

## EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE METHODOLOGIES OF SPATIAL PLANING IN WESTERN BALKANS

The case of Albania 2030 National Strategic Visioning

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### ABSTRACT

*One of the biggest challenges of our country still remains the consideration of urban planning as a management tool for controlling the development, in order to achieve territorial, social and economic cohesions. The transition from a centrally planned economy, where everything was controlled by the government, towards decentralization and market economy caused many consequences, among which uncontrolled and fragmented urban development, loss of agricultural land due to urbanization, concentration of population and dense urbanization in the major cities, abandonment of western lowland and eastern parts of the country etc.*

*This research work tries to build against the vacuum that is created in Albania by the lack of tradition of national spatial development policies and plans, on the conditions of market economy and freedom. Previous elements of national visioning have not been sustainable in the long run, due to the fact that they have been imposed by authoritarian means and not understood as a real need of the country and society, facing growing competition among nations at global scale, and the need for creative solution, facing economic recession and waste of national resources. Therefore this work is a modest practical and theoretical contribution for Albania with a hope that could be useful also for the Albanian authorities, while undertaking action at such level. In return the Albanian case of national spatial visioning might serve as an interesting learning laboratory for the new science of spatial planning in Europe and beyond.*

### INTRODUCTION:

#### **Albania: Urban Development Models 1945-1990:**

From the beginning of the 90s Albania was one of the most centralized planned economies, where government practically owned everything and controlled all forms of territorial developments. Two main criteria characterized the urban development and the whole process and structure of urbanization in the country: the combination of concentration and centrality (Aliaj, 2003, Making Cities Work). The main planning instrument during this period was the so-called Regulatory Plan for living urban areas, which was very rigid and did nothing more than showing where and what was the use of each building, with very poor appliance of architectural standards. Even though an official national spatial plan was still not to be mentioned, the interventions and policies taken by the authorities of the time were somehow the first steps toward a national spatial planning conception. Although, this was done on the basis of top-down principles and centralizing objectives. This was represented by the government's aims on the economy of the country, which were directly related with territorial development and development. The government's top aims were to set-up and prioritize the development

industries. Based on this economic policy, the main principle for taking the decisions in relation with the industrial allocation, were by setting up these industries nearby raw-material and thermo-energy sources, as well as near the consumption centers, which in most of the cases was followed with the foundation of new industrial cities. On this context the main priorities of the government of the time were to ensure the harmonious development of industry and agriculture, in favor of the general progress of the countryside, and the support of the intensification of agricultural production. Related to this last intervention, the government aimed to use it as a barrier for preventing urbanization. Authorities neither wanted, neither could afford quick urbanization and its consequences. But this accumulated and exploded after the 80s. Meanwhile before this period the goal was to improve the living conditions in less-favored agricultural areas, and to concentrate the resources in well-suited regions of high productivity, in order to keep the population there and occupied with the agricultural activities. But during the 80s the sustainability of such centralized spatial system collapsed totally.



Figure 1: Urban Development models 1945-1990

### Albania: Transition of Planning System 1991-2014

From the beginning of the 90s Albania became a more open and a democratic country, so on the following years the Albanian Parliament approved two planning laws, namely Laws of Urbanism No. 7693 (1993) and No. 8405 (1998), which changed many times on the later years. Both these laws presented the general regulations for the development, location and architecture of the structures, based on the land use. Even though the second law made some new changes and improvements compared to the first one, it still didn't succeed on recognizing the recent changes of the territory informal developments and the ownership transference, from the state to the private sector, otherwise known as the privatization process. Therefore, yet, failing to set national spatial planning and development objectives. However it must be specified that until 2006 territorial planning in Albania

was mainly based on the tradition of the so called Urbanism , with culture of authoritarian planning, mainly with physical objectives. In 2006 the government decided to reform legislation and move towards more abstract rules and principles of decision making related with spatial planning, regional planning and national policies, influenced by two main forces: (i) the bottom up pressure coming from the local initiatives, mainly represented by Co-Plan, Institute for Habitat Development, a local NGO inspired by the Dutch Planning Schools; (ii) and political influence of the international partners/donors in Albania, mainly represented by the development assistance programs like World Bank, UNDP and USAID, and the Dutch and Austrian Technical Assistance in Albania. The 2006 Legalization Reform, for the first time articulated the term Spatial Planning , but despite the recognition of such need, no Spatial Plan was drafted, a policy document was drafted, but never turned into a legal document and a spatial plan. Furthermore, capacity building programs did not associate the initiative, in order to prepare the un-experienced local/regional governments, which were not yet able and trained to cope with the new spatial concepts (Toto, 2012).

