

Shrinking Small Towns in Serbia: Development Challenges and Planning Policy Opportunities

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Abstract

Serbian territorial policies actively supported small towns during the socialist period, fostering growth. However, the post-socialist transition brought socio-political changes, economic restructuring, and widespread depopulation. Subsequent territorial policies have largely neglected the development of small towns, resulting in urban shrinkage across much of the country. This paper examines the developmental challenges facing small towns in Serbia, focusing on their current position within national spatial policy and planning framework. Drawing on European spatial policy and theoretical insights, the research aims to: 1) identify the primary obstacles to development of small shrinking towns; and 2) explore potentials for policy improvement. The findings highlight the need for a more targeted and strategically aligned policy framework to revitalize Serbia's small towns.

Keywords

small towns, shrinking town, Serbia, spatial policy, urban policy

Izvleček

Krčenje majhnih mest v Srbiji: razvojni izzivi in priložnosti prostorske politike

Srbske teritorialne politike so v času socializma aktivno podpirale majhna mesta in s tem spodbujale njihov razvoj. Toda prehod v postsocialistično obdobje je prineslo družbeno-politične spremembe, gospodarsko prestrukturiranje in depopulacijo. Kasnejše teritorialne politike so večinoma zanemarile razvoj majhnih mest, kar je povzročilo krčenje urbanih območij po večjem delu države. Prispevek obravnava razvojne izzive, s katerimi se soočajo majhna mesta v Srbiji, pri čemer se osredotoča na njihov trenutni položaj v okviru nacionalne prostorske politike in prostorskega načrtovanja. Na podlagi evropskih prostorskih politik in teoretičnih spoznanj raziskava 1) opredeljuje glavne ovire za razvoj majhnih mest, ki se krčijo, ter 2) ugotavlja možnosti za izboljšanje politik. Med ugotovitvami je izpostavljena potreba po bolj ciljno usmerjenem in strateško usklajenem okviru politik za oživitev majhnih mest v Srbiji.

Ključne besede

majhna mesta, krčenje mest, Srbija, prostorska politika, urbanistična politika



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1 Introduction

Small towns in Europe are experiencing a complex and often challenging period of development (Böhme et al., 2022). Once vital centers of commerce, industry, and social life, many are now grappling with the effects of globalization, demographic shifts, and evolving economic landscapes. Across various regions, common trends emerge: deindustrialization erodes traditional economic bases (Fertner et al., 2015), younger generations migrate towards larger urban centers in search of opportunities (Makkai et al., 2017), and centralized policies often prioritize metropolitan growth, sometimes inadvertently marginalizing smaller settlements (Ehrlich et al., 2012). These interwoven factors contribute to urban shrinkage, characterized by population decline, aging, and a weakening of the social and economic fabric of small towns. However, despite these widespread challenges, the importance of small towns is increasingly recognized at the European level, acknowledged for their crucial role in territorial balance, cultural heritage, and as providers of essential services within their broader regions (Knox & Mayer, 2009; Servilo et al., 2014; Kah, 2024).

Serbia, undergoing its own unique socio-political and economic transformations, exemplifies these broader trends. During the socialist era, state-led industrialization and urbanization policies propelled the growth of numerous small towns. However, following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the later shift to a market economy, many of these towns have experienced rapid shrinkage (Ljubenović et al., 2025). Furthermore, spatial divide has emerged, with concentration of capital, economic and administrative functions in a small number of major cities (Živanović & Gatarić, 2017; Stojanović & Vojković 2005) leaving small towns isolated and under-resourced. Although the demographic potential of small towns is widely recognized (Kokotović Kanazir, 2016), their performance is largely hindered by institutional shortcomings (Spasić et al., 2007). In Serbia, the planning and governance framework has failed to effectively promote their growth, resulting in their continued marginalization. One part of a problem is a lack of definition of urban areas as well as their official categorization by size in national urban policy (Ljubenović, 2022). Internationally, the United Nations and European Union harmonized the definition for urban areas, identifying towns as settlements with a population of at least 5,000 people located within contiguous grid cells with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per square kilometer. Building on this, ESPON's project TOWN further defines small towns as urban settlements meeting the same density criteria, but with a population between 5,000 and 25,000 (Servilo et al. 2014). The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) categorizes all settlements as either urban or other based on administrative-legal criteria, however, there is no further classification of urban settlements. In the Serbian context, small towns are generally defined by researchers as urban settlements with populations under 20,000 (e.g., Kokotović Kanazir, 2016; Spasić et al., 2007). Given the absence of a formal classification in policy, this study adopts the definition of small towns as settlements categorized as urban by SORS, with a population between 5,000 and 25,000. Shrinking is understood as a complex process with multiple economic, demographic, and spatial causes. Since population loss is both an early sign and a common measure of this process (Turok & Mykhenko, 2007; Wiechmann & Wolff, 2013), it is used as the main indicator for identifying shrinking small towns in this study. Accordingly, small towns that experienced population decline between two inter-census periods are categorized as shrinking.

Serbia's urban system is characterized by a stark primacy of the capital city, Belgrade, few larger cities and the vast majority of small towns. According to the 2022 Census,

29% of Serbia's urban population lives in Belgrade, which is four times larger than the second largest city, Novi Sad. Only three other cities have populations exceeding 100,000 (Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac) that serve as macro-regional centers. There are 25 urban settlements with 25,000–100,000 inhabitants, often serving as regional centers (Živanović et al., 2019), while the vast majority of urban settlements (80) belongs to the category of small towns. Around 40% of the national population still lives in predominantly rural areas. This settlement structure presents a challenge for balanced development, as many small towns function as important local hubs yet lack the demographic and economic capacity of the sub-regional centers.

Demographic and economic decline is linked to broader urbanization and centralization trends. Socialist-era urbanization strategically favored Belgrade and a few other major cities. The absence of adequate regional development policies led to intense concentration of population and capital in Belgrade, now home to 29% of Serbia's urban population and four times larger than the second largest city, Novi Sad. Serbia lacks evenly distributed mid-sized cities (200,000–500,000 inhabitants) that could drive balanced internal development (Tošić & Krunić, 2005). This centralization marginalizes small towns, reducing their role to population sources for larger urban centers (Stojkov & Šećerov, 2012). While Vojvodina's small towns, benefiting from better connectivity and planned development, have maintained some vitality, those in Central Serbia face more severe shrinkage.

This paper examines the multifaceted development challenges facing small towns in Serbia, focusing on their role and position within the current Serbian spatial policy and planning framework. Set against the backdrop of European policy recommendations for fostering balanced and sustainable territorial development, the paper aims to assess the existing planning and policy framework for small towns in Serbia and discuss its alignment with European policy directions. While not yet a full EU member, Serbia is on the path to complete integration with the union. Consequently, the country's spatial and urban policies have been adapted to align with EU standards. By understanding both the national context and the broader European guidelines, the paper seeks to: 1) identify the primary issues and challenges hindering the development of small shrinking towns within the existing Serbian urban and spatial policy framework; and 2) explore potentials for policy improvement.

