Transport Network Impact in Shrinking Cities The case of Gjirokastra city and rural region

Keywords / Transport network, transport corridors, infrastructure, city connection

PhD. Besjana Qaja
Polis University / Tirana, Albania

Introduction

Shrinking cities are cities that are experiencing acute population losses. Deindustrialization and emigration abroad are some of the common cities shrink reasons.

A shrinking city is a densely populated urban area with a minimum population of 10,000 that has faced large population losses for more than two years and is undergoing economic transformations with some symptoms of a structural crisis (Wiechmann 2007). **International Network of Shrinking Cities (SCIRN).*

Academic research shows among other things that the problem of shrinking areas is more than just a problem of low population density.

- Distance is what characterizes low-density areas, which are likely to face location disadvantages, leading to low socio-economic development.
- The demographics of remote and low-density areas are characterized by specific phenomena such as emigration, low birth rates and an aging population.
- Low density areas are likely to present special geographical features (proximity to the border, presence of mountains, isolation, geographical distance) which may imply specific development challenges, also in terms of accessibility.

The form of urban transport changes with the growth phase of the city or with its decrease, and transport also changes according to the life cycle of the city.

Infrastructure connections at regional level

The case of the city of Gjirokastra and the region it consists of has had a population contraction which has experienced a decline of -2.3% from 2020 to 2021 (Instat, 2021), being the region with the lowest population in place and its highest decline.

These phenomena of population change have been shown to affect the development of various economic sectors of the country and especially of the settlement, such as agriculture, tourism, infrastructure, transport, etc.

Gjirokastra Region is one of the areas in which passes one of the important infrastructure projects at the national level such as the North-South corridor (blue corridor), which starts from Trieste (Italy) and passes first through Slovenia to Rijeka in Croatia. Most in Croatia consists of the A1 motorway. Near Dubrovnik, the Adriatic-Ionian Highway runs through Bosnia and Herzegovina in Trebinje to Montenegro. There it continues through Podgorica in the northern part of Shkodra to Albania and further to Durres in the direction of Greece. In Greece this highway passes through Ioannina and Patras ending at Kallamata.

This corridor within the Albanian border reaches a length of 374 km (extending from Hani i Hotit to Gjirokastra), along the district of Gjirokastra crosses the axis Tepelena-Gjirokastra (30 km) and Kakavija-Gjirokastra (23 km).

The use of the term 'corridor' is related to the fact that the construction of transport infrastructure includes not only the road network, but also the railway, air, port and control, and navigation systems.

The Adriatic-Ionian Highway is a highway under construction, along the west coast of the Adriatic and the Ionian Sea. The Kalter Corridor runs through the western part of the Balkan Peninsula. The Blue Highway, or Adriatic-Ionian Coastal Highway, is an idea that logically connects the Dalmatian road with the Greek coastal axis.

Albania is included in the European network TEN-T, through the Adriatic - Ionian highways (which for the most part in the Albanian territory coincides with the road axis North - South) and which is the Mediterranean Corridor, starting from Spain (Almeria) and passing through six European countries (Spain, France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary) in a length of 6,000 km. The Adriatic-Ionian Highway connects the Mediterranean TEN-T corridor, which crosses the Croatian coast, with the roads along the Montenegro coast and crosses Albania from Muriqani to Lezha-Tirana-Fier-Tepelena-Gjirokastra and ends in Kakavija.

Five years ago, the European Union took a decision of strategic importance to the Balkans. By 2030, the region where we live will be connected to the nine most important European road corridors via the Adriatic - Ionian highway.
With the aim of bringing the countries of the continent closer as these corridors already aim, the Pan-European Transport Conference was born, under the support and coordination of the European Commission. First convened in Prague (1991), it outlined the outline of the pan-European transport network development project. While the second meeting, held three years later in Crete (1994), defined the general strategic lines of the projects, the so-called 'Pan-European Corridors', which are ten. Considering that the defined network of corridors was very schematic, the third meeting held in Helsinki (1997) expanded the scheme of transport corridors, adding the connection of road corridors (called 'main line') with several connecting lines (called 'branches') to those regions that were economically most backward.