However, despite the new reform law, which was approved by the parliament, in 2007 a law for the formalization and integration of the informal settlements in Albania was approved, also associated by a process of self-declaration of the informal constructions. In addition, a national aerial survey, and the respective GIS applications developed into a national system, including a national registry of planning initiatives and development permits. In 2009 the parliament approved the new Territorial Planning law, which was a framework law for emerging spatial planning concepts and development processes, but it was still very detailed on some other aspects, and its implementation was totally depended by the relevant bylaws and specific regulations, which were yet not fully completed. It is also important to recognize that the present Territorial Planning Law is a legal instrument, which brought new spatial development concepts and practices in comparison to the previous laws. These new concepts amongst other include the introduction of new compulsory development instruments such as the detailed local instrument/ plan (Albanian: PDV/ IDV); in order to avoid the plot based development and allow for the transference of development rights; etc. Few changes were made to this law for electoral purposes during 2013, but there still remain the same concepts for territorial planning law for Albania (Toto, 2010). On 2014 the new government has initiated the reform for the administrative and territorial reorganization of the country, which started with proposals to consolidate existing local governments and reorganize regions. So far the government has been on favor of the proposal with the 35-47 LGU and there is still no decision made regarding the reorganization of the country in regions, although several proposals have been taken in consideration. However it is very important to mention the three main priorities that the government has: (1) drafting the National Plan of Albania; (2) drafting the Integrated Coastal Zones, (3) drafting the Durrana Plan.

As a conclusion, after the changes of early 90s till now-days, Albania practically shifted to an extreme. It has been one of the most liberal economies of the former Eastern Europe, with practically no spatial planning policies and no control of authorities over the territory. Despite several attempts to reform the planning legislation, almost nothing has been working on the ground level, especially at national scale. In spite of efforts made over the last decades, territorial development and administration still remain misunderstood by professionals and mishandled by politicians. (Aliaj, Dharmo, Shutina, 2010). The planning system will continue to go into further changes, because of

regular political changes and economic recession. Therefore its instability will remain a main issue for the coming years, until a balance is reached from inertial pressures of transitional developments. However the big urbanization and construction boom, as well as consequences of informality are becoming at ease, thanks to the relatively small size of the country and completion of urbanization as well.

### **Planning Problems and Consequences:**

During the last 20 years the so considered traditional urbanism, in the sense of strict application of the principles of codes and distances, has become more a kind of administrative corruptive over-exploitation and densification of land, rather than an urban management tool. People have taken matters into their own hands, undertaking extreme individualistic solutions, and aiming to avoid inflated prices and often corrupt procedures of public administration (Aliaj, Dhamo, Shutina, 2010). So in the overall, this led to chaotic initiatives and informality, which spread all over the country. Practically 90% of businesses and 80% of properties are considered to have at least certain degree of informality (Albanian Government, ILD Peru/UNDP, 2007). This resulted in serious environmental concerns, development of an arbitrary property system, over-densification of the main living centers, and loss of agricultural land. Therefore, efforts of spatial planning, especially at the urban scale have been failing, among others, because of the lack of planning instruments and lack of national/regional visioning, as well as confusion among different ministries over such competency. Such a radical process of changes has been promoting further urbanization and displacements/changes of economic structures, while threatening irreplaceable spatial and natural potentials of the country.

### **New Territorial Realities and Challenges**

On these conditions, Albania met with a new reality over its territory at the brink of EU accession. According to the latest INSTAT, Population and Housing Census of 2011, peripheral regions in the north and south of Albania have been nearly abandoned, while the central and western ones, although have been more dynamic on the urban growth perspective, they still have not kept pace with population growth. Whereas the population has tripled in the capital region, and developed land has doubled without proper physical and social infrastructure, thereby creating a problematic urban model (Aliaj, Dhamo, Shutina, 2010). This in return harms future development of the country, especially high expectations on tourism, agriculture and energy developments (Aliaj, 2008). On top of that, more than 2 decades after the social-political changes of early 90-s, Albanian administration has not been able yet to develop and approve a spatial vision at the national scale, not mentioning the total lack of professional capacities on the way this vision must develop and be visually represented. This consequently harms economic growth and prosperity and is worsened by the failure of authorities in establishing a stable property registration system, and fair property restitution inherited by the past. Authorities need to also learn how to formulate understandable policies and translate them properly into policy and cartographic representations, in order to ease their implementation and easily address them to their aimed institutions and audience. So far no one has been contributing to these aspects, so it is crucial to work on both directions: the instruments of visioning and techniques of visualizing. This includes the use of statistical basis, with a constructive dose of creativity, in order to synthesize and reach to aimed trend-scenarios and proposals regarding the national economic, environmental and spatial development.