2 Methodology

This paper employs a desk-based research methodology, drawing primarily on a systematic review of policy documents and scholarly literature relevant to small-town development in Europe and Serbia. The theoretical background section focuses on the causes of shrinkage and the European policy context, serving as a foundational literature review. It synthesizes insights from academic sources and European policy documents to establish a set of evaluative criteria against which Serbia's planning policies are assessed. Following this, a review of the development context and challenges of small towns in Serbia provides the basis for a critical examination of Serbia's planning policy framework, conducted through an in-depth analysis of key legal, strategic, spatial, and urban planning documents at the national, regional, and local levels. This document analysis is complemented by insights from scholarly articles and reports addressing the specific development challenges of Serbian small towns. Beyond demographic change, the analysis also included economic restructuring, urbanization patterns, and the broader political and institutional context since the Second World War. Synthesizing the findings, the congruence and gaps

between European policy recommendations and the Serbian planning framework for small towns are determined and recommendations are drawn.

To ensure robustness, a systematic source selection process was applied. The literature review drew from academic databases and search engines including Google Scholar, EBSCO, SCIndex, and NarDus (in both English and Serbian), using keywords such as "small towns", "urban shrinkage", "Serbia spatial policy", "Serbia settlement network" and "post-socialist urban development", to identify relevant scholarly works. For European-level documents, official institutional repositories were consulted, including the European Commission (2025), ESPON (2025), and the portals with documents of EU Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning (e.g. Territorial Agenda, 2025). Selection criteria required that documents explicitly or implicitly addressed small towns.

For Serbian documents, the analysis covered laws, strategies, and spatial and urban plans across all three planning levels (national, regional, and local). Sources included the official portals of the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, the Agency for Spatial Planning and Urbanism of the Republic of Serbia, the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, as well as municipal self-government websites for local-level planning practices. The documents were analyzed using a content analysis approach. Each was coded according to the parameters in Table 1.

Criterion	Description	Relevance to Research
Type of document	Law / Strategy / Plan	Differentiates normative and strategic frameworks
Spatial scale	National / Regional / Local	Identifies planning hierarchy levels
Explicit references to small towns	Mentions, definitions, or specific provisions	Shows visibility of small towns in policy
Demographic projections	Presence of population forecasts and trends	Evaluates whether planning is evidence-based
References to urban shrinkage	Mentions of population decline or outmigration	Measures policy acknowledgment of shrinkage
Development priorities and compliance with European policy recommendations	Consistency with European policy recommendations for small towns planning	Shows alignment with small-town needs and links Serbian framework to European policy context

Table 1: Criteria for analysis of Serbian policy framework.

Source: Author.

This targeted selection and review process aimed to cover both the normative framework (legislation and plans) and analytical insights (research studies), providing a comprehensive basis for evaluating planning policy impacts on small towns.

3 Theoretical background

3.1. Causes of shrinkage and specific challenges of small towns

Unlike larger urban areas, small towns show unique patterns of development and shrinkage. These are shaped by a diverse mix of territorial, economic, institutional natural and historical conditions. Historically, they served as vital trade, service, and smaller industrial hubs for rural regions. However, global economic restructuring has led to deindustrialization, with the loss or transformation of these traditional sectors (Makkai et al., 2017). Their narrow economic bases, often reliant on few industries or single employers, make them particularly vulnerable to economic downturns (Fol & Cunningham-Sabot, 2010). Larger cities attract investment and talent, further diminishing the competitiveness and economic relevance of small towns. Changing global food networks and rural decline also weaken their function as markets for local products (Božić, 2017) and service providers.

Demographically, small towns are aging due to the out-migration of young, educated individuals seeking better opportunities. This exodus exacerbates aging, reduces the workforce, stifles innovation, weakens community ties, and erodes social capital (Makkai et al., 2017).

National and regional policies often favor larger cities, leading to centralization of public services like schools and administration. This reduces local employment and civic engagement in small towns (Ehrlich et al., 2012). Post-socialist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), marked by the end of formal urbanization and reduced state funding, has further impacted small towns. (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2013).

The national urban hierarchy marginalizes small towns, especially in regions dominated by major urban centers (Servilo et al., 2014). In these areas, the dominant urban centers overshadow the influence of the smaller towns, even though the latter provide the primary living environment for 36.3% of the EU population (Eurostat, 2024). According to the territorial arrangement, three types of small towns are distinguished (ESPON 1.4.1., 2006):

- agglomerated - cities on the edges of densely populated agglomerations;
- networked – cities in areas dominated by medium-sized cities, well connected to European transport networks;
- cities in remote and peripheral areas.

Agglomerated and networked towns often have better prospects, while small towns remote/peripheral ones suffer from isolation and poor connectivity (Cox & Longlands, 2016), accelerating outmigration and shrinkage (Steinführer & Grossmann, 2021). These factors create a self-reinforcing cycle: economic decline fuels demographic shrinkage, which further weakens public services and investment attractiveness, intensifying revitalization challenges.

3.2. Small towns in European policy

The significance of small towns is being increasingly acknowledged at the European level, which is becoming more apparent in recent policy. (Kah, 2024). European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) was one of the first attempts to create a long-term strategy for balanced territorial development in Europe. Its vision has

shaped policies aiming to reduce regional disparities and foster sustainable development across both urban and rural areas, where small towns have significant role. Developing a balanced, polycentric urban system with strong urban-rural links is a main spatial development guideline. Specific policy orientations that are particularly relevant for small towns include (European Commission, 1999):

- Building networks of smaller towns in sparsely populated and economically weaker regions.
- Fostering cooperation between cities at regional, cross-border and transnational level in order to develop functional complementarity; promoting cooperation.
- Managing the physical expansion of towns by following compact-city model.
- Improving accessibility with various types of transport through an integrated approach to planning.
- Preserving and developing natural and cultural heritage.
- Promoting economic diversification of small towns depending on single structure.
- Fostering urban-rural partnership through integrated approach; maintenance of a basic supply of services and public transport in small towns in rural areas.

Urban Agenda for the EU recognizes the significance of smaller cities and their hinterlands in European economy (European Commission, 2019). It highlights the importance of the thematic partnership approach for smaller towns to support institutional and financial capacity. However, it does not provide details on actions specifically targeted at towns.

Europe 2020 Strategy sets out targets for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2020a). Although small towns are not explicitly addressed in this document, its emphasis on innovation, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability provides a framework for revitalizing small towns as part of broader regional development.

