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Urban Fringe

A Change of Plan, or a Change of Planning?

Naja Marot

Like many countries in Europe, Slovenia is experiencing significant changes in its urban and rural fabric through suburbanization and immigration. Small communities with limited administrative capacity to adapt to these incoming populations have been particularly affected. The associated problems include a lack of facilities for new migrants to existing villages, the rapid construction of atypical homes, and a dearth of recreation areas (Music 2004).

Little has been done to effectively address these challenges. Worse, new municipalities have been created for political reasons without any consideration of their capacity for implementing their required legal tasks. These tasks are especially not being achieved in the field of spatial planning. Instead, Slovenia is witnessing an imprudent construction of infrastructure at the micro level. This type of local development does not take into account the strategic context of the wider region. This approach bespeaks a larger problem, namely the lack of a strong and valued spatial culture in Slovenia.

Proliferating Municipalities

Although only 16 of Slovenia's roughly 6,000 communities boast more than 10,000 inhabitants, there has been a proliferation in the number of local governments. In 1994, the number of recognized municipalities first increased from 62 to 193 and by 2007 that number reached 210. This designation entails significant administrative responsibilities since under Slovenian law municipalities serve as economic, social, and cultural centers of their territory (Benkovic Krasovec 2006). As in many cases this new designation is based on political machinations and not actual population, it is not clear that the smaller municipalities have the resources to meet these requirements.

The Slovenian Planning System

After gaining independence in 1991, Slovenia has made constant, but not necessarily successful, alterations to its spatial planning acts (Gerbec 2003). The 2003 act introduced planning at the national, regional, and municipal levels and focused on the preparation of strategic and implementation documents. The 2007 act shifted the focus away from strategic planning to project-oriented planning and removed the regional planning level without any specific explanation. Currently, a new act that will add a regional administrative level is wending through parliament. This may once again alter municipal responsibilities and introduce regional spatial management.

The majority of municipalities, hampered by a lack of planning capacity and financial resources, had not started preparing the documentation required by the 2003 act when the 2007 act was passed. The constant change of directives further impedes progress as municipalities hesitate to plan when the rules of planning may change significantly so quickly.

Consequently, Slovenia is now in the situation where small municipalities have neither their own spatial planning departments nor strategic long-term plans of territory management, yet face a reality that demands planning. The morass of proliferating municipalities, unclear planning dictates and rapid development on the ground has led most municipalities to spend all their money on infrastructure, some of which is justified. Nevertheless, in the absence of coordinated planning small communities are facing several severe problems including new housing that is typically inconsistent with the local area, unsustainable enterprise zones, and the unmanaged disappearance of open space.

This perfect storm of rapid change and a dearth of planning portends ominously for the future of the Slovenian countryside. For now, regional planning exists only in regional development programs prepared as fundamental documents for the purpose of securing European structural funds (Gaberscik 2004) without any stronger spatial planning emphasis. This model cannot be easily extended to small settlements due to their limited planning staff and resources.

Moving Forward

Rather than focus on constantly changing the spatial planning legislation, policy makers and planners in Slovenia would be better served by developing a strong culture of planning, public participation, and regional cooperation. Developing a spatial culture and forcing people to think of

their surroundings when planning and building would be more effective than adopting new acts which are unsatisfactorily implemented.

One way to encourage spatial thinking is to encourage public participation and to include as many actors as possible in the planning process, a practice which has not been very common in Slovenia thus far. We should also be promoting cooperation between different administrative levels. Spatial planning is a complex task, and small municipalities must strategically plan the territory together with their neighbors in order to utilize both scarce planning resources and land more efficiently, to make implementation more feasible. In addition, municipalities must realize that planning cannot be limited to land use plans and building permits.

Dealing with the problems of rapid growth on Slovenia's urban fringe will require all the fields engaged in the planning process to cooperate, to vigorously pursue true public participation, and to advertise and promote core spatial values. Maybe then a spatial planning act will have a chance to successfully enter practice. For now, its propositions seem, like so many plans, just a series of ideas on paper.

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Naja Marot is a doctoral student at the University of Ljubljana and a junior researcher at the Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia. She received a B.A. in Geography in June 2005. Her thesis concerned revitalization of a former Slovenian mining town and was awarded with the highest scientific prize for students in Slovenia. Now she is mainly interested in the implementation of the spatial planning system in Slovenia. She also works on projects covering territorial impact assessment and climate changes effects of spatial planning.