In conclusion, despite the fact that Albania has entered a radical and quick process of change, and that there has been a combination of a set of inherited problems, it must be emphasized that the lack of national spatial development policies and plans has been seriously harming the sustainable growth of the country. This is a result of both, lack of understanding at political/ decision-making levels, as well as poor professional capacities at specialized institutions. Therefore the sustainability of future growth and the solution of the accumulated problems need now a qualitative jump at strategic level. The drafting and implementation of a national spatial development plan is considered as the next strategic step to be undertaken by Albania, to adapt to the standards of the EU family.

### **Research Proposal & Aims:**

National governments in some countries, take the lead in creating a proactive and integrative spatial planning system that can encourage investment and facilitate more sustainable development (*Alterman, 2001; European Commission, 1997*). Indeed it is a common fact for most of the Southeastern European countries (including Albania) that lack of such initiative, results nowadays in sufferings from chaotic growth and informal developments manifested in sprawl of urbanization. Inspired by the Albanian context and its need for future sustainable development, this thesis project aims to help on drafting a series of national spatial concepts, which will be used to formulate an overall national spatial development vision for the territorial development. Since there is a lack of understanding of planning policies regarding the poor communication and poor cartographic language, which also affects their implementation, the product of this research paper will be followed also by some guidelines on how to make a proper and understandable translation, through the presentation of a set of recommendations and principles, the introduction of a spatial development vision and the visualization all of these documents with respective cartographic material.

### **Methodology**

So far, there has been no research work done to address or support the creation of a spatial development vision for Albania, so it was quite essential to first start the work with the observation of other cases, where spatial development policies have been implemented. In order to collect this information, the work was based on two types of research methods:

- Field study (interviews, group discussions, meetings, conferences, etc. also considered as primary data);
- Reading and reviewing of local/international reports and literature (secondary data);

The revision of the specialized literature on the applied spatial policies in the EU countries and other cases, which are leading on this aspect, gave input on learning how spatial planning works, and how to apply it on our context. At this point, evidencing the progress of such debate on the national scale, by interviewing key-stakeholders, professionals and decision makers was very crucial. An integral part of this phase was also the participation in conferences, workshops and meetings organized in Albania on this subject, or related issues, on the framework of EU integration of the country, and national spatial development policy related. The reading and reviewing of local/international reports and literature, was particularly important for identifying the international efforts made on this subject. Regarding the Albanian situation related with this topic, despite the published written materials, there were also two main local sources that provided the necessary information: (i) *Statistical instruments*

from the official data since the 1990 s; especially the 2001 and 2011 population censuses; (ii) *Maps and areal images* before the 90s and up to date, especially the maps of during late 80-s of the *National Institute of Military Topography* ; and the national areal surveys during legalization process undertaken by ALUIZNI (albinfo.al).

### **A NATIONAL SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT VISION FOR ALBANIA**

Developing a national spatial vision and formulating spatial concepts in a context like Albania, on which no previous attempts have been made, and planning has not been working, makes it challenging. It is very important to take into the account the fact that during the economy, territorial policies aimed mainly at agricultural purposes, while anti-urban policies were regular practices in the country. On top of such tradition, during the last 2 decades Albania was also pushed by the international partners towards an assistance, which aimed the use of agricultural potentials and natural resources (like energy and mining). Practically at this moment are considered only development issues of agriculture, forestry and tourism, but they have not been fully addressed and considered, as a complete set of potentials. Let alone they were never seen interrelated with the urbanization process. At this point, the national spatial development vision should address specifically such issues, formulating policies and related spatial concepts for protecting and using them properly, in order to provide territorial, social, economic and sustainable development. At this point working on the basis of ecological planning concepts, which offer practical blueprint for relationship between the built environment and nature, is quite essential (*Ian McHarg, 1969*). On the other hand, having put to practice the comparative planning theory (Faludi, 1990) and helpful.