Territorial Agenda 2030 highlights the importance of balanced development and recognizes the specific needs of various territories, including small towns. It recognizes the potential of small towns to cushion polarization through polycentric development, and address their development in several key ways (European Commission, 2020b):

- Fostering cooperation and networking among cities, towns and surrounding areas within a single functional region
- Applying a place-based strategy that uses distinct potential of each area to address its specific challenges,, such as depopulation.
- Implementing a multi-level policy framework to strengthen cooperation between and across spatial levels, including urban-rural partnerships

The New Leipzig Charter provides guidance for applying principles defined in Territorial Agenda 2030 at urban scale (European Commission, 2020c). It emphasizes comparable living conditions in small and medium-sized towns, especially in shrinking areas. This highlights the importance of including small and medium-sized towns in urban policy, ensuring that they aren't overlooked as well as awareness that the challenges of urban decline are not limited to large metropolises but also affect smaller urban centers. The Charter notes that local authorities are responsible for local urban development in their national context, setting strategic guidelines and operations. Small-scale neighborhoods are linked to broader functional areas, and towns play a key role in stabilizing surrounding rural areas. It also calls for integrated urban-rural planning forming a complex network of functional interdependencies and

partnerships between towns, cities within functional urban areas or other territorial entities.

The ESPON's (European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion) project TOWN focuses on the role and functions of small and medium sized towns (SMST) in the European territorial structure, as well as the potentials and limitations for their development. The project's report emphasizes the variety of small towns in Europe (egg. residential, productive, or with creative knowledge profile), wherefore it is not recommended to form the policy for their development at the European level. Several recommendations derive from this report (Servilo et al., 2014):

- The development of a comprehensive national territorial policy framework that acknowledges the roles and functions of SMSTs within their regional settings, while remaining flexible enough to accommodate their differences.
- The establishment of national or regional hierarchy to prioritize support for certain small towns (e.g. like micro-regional centers).
- Applying place-based approach depending on the regional location – focusing on ties to larger cities for agglomerated SMST; on clusters for networked SMST; or on rural hinterland relationships for autonomous/isolated SMST.
- At the local level, SMST should be viewed from an endogenous perspective and the possibility of developing a high quality of life.
- Providing SMST with additional resources and support from higher levels (EU, national, regional), since local governments in many countries have limited authority and financial power.
- A place-based approach should be applied flexibly and creatively—respecting regional and local contexts, engaging a broad array of local stakeholders, and leveraging local insights to formulate a long-term strategy.
- Fostering inter-municipal cooperation, cross-border cooperation and urban/rural cooperation.

There are also specific measures for shrinking small towns in CEE, which include local economy restructuring, green space development, and flexible and creative solutions for public services (Servilo et al., 2014).

ESPON's Policy Brief on the Role of Small and Medium-sized Towns and Cities in Territorial Development and Cohesion gives following key policy recommendations (ESPON, 2024):

- Encourage polycentric development and functional urban–rural linkages.
- Develop integrated and flexible territorial programs to accommodate the unique dynamics of small towns.
- Enhance capacity building and intermunicipal cooperation.
- Foster economic diversification strategies that are based on local cultural, social, and environmental capital and promote green transition.
- Implement participatory, data-driven local development agendas.
- Summing up the insights from European policy documents, the following recommendations emerge for small towns planning development framework:
- National level: establishing a hierarchy and typology of small towns based on their territorial position, location and relationship with larger urban areas.
- National and regional level:
 - forming a network of small towns in order to foster regional cooperation,
 - connecting small shrinking towns with growing and prosperous areas,
 - providing institutional and financial support.

- Local level:
 - the development of an endogenous approach within the framework of an integrated strategy,
 - urban-rural cooperation,
 - local networking – engaging various local actors,
 - the development of compact city model, with quality public and green space,
 - economic diversification.

4. Development Challenges of Small Towns in Serbia

Over the past several decades, small towns in Serbia have faced significant difficulties driven by a complex combination of demographic, economic, spatial, and institutional factors.. These challenges, emerging prominently during the turbulent transitions of the 1990s and deepening into the 21st century, have redefined the role and potential of small towns within the national urban network.

Serbian small towns are diverse, shaped by distinct historical and geographical influences. Vojvodina, with its planned urban development under the Habsburg Empire, contrasts with the more organically evolved small towns of Central Serbia (Filipović et al., 2016). The Central Serbia has a greater heterogeneity in the types of small towns, which mainly developed along the main travel routes as marketplaces, exhibiting varying roles from local rural hubs to sub-regional centers and specialized towns like spas or industrial/mining towns (Spasić et al., 2007). A unifying characteristic is their role as municipal centers closely linked to their rural surroundings.

Serbia's transformation from a primarily agricultural society was driven by state-led industrialization and urbanization following Second world war. This period was marked by a significant growth in both the number and size of small towns, often driven by monofunctional industrial development and rural-urban migration (Filipović et al., 2016). However, socialist policies also fostered spatial imbalances, concentrating development in larger urban centers, particularly Belgrade.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the subsequent socio-political and economic turmoil of the 1990s marked a critical turning point. The transition to a market economy was significantly delayed and complicated in Serbia, exacerbating existing spatial disparities and triggering new challenges (Perić, 2016). The centralized socialist system was dismantled, replaced by a neoliberal model amidst political instability and economic crises. While refugee influx in the 1990s temporarily masked depopulation trends, urban shrinkage became evident after 2000, revealing the demographic consequences of the post-socialist transition.

Demographic decline is a primary challenge. Since the 1990s, economic and social transformations have dramatically altered the Serbia's settlement network, leading to pronounced population imbalances. Negative natural growth, characterized by persistently low birth rates since the 1990s, combined with out-migration, has led to substantial population loss. Between 1991 and 2002, Serbia's population declined by about 4.2%, with rural settlements declining even more sharply at 9.1%. Young, skilled individuals emigrate to larger Serbian cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš) or abroad for better opportunities. In the 1991–2002 period, 31 out of 81 small towns experienced shrinkage. This number rose to 61 in 2002–2011 and further to 70 in

2011–2022, indicating intensifying shrinkage (Table 2, Figures 1–3). Notably, population increase in the most recent inter-census period is attributed solely to immigration, while the primary factor contributing to depopulation is the negative natural increase (Ljubenović et al., 2023). On the other hand, there are no comprehensive data on migration. Only internal migrations are monitored in the form of the number of immigrants and emigrants from towns, but not the direction of migration.

Period	Number of shrinking towns	Population decline			
		0–5%	5–10%	10–20%	> 20%
1991–2002	31 (38.3%)	12	11	7	0
2002–2011	61 (74.4%)	27	26	7	1
2011–2022	70 (85.4%)	9	17	40	3

Table 2: Prevalence and intensity of shrinking small towns in Serbia.

Source: Author; Data: Census of population, households of abandoned apartments and apartments in the Republic of Serbia (1991, 2002, 2011, 2022).

