

## **Complementarity of Urban Plans and Strategies Case Study – City of Niš in Southeastern Serbia**

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### **Niš – one of the biggest cities in Serbia and in South-Eastern Europe**

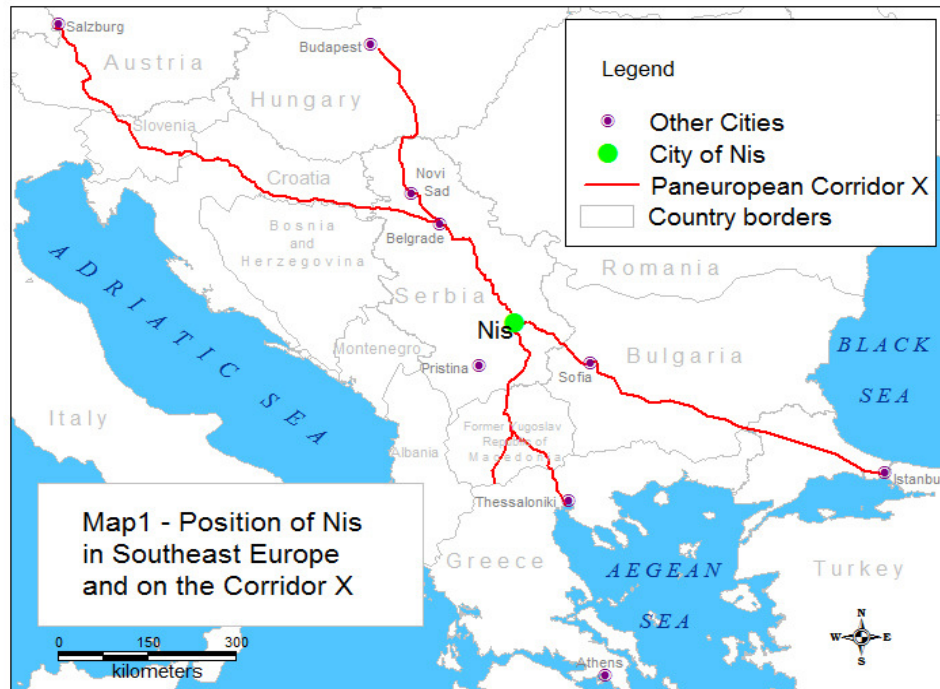
Niš is one of the biggest cities in Serbia. Capital town Belgrade with the population of 1,6 million inhabitants is followed by the town of Priština which is the capital of autonomous province of Kosovo in southwest. The third position by size of cities in Serbia is shared between Novi Sad and Niš which have the population of around 250 thousand inhabitants each. Novi Sad is the capital of autonomous province of Vojvodina in the north. Niš is the most important town of the southeast part of the country. Serbia administratively has two autonomous provinces and the rest of the territory is called Central Serbia. The proposal to divide the whole country in between 5 and 7 regions is an open issue which hasn't been agreed yet politically.

Niš has a very specific position on the crossroad of important roads. The main traffic axis passing through south-eastern Europe splits in two branches in Niš coming from Belgrade in the north, one branch goes towards east, leading to Sofia and further on to Istanbul and represents the easiest link with Asia in southeastern part of Europe. The other branch goes towards south and represents the shortest mainland connection between Greece and the rest of Europe. This position of Niš is a huge regional potential of the city which is still underused. The city is an outstanding transition point where roads from Asia Minor, Central Europe and Mediterranean meet in the most natural way following the valleys of rivers Vardar towards south, Morava towards north and Nišava towards east. This transport axis was recognized as pan-european corridor X coming with its branches from Salzburg and Budapest leading to Thessaloniki and Istanbul.

Niš as an important urban centre was a strategic point all throughout the history. Its cultural heritage is present in the archeological sites and monuments in the central city area (the locality of Mediana from the Roman period, Fortress from the Ottoman period). Niš is the place of birth of the Byzantine emperor Constantine the Great, founder of Constantinople, nowadays Istanbul. In the middle ages the city was a typical Turkish settlement with walled city and the organic urban pattern under oriental influence. The first plan for the city came in the year of final liberation of the Ottoman rule in 1878. The regulation plan was made by the Austrian engineer Franz Winter and it determined the urban matrix of the inner city center as it is today (Maksimović, 1978). The period of kingdoms of Serbia and Yugoslavia was characterized by stronger European influence. The next urban plan dates from 1939. Another phase of the urban development started after the Second World War with three general urban plans from 1953, 1973 and 1995 (Stanković, 2009). The Institute for Urban Planning was created in 1958 when the activity of urban and regional planning intensified in Niš and its region.

