

## SUBURBAN SETTLEMENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF URBAN POLICY: LATVIAN EXAMPLE

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### Abstract

Conditions of land ownership, land development and land development control on the urban fringe of Latvia are similar to those prevailing in other Baltic countries. In Latvia several factors have combined to produce a situation that is unusually favourable for the individual owners of land on the urban fringe. No legal and administrative barriers, market factors such as the high and rising price of land which created and incentive to speculate in land, weak land development regulations which allowed land-owners to subdivide and sell land on a plot-by-plot basis at fully urban prices with no requirement to provide urban services. Land-owners avoid any responsibility for the external diseconomies of the development they influence while selling land. They received net what buyers paid for housing sites, while leaving municipal governments to retroactively have to provide essential public services. This institutional framework has allowed the continuation of unserved sprawl-type development in urban fringe areas in Latvia, and in particular has encouraged the highly distinctive pattern of intermixture of land-uses. As a result the most important features in Latvia are: the fragmentation of rural land holdings; the continuing mixture of land-use, mixture of interests of land- owners as land users, developers and speculators, and the relative weakness of land development control. The present paper discusses the following main queries: what instruments are available for state and municipality, what is the role of planning in governing and guiding of urban diffusion processes to control urban sprawl in Riga surroundings (Pieriga) in the context of urban and spatial development policy in Latvia. The question is about modern settlement in a concrete spatial and functional context due to active suburbanisation processes in Riga impact area during the past 6-7 years. By defining regional policy towards cohesion, the main emphasis was laid upon application of passive economic support measures. Change of implementation of regional policy measures was observed lately, namely change from support of rural areas towards support for urban centres as drivers of economic development. At the same time, urban centres changed its role and shape due to rapid economic development up to 2007. Particularly larger centres received relatively small support aimed at regional development; they developed by expanding and by creating new structures of economic functional areas in direct vicinity. Being outside the scope of regional policy, development in these territories took place in an unorganized manner. This was possible and was largely due to the lack of implementation of an integrated land policy in Latvia, which would have allowed by means of spatial planning tools the appropriate guidance of development of large cities and their adjacent areas towards rational, sustainable and functionally effective network of settlement structure. Presently suburban areas are characterised by a diverse weakly organized variety of settlement structures, which require transformations. The issue on the agenda is by what means this could be achieved. Whether morphologic approach of spatial organisation and governance is self sustained and what solutions should be suggested. These queries are discursive and discordant.

### Keywords:

Regional planning, boundaries, urban, governance.

### Policy context

#### *Urban policy in the European Union*

The European Union cohesion policy in recent years focused on creation of structures on the basis of policentricity, emphasising role of regions. At the same time the role of development centres as engines of international competition is enhancing. In that context suburbs play an important role as an integral part of

functional city region playing complementary social, political and cultural roles and besides, this need to be explored in the context of urban and regional policy.

Urban regional policy in Europe during the past few decades is associated with territorial cohesion and competitiveness. Aspirations towards creation of more balanced and sustainable spatial structures at the same time retaining competitiveness form the idea

of policentricity, which has neither clear definition nor spatial scale. In the early 1960ties the concept of equilibrium of metropolises (*métropoles d'équilibre*) was introduced in France (Baudelle & Peyrony 2005). In some countries policentricity was realised by developing concept of "core areas" focusing on ensuring the spectrum of services to be supplied in the whole country rather than on balancing of economic development. This is also characteristic to policy in Latvia (Research ... 2007) during the Soviet times.

The European Spatial Development Perspective regards space as a place for policies and looks at policentricity through interaction among cities and rural areas. European spatial development is based on setting up of separate dynamic economically integrated territories, which form international network of metropolitan regions (European... 1999). Cooperation, clustering of cities is supported at the same time delimiting their uncontrolled expanding. Rural policies support strengthening of small and medium sized towns and their cooperation as basis for diversification of rural areas.

### *Urban policy in Latvia*

Latvian urban policy in the last 20 years policy was not clearly defined. In practice the policy has been more focused on structural development of peripheries. Riga in this context lost part of population and its economic potential. Riga suburban area is characterised with growing population, location of services and production in proximity of the city thus creating common functional-rurban area.

Since joining EU several policy planning documents are in place governing this field. In general, state policy planning documents are related to EU policy approaches. The National Development Plan of Latvia for 2007-2013 suggests polycentric development by utilising development potential of cities and capability of creating favourable impacts on larger adjacent and surrounding territories by forming networks of cities as precondition for sustainable development of the country (Latvian National ... 2006). Spatial development perspective of the Latvian long term development strategy (Latvian long ... 2009) is aimed at creation of equivalent living and working conditions for all inhabitants, irrespective of their place of residence. This approach is based on cities, their functional networks and specialisation, particularly emphasising the strengthening of the role of Riga as an international metropolis. Riga metropolitan area is defined as an area of national interest, including planning principles of EU metropolitan areas.