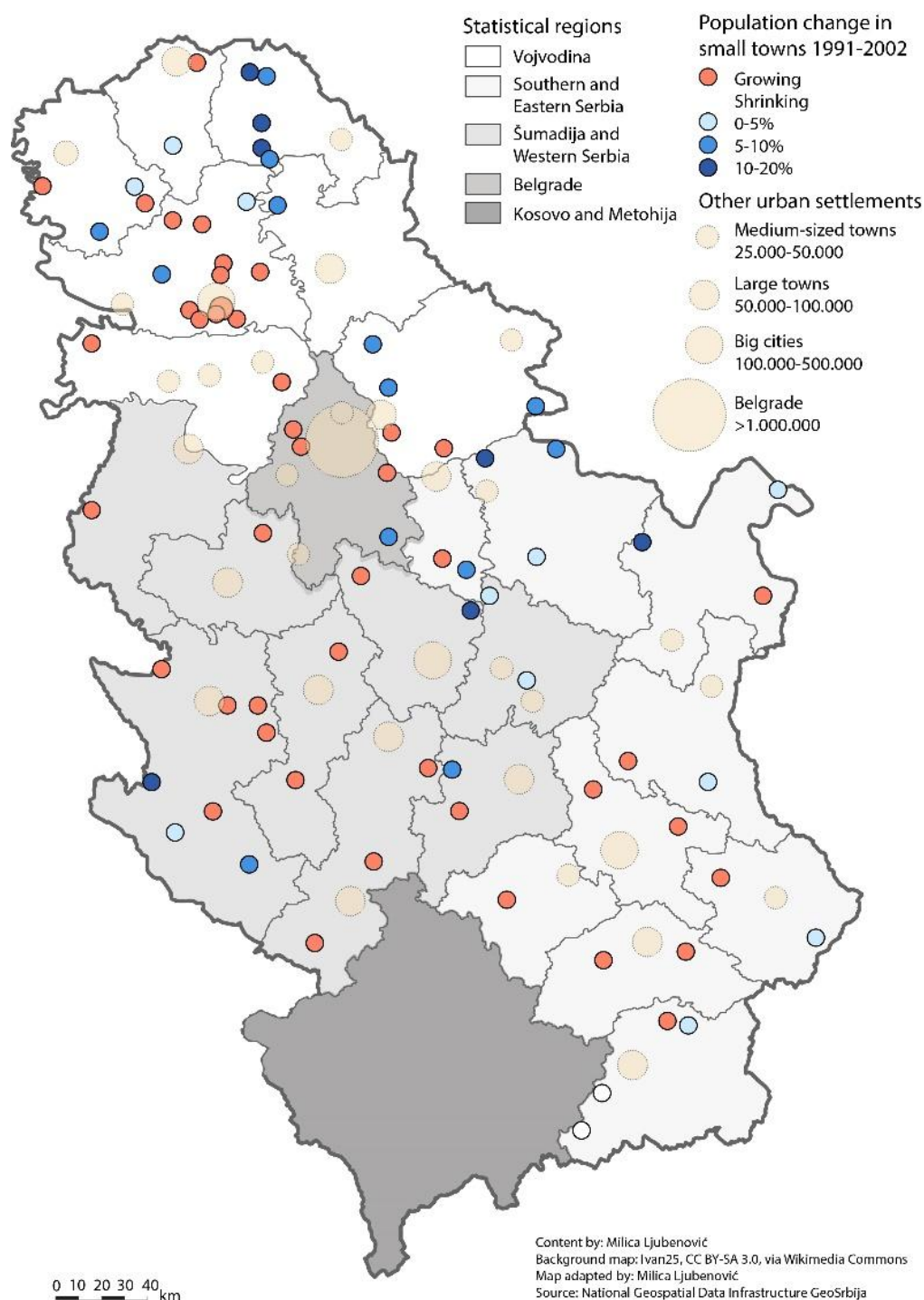


Figure 1: Prevalence and intensity of shrinking small towns in the urban system of Serbia in the period 1991–2002.

Source: Author; Data: Census of population, households of abandoned apartments and apartments in the Republic of Serbia (1991, 2002).