Niš is one of the 15 largest cities in Southeast Europe – the part of the continent also known as the Balkans. The Balkans consist geographically of eight entire countries or their parts, Serbia is one of them. Since Serbia is not part of the European Union its immediate main partners for international cooperation in spatial development are the countries of Southeast Europe. Some projects on transnational level (Estia, Vision

Planet, Planet Cense etc.) as well as projects of cross-border cooperation (Eurobalkans and others) were realized during last two decades when the cooperation on international level in spatial development started.



Map1 - Position of Niš in Southeast Europe and on the Corridor X

## Spatial Planning documents in Serbia and in Niš

The current Law on Planning and Construction in Serbia dates from 2009 and it defines four types of spatial plans and three types of urban plans. Spatial plans are at the level of republic, at the level of region or district and at the local level which is the level of municipality or a city. The fourth type of spatial plans is for specific areas (national parks, areas of natural or cultural heritage protection, important projects of construction at national level, tourist areas, infrastructure corridors etc.). Three types of urban plans have for aim the regulation of settlements (general plans for entire settlements of larger size, general regulation plans for smaller settlements or parts of bigger settlements and detailed regulation plans for specific facilities). Those different types of plans have to be coordinated and compatible among each other offering various levels of insight in spatial development on different levels. The legislation in the domain of spatial planning in Serbia is changing quite often, since 1965 when was created the first law focused specifically on spatial planning, seven laws were replacing one another with minor differences. The frequent changes in planning regulation result in slight differences in forms of planning documents and the constant adapting to the context of new laws.

The structure of spatial plans is defined by the law, although it leaves space for the flexibility in relation to the particular planning area. The analytical and synthesis parts are two main elements of plans. The analysis varies throughout different sectoral topics, having in mind the integrated approach and combining sectoral topics in the common vision. Existing spatial plans overlapping on the same territory have to be taken into account as well as other strategic documents. SWOT analysis is based on the data

collection taking into account all aspects of the sustainable development. The synthesis part considers planning solutions and strategic priorities dealing with the following topics: natural resources and environment, population and social development, infrastructure, economic development and territorial cooperation. The implementation and action plan should be provided by a separate document which is the Program of implementation for all types of spatial plans except local spatial plans for municipalities and cities. This document is an innovation introduced in 2009 with the new law and there aren't any Programs of implementation which have been created up to now. This type of document is a challenge for improvements in the planning practice since the implementation is one of the weakest points of spatial planning in Serbia.

The structure of urban plans in Serbia deals more with zoning and land use policy. It defines standardized types of zones provided by legal provisions: individual and collective housing, zones of activities, green spaces, infrastructure, public services, water bodies etc. Urban plans have to be in accordance with spatial plans which give the framework for urban planning. Main parts of urban plans are the rules of territorial management and the rules of construction. Urban plans have potential to limit the illegal construction which is present all over Serbia, but the procedures which are complicated and the absence or inaccuracy of plans are not in favor of effective urban planning process. The general urban plan which is currently in force in Niš dates from 1995 and it has been amended two times, in 2002 and 2007.

Spatial planning in Niš and its region is realized through plans on different levels. The highest level of planning is treated through the Spatial Plan of Republic of Serbia. The first spatial plan of the republic was made in 1996 for the period until 2010. The new Spatial Plan of the Republic is in its final phase, it should be approved by the National Assembly until the end of the year. Regional plan which covers the territory of Niš is the unified plan for three districts (Nišavski, Toplički and Pirotski) which is in its initial phase and it should be finished until 2012. A few existing plans for specific areas cover parts of the territory of Niš or its surroundings: Sićevo canyon Spatial Plan, Kamenica highlands Spatial Plan, Bojanine vode tourist area on the Suva Mountain Spatial Plan, three plans for infrastructure corridors – towards Belgrade, towards Bulgaria and towards Macedonia. Spatial plan at the local level for the City of Niš is being elaborated and it is in its final phase. The old spatial plan for the City of Niš dates back in 1992. The elaboration of the new Spatial Plan for the City of Niš was initiated in 2006. The first phase of elaboration for all spatial plans is the Concept of the Spatial Plan which is the basis for the draft version. After the vote in the City Assembly the draft version becomes the final version that is the legally binding document. The spatial plan gives strategic guidelines for the whole territory of the municipality or city, it prescribes the elaboration of urban plans for some parts of its territory and for the rest of the territory which is not supposed to be covered by urban plans it gives the rules of management and construction.

