

INTRODUCTION TO THE CROATIAN SPATIAL PLANNING SYSTEM

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Version 1 22.05.2020

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1. Introduction

Physical (spatial) planning includes the development (organization) of settlements, economic and social activities, networks of infrastructural systems, environmental protection and the protection of natural and cultural values. In that process, the basic principles are rational use, balance, protection of space, and the appreciation of heritage.

In Croatia, the central institution dealing with physical planning is the Institute for Spatial Development operating within the Ministry of Construction and Physical Planning. Among other things, the Institute for Spatial Development develops and coordinates the development and implementation of the National Physical Planning Strategy and other plans adopted by Parliament and the Government, managing and developing the physical planning information system, performance of expert tasks and assistance in the development of physical plans in cooperation with different state administration bodies. In addition to the Institute, on the lower levels (in the counties and cities/towns) there are offices dealing with physical plans (HZPR 2020).

The strategic plans give guidelines, while the implementing plans provide a specific building purpose and conditions and serve as the basis for issuing permits. According to the Physical Planning Act, spatial plans are hierarchically classified into state-level plans (Physical Planning Strategy of the Republic of Croatia, State Plan for Spatial Development, Spatial Plans of Areas with Special Features (national park, nature park), and the urban development plan of state significance), regional-level plans (county spatial plans, the Spatial Plan of the City of Zagreb and the urban development plan of county significance), and local-level plans (spatial development plan of a city or municipality, the general urban plan and the urban development plan). The plans shall be mutually aligned and aligned with the higher-level plans, all the way up to the national plan. The existing but also former spatial plans are kept on file not only to be able to see how a certain area has developed through time, but also to be consulted during specific works. In the context of pluvial floods, they can indicate the initial natural and topographic conditions of drainage, the established solutions and the gradual development of the protection system.

Space is a valuable and limited, most frequently non-renewable resource shared by a large number of users. For that reason, the purpose of physical planning is to organize its rational and optimum use. Since urban areas are the areas at the highest risk in the event of heavy rains, physical planning has a key role in the implementation of the flood risk reduction measures. In doing so, systematic and high-quality cooperation between different groups of users is essential. Even though professional literature contains a number of engineering solutions to reduce the adverse effects of heavy rainfall, urban floods can in no way be analysed exclusively through an engineering approach. Instead, the integration of a wide range of experts and stakeholders is required - from the local community, through public companies, climatologists, biologists, to landscape architects, engineers and urban planners. The selection of the optimum solution shall not be considered only in engineering terms, but also in terms of the costs of implementation and environmental and social impacts.

2. Administration and Planning

The modern administrative-territorial organisation of the Republic of Croatia is based on the 20 counties and the City of Zagreb as the basic administrative-territorial units and their governing (and self-governing) functions. The capital city of Zagreb and the county centres form a network of leading Croatian towns, which vary in size and gravitational influence. This administrative-territorial model has been practiced since main Croatian urban centres in the European NUTS Regionalisation Context the beginning of restructuring in 1993, and went through some changes in terms of modifying the borders of some counties in 1997.

Taking into account the existing network of cities, the modern administrative-territorial model was created as an expression of aspirations for territorial differentiation and organisation of the country into units that would enable versatile economic, cultural and other types of development along the lines of the development. Conceived county organisation of historic Croatia, including the dual monarchy as the Austrian-Hungarian Empire when Austrian Dalmatia was structured in districts or counties, the model resulted in the establishment of 20 counties and the City of Zagreb.

Initial proposals in 1992, for 10 to 12 counties, which would be distributed evenly throughout the area of contemporary Republic of Croatia, within the limits of influence of the same number of leading cities, were not accepted. In fact, by means of democratic debate among various parties, political and other bodies, and often the particularistic demands of smaller units and cities, etc., the final outcome was the designation of 20 counties and the City of Zagreb at the end of 1992. At the same time, the number of municipalities (including newly structured administrative towns) increased almost fivefold compared to the previous number of about 115 during the time of Socialist Croatia within Yugoslavia in the period after 1961.

3. Spatial Planning

Legal basis for spatial planning in the Republic of Croatia is the Physical Planning Act passed by the Croatian Parliament on 6 December 2013. The responsibility for the national level lies with the Ministry of Construction and Physical Planning, which recently has started with the preparation of the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia by 2030. Apart from this, there are no binding planning instruments for the national level in force, yet. Practically all responsibilities and competences are with the cities and municipalities on one hand and the 20 counties on the other.

3.1. Regional Planning (county spatial plans)

A county spatial plan is a fundamental document for the physical planning of regional self-government units. A county spatial plan elaborates the objectives of physical planning and determines the rational use of space in accordance, to the highest possible extent, with neighbouring counties, spatial development and protection of space. An integral part of the spatial plan of a county or the City of Zagreb may also be the spatial plan of areas with special features for areas with natural values of the county or City level determined by a special law.

3.2. Development plans of cities or municipalities

Spatial plans are fundamental documents for the physical planning of every local self-government unit in Croatia. Plans are adopted by representative bodies of local self-government units, i.e., the municipal or town council after a public debate has been carried out. The spatial development plan defines the direction for the development of activities and purpose of areas, and conditions for sustainable and balanced development in the territory of the major city, city or municipality.

Spatial development of settlements or parts of settlements shall be regulated in more details by urban development plans, that is, detailed development plans, which in accordance with the spatial plan, shall also be adopted by the representative body of a local self-government unit.

3.3. Leading cities and the administrative-territorial model in Croatia

Recent political and economic circumstances, in particular the construction of the modern highway network, marked new differentiation between settlements. Today, seven or eight leading Croatian cities have prominently sized urban regions. They form the basis of a contemporaneous network of socio-economic groupings, areal-temporal spatial convergence, and gravitational relations, etc.