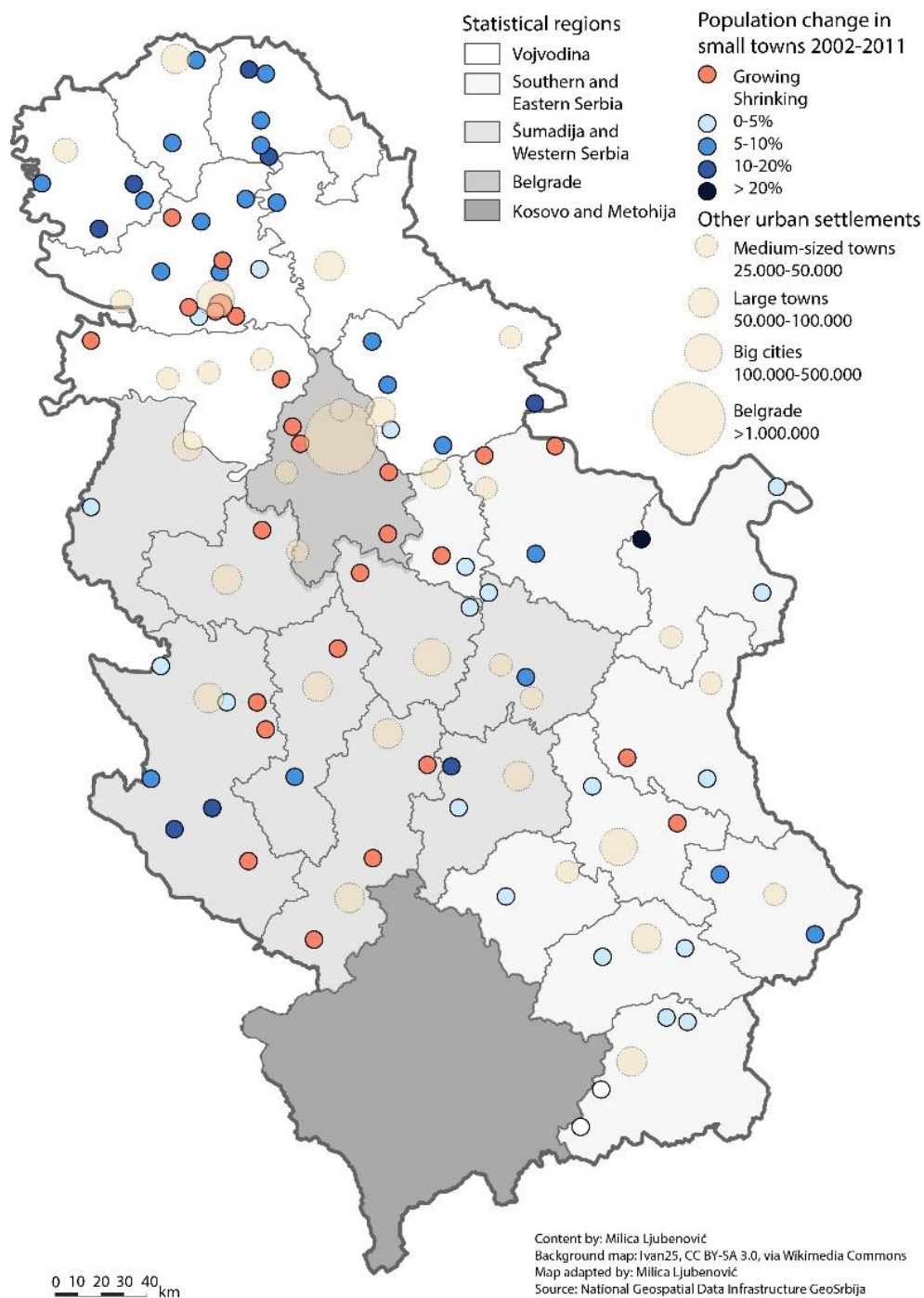


Figure 2: Prevalence and intensity of shrinking small towns in the urban system of Serbia in the period 2002–2011.

Source: Author; Data: Census of population, households of abandoned apartments and apartments in the Republic of Serbia (2002, 2011).

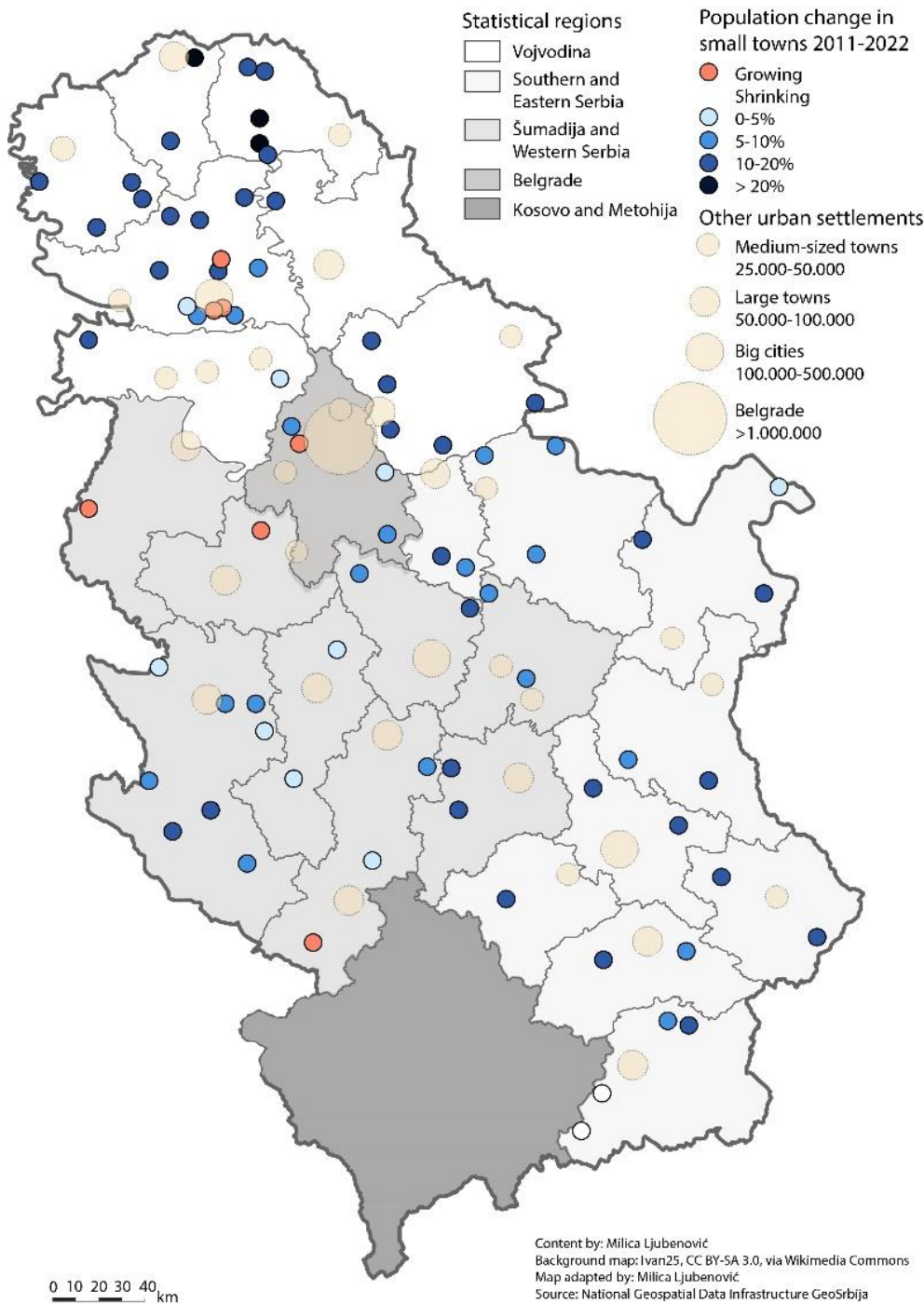


Figure 3: Prevalence and intensity of shrinking small towns in the urban system of Serbia in the period 2011–2022.

Source: Author; Data: Census of population, households of abandoned apartments and apartments in in the Republic of Serbia (2011, 2022).

This demographic shift results in an aging population within small towns. The exodus of younger residents depletes the workforce and diminishes the social capital vital for community cohesion and long-term development.

Small towns in Serbia are economically vulnerable due to their historical reliance on narrow industrial bases. They traditionally functioned as industrial or service centers for rural areas. However, with the onset of deindustrialization and the economic restructuring that followed the collapse of the socialist system, many of these traditional industries were unable to adapt. Former industrial centers such as Trstenik, Aleksandrovac, and Majdanpek lost their economic significance, resulting in job loss and reduced economic activity. Unsuccessful privatization further exacerbated this, leaving many towns with monofunctional economies overly dependent on single, struggling industries. The lack of economic diversification not only undermines local resilience but also hampers the ability to attract new investments or foster innovative sectors that might stimulate sustainable growth (Lang, 2005).

Demographic and economic decline is linked to broader urbanization and centralization trends. Socialist-era urbanization strategically favored Belgrade and a few other major cities. The absence of adequate regional development policies led to intense concentration of population and capital in Belgrade. Serbia lacks evenly distributed mid-sized cities (200,000–500,000 inhabitants) that could drive balanced internal development (Tošić & Krunić, 2005). This centralization marginalizes small towns, reducing their role to population sources for larger urban centers (Stojkov & Šećerov, 2012). In Vojvodina, small towns benefiting from stronger connectivity and more structured development, resembling the network type in ESPON's typology, have managed to retain a certain level of economic vitality, although they experienced notable population decline in the last intercensal period (Figures 1–3). Networked towns in Šumadija and Western Serbia have been comparatively more resilient, showing the least shrinkage. By contrast, many small towns in Southern and Eastern Serbia are remote or peripheral, including several border towns, and are experiencing the most severe depopulation. Finally, agglomerated small towns located on the fringes of Belgrade and Novi Sad benefit from proximity to large urban centers, yet census data indicate that even these towns have undergone mild population decline. Small towns did not experience suburbanization; most population loss was due to migration to larger cities or abroad. However, around major cities like Belgrade, some suburban municipalities have grown at the expense of the urban core, and smaller towns near metropolitan areas might lose population to those peri-urban zones.