Results
These actions that have already been approved and are being implemented should be exploited by local economies of municipalities or settlements with potentials and untapped resources. The concrete case of Gjirokastra, being one of the countries with special historical values and part of UNESCO, should establish a better connection with the national network and expand its interaction with other settlements.
It should increase the connection with the neighboring country Greece through joint projects by creating points of interest for investments in its primary sectors to support the importance of the city which is part of UNESCO.

Year	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
Popullation	*68,020*	*65,939*	*62,952*	*61,423*	*59,381*	*58,031*

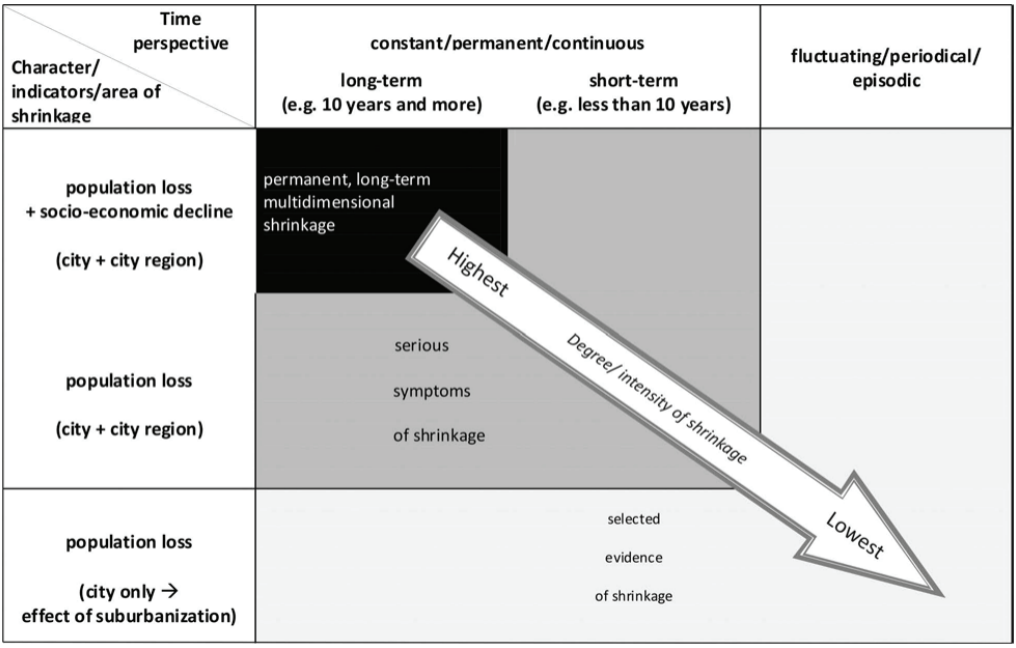

Fig. 1 / Typology of shrinking cities – 'graduation' of shrinkage. Source: Stryjakiewicz (2013: 127).