Financial instruments in the field of urban policies were not in place in Latvia for many years. Since 2007-2013 programming period, a special support programme for cities is established, which envisages support for 16

units. National strategic framework document envisages a special programme for Riga aimed at strengthening of its competitiveness, at the same time pointing out the necessity for priority support for lagging behind areas aimed at levelling of territorial disparities (National ... 2007). Riga city, Riga planning region and former Riga administrative district are often excluded from eligibility to receive state support as central and most developed areas.

### **Metropolitan governance and peculiarities of land policy**

The pattern and behaviour of suburbanization on the fringe or metropolitan areas have been examined thoroughly elsewhere (Veer 1994; Sorensen 1999; Daniels & Lapping 1996). A major number of studies into the dynamic impacts of general urban – suburban development (Kaiser & Godschalk 1995) Explanations have included economic, social, legal and cultural factors (Mattoon 1995; Maier 1998; Sorensen 1999). Research areas focused on land policy as a framework for implementation of planning tools have only recently emerged as a field of investigation. In a set of papers the significance and impact of implementation of tools preventing urban sprawl in the local and community context has conducted (Calavita & Caves 1994; Rothblatt 1994; Steiner et.al. 1999; Benz 2001; Wiewel & Schaffer 2001; McDonald & McMillen 2004; Lupi & Musterd 2006).

Merely economic tools can be used to achieve objectives of regional policy, whereas by differentiating support volumes and types territorially - namely providing support to parts of territories, the development of the remaining territory falls outside the scope of support and becomes uncontrolled. This can be avoided if in parallel there is an integrated spatial development policy in place, which is being implemented. Its most direct implementation with respect local governments level is the application of the land use policy. The key tool in its application is the territorial (physical) planning.

State land policy in general is little being awared of and is little studied area. One can speak about coordination of this area only since 2008 upon approval of Basic principles for land policy for 2008-2014 (Basic principles ... 2009). In general, discrepancy is observed with regard to declared policy and its implementation. By formal approval of spatial planning principles and recommendations their implementation mechanism is, however, inadequate. The state has no spatial policy of its own; guidelines at regional level have not produced a tangible impact on outcomes of local level planning.

It possible to argue that especially during last 6-7 years Pieriga developed towards expansive and weak governed land use transformation from rural to urban or semi-urban resulting in gradually growing pressure

on infrastructure and environment, presently in the need for new solutions. New challenges of social life appear mainly because suburban settlements lack working places and substantially share daily commuting increase.

Significant development factor is land structure of territories, which was basically determined by land reform in 1990ties. Initially, it was envisaged to implement land reform in parallel to process of territory planning, yet planning of territories lagged behind, whereas land reform was promoted by the state. Regulatory legal documents were often contradictory (Land ... 2002). Regulatory framework for land reform, territorial planning and construction was weakly coordinated. Land reform was not associated to administrative territorial reform and changes of city boundaries. According to experts' opinion, during Soviet times, development of cities was carried out in a manner of compact development, which would enable further expansion of cities within the range of 50-100% in the coming years even without population growth (Linkola 1994). During land reform, no designated areas were specified for this purpose. Parcelation of land was not limited in suburban areas, as there were no territorial plans enforced and in place (Linkola 1996) as well as other regulatory documents. Unrequested land was distributed among the state and the local government. Quite often local governments were not aware of their role in local land policy and failed to take advantage of making land reserves for future development needs.

As a result - today local governments have little land in possession, and lack of land reserves make search for solutions much harder. Territorial plans of local governments do not analyse land possessions in the context of land market and further envisaged territories envisaging alteration of land use, compensations, as well as other mechanisms for ensuring public function for planning. Land use regulatory legislation cannot be changed fast; it leaves an impact on investment attraction, present and future socio-economic development of the territory in question, by slowing the development.

### Suburbanisation processes and spatial structure of Pieriga

Riga suburban area (Pieriga) is a space, where present and formerly implemented policies and interests meet and intersect in the sharpest manner. Suburban area has neither clear definition nor boundaries. It can be regarded as a bordering space between two interacting areas - city and rural areas, where urban and rural lifestyle interacts and is reflected in the landscape. Impact area is formed around the city - agglomeration area, which is the territory subject to our study here. For purposes of analysis this area was delimited to administrative boundaries of local governments of former Riga district where suburban development processes are reflected in the most vivid fashion.