The political and institutional context further contributes to the shrinkage of small towns. The post-socialist transition weakened decentralized governance structures, eroding local autonomy. The authoritarian 1990s regime and the subsequent fragmented transition process after 2000 diminished the capacity of local self-governments to manage development effectively. Small towns have become increasingly reliant on central government support, limiting their ability to implement tailored, local policies. Moreover, national urban policies have traditionally prioritized larger urban centers, reinforcing the marginalization of small towns in regional and local development strategies (Stojkov & Šećerov, 2012). This policy bias, coupled with the rapid and often uncontrolled process of urbanization during the socialist period, has left small towns with weakened roles in the national economy and diminished quality of life.

5. Planning and policy framework for small towns in Serbia

Serbia does not have a dedicated policy specifically for small towns; instead, issues related to them are managed within broader spatial and urban development documents. The selection followed the criteria derived from European policy recommendations, with the aim of identifying whether and how Serbian planning documents respond to challenges of small-town shrinkage (Table 3). At the national level, the selection focused on laws that guide the spatial organization, territorial development, and autonomy of local self-government, as well as the umbrella strategic and planning documents that frame urban and spatial development across the country. At the regional, the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia was chosen as an illustrative case, given that it represents the most underdeveloped region with the pronounced population decline. This choice reflects the methodological logic of extreme cases (Yin, 2009), where challenges and gaps are most visible. At the local level, four towns were chosen, each representing a different cluster as obtained in previous research (Ljubenović et. al, 2025). The selected documents were then subjected to content analysis, whereby each was coded by type, scale, and explicit references to small towns, population decline, and demographic projections, as well as their alignment with European policy recommendations.

Document	Type	Level	Relevance
Law on Regional Development (2009, with later amendments)	Law	National	Provides the legal framework for balanced territorial development; basis for addressing regional disparities that strongly affect small towns.
Law on the Territorial Organization (2007, with later amendments)	Law	National	Defines the system of settlements and administrative units; key for understanding the position of small towns within Serbia's settlement hierarchy.
Law on Local Self-Government (2007, with later amendments)	Law	National	Regulates the autonomy and competencies of municipalities; directly relevant for governance capacity of small towns.
Law on Local Self-Government Financing (2006, with later amendments)	Law	National	Defines municipal revenue sources; crucial for assessing the financial capacity of small towns to implement development measures.
Strategy of Sustainable Urban Development of the Republic of Serbia until 2030 (2019)	Strategy	National	Main urban policy document; includes goals for sustainable development of cities and towns, indirectly covering small towns.
Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia 2010–2020 (2010)	Spatial plan	National	Umbrella spatial development framework; basis for guiding spatial development
Regional Spatial Plans (4 plans covering Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia, 2010s)	Spatial plan	Regional	Used to examine how regional planning addresses shrinkage.

Local strategic documents (Aleksinac Knjaževac, Bela Palanka, Majdanpek)	Strategy	Local	Define development priorities at municipal level; illustrate how small shrinking towns set goals and strategies.
Municipal Spatial Plans (Aleksinac Knjaževac, Bela Palanka, Majdanpek)	Spatial plan	Local	Provide statutory spatial frameworks; include demographic projections and settlement structure, crucial for analyzing shrinkage recognition.
Plans of general regulations (Aleksinac Knjaževac, Bela Palanka, Majdanpek)	Urban plan	Local	Detail land use and development controls; show how planning instruments address practical implications of demographic decline.

Table 3: Analyzed legal, planning and development documents relevant to small towns in Serbia, categorized by type.

Source: Author.

The Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia (PPRS) for 2010–2020 serves as the umbrella document for spatial planning, while the new plan for 2021–2030 has not yet been adopted. This document embraces a polycentric urbanization model as a means to achieve a more balanced population distribution, aiming to alleviate the negative demographic, economic, and social impacts of rapid, uncontrolled migration. To support this approach, the plan emphasizes strengthening the role of small and medium-sized urban centers.

In addition, it calls for enhancing demographic dynamics and human capital in areas suffering from depopulation or adverse demographic trends, particularly in eastern and southern Serbia. Certain urban centers and small towns (such as Negotin, Kladovo, Majdanpek, and Knjaževac) are identified as needing an economic shift toward modern, sustainable industrial production, tourism, and other compatible activities. The plan also recommends fostering cooperation among municipalities rich in natural resources to integrate environmental protection with tourism development. Additionally, PPRS advocates for a spatial-functional development model based on functional urban areas. This model involves connecting major urban centers with surrounding settlements, establishing a hierarchical network among centers, and transferring certain responsibilities to less functionally significant areas. The ultimate goal is to create a dynamic urban–rural structure, supported by improved transportation links, infrastructure, and local partnerships, while simultaneously building distinct urban identities and encouraging re-industrialization.

To create a more efficient regional structure for the country, the Law on Regional Development was adopted in 2009. This law defines the division of Serbian territory into regions and categorizes them by development levels, indicating whether they are developed or underdeveloped. According to the Law on the Territorial Organization of Serbia, the territory is divided into national, provincial, and local levels. However, of the regions established by the Law on Regional Development, only Belgrade and Vojvodina actually possess a regional level of governance. Although local units are categorized into five development groups and funding is allocated for things like inter-regional cooperation and supporting underdeveloped areas, the mechanisms for true regionalization and decentralization of power are missing (Ministry of Construction, 2016).

On the territory of Serbia, there are ten spatial plans at the regional level out of which four cover the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia. These regional spatial plans further elaborate on the urban centers hierarchy established in PPRS, identifying sub-regional and local centers. In the case of Central Serbia, these plans, however, do not follow statistical regions since they were adopted before the Law on Regional Development. The absence of an institutional framework for regional governance complicates their implementation. Moreover, inter-municipal cooperation is mentioned only in some of the regional plans, without detailed elaboration (Ljubenović, 2022). The newest policy document for long-term development of urban settlements in Serbia is the Strategy for Sustainable Urban Development of the Republic of Serbia until 2030, adopted in 2019. This strategy addresses all urban settlements collectively while considering demographic trends. It suggests that rather than expanding urban areas, efforts should focus on increasing compactness and redeveloping existing built-up zones, possibly through repurposing specific locations. Consequently, the strategy calls for re-evaluating current urban planning documents, such as general urban plans and regulation plans.

