balkans in the context of the Danube Region**

The region is gradually being integrated into the European Economic Area. The eastern enlargement of the European Union and the fact that, since the re-unification of Germany, the European urban core area has been shifted eastwards does benefit the Danube Region. At the same time, due to the quickening pace of (belated) modernisation, there is a growing circle of areas and settlements, which start to fall behind. Certain rural areas are facing a loss of functions due to the outward migration of their population and general impoverishment.

The urban system of South East Europe will, most likely, be characterised by a number of specific features during the next decades:

- a polycentric macro-regional urban system constituted of monocentric national urban systems and a fragmented rural network,
- a high level of industrial employment in cities compared to European core regions,
- a high concentration of companies of international and national importance in capital cities,
- the decline of the urban bourgeoisie and civil society,
- an increase in poverty and in degenerating social strata,
- the poor condition of the built heritage and the slow development of infrastructure.

The individual countries in the area have mainly followed a similar path in their post-socialist transformation, with the objective of 'returning' to Western Europe – which implied the strengthening of Western influence and increasing vulnerability. The common past, together with the challenges of the present, outline a form of East Central European development path in which West European urbanisation trends emerge in specific ways. Even in Western Europe which serves as a role model for Eastern Europe, the context has become one of increasing uncertainties. The economic driving forces of urbanisation have also been transformed and so the reference point is constantly changing.

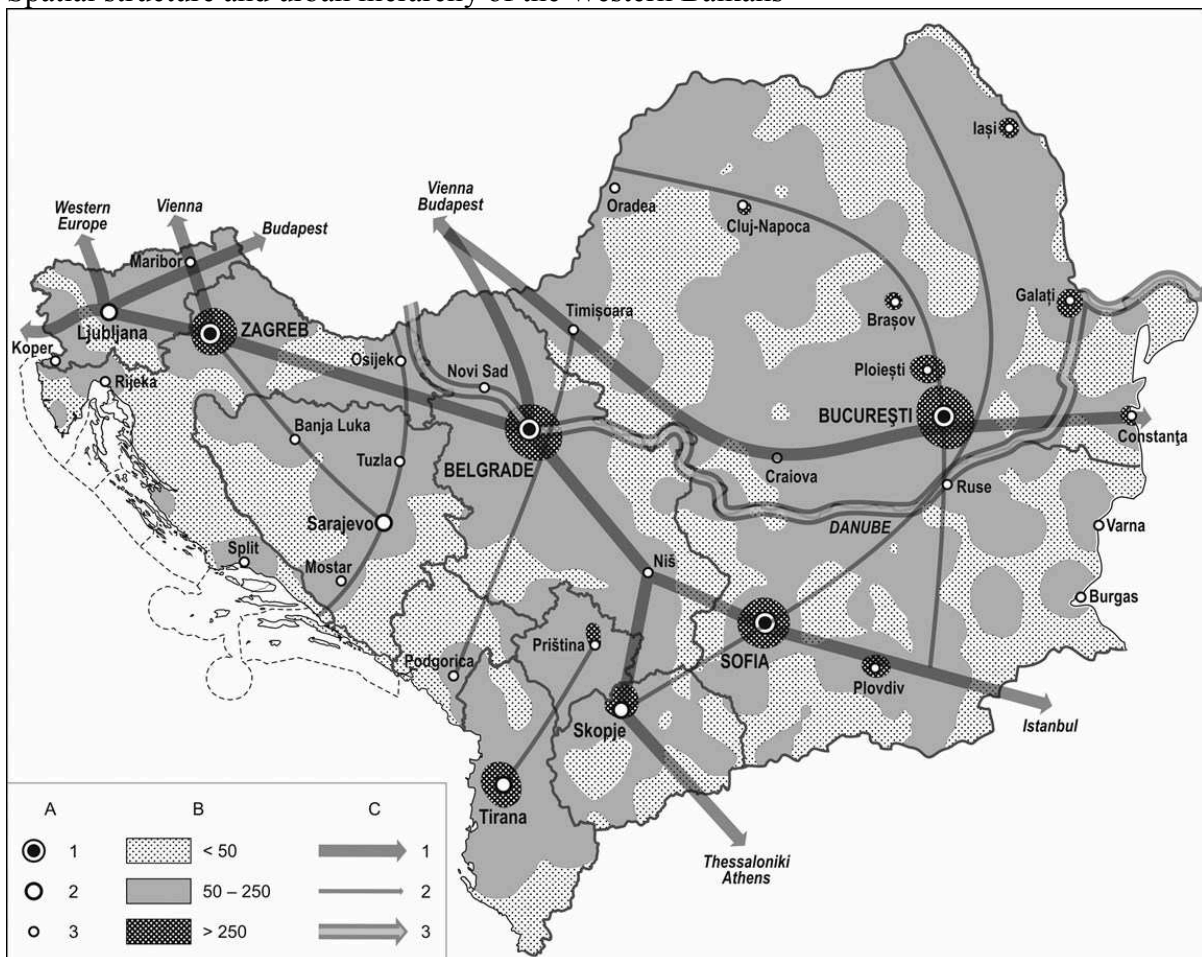
The influence of the Danube on the urban network and on spatial development was not only felt in the past but has continued up to the present period. Commercial-industrial activities related to the river have contributed to a strong concentration of population on the upper and middle sections of the Danube, and several connection points have been created at the intersection of lines of force on the river, giving birth to a dominant urban Central European zone. From the standpoint of the urban network, the middle section of the Danube has become a true axis of urbanisation (Linz–Vienna–Bratislava–Budapest), which has now extended to the South-East - towards Novi Sad and Belgrade. The lower section of the river is more sparsely populated and it has a rural aspect. Here the Danube was the border of an empire for a long time, and, consequently, its territory has remained a periphery. Socialist urban development was also unable to foster any significant changes here, due to the weakness of cross-national connections on one hand, and the fact that the population and the economy were traditionally concentrated in ports on the Lower Danube. This is graphically shown by a development curve to be observed along the length of the river. The varying levels of development of the individual sectors will also generate in the future different demands in development terms, and the greatest, the most significant effect of these may occur precisely in the more backward territory of the Lower Danube.