The Concept of the Spatial Plan for the City of Niš covers the territory of five urban municipalities. It consists of two main chapters. The first chapter contains: position of the territory of the plan, historic development, coordination with other planning and national documents (vertical coordination), coordination with sectoral institutions (horizontal coordination), other important documents, vision and objectives, timeframe, interregional links, zone of influence. The second chapter contains sectoral analysis and proposals for integrated development in the following domains: environment, population, settlements, public services, economy, infrastructure and cultural heritage. The draft version which is going to be based on the concept has to respect legal provisions. In addition to the topics covered in the concept, it contains rules of management and construction for the area which is not covered by urban plans, as well as the

implementation guidelines – priority solutions and projects, actors in implementation and measures and instruments for implementation. Main goals of development defined in the Concept of the Spatial Plan are: balanced territorial and economic development, neutralization of development conflicts, preservation of environment and increase of the quality of life. Main objectives for realization of those goals are:

1. redefinition and positioning of Niš in the national context, based on decentralization and regional development, hierarchically just after Belgrade
2. organization of the intermodal node due to the exceptional position
3. strengthening of interregional links with other regional and municipal centers
4. improvement of transregional and cross-border economic and cultural links
5. improvement of economic structures
6. management, development and protection of the territory of the plan through support and organization of natural and cultural resources, distribution of population and employment, economic activities (services, culture, small and medium enterprise, tourism), energy efficiency etc.

Both spatial and urban plans have the graphic interpretation of planning solutions. Although the GIS software is more and more widely used, lots of plans still use CAD software. The content of maps and their aspect are defined by law for spatial and urban plans, while illustrations for strategic planning documents are not unified by their form.

### **Strategic planning documents in Serbia and in Niš**

Strategic planning started developing in Eastern Europe with the transition. In Serbia the proliferation of strategic documents is characteristic for the first decade of the twenty first century. It occurs at all levels from local, through regional to national. Number of local strategic documents is the highest, followed by more than seventy strategies at national level and with some strategies at regional level. Regional level is less represented because it is the territorial level which is not well defined in Serbia. An inventory of local strategic documents was initiated in the framework of the Poverty reduction strategy in cooperation with the Standing Conference of Cities and Municipalities in Serbia, but this database is not complete. National strategies are approved by the government and can be accessed through the internet site of the Serbian Government. Local strategies are sometimes approved by local authorities, but it is not always the case. Very often local and regional strategic documents are elaborated with the support of international organizations or foreign support cooperation programs.

