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Urban-rural Interactions in Latvia

Policies and plans for rural areas tend to start by assuming that they are separate and distinctive from urban areas, and that this distinctiveness is more important than any of their other characteristics. Laila Kule argues that this introduces an unwelcome hierarchy in regional development priorities, and shows how Latvia has attempted to build on connectivity rather than difference in urban-rural development.

Urban-rural relations in European planning

The European Spatial Development Perspective of 1994 recognised the importance of new forms of urban-rural relationship alongside polycentric urban system, access to infrastructure and knowledge and sustainable development, as central for effective territorial management. The ESDP listed urban-rural partnership as one spatial policy option to be implemented at several spatial levels and stated that

“many local problems cannot be solved nowadays without an integrated way of looking at towns and countryside, since they tend to be regional problems” (CSD 1999, p.25).

Both co-operation and co-ordination were mentioned as important principles for successful urban-rural partnership. Some proposed preconditions seemed ambitious for real world geographies including partners’ equality and independence, given the role both play in producing spatial differences between rural and urban spaces and between individual places/localities within both urban and rural realms.

More recently, EU territorial cohesion consultations have recognised urban-rural interactions as a complex and ambiguous issue. Urban-rural relations depend on how those places are understood and defined. ‘Urban’ and ‘rural’ as terms are social constructions, binary concepts expressing position on a continuum, associated with physical and socio-economic (relational) space and thus are spatially and socially contextual. More work is now concentrating on classifications reflecting urban-rural variety and complexities. Urban-rural relations are used in different policy contexts and scales, although less commonly in academic studies (Davoudi and Stead 2002; Caffyn and Dahlström 2005).

This article explores this in the context of Latvia. Since the early 1990s, Latvia, a post-socialist country undergoing through rapid multi-faceted transformations, has been following learning from European spatial development discussions. Becoming an EU member state in 2004 involved in EU policymaking and access to its regional and rural aid policies. Soviet rural-urban policy in Latvia was controversial. While rural villages were planned and built as urban settlements, including multi-storey residential buildings, permitted forms of ownership and entrepreneurship and human mobility restrictions in rural and urban areas differed. Despite this enforced equality between places, during the Soviet era, urban-rural discrepancies failed to substantially narrow.

In a contemporary Latvian context, rural and regional problems are tightly intertwined. Three main levels of difference can be discerned: firstly between the capital and the rest of the country, secondly between the easternmost region Latgale and other regions, and thirdly the urban-rural split. This latter difference is evident in all regions and has persisted since the time of Latvia’s first national regional policies in the 1930s.

The challenge for Latvia’s National Rural Development Programme

Since the mid 1990s national regional policy has underlined the importance of inter-sectoral coordination (joined-up government) in meeting particular regions’ interests, supporting endogenous development based on local resources, and preserving identity whilst offering equal access to social, economic and environmental development despite territorial disparities. The focus is on the local scale, because Latvia cannot be sensibly divided into sub-regions above the municipalities other than between Riga, the capital, and the rest of the country. Composite Territorial Development Indexes have been developed for regions, urban and rural local municipalities (SRDA 2009) to designate lagging areas and to define eligibility for projects financed by European and national funds.

The first detailed regional policy document prepared and implemented was the National Rural Development Program of 1998 that portrayed the ‘rural’ with a wider notion than agriculture, and paid attention to the countryside as a living space that preserves nature, culture and landscape values typical for the Latvian national identity. An agrarian crisis emerged as the shift from collectivism started in 1988; decisions on Agrarian Reform and rural Land Reform in 1990 were based on principles of justice and the re-establishment of the Pre-Soviet occupation land ownership pattern in 1940.

The new National Rural Development plans for 2004-06 and for 2007-13 regard rural as agriculture, forestry, nature and living space for rural inhabitants. These rural development programs in general define rural as areas outside the administrative borders of local municipalities with ‘urban’ in their title. Rural policy instruments have specific definitions of ‘rural’ in the context of their policy aims, and some of these definitions include not only smaller but also larger urban areas, particularly in the field of food production.

Latvia as a European outlier

In Latvia, rural and urban areas are closely linked through movements of population, goods and capital, joint technical infrastructure or partnerships like shared service provision and governance. Current national rural development plans do not specifically address these linkages, although some aspects can be related to rural-urban aspects such as the food production chain, nature conservation/recreation, rural tourism and local infrastructure development.

The urban dimension as part of regional development only received attention by Latvian policy-makers after the encouragement by the European Commission. The urban dimension was included under the subtitle ‘Polycentric Development’ of the National Development Plan 2007-13 which is implicit within urban development at various spatial levels. The development of Riga city is salient at the international level; there are five planning regions that...
have important roles with trans-border co-operations and interactions. There are networks of towns which constitute the Latvian urban space. Finally, there are urban/ rural connections.