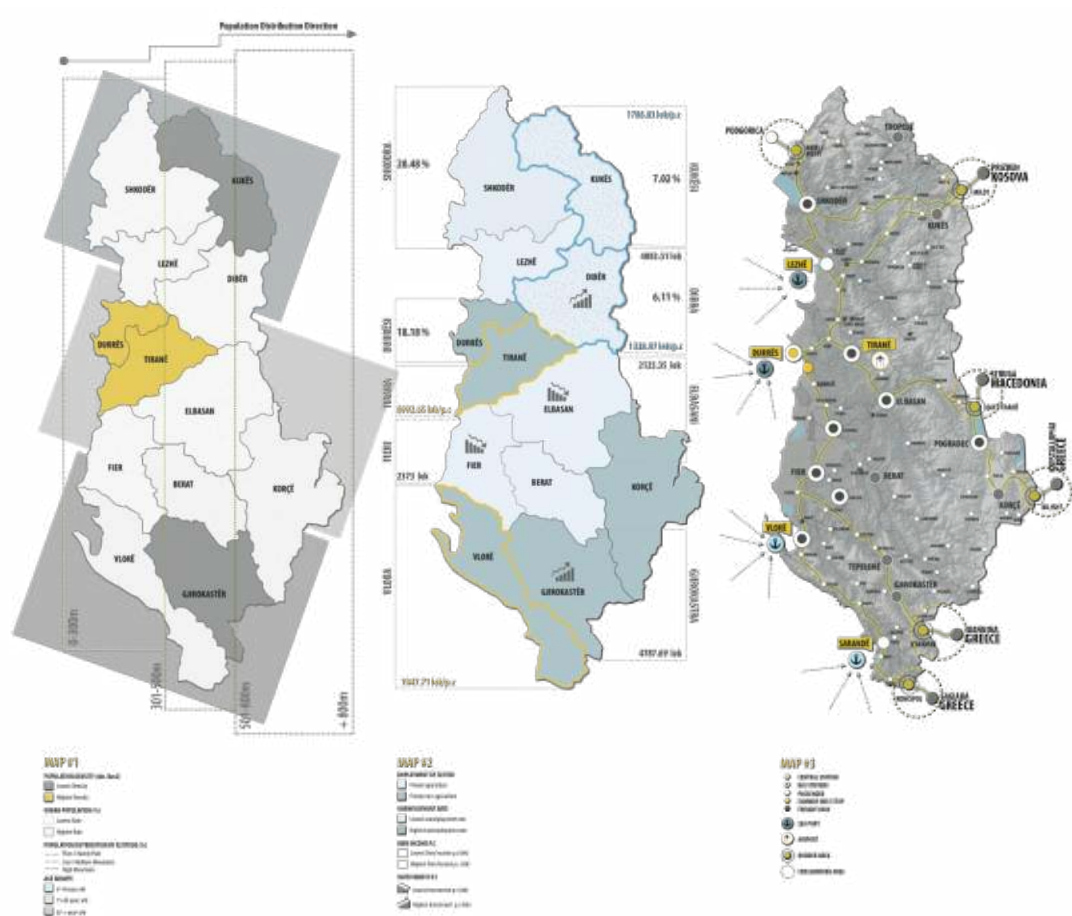
**Issues to address on a national scale** - In order to establish a national spatial vision one might address several critical issues:

- The need to establish a good system of statistical database, based on the same indicators, which can allow professionals and decision makers to make research and on that basis to take the right decisions to address existing problems;
- In order to establish a long term spatial system is necessary to establish also good geographical information systems, which allows drawing different graphical outcomes, which are helping better management of territorial and spatial potentials.
- The national planning legislation and procedures must encourage and enforce the design and implementation of national visions, which serve as an instrument for central, regional and local governments for good spatial governance.
- Therefore the planning practice needs also to have a school and tradition on how to draft, design a national spatial plan, on basis of well accepted technical and graphical tools. This is important because professionals at national scale and decision makers must establish a common language and understanding of such instrument.
- Last but not least the spatial plan at national scale must be associated with sub plans of spatial importance for the country, which treat in details sectorial issues like: national trunk infrastructure plans, land use plans, environmental and sustainable development plans, social economic development plans etc. However it does not mean that the importance of spatial national plan can overshadow the importance of planning at other levels of planning (regional and local), because a

combination and complementation of planning tools at three levels, can be the only solution for a long term sustainable development and positive social economic growth.

**Context analysis** - In order to start setting up a set of principles and then visioning, is very important to understand the context in Albania, regarding the social-economic-and territorial components. The research work took in consideration several main indicators for each interest field, and for each group of analysis there was made a synthesis with conclusions (more detailed information on part 1 of the annexes).

- The Social Development
  - The population density is higher on the central parts of the country, mainly in the metropolitan area;
  - Based on the altitude, the population distribution increases from the low plain areas (0-300m) towards the low and medium mountainous (301-800), and the high mountains of over 800m;
  - The urban population is higher mainly on the central and southern parts of the country;
  - According to the age groups, the group of 15-64 years old dominates in the whole country, but however the higher rate of 0-14 years is more accurate on the northern regions, while the higher rate of 15-64 years on the central parts, and the last group of over 64 years old has a higher rate on the southern regions.
  
