

8. REGIONS AND REGIONAL PLANNING

Spatial inequalities and regions at a glance

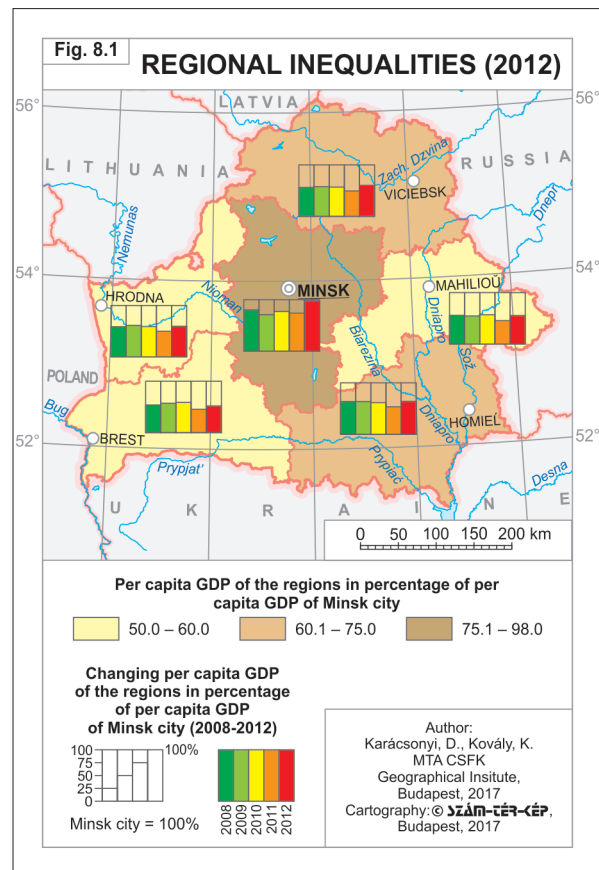
Whereas landscapes in Belarus change from north to south (e.g. from the Belarusian Lakeland in the north to the Paliessie region in the south), in terms of socio-economic development the country exhibits an east-west gradient as well as regional differences that reflect centre-periphery disparities. Some of these inequalities can be traced back to the period when the country's western regions formed a part of Poland (Kireenko, E.G. 2003). The east-west dichotomy is also apparent in the more industrialized nature of the eastern regions (Ioffe, G. 2004, 2006) and the richer cultural and architectural heritage of western areas with their more favourable demographics. Nevertheless, these differences are far less profound than those seen in Ukraine.

Belarus's **regional differences** are, however, outweighed by the dichotomy that exists between Minsk and the rest of the country. This dichotomy constitutes the main inequality of development in the country (Figure 8.1). None of Belarus's regions or districts have reached the same level of development as Minsk. Still, inequalities measured in terms of regional GDP are gradually being balanced out, a process that has been accompanied by a decline in income inequality (Figure 5.15). Per capita personal income in Minsk is 1.57 times higher than the national mean value, while in Homiel, Brest and Mahilioŭ per capita income is 82–84% of that mean value. In terms of socio-economic development and based on Kozlovskaya's calculations, which employ eight quotient indicators (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2010), the Minsk metropolitan area and the Minsk and Homiel regions are the top-ranking areas, the Hrodna and Viciebsk regions are ranked in the middle, and the Brest and Mahilioŭ regions have seen their rankings decline since the end of the Soviet era.

The country's landscapes, which change from north to south, form three distinct regions.

The most sparsely populated area is **Paliessie**, which lies in the south. The only exceptions within this area are the eastern and western gateways of Brest and Homiel, which are the administrative centres of the region.

Brest, which is the location of the largest border crossing in the west, is famous for its fortress. The Bielaviežskaja Pušča National Park near Brest is a World Heritage Nature Reserve. It received this status as Europe's largest primeval forest. The pride of the park is its population of bison. Brest is also renowned as the site of several major historical treaties and events (the Brest Union of 1596, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of 1918, the defence of the Brest Fortress in 1941, and the



signing of agreements connected with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 in Viskuli).

In addition to these two major urban centres, the area has several towns that were established at river crossings (on the rivers Prypiać, Dniapro, Sož). The largest of these towns are Pinsk and Mazyr (refinery). Close to Pinsk lies the Prypiać National Park, which is famous for its birdlife and for its peatbogs and sand dunes. The historic town of Turaŭ is also situated in the region.