Latvia Factfile

Population: 6,460,000
Inhabitants: 2,265
Population of largest city (Riga): 713,000 (32% of total)
Per capita GDP, 2007: €13,700 (55.7% EU-27 average)

Agricultural contribution,
1995: 9.1% of GDP; 17.2% of employment
2008: 3.6% of GDP; 9.8% of employment

Manufacturing contribution,
1995: 25.7% of GDP; 21.5% of employment
2008: 14.2% of GDP; 17.4% of employment

Services contribution,
1995: 65.2% of GDP; 61.3% of employment
2008: 83.2% of GDP; 72.8% of employment

Latvia’s economical and political transformations resulted in unfavourable demographics. Since 1989 Latvia’s population has decreased by 15.6%, although population shrinkage is not observed in all areas. Suburbanization processes with high population growth are observed in rural municipalities adjacent to Riga (Krīšja -ne 2007, SRDA 2009, Krīšja -ne, Bērziņš 2009). Agriculture policy changes resulted in the increase of forest and vacant agricultural lands. The Ministry of Agriculture reports the share of agricultural lands in 2005 constituted 1,144,000 ha, covering 6,984 km² with 48,500 daily commuters to Riga. A 2006 survey indicated 62,200 commuters (Krīšjas and Bauls 2004, Krīšja 2007). The Central Bureau of Statistics claims 107,600 in-commuters and 15,800 out-commuters in 2007 (Krīšja and Bērziņš 2009). The recession has slightly decreased the number of commuters, and commuting to regional cities is less pronounced although reliable data is absent. To better understand Latvia’s real rural-urban linkages, the Latvia State Regional Development Agency financed an applied research project in 2008-2009 (Küe et al. 2009). Latvia’s rural-urban relations are firstly influenced by ‘northern’ peculiarities such as sparse population, high share of forests, seasonality, cyclic movements, second homes and rural idyll as national identity. They are also influenced by post-Soviet peculiarities such as efforts towards abolishing capitalist inequality, including between rural and urban areas. Thirdly, more recently urban-rural relations have been influenced by increased mass motorization, information communication and other advanced technologies. A fourth peculiarity – inherited from medieval times and re-established after 1991 – is that Riga City owns 568 km² forestlands in other rural municipalities.

Rural and urban places are transforming and becoming further interlinked through flows of people, information and materials. Rural-urban linkages spatial patterns are becoming more diversified and fragmented. In this study, a set of ad hoc systems of classifications and typologies were developed to capture both the diversity and particularity of places, but also urban and rural function in terms of inter-place connectivity. This study particularly considered:
• Distance from the larger cities
• Position within flows such as transport of people, goods, energy, capital, information
• Specific particularities, including natural and cultural amenities, natural resources, boundaries and locations of unwanted land uses

A draft typology of regions according to their urban/ rural connectivity was prepared and discussed with focus groups including local politicians and civil servants in 27 local municipalities. Interviewed persons included local politicians and municipal staff members. The final typology included:
• Rural in formal urban areas
• Rural areas of large city-region too diverse to sub-classify
• Other rural areas (sub-classified) including commercial agricultural/forestry areas, national border areas, transport flows areas (important roads and harbours and adjacent areas), natural resources mining areas, statutory protected nature areas (covering at least third of area), natural amenity areas (hilly and coastal areas), mythic rural areas (existing and potential rural brands and areas with strong rural identity/
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Coping with Urbanity

Where migration is a mass phenomenon, it seems sensible to turn to the statistics to give you the facts and figures of the situation. Erka Čaro argues that to understand, shape and direct the contribution of migrants to Albania’s urbanisation, it is better to go beyond the facts and figures to get to the feelings of the migrants.

Introduction

Internal migration is one of the most dynamic phenomena of last decades in post-communist Albania and has shaped the socio-economic and demographic situation of the country (UNDP 2002). Since the early 1990s over 400,000 people, out of 3.1m, are estimated to have migrated within the country (INSTAT 2004; World Bank 2007). Between 1989 and 2001, the share of urban population increased from 35% to 42% (World Bank 2007). The internal migration flows show a distinctive regional trajectory. People are moving from rural areas of the North-Eastern districts towards urban areas in the Central Region of the country (Figure 1).

Since the 1990s, the North-Eastern region has continuously been excluded from the development policies of the State.

References


meanings), unwanted land uses areas (waste, polluting industry, military) and inner periphery rural areas (particular specifics deficient areas).

522 local level municipalities were statistically analysed in accordance with the typology, one municipality could correspond more than one type of region in relations with urban/rural connectivity. The research provided evidence that multiplicity and variety of urban-rural interactions or the possession of more than one type of urban/rural connectivity is associated with higher economic performance at local municipality level (Kīde et al. 2009).

Group interviews revealed many urban-rural relations not measured by national statistics or monitored by current policy reviews, like informal recreation management and inter-municipal agreements on shared service provisions. In soft issues (social, culture, education) municipalities tended to cooperate with those similar in size and interests, often ignoring centre-periphery and proximity aspects. Conversely, in hard issues municipalities are restricted to cooperate with larger adjacent urban areas because of infrastructure and geographical considerations.

Interviewed municipalities expressed a desire for regional/ national policy interventions and stimuli to coordinate rural-urban aspects not currently covered by policy recommendations. These particularly included in education, health provision, entrepreneurship and countryside resources (recreation, food) use by non-local population. There was a desire for more information on best practice provision and incentives to population to increase the multiplicity of rural activities.

It was agreed that urban-rural dimension was only an additional aspect to basic services provision in rural areas. There was thus a need for policy instruments promoting urban-rural governance that can help in the provision of these remoter rural areas, drawing on governance arrangements (inner-municipal, inter-municipal, regional, sectoral and cross-sectoral) suitable to the peculiarities of the urban-rural pattern.

Wider implications for rural planning

The Latvian effort to clarify regions according to their urban/ rural connectivity has at least one lesson for the recent European debate on territorial cohesion introduced by the Green Paper (CEC 2008) that covers urban and rural aspects. It is important to take account of the fact that not only urban-rural partnerships are a part of integrated local development but rural-urban relations have also implications at all spatial levels.

There is an important role for national, regional and municipal governments and governance networks to coordinate rural-urban aspects to avoid informality and inequalities. A serious application of an approach building on the connectivity rather than the differences of urban and rural areas can help to better frame policy interventions across traditional sectoral divisions, and hence provide promising future policy options.