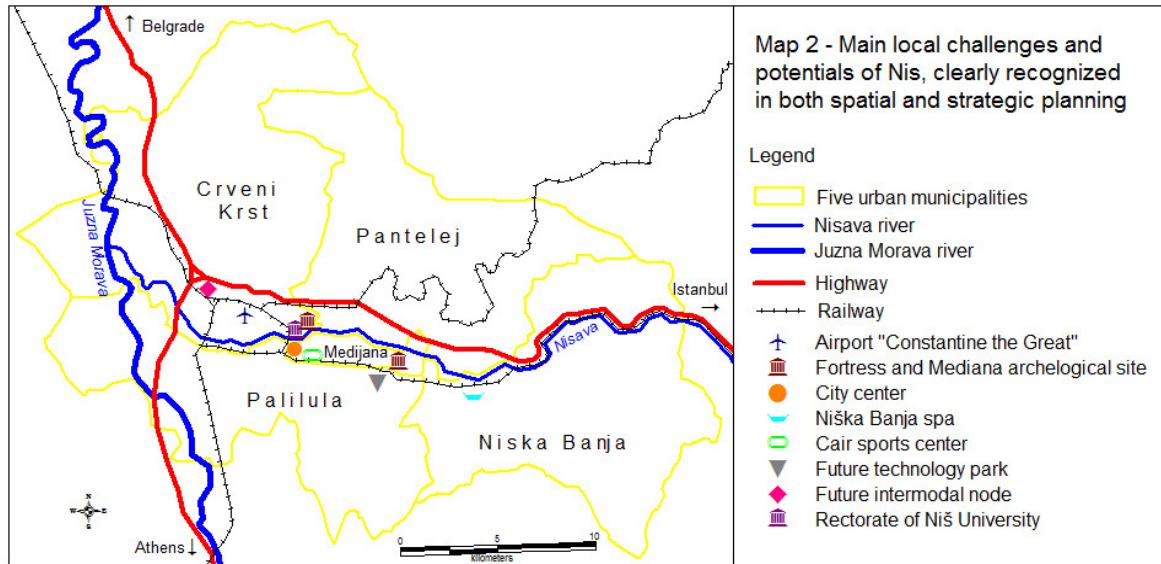
Diverse strategies are being adopted in Serbia. By the level of generality there are integrated development strategies, but most of them are sectoral development strategies (Živanović et al, 2006). The sector which is the most represented concerns support to economic development in its various aspects. Local economic development is the domain which is also widely supported at the international level, for example through the UN Habitat's manual from 2003 entitled Strategic Planning for Local Economic Development. Main steps in the process recommended by this manual are: situation analysis, stakeholders and participation, visioning, setting objectives, identifying and evaluating alternatives, action planning and implementation. Besides the local economic development planning documents another widely used form of sectoral strategic plans are LEAP – local environmental action plans which are a type of environmental plans with the form of Local Agendas XXI. Sectoral plans for social development, as the third component of sustainable development, are less present. Infrastructure alone is not the

topic which is suitable for strategic planning at lower level. It is the domain which is taken into account, but it is more suitable for spatial and urban planning documents.

In August 2010 seventy seven Strategies in different domains can be found on the internet site of the Government of Serbia. National planning strategies are not binding but they give framework and are used for vertical coordination with other strategic or spatial and urban planning documents. All strategies are somewhere relevant for spatial and urban planning – but however we can put an accent on some of them: Regional development strategy, National Sustainable Development Strategy, Poverty Reduction Strategy, Strategy for Development of Rail, Road, Water, Air and Intermodal Transport etc. In the wave of fashion of strategic documents, after the turn of the century, even the spatial planning document at the national level, in accordance with the previous Law on Planning and Construction from 2003 was renamed in Spatial Development Strategy (Grumo et al, 2010). This strategy was finished in 2009, but as the new Law on Planning and Construction entered into force while the Strategy was in its final phase, the Strategy was used as a base for new Spatial Plan of the Republic which was reintroduced by the law in 2009. The new Spatial Plan of Serbia should be adopted by the National Assembly in autumn 2010. Variety of national strategic documents is taken into account and represents a good material for vertical and horizontal coordination. They facilitate the adequate application of the principle of integration for development planning process.

The territory of the City of Niš is quite well covered with strategic documents in a typical way since most of them are economically oriented, and some of them are integrated. To mention some of around fifteen existing local strategies we can site the topics covered, small and medium enterprises, employment, tourism, housing, rural areas surrounding the city, environmental action plan etc. The bright example of the City of Niš Development Strategy is an ongoing process of strategic planning which started in 2006 with the support of UN Habitat. The process started with the conference “Towards integrated development” where the existing local and national strategies were analyzed. The main strategic planning process was realized in participative manner involving relevant local stakeholders. The visioning, SWOT analysis and identification of objectives were done involving various stakeholders. The Strategy was adopted in the end of 2007 by the City Assembly. Two years later it was reviewed and slightly changed. The action plan in support of implementation dates from the end of 2009 with projects defined in accordance with the objectives from the strategy. The action plan determines the partners for realization, the timeframe, financial resources and indicators for monitoring. Main goals of the strategy implied the identification of specific objectives for the formulation of the action plan. Those main goals are:

1. territorial development oriented to environmental sustainability – to transform the city of Niš into the urban centre with environmental quality, communal services and transport links in accordance with the best practices of other European cities
2. safe and reliable environment for investments – to create conditions for adequate employment, assure logistics and attract investments, create new enterprises
3. balanced and comprehensive improvement of the quality of life – create an encouraging and safe social environment in which all citizens will be able to express and fulfill their needs for belonging, identity, socialization and progress
4. improvement of the institutional setting and the governance process – implement institutional reforms aimed at increasing the capacities and the efficiency of the community decision-making process, following principles of subsidiarity.