- The Economic Development
  - The population of the south-west and the metropolitan area works mainly on the non-agricultural activities;
  - These areas have also the highest rates of own income;
  - Meanwhile the highest rate of investments p.c is mainly on the north-east and south-east areas (which are poorer, but with touristic, landscape and cross border cooperation potentials);
  - Unemployment is higher on the north-west (agricultural and touristic values), and lower on the northeast areas.
  -
  
- The Territorial Development
  - Sea ports play a crucial role on the import/export of goods and also on the touristic flows;
  - From these focal points the main national roads distribute the flows (of goods or/and people) towards the other parts of the country, where the metropolitan area, the seaside west and south and the mountainous north and south are the most famous ones; the central inlands of the country are more abandoned, less developed and not well integrated with the rest of the country;
  - The railway system could play a crucial role on connecting the less developed areas, but this infrastructural system is outdated and old, and does not play its role properly;
  - The cross border areas are very important, because of the activity they generate and the opportunities they present for both parts of the territory, Albanian and/or not.



Map 1: Social, Economic and Territorial Development Profiles of Albania

**Set of Principles** - The formulation of a spatial vision for Albania needs to be supported by a set of principles, which build on existing potentials and ensure sustainable development. These principles will be then explained and translated through a series of spatial concepts.

1. Regionalism

Based on the foundation of regions of different importance within a country, which consists on the creation and implementation of institutions that express a particular identity and shape collective action within a geographic region, and also as a political ideology that focuses on the interests of a particular region or group of regions, whether traditional or formal.

2. Polycentrism and Growth Poles:

- Polycentrism, based on the theory of Palmiro Togliatti refers to the organization of a region around several political, social or financial centers. A county is said to be polycentric if its population is distributed almost evenly among several centers in different parts of the county.
- The central idea of the growth poles theory is that economic development, or growth, is not uniform over an entire region, but instead takes place around a specific pole, or cluster (Rodrigue, Comtois, Slack, 2013).



3. Development Corridors and Free Economic Areas:

- Development Corridors provide connections between different nodes or hubs of urbanized and economic agents along a defined geography, and they work as a system, or in terms of the network effects, that they include.
- Free Economic Areas refers to designate areas, well equipped with infrastructure and services, in which companies are taxed very lightly, or not at all in order to encourage economic activity.

4. Sustainable Development through the consideration of Natural Potentials and Green Corridors

- Sustainable Development stands for a good balance between the three components economy-environment- society, and promotes the preservation of natural and cultural heritage on long terms.
- On the other hand green corridors represent areas of habitat, which connect wildlife populations separated as a result of urban development and human activities.
- On this last principle is very important to also consider the ecological component that stands for those planning concepts, which will ensure a healthier relationship between the built environment and nature (McHarg, 1969).

**Albania 2030, a Spatial Vision for the Country** - Albania 2030 describes the development policies for the coming 15 years, based on the growth scenario of the four main economic pillars: tourism, agriculture, energy and mining. This is achieved by taking in consideration several spatial instruments, including:

- Controlling the growth of urban centers against sprawl and informality, by consolidating urbanized areas, metropolitan regions and complementary urban centers;
- Identification of industrial and economic priority areas to support employment and economic growth;
- Increasing the regional competitiveness of the country by strengthening the international hub, national and regional networks and regional gateways;
- Identification and completion of national and regional importance infrastructure of roads, sea ports, airports and energy;
- Identification of 6 main regions of the country which are specialized based on their social-economic resources;
- Identification and strengthening of polycentric and cross border regions, growth poles and free economic areas, aiming to establish a new economic model which is based on a better regional balance and corrects the effects of radical urbanization, disparities and segregation;
- A special focus on environmental issues and sustainable development by identifying projects of hotspots rehabilitation, protection of forestry and green space, extension and consolidation of green spaces in Albania ;
- Recognition and cultivation of the big potentials of the country as regarding landscaping, historical and natural routes, eco-tourism etc.;
- Achieving national development goals by considering with special importance the neighboring Albanian speaking territories as well as coordinating with western Balkans and Adriatic sea region, not forgetting the process of EU integration;
- Improving the social-economic efficiency and effectiveness by providing integrated and equal access between the center and periphery based on a ring radial system. Therefore achieving an important