Almost all Croatian cities with over 25,000 inhabitants are county centres. These cities mostly have relatively small populations, and only seven of them exceed 50,000 inhabitants, with the stronger gravitational influence and level of equipment of central function institutions. Most of them experienced population decline in the last decades, as result of poor demographic characteristics (natural decline, and a variable, often negative migration balance). The demographic and economic decline of the leading cities, which extended to even more intensive demographic decline in rural settlements, small towns and peripheral regions, is one of the causes of recent requirements for changes to the administrative-territorial organisation of the country, although there are no clear indications that this is actually the cause of depopulation and economic recession.

Instead of scientific and multidisciplinary clarifications of the reasons for the continuing decline in GDP and population, the different governments had launched a variety of measures adopting and amending acts and other regulations that directly affect regional (county) and territorial-administrative organisation and development, as well as that of towns and peripheries. However, the optimal model of territorial-administrative differentiation, or regionalisation, based on the network of leading centres in functional, demographic, economic, logistic, traffic, and other terms, has not been implemented yet. Due to the size of the Republic of Croatia and its population, taking into account the *EU NUTS-3* level of regionalisation, and in comparison with its neighbouring countries this would have resulted also in eight to ten, maximally twelve 3rd level regions.

In reality, there are only six such clearly prominent centres in Croatia, regardless of the number of counties, which have gravitational significance beyond their counties: Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek, Zadar and Slavonski Brod. These centres, which as a rule form broader regional gravitational complexes at the county and supra-county levels, with approximately 250,000 to 550,000 inhabitants should be the main pillars and basis of the modern regional structure of the country, because this is already the actual situation.

The current economic situation, the weak, sometimes very adverse effects of transition, accompanied by the fact that most of the former, rather stronger centres have been depopulated and economically weakened, and the levels of their central function institutions lowered, have actually reduced gravitational influence to the sub-regional level.

Current approaches to the regionalisation and powers of the leading Croatian cities are directly prompted by contemporary debates about the administrative and territorial reorganisation of the Republic of Croatia. They arise from the need for a more effective, decentralised and appropriate regional development of the country. At the same time, criticisms have been expressed regarding the number of existing counties, administrative cities/towns and municipalities, which, according to many, is irrational, dysfunctional, and economically unsustainable.

3.4. Regional administrative power and planning competences

Considering that recent regional development processes in Croatia have resulted in clear recognition of at least eight regional centres, it would be necessary and useful, within any new concept, to recognise them as centres of a minimum of eight regions (nine with the City of Zagreb). It is also possible to adopt a more flexible approach to this issue by recognising more than seven or eight first order centres. In this way, the basic network of centres selected would define the potential number of regions in Croatia as a maximum

of eleven or twelve with the *City of Zagreb*. Gravitationally optimal reorganisation would have a positive impact on the demographic, economic and geographical, i.e. overall spatial development of the country. This applies especially also to their corresponding administrative competencies including those for spatial planning.

4. Heavy Rain Risk Management and Spatial Planning

In preparation of the *National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia by 2030* the Ministry of Construction and Physical Planning is being involved in the green infrastructure theme. Following this, the ministry highlights the theme of Green Cities, with two specific sub-themes: Green infrastructure in urban areas and circular management of space and buildings, with both themes having an unquestionable impact on the territory and landscape.

However, the most important responsibilities lie with the *Ministry for Water Management and Sea Protection* as the relevant activities are carried out by *Croatian Waters* in the field of water management, especially those relating to watercourses in cities, flood protection and investments in the field of the water management sector. *Croatian Waters* have shown the methods by which they implement flood protection measures, as well as educational programmes on the importance and significance of water they carry out in kindergartens and primary schools all over Croatia.

The spatial plans and river basin management plans have a significant role in the flood risk limitation and reduction through the reduction of a potential number of people and goods exposed to the risk. Since the biggest problems continue to be the built-up areas and the existing values exposed to heavy rain events, the main challenge is their adaptation (e.g. gradual replacement of a combined sewer system with a separate one), reorganization and change of use. In the un-built parts of the basins it is possible to reserve space for the implementation of flood risk reduction measures (e.g. a retention basin), and construction can be restricted in the critical zones. If that is not possible, for example due to property rights issues, it is recommended to familiarize potential users of space with the hazards or realistic scenarios in the specific area.

Furthermore, it is recommended to integrate the measures and effects of climate change adaptation into spatial plans, which hasn't been practice so far. This particularly refers to the coastal regions, since the rising seawater levels, which continue to be on the rise, contribute to the floods. There are papers analysing the impact of rising seawater levels on UNESCO's heritage in Croatia (Trogir, Diocletian's Palace, Euphrasian Basilica, etc.), with the solutions for their protection being extremely expensive. The best thing that can be done is to integrate the projections of rising seawater levels into plans for future construction activities.

5. References

HZPR (2020): Prostorno planiranje u Republici Hrvatskoj. Website: <http://hzpr.hr/>.

RAINMAN Key Facts

Project duration: 07.2017 – 06.2020

Project budget: 3,045,287 €

ERDF funding: 2,488,510 €

RAINMAN website &
newsletter registration: www.interreg-central.eu/rainman



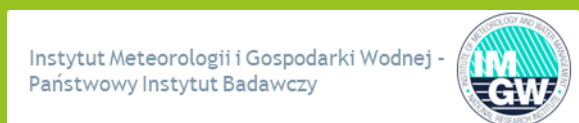
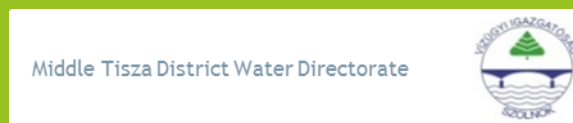
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