The strategy also notes that small urban settlements have been adversely affected by the rationalization of public services, implemented solely for cost efficiency without in-depth needs analysis, which has reduced their functional significance compared to rural areas. To address this, it recommends improving the availability and quality of public services in urban areas and calls for the creation of a sustainable development fund. This fund would integrate urban and spatial interventions into national and local budgets, align strategic planning with traditional urban planning, and enable local governments to secure funding for updating urban plans.

With the adoption of the Law on Local Self-government in 2007, local self-governments received greater authority, which includes the adoption of local self-government unit spatial plans, urban plans, and development programs. Furthermore, the Law on Local Self-Government Financing, enacted in 2006, has granted municipalities increased financial power and additional revenue from payroll taxes, enabling them to finance development projects. However, they still have a high dependence on the central government (Kopanja et al., 2013).

The urban plans in many small towns are still based on an outdated assumption of growth and are not properly adapted to the current conditions. Despite negative demographic trends, many towns in Serbia still focus on increasing population density and expanding construction areas (Figure 4). Demographic development projections were mostly positive, but actual trends did not reflect this. One reason is that most of the plans were made before the 2011 Census, which was the first to provide a realistic picture of demographic development. Strategic plans are developed as a formal obligation, with ambitious economic goals, and they are generally not implemented or fail to impact urban and spatial planning (Ljubenović, 2022). Moreover, connections with the rural environment are typically insufficiently elaborated. Additionally, citizen participation in planning is low, with the primary issue being a lack of motivation among citizens for direct involvement in the plan's development (Maričić et al., 2018).

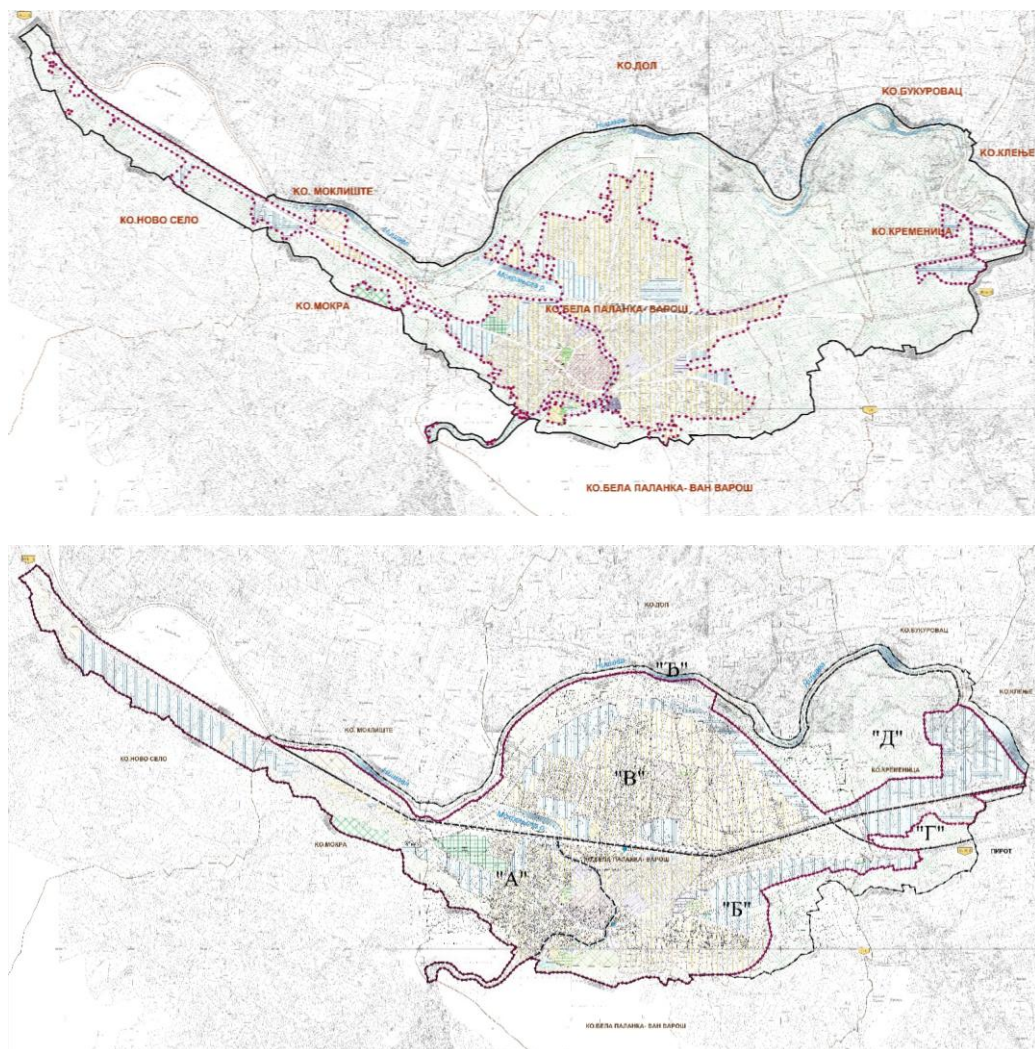


Figure 4: General regulation plan of Bela Palanka from 2013: upper figure - Existing functional organization within the scope of the plan with the predominant land use (the red dots represent the boundary of built-up area); lower figure - Plan boundary and boundaries of the planned construction area of a settlement with a predominantly land use (the red dots represent the boundary of the planned construction area).
Source: https://belapalanka.org.rs/pgr_bele_palanke.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The planning and policy framework for small towns in Serbia, according to the analyzed documents demonstrates a degree of alignment with European policy recommendations, particularly in its stated intentions. The Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia embraces the principle of polycentric urbanization, identifies the need to strengthen small and medium-sized towns and promote functional urban areas through inter-municipal cooperation, echoing the European policy emphasis on networking and territorial cooperation. However, PPRS addresses all small towns as

unique category, without referring to their specifics, excluding several noted examples.

Furthermore, the Strategy for Sustainable Urban Development of Serbia until 2030, with its focus on compact urban development and re-evaluating urban planning documents, aligns with the European policy orientation towards compact city models and sustainable urban growth. However, this document does not make any categorization of urban areas and leaves the determination of locations for priority intervention to the local level.

The Law on Local Self-Government, by granting municipalities greater authority and financial power, theoretically empowers local actors to implement development strategies, which resonates with the European focus on multilevel governance, higher level support and place-based approaches. This is the only document that gives a categorization of local self-government units.