In terms of the rate of urbanisation, a North-West to South-East slope can also be differentiated, even if socialist development and the fever to gain 'city' status significantly reduced the existing disparities. In reality, the urbanisation of towns or small cities was far from effective, and in several cases the settlements acquiring 'city' status lacked serious urban functions.

A unified treatment of the region and its development based on a coherent strategy is considered to be difficult because the area has never functioned in the form of a single state,

and so its urban network has never constituted a unified system, even when numerous similarities have been visible. The entire area is unquestionably gravitating towards the North-West. None of the major cities of the Danube Region constitutes a dominant core region around which a centre for the entire Danube Region could potentially be organised. There is no internal centre of gravity which could integrate the region from most aspects. The peak of the settlement network of the area is constituted by cities and city regions with 1-2 million inhabitants (Bucharest, Budapest, Vienna, Belgrade, Sofia etc.). This produces a polycentric urban network in the entire region which will predetermine the future division of functions. One of the most significant outcome of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region could be the division of possible functions among the centres, thus, enabling the network cooperation. The wars in the Former Yugoslavia in the 1990s broke Northwest-Southeast relations in the region. Due to the enlargement of the EU, an increasing part of the region forms a unified political and integrating economic entity, and thus, political obstacles of cooperation are being removed.

*Figure 4*  
Spatial structure and urban hierarchy of the Western Balkans



*Key:* A.1. – World cities, A.2. – Cities, A.3. – Significant urban centres; B – Population density inh./km<sup>2</sup>.; C.1. – Trans-Balkan routes, C.2. – Intra-Balkan spatial lines, C.3. – Danube

*Source:* Author's own elaboration.