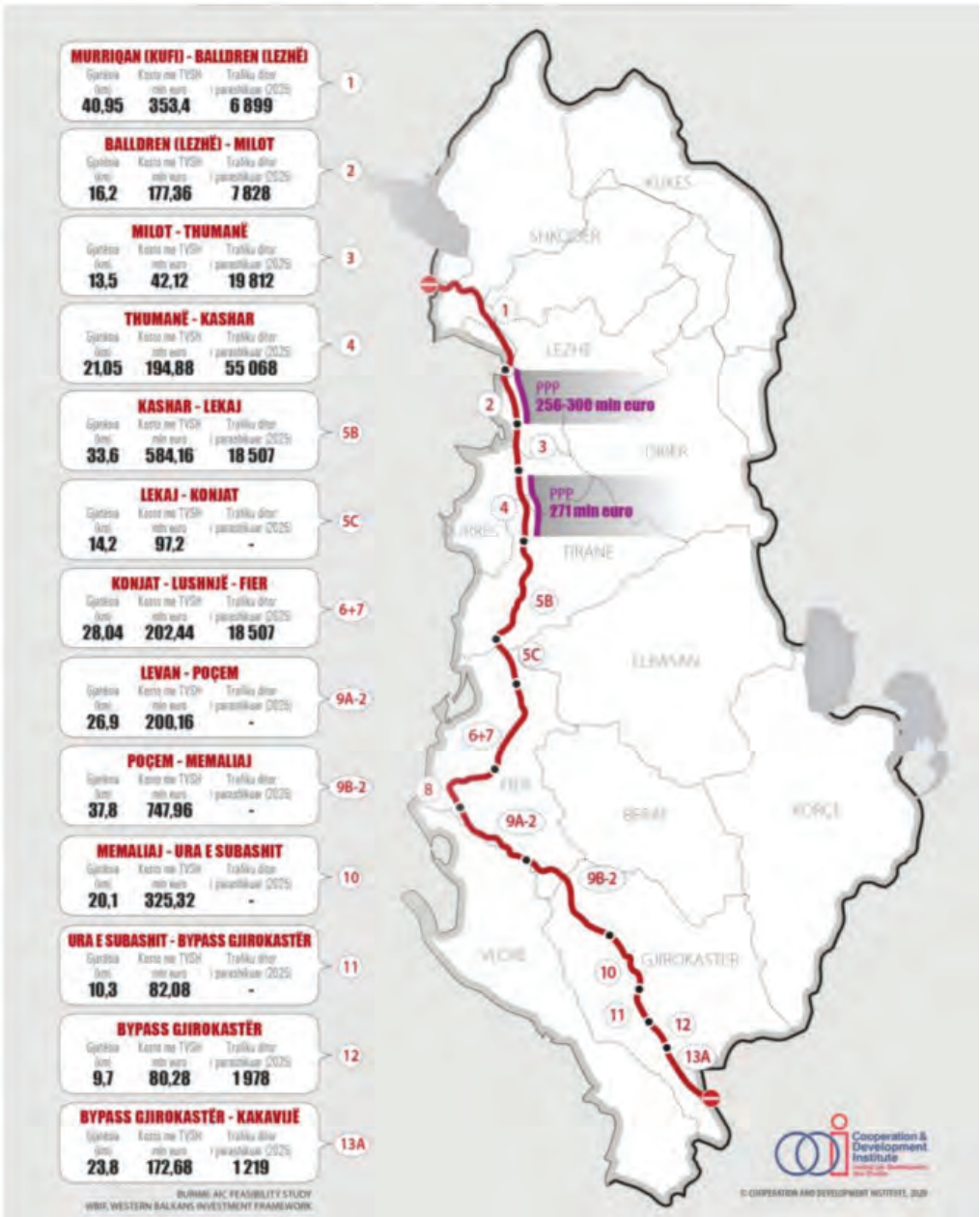

Fig. 2 / North-South corridor crossing trail. Source / Cooperation and Development Institute, 2021