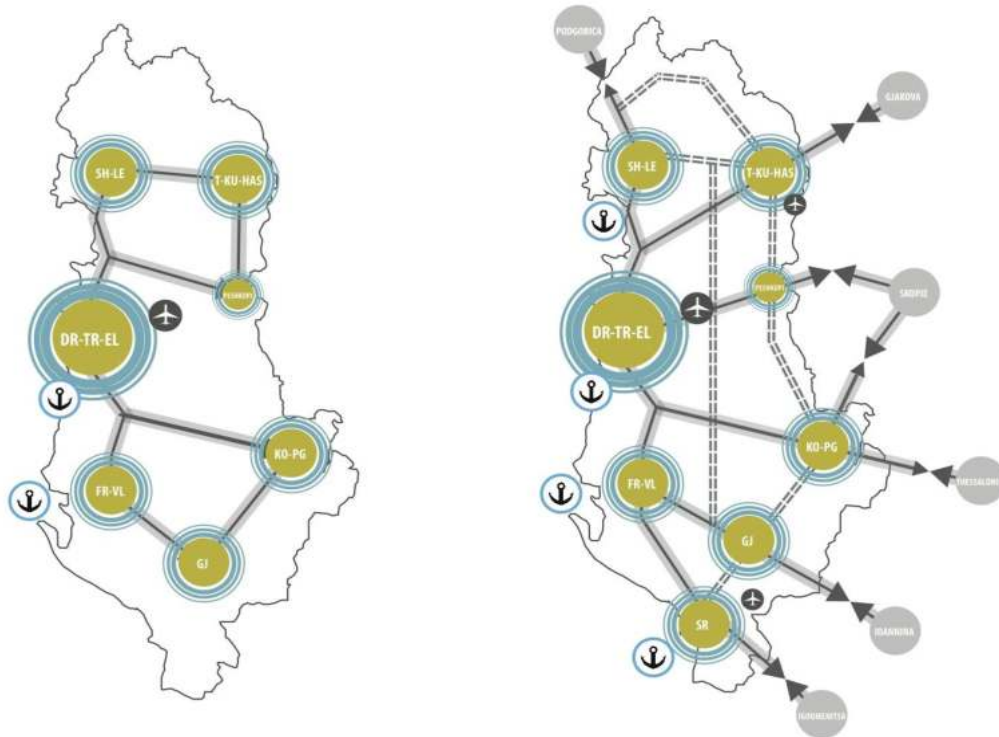
objective, transforming Albania from an isolated economy, on a regional and European actor of economy.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

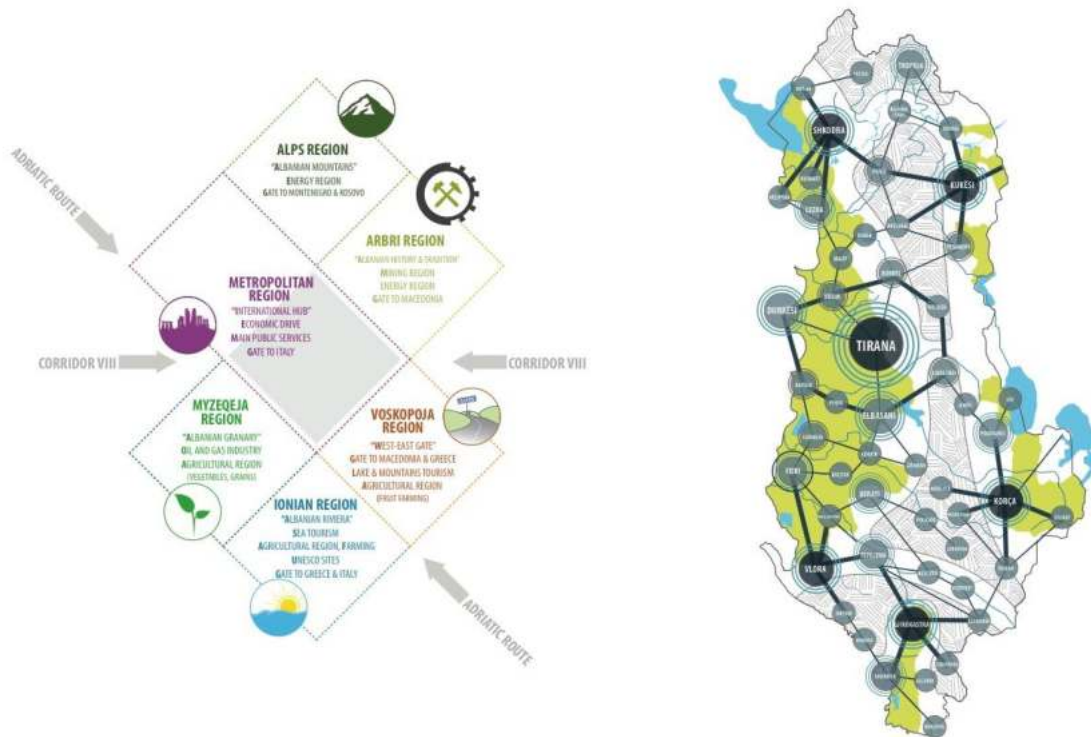
**Conclusions** - This research has been dealing with spatial planning and its role to boost social-economic growth of the country. The problem is that Albania so far has not been able to develop a document that has the full meaning and role of a national spatial development plan. On the other hand EU, which is the political objective of Albania, has not imposed a law on territorial issues and a directive, because this is considered an exclusive function of the national authorities of each country. But EU has introduced its own perspective (ESDP) on this subject and has established a network like ESPON, which is trying to use the statistical data produced by each country and by the EU institutions to analyze, research and draw conclusions that help policy making and decision makers take the appropriate decision for the best use of national territory and resources in accordance to national and European interests. At the end a spatial development plan must be an instrument for better governance and better quality of life for people and communities.