With the advancement of European integration, the permeability of borders and the intensification of cross-border relations, the outlines of a unified city region and growth district are emerging in the Central Danube Basin. The dynamically developing core region is organised around the Vienna, Bratislava and Budapest axis. The question of whether the area is an enlargement of the European Pentagon or the centre of a totally new Central European growth region is yet unclear.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Balkan Peninsula is one of the largest physical geographical regions in Europe, whose northern borders are defined in different ways. The region is heterogeneous from a physical geographical aspect; all geographical features of Europe appear here. Nevertheless, it is not the geographical aspect that makes this region to be complicated. On the peninsula there have always existed a complicated mosaic of people, cultures, religions etc., therefore the intensity of historical events has always been high in this region. The different spatial categories (Balkans, Western Balkans, Southeast Europe etc.) are themselves components of a historically conflict-laden process and the designated areas have specific meanings for almost everyone. Inner acceptance of the specifically defined territories was and is still problematic in most cases.

One of the most significant characteristics of the urban network of the Danube Region is that the capital cities (excluding Bosnia-Herzegovina with its special status) concentrate the heart of the economy and of the population not only within national borders, but also compared to the second level of the urban network (the regional centres).

The strengthening of integrated state territories and autonomous urban networks are visible in those states which have won sovereignty during the past two decades. New capital cities of newly established states show a remarkable development from every perspective. Macro regional centres are relatively weak, or cannot even be counted as real counterpoles, due to the small size of the countries and the scarcity of resources which have permitted the emergence of only one metropolis. Former catchment areas have been transformed with the internationalisation of borders, and so the number of cities providing regional functions has increased (with the new centre-integrating areas losing their former centres). The newly implemented public administrative systems have extended the functions of several settlements. Due to ethnically-based institutional development (e.g. the establishment of universities for minorities) certain cities have gained a senior position in the network independent of any system of public administration.

The phenomenon of suburbanisation can be seen in the region only since the 1990s, but the growth of metropolitan agglomerations has been constant despite the radical decline in birth rates. In parallel, the negative impacts of the process can also be observed (segregation, overburdening of the environment etc.). The losers in the process of migration were rural areas and industrial cities which lost their ability to retain their population. One distinctive movement of population arose due to the wars in the Former Yugoslavia which brought a change in the population number and ethnic composition of the settlements involved.

The Balkans region constitutes the most complex periphery of Europe from several perspectives. The cyclical change of integration and disintegration is the major factor shaping territorial and settlement processes. Currently we are witnessing an advanced stage of disintegration, with the settlement network having reached its most highly fragmented level. Structural transformation has continued until today. Unresolved questions (border problems, unsettled conflicts etc.) make the fulfilment of the new integration cycle very difficult. With the exception of Slovenia every state is running certain risks – for example in terms of ethnic or life quality issues. The urban network of the area is currently a system of monocentric

(capital-city centred) clusters separated on a national (ethnic) basis.

Certain processes (e.g. national sovereignty, mass emigration, the loss of population from rural areas) would have emerged without the intervention of war, albeit at a much slower pace and to a more moderate degree. With the collapse of Yugoslavia, the internal relations of the area were radically transformed. The war and the building of nation states resulted in the termination or the deliberate neglect of former relations. Cross-border cooperation has intensified in certain, mainly ethnic respects, but outside the borders of the region Great Power relations have gained significance, showing varying orientations from nation to nation.

With the end of conflicts and the drawing of new, long-term paths a new era of integration seems to be about to commence. Individual countries do not merely participate as partners, but the competition for attracting foreign capital will become more intensive at both national and settlement level. Integration into the global and European blood-stream can be achieved successfully only by certain countries and a very few cities. For the rest, this remains only a remote possibility. A transition similar to that of the Visegrád Countries is likely to occur: modernisation (integration) will be fulfilled in a top-down direction at points within the settlement hierarchy, and along European corridors in a North West-South East direction. Hence, capital cities with their established connections will become the primary beneficiaries, further increasing their relative weight. Among the winners in the process will be gateway cities and large cities in general. Among the losers will be settlements and areas 'squeezed' along ethnic borders and facing a peripheral situation due to the change of orientation. The new (urban) network relations will not necessarily rely on former structures, since Europe's interests and scales totally differ from those during the Yugoslav era.

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