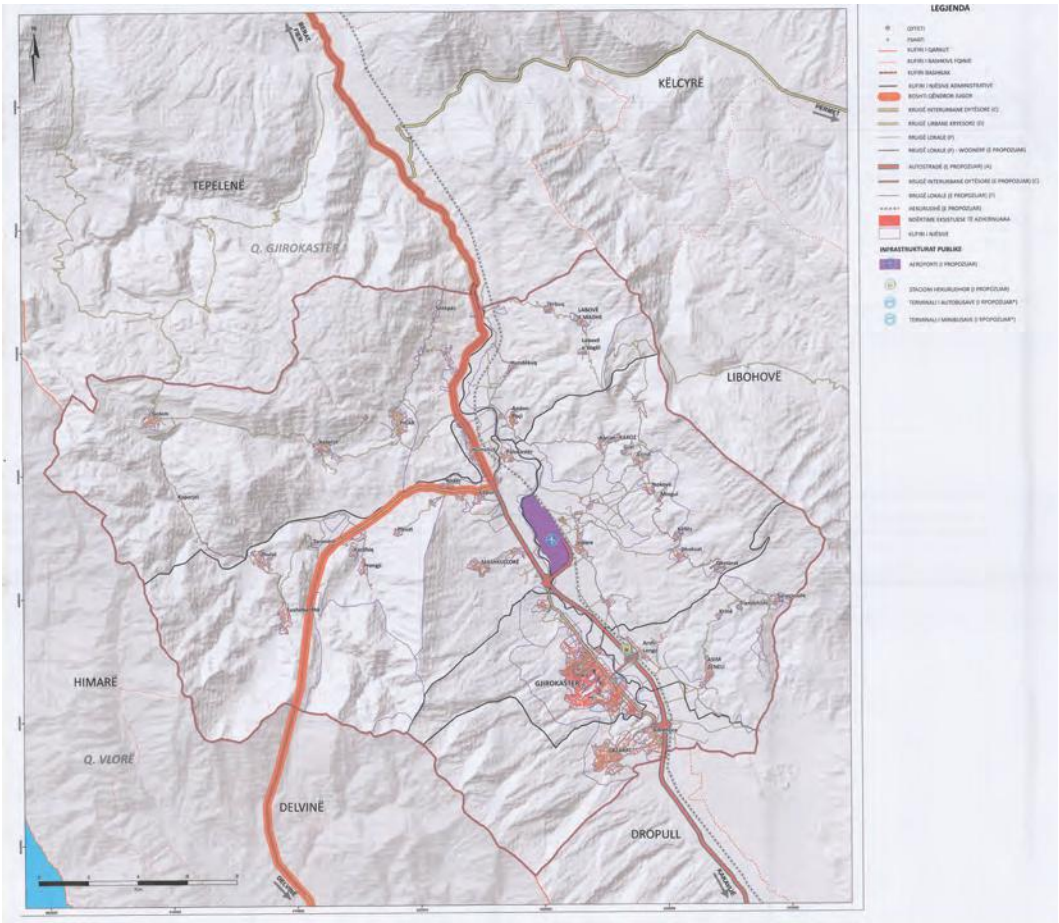

Fig. 3 / Road infrastructure, General Local Plan. / Source / Akpt, 2021.

Fig. 4 / The blue corridor trace. / Source / the author, 2021

Conclusions

For the improvement of the settlements that have had this historical development, there must certainly be incentives which include the social and economic aspect to bring back the inhabitants and the investments in these settlements. These can be achieved through a series of measures starting from:

-Reducing unemployment by stimulating entrepreneurship; urban renewal programs (renovation of central parts of the city, protection of industrial (craft) / cultural heritage, revitalization of various facilities for cultural / educational purposes.

- Reactivation of local actors, cities, enterprises, business environment institutions, non-governmental organizations.
- Based on the cooperation with other more advanced spatial units, to achieve the adaptation of successful strategies for the return of residents and their subsidization.
- Improving the secondary and tertiary road network to create a network more connected to the main access corridor such as the blue corridor.
- Improving the transport network to start a new life cycle for the city and its settlements.

As recommended above, they aim to improve the performance of settlements in relation to living conditions and not leaving to other countries, valuing local resources and promoting the country.

Bibliography

Wiechmann, 2007. Rrjeti Ndërkombëtar i Kërkimeve të Qyteteve në Tkurrje (SCIRN).
Instat 2021, Popullsia e Shqipërise.
Stryjakiewicz Tadeusz, 2013. The Process of Shrinkage as a Challenge to Urban Governance, pg. 29.
Cooperation and Development Institute, 2021. https://cdinstitute.eu/