Map 2 - Main local challenges and potentials of Niš, clearly recognized in both documents

### Comparing content and objectives of spatial and strategic planning documents

Strategic planning based on corporate practice is being put forward and used as an approach to more effective participatory public planning. Most of the ideas present in the strategic approach have been a part of planning education for decades and most of planners view the approach as “old wine in new bottles.” Nevertheless, planners should view the new popularity of corporate-style strategic planning as an opportunity to revive interest in planning (Kaufman et al, 1987). Management in the public sphere has, first of all, the role of minimizing discontinuities which are the result of short political mandates and constantly changing priorities (Mintzberg, 1994). That is why strategic planning is welcomed in transition countries as a supplement to the spatial and urban planning as inherited elements of the system, even if efforts to adapt to the new political and economic context are being made. Main intention of the informal strategic planning in Serbia is to overcome the limitations of the formal spatial development schemes, the lack of flexibility in their structures, hierarchies and procedures (Lazarević Bajec, 2009).

Since the formal spatial and urban plans are less flexible and their structure and content are guided by the law, also dependant on the path inherited from the past, they make a part of the system which in certain aspects facilitates the practice of planning. In some other aspects the system of urban and spatial planning is not friendly to changes that are supposed to improve its practice. The innovation can more easily penetrate through the strategic planning process which is less structured, but more open to creative and less unusual practices. Knowledge of the future in planning terms is often unknown and uncertainty both within the internal and external environment is a major constraint (Tsenkova, 2007). Strategic planning is often initiated by international organizations or bilateral cooperation programs. The recent history in Serbia which didn't have any support and understanding concerning the break-up of Yugoslavia, followed by embargo and bombings, extremely bad and exaggerated presentation of the country in the western media, those are the elements which reduced the trust in some forms of international cooperation. It represents an additional challenge to gain trust for strategic documents elaborated with foreign support and methodologies. Although a lot of strategies are being made, few of them are really being implemented due to different factors among which is the lack of trust, not only in foreign aid and support, but also in

domestic institutions and actors which were not capable to cope with difficulties that the society has been facing.

Spatial planning and spatial strategy making both refer to the term of governance which is used to encompass both the formal machinery of central and local government and the informal networks through which business, environmental or neighborhood groups interlink with the formal government (Healey, 1997). Partnership of different stakeholders from public, private and non-governmental sectors is a major challenge for the participative planning, whether it is innovative strategic planning or inherited spatial and urban planning. Đorđe Mojović, national director of the UN Habitat's SIRP program, stated during the elaboration of the Niš Development Strategy: "We don't have to wait for new legislative solutions for everything, since they can't contribute immediately to the improvement. It is possible to realize system changes with inner potentials, but for that there must be critical mass of willingness and knowledge, but ethical motifs as well. Permanent education has to be introduced for all participants of the governance process, from selected politicians in the Assembly to administration officers".

### **Challenges of complementarities**

The Concept of the Spatial Plan of Niš is taking into account the recently approved and reviewed Niš Development Strategy. The Strategy took into account the previous spatial and urban plans. That is the way it should be. They don't ignore each other although they could. Both documents are approved by the same local self-government which was able to recognize the benefit of two documents with similar scope but with differences in approach. Both have advantages. Spatial and urban planning documents are well embedded in the system. The Niš Development Strategy and other local strategic documents bring some innovative elements in the approach development planning. The time will show how far and how fast their implementations will go. Strategic planning documents can be seen as facilitators of coordination and exchanges, having in mind their facility to introduce innovative practices and to apply them in different territories.

Niš is a city which has various potentials. The objectives of both documents recognize similar orientations towards improved quality of life for the population. The advantage is that they use different language to address the same issues. It is important that those two documents communicate and the actors, beneficiaries and users communicate through them. In any case, they are leading towards the same future, and as complex documents and processes, they are going to contribute each to the sustainable development of the City of Niš. Spatial planning in Serbia, inherited from the period of ex Yugoslavia, has a background where it is possible to recognize lots of elements of strategic planning. The background in spatial planning is a base for improvements and future efforts which should lead to the improvements. One important event which has been taking place in Niš for almost twenty years already is the International Urban Planners Exhibition which is being held since 1991 on the 8th of November – the international day of urbanism.

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