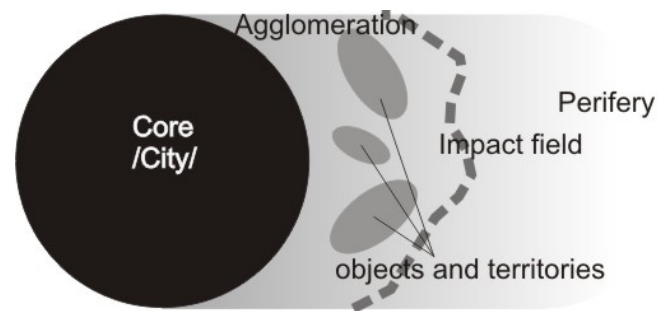


Figure 1. Suburban agglomeration area

Urban policy of Pieriga is defined in territorial plan of Riga planning region and comprises main principles - prevention of merging of human settlement areas, limitations with respect to parcelation of land, planning of compact human settlements, perspective argued and based on forecasts (Riga planning ... 2007). At the same time several documents reveal trends being contradictory to guidelines (Riga planning ... 2008).

Research was conducted in the summer and autumn of 2009 and was based on GIS approach, analysis of territorial plans and interviews with planners and politicians of local governments (Riga planning ... 2009). Present built environment was analysed: construction of housing areas up to 1990 and after 1990, public services location and industrial areas, gardening settlements. Envisaged construction was analysed in the context of planned settlements and planned construction sites outside the formal settlement areas.

Development processes in Pieriga had taken unsteady path. In order to better illustrate discrepancies, one may define 3 development circles, which are characterised by differences in development processes. The closer circle forms as a continuation of Riga city growth, characterised by structure characteristic to city, high prices of real estate - territories within the Riga beltway (bypass road). The next circle is made by territories with large land resources, large reserved areas for construction and the present mosaic of rural villages (areas outside the bypass beltway). More distant and remote territories form remote area of Pieriga, where this "development pressure" is not that strongly felt and is reflected in the way of expanding of village area, reservation of some land for development purposes by landlords. Naturally, they make large traditional agricultural lands and forestry areas. The division is rather conditional, as transformation of territories is determined not only by vicinity of Riga, but also largely due to peculiarities of landscape. Agricultural areas and privately owned forestry areas are mostly subject to transformation.

The aforementioned territories would require a variety of solutions in terms of perspective planning. Should the first closest circle be closely associated to physical expansion of Riga city, which could become the territory of Riga city if Riga city gets expanded, then

the second circle contains suburban settlements which in the nearest future will not physically merge with the city, but will be closely functionally related to it.



Figure 2. Development circles of suburban area

After characteristic construction inactivity of early and mid 1990ties the most active development took place during the last decade, especially in the period 2003-2008. New construction areas of local territories adjacent to Riga was in the range from 2-6% of the whole area of the municipal territories. These construction areas are located mostly in former agricultural areas adjacent to state roads and highways. Location of newly formed villages quite often was not appropriate for intended use (meadows subject to flooding risk, inappropriate ground conditions).

Territorial plans of local governments reflect this construction trend most clearly. Pieriga is characterised by large areas of planned villages, which often merge and form continuous settlement space. Establishment of such villages is based on land structure (parcelation) and wishes of the developers. In separate local territories the planned villages cover all of the agricultural land. They make approximately 1/5 of the district area, whereas actually developed areas - only 4%, which denote large land reserves and inadequate planning of territory.

Possibility to parcel and develop rural areas that are located outside boundaries of settlements and on similar principles as in villages is envisaged in a number of territorial plans of local governments of Pieriga area. This marks dismantling of planning boundaries of settlements and dissolves differences among village as a human settlement and an open rural space.

Among peculiarities of Pieriga settlements is the fact that they are characterised by a large number of Soviet times gardening communities, which make 2,8 thousands ha (almost 1% of Riga district area). They are regarded as auxiliary territories subject to development and settlement supplementary structures. During the

past years they gradually transform into permanently inhabited settlements or acquire other type of use, which is not related to human dwelling function. Key issue - present structures - infrastructure, status of land ownership, contradiction to new living standards.

Table 1. Present and planned construction in territories of local governments of former Riga district area

	% of district area	Thousands of ha
<b>Riga district area</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>314,0</b>
Area of villages and towns in 2008	16,3	51,1
Construction area in villages in 2008	3,7	11,5
Construction area outside villages in 2008	1,0	3,2
<b>Total developed construction area in Riga district in 2008</b>	<b>4,7</b>	<b>14,7</b>
Planned area of villages and towns in 2009	18,0	56,5
Planned construction area outside villages in 2009	3,3	10,2
<b>Total planned development construction area in 2009</b>	<b>21,2</b>	<b>66,7</b>

#### Settlements in Pieriga area and the case of Kekava local municipal territory

The Law of administrative territories and settlements prescribes the following gradation of human settlements (The law ... 2009): town, village and farmstead. Peculiarity of Pieriga area - settlements can hardly be incorporated into formal categories, it also encompasses mental cultural heritage on perception of identity, which manifests itself in local toponimes. In Pieriga area this foundation is acquiring a new layer of new understanding and awareness about settlement, which was formed in a short period of time and under market conditions.