However, despite these points of convergence at the national and regional level, several critical gaps and challenges emerge when considering the Serbian policy framework. Firstly, while Serbian policy documents mention inter-municipal cooperation, regional networking, and functional urban areas, the institutional mechanisms and financial incentives to effectively realize these concepts appear weak. The initiators of inter-municipal cooperation in Serbia are mostly external – private investors, international financial institutions or donors (Pavlović Križanić, 2010), there are also examples of cross-border cooperation, and the largest number of projects resulting from inter-municipal cooperation relate to the field of waste management. The absence of regional governance structures, which is also the deficiency of many post-socialist countries (Ehrlich et al., 2012), hinders the potential for coordinated action and resource pooling amongst small towns, as promoted by European policy through networking and cooperation frameworks. In this respect, the Shrink Smart project also recommends the alignment of planning and urban regeneration policies at the regional level, the establishment of agencies focused specifically on urban regeneration, and the creation of regional urban planning mechanisms that can provide a coherent strategic framework for development (Bernt et al., 2012). The regional level is also recognized as the most suitable for defining inter-municipal cooperation (Domhardt & Troeger-Weiß, 2009).

Secondly, the Serbian policy framework, while acknowledging the need for economic diversification in struggling small towns, provides limited specific guidance or targeted support measures. PPRS still relies on the reindustrialization approach. European recommendations emphasize the importance of place-based approaches, tailored to the unique characteristics of different types of small towns (agglomerated, networked, remote/peripheral). The unique advantages of small towns, based on endogenous resources, are recognized as the basis for the development of creative strategies aimed at new, innovative paths of development (Selada & Cunha, 2012; Noronha & Vaz, 2015). In contrast, Serbian policy documents tend to offer broad recommendations applicable to all urban areas, with less granular strategies that address the diverse needs of small towns in different territorial contexts. The lack of a clearly defined hierarchy or typology of small towns at the national level, as suggested by the ESPON TOWN project and recognized as crucial for targeted policy interventions in the European context, is also evident in the Serbian framework.

The failure to implement planning concepts for urban centers and their functional areas has allowed negative development trends to persist. This has also intensified the polarization of Serbia's territory, widening the gap between developed centers (mostly larger settlements) and an increasingly underdeveloped periphery, which includes almost all smaller municipal centers and rural settlements.

The national strategy's emphasis on compact cities and re-evaluation of urban plans is pertinent, but its effectiveness is hampered by the continued prevalence of urban growth paradigms in local urban plans. As observed, many small towns in Serbia still operate under planning approaches focused on expansion rather than adaptation to demographic decline and economic restructuring. This suggests a disconnect between national strategic direction and local planning practice, highlighting a potential weakness in the policy implementation chain. This is also a consequence of unsynchronized timeline of inconsistent order of adopting plans, which are further unsynchronized with census conceptions and therefore base their analysis on outdated trends (Ljubenović, 2022).

Finally, the issue of limited citizen participation in planning processes in Serbia presents a significant challenge to the effective implementation of integrated place-based approaches. Endogenous development strategies, local networking, and urban-rural cooperation, all emphasized in European recommendations, require active engagement of local stakeholders and communities. The lack of citizen motivation and mechanisms for meaningful participation in Serbian planning processes may undermine the potential for truly place-sensitive and locally-driven development in small towns, which is crucial for building local economic resilience (Cox & Longlands, 2016).

When comparing these findings with international experiences, it becomes evident other countries are also still seeking appropriate approaches for dealing with small towns shrinkage. Governance responses to shrinkage vary: for instance, there are youth-oriented revitalization programs emerging in parts of East Asia (Kim, 2024), and resilience-based planning approaches being discussed in Europe (Eraydin & Özatağan, 2021). In Western European context, small towns have sought to counteract decline by leveraging niche strengths, such as attracting commuters or retirees by enhancing their residential appeal (Fertner et al., 2015). In the case of post-socialist context of Estonia and former East Germany, it is shown that recognizing the needs and priorities of local community and building social capital is important for using endogenous resources and developing successful local strategies in shrinking small towns (Leetmaa et al., 2015).

In conclusion, while Serbian planning policies express alignment with several key principles of European territorial development policy, significant gaps exist in terms of concrete implementation mechanisms, targeted support for diverse types of small towns, adaptation of local planning practices to demographic realities, and fostering genuine local participation. For Serbian small towns to effectively address their development challenges and harness their potential within the national urban system the primary step would be to form a national policy with specific concerns of small and medium-sized towns. This policy should include typology of small towns based on the problems and challenges they face, the territorial position and the relationship with larger urban areas. Based on that, their redevelopment strategies should be defined, with specific packages of measures for each level (national, regional, local), which must act synchronously, in order to ensure the development of adequate regional and local plans and programs. It is also necessary to establish adequate

governance structures and implementation monitoring mechanisms. By identifying priorities and areas for action, it is possible to design more tailored and place-based policy interventions, and direct adequate resources and funds. A shift in local planning paradigms towards sustainable shrinkage management rather than growth, and enhanced mechanisms for citizen engagement are crucial next steps for small towns revitalization contributing to a more balanced development and resilient urban–rural continuum across Serbia.

Besides its practical contribution in offering guidelines for aligning Serbian planning frameworks with European policy recommendations to address the acute challenges of small-town shrinkage, this research also advances the broader comparative debate on urban shrinkage. The analytical framework – linking European policy recommendations, national legal and planning frameworks, and local planning practices – offers a transferable approach that can be applied to other countries facing similar issues in small towns. Thus, beyond its national scope, this study contributes to the cumulative knowledge on small-town planning policy in shrinking regions across Europe and beyond.

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Povzetek

Majhna mesta v Srbiji se soočajo z vedno hujšo krizo urbanega krčenja. Medtem ko so bila v času socializma aktivno podprta in so se razvijala, je postsocialistični prehod prinesel gospodarsko prestrukturiranje in družbeno-politične spremembe, ki so povzročile obsežno depopulacijo. Ta trend so dodatno okrepile poznejše teritorialne politike, ki so ta manjša naselja večinoma zanemarile. Prispevek preučuje prostorsko politiko in načrtovalski okvir Srbije ter ju primerja z evropskimi priporočili. Ključna ugotovitev je izrazit razkorak med načrtovalnimi cilji in njihovo izvedbo. Čeprav nacionalni dokumenti, kot je Prostorski plan Republike Srbije, zagovarjajo načela policentrične urbanizacije in krepitve majhnih mest, so institucionalni in finančni mehanizmi za uresničitev teh ciljev šibki ali celo neobstoječi. Poleg tega se ta razkorak kaže tudi na lokalni ravni, kjer številni občinski prostorski načrti še vedno načrtujejo rast, namesto da bi se prilagodili realnosti demografskega upada. Prispevek izpostavlja nujnost bolj ciljno usmerjenega in strateško usklajenega okvira politik. Priporoča oblikovanje posebne nacionalne politike, ki bi vključevala tipologijo majhnih mest ter opredelila krajevno prilagojene strategije za njihovo oživitev in prispevek k bolj uravnoteženemu nacionalnemu razvoju.