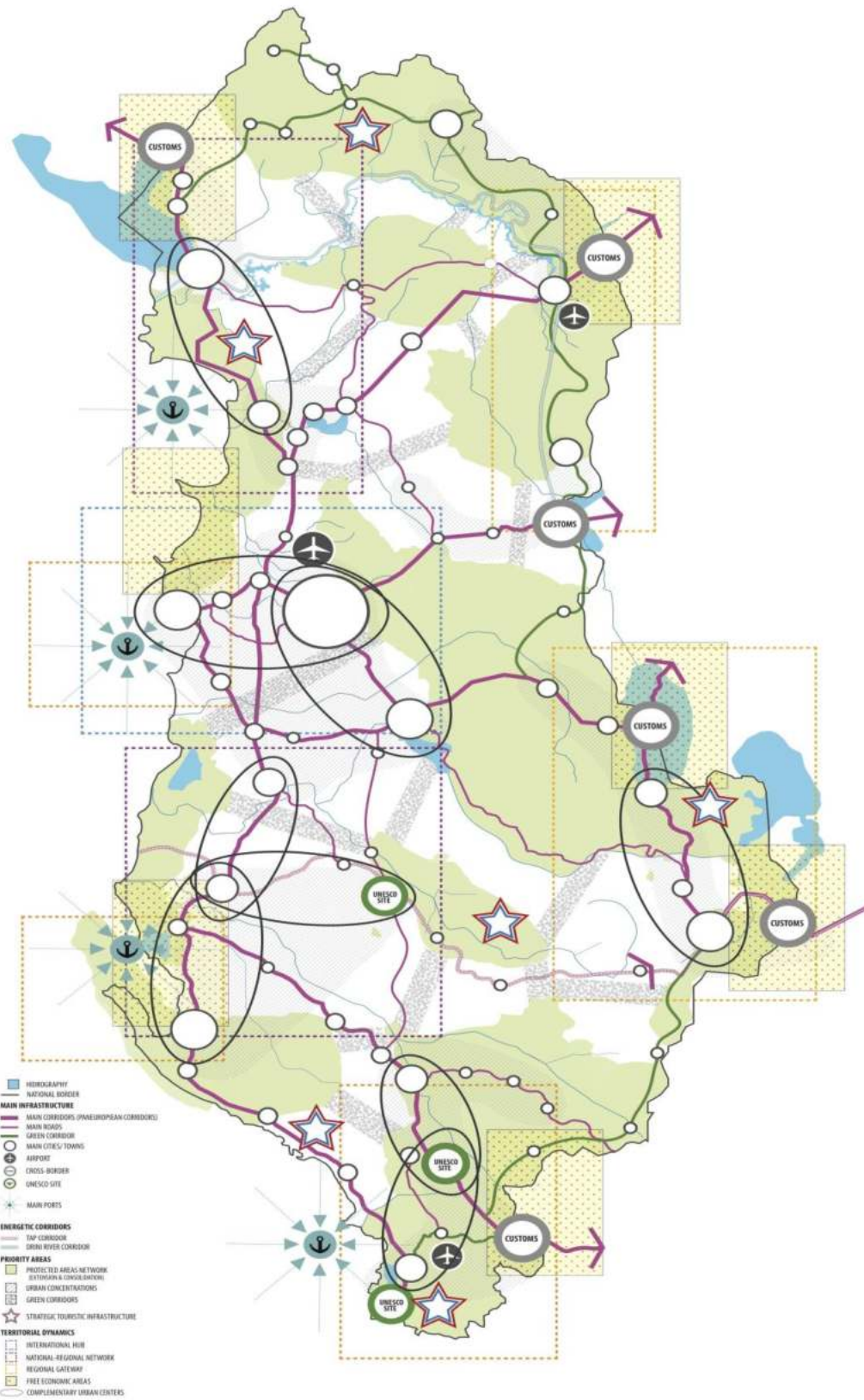
- As a first conclusion we can say that nowadays, when European integration is a national priority for Albania, spatial development also becomes a priority issue. And when we talk about spatial planning we mean a key instrument for establishing long-term, sustainable frameworks for *social, territorial* and *economic* development, both within and between countries (UNECE, 2008).
- A second conclusion is that spatial planning although highly praised, it s rela very few countries implemented it in the real meaning that it has.
- A third conclusion is understating what are the visualization techniques and graphical instruments of representation to prepare the cartographic data of the national spatial plan. Since many countries have features of national spatial planning policies, but there is no common ground for the their translation into cartographic documents for the broader public, building a common reference system of visualization manners is quite essential.
- The fourth conclusion is that in order to develop a national spatial development vision for the country is necessary to refer to several scientific arguments. Throughout the context analysis and case studies four main principles were considered as crucial for the national spatial visioning. Each principle was then explained through a series of analysis and spatial concepts. The four main principles list as below:

Map 2: Connectivity before 90s; Connectivity according to Albania 2030 Vision.



Map 3: Agriculture, Mountains and Growth Poles





- Regionalism - There was made an adaptation of the proposal of Co-plan 2014 for the re-organization of the country on 6 regions. This concept supports the efficiency and the effectiveness of the economic growth of the country, considers environmental sensibilities by considering the concept of river basins, and brings central government near local communities and authorities without extra costs in terms of infrastructure and services. The further analyses of this research work have evidenced the cultural historic identities and economic specializations of each of these regions, as an instrument for promoting regional development balance, for fighting regional disparities and promoting balance.
- Polycentrism and Growth Poles - On this aspect there were identified 6 main growth poles, which have two patterns of polycentric development each. Within the country they are interrelated on a radial system because of the existing patterns of infrastructure and services, with the exception of Tirana, which is interrelated on an annular system. The second pattern of polycentric interrelations has to do with the cross border perspective and in this case all the growth poles interrelate on an annular system, again with the exception of Tirana, which has a radial interrelation with the European and global markets.
- Development Corridors and Free Economic Areas - The development corridors are strongly related with the infrastructural and services corridors. Most of the Albanian economic corridors are located on the western plain of the country and few of them in the peripheral growth poles. There were identified the economic specializations of each corridor, promoting the concept of clustering areas and recommending strengthening of such specialization, in order to avoid competition and promote complementarity. The economic corridors are strongly related to the free economic areas, airports and seaports. Therefore there were identified 5 types of development corridors, 7 free economic areas, 3 strategic airports and 4 sea ports, trying to explore also the geo strategic position of the country.
- Natural Potentials and Green Corridors. - Albania is rich on natural potentials. There were outlined several green, historic and landscaping corridors, which can promote a national identity, environmental education and boosting of tourism industry. These corridors are part of a networking strategy that was added to the existing agricultural land and protected areas. On the first step is planned an increase of the existing surface of protected and green areas, and then the consolidation of this network through several linking green corridors. This goes in line not only with the conservation needs, but also with the rehabilitation of the environmental hotspots in the country, which are mainly concentrated on the western plain of the country. This green framework corrects also the negative impact on environment, because of rapid infrastructure development.

**Recommendations** - Albania should move from the inherited spatial framework of centralized economy that was promoting self-isolation culture towards a new society, which is open and competitive towards regional and global markets. Therefore from an enclosed 8-shaped concept of the main national infrastructure, the spatial development vision on this research paper promotes shifting towards a ring radial system, starting from the capital region towards peripheral growth poles and cross border areas of interests. All infrastructure and services should be oriented towards such concept, where radials improve national and international connectivity, and rings increase national economic efficiency and courage prosperity of the Albanian speaking territories in the neighboring countries. Another recommendation is the enforcement of the creation of 6 regions with clear social economic patterns and specialized identities. Therefore the Metropolitan Region and Voskopoja Region will be focused on the regional and international strategic infrastructure and services, the

Northern and Southern Regions will be focused on the sea and mountainous tourism, while two other remaining regions will focus on the main economic activities like agriculture, mining and energy. The final recommendation is that Albania 2030 spatial vision for the country must foresee a development perspective for at least 15 coming years, and it should promote a sustainable economy, based on the four economic pillars.

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