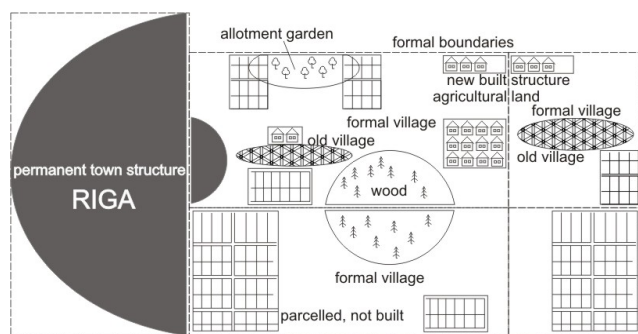
Awareness of a village was formed during Soviet times or was inherited from older times. On one side there is a social awareness of a village - a place, where people live, meet, communicate, work and associated attributes: school, post office, supermarket, church, culture centre, some manufacturing facility and etc., on the other hand, there is a new "purely residential area", which does not have the aforementioned attributes.

Formally - villages are determined in land use plans, which form the basis for the address register. However, village areas do not reflect actual human settlements, but rather mechanically planned one, and should therefore be regarded as tax policy tool and planning tool instead of social awareness of a settlement area. New places that were not developed before and were

not aimed to be developed as settlements – often called “meadow villages”, have their own architecture and can be regarded as a group of dwellings, which are often delineated from the surrounding area, besides internally they possibly haven’t got their own social organisation.

Scope of the analysis comprised Latvian urban policy and planning in municipalities of Riga planning region, settlement structure of Kekava municipality. Kekava pagasts (local rural municipality) borders Riga and it has features characteristic to Pieriga construction. Number of population has increased during the past 10 years from 11000 to 14000, which was accompanied by intensive development of new settlements.

Morphologically diverse territories can be distinguished: structure of urban type construction development in rural areas, which is characterised by multistorey buildings (3-9 storeys) and close functional link with the city; rural or traditional type village development, which is based on former estate centre; new parcelled development “meadow village”, which originates on agricultural lands, areas of gardening communities; scattered development, which is not compact. It is notable, that such structures can be established within a single “planned” village.



**Figure 3. Structure of development in territory of Kekava municipality**

In Pieriga we cannot discuss the term village in its common notion. Rather we can speak about rural spaces, which gradually are being filled with new content by making functionally diverse dwelling development structure.

Most diverse urban forms make basis of settlements in the context of past years suburbanisation process - villages, unstructured new developments of groups of dwelling houses, which have no service infrastructure and also lack of social life is observed at a given settlement there.

### **Role of local government - conclusion**

Due to sectoral and limited territorial approach, or in other words, because of lack of integrated state policy in regional development, local governments play significant, if not the crucial role with regard to suburban spatial development. Local governments play the most

important role in organisation of local space. However, during the field study in local territories (Riga planning region monitoring ... 2009) it was identified that many local governments are not aware of land policy tools at their disposal for promoting development of their territories, which clearly was manifested by planning in Pieriga during the past few years. New settlement structure was formed due to market pressure and mostly because of speculative real estate deals, which influenced local planning process, determined and regulated land use transformations in Pieriga. By changes (increase) in payable tax amounts, villages may become unattractive as settlements, which in future may lead to review of their status and formal boundaries.

Up to the present day, development in local government is understood by increase in number of population, improvements in transport infrastructure, presence or attraction of production and service facilities (this is partly explained by tax policies and functions of local governments). Planning situation in local governments is clearly contradictory to EU and declared Latvian regional policy and regional development strategies and regional spatial plans. In the nearest future it is envisaged to face the consequences of this situation. Local governments are not yet aware of the significance of such situation and their responsibility for consequences, whereas people have yet not faced financial burden of territorially based decisions.

The main conclusions are: municipality has no own strategy to develop spatial structure and localities, but the state with own policy has no efficient impact on building expansion process; The main influence on changes of land use and settlement structures depend on land market and municipal budget formation predominately based on personal income tax; The city and suburbs are not perceived as a particular area of regional policy.

New self-sufficient solutions should be found for the area of city and suburbs. In the nearest future this could be one of key issues for new the national regional policy in Latvia.

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