Homieĺ, the second largest city in Belarus, is a centre for a wide range of engineering industries. It is also the location of the famous Paskevich Palace and Park. The Paliessie Radiation Ecological Reserve lies in the eastern part of the region and there are special tours in this area that was so severely hit by the Chernobyl disaster. Most roads in the region run from east to west, given the impassable marshes in the south. The northern part of the area is relatively industrialized.

The terrain gradually becomes hillier towards the north, culminating in the **Belarusian Ridge**, which straddles the Mahilioŭ, Minsk and Hrodna regions. The main east-west transport routes cross this area, thereby avoiding the southern marshy areas and the many lakes in the north. This region is the most industrialized in Belarus and, in the west, it is also the richest area in terms of national monuments (Hrodna, Pinsk, Brest, Navahrudak, Mir, Slonim, Lida, the Žyrovičy Monastery, and the Struve Geodetic Arc, which has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List).

Hrodna lies at the centre of the Nioman valley. A major centre for Polish minority culture, the town has a university and a wealth of architecture. The town of Navahrudak was the nucleus for the formation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 13th century, which then became one of the largest states in medieval Europe. The region has numerous well-preserved ancient churches (St. Boris and Gleb's Church – Hrodna), fortifications and medieval castles. The area is the native region of Adam Mickiewicz (Zavosse – Baranavičy raion) and of Tadeusz Kościuszko (Kosava-Mieračoŭščyna – Ivacevičy raion).

The capital city, Minsk, is poorer in terms of architectural heritage. Minsk has a historical medieval core, but the city is otherwise dominated by extensive parks and modern high-rise build-

ings, a legacy of the Soviet era. The River Svislač, which cuts the city in two, expands into an artificial lake (Minskoje More) to the north of the city. The lake is a popular spot for bathing in the summer. The Minsk region is also the location of the Salihorsk potash and salt mines and it is home to the Niasviž Museum (a UNESCO world heritage site), the Historical and Cultural Reserve of Zaslauje, the memorial area of Khatyn, the ski resorts of Lahojsk and Silichi, and the “Stalin Line” military historical memorial.

Mahilioŭ, a major railway junction, is renowned for its historic buildings (St. Nicholas Monastery and the Church of St. Stanislaus) and as a centre for engineering. Meanwhile, Babrujsk, an industrial town, is noted for its mineral water springs and its 19th century fortress. The Mahilioŭ region hosts the “Belarusian Suzdal”, a series of churches and monasteries at Mstislaŭ.

The far north is the location of the country's principal area for leisure and recreation, the **Belarusian Lakeland**. In a broader sense, the area forms part of the Viciebsk region. Specialization in this region has given rise to the development of cultural, educational and event tourism (Viciebsk, Polack), balneological tourism (Ušačy and Letcy resorts), and sports and recreational tourism (Braslaŭ Lakes National Park). The Braslaŭ tourist area, which is based on a series of lakes (more than 30 lakes), is a popular place for sport and recreation. The ecosystems of the Braslaŭ Lakes preserve rich flora and fauna and are attractive for the development of ecological tourism. The northern tip of the Minsk region is the site of the country's largest lake, Narač, which is surrounded by a national park. The small town of Narač is a tourist paradise much favoured by the residents of Minsk.

The centre of the area is Viciebsk, the birthplace of Marc Chagall. The town is Belarus's cultural capital and is famous for its national monuments; it also has a strong mechanical engineering sector and is the place of manufacture of “Vitjaz” televisions. The Slavianski (Slavic) Bazaar, a cultural festival, is held in the town each year. Two further centres in the region are Polack and Navapolack; the former is famous for its architectural wealth and the latter for its petrochemical industry. Polack is the oldest city in the country. It has a rich historical heritage stretching back 1,140 years and is the site of many

architectural gems dating to the 11th and 12th centuries (Sophia Cathedral, the Transfiguration Church) and to other epochs. Polack is the cradle of Christianity in Belarus (a place of pilgrimage to the St. Euphrosyne Monastery) and the home town of an outstanding educator and pioneer of printing, Francišak Skaryna (Museum of Printing, a memorial monument).

Regionalization and raionization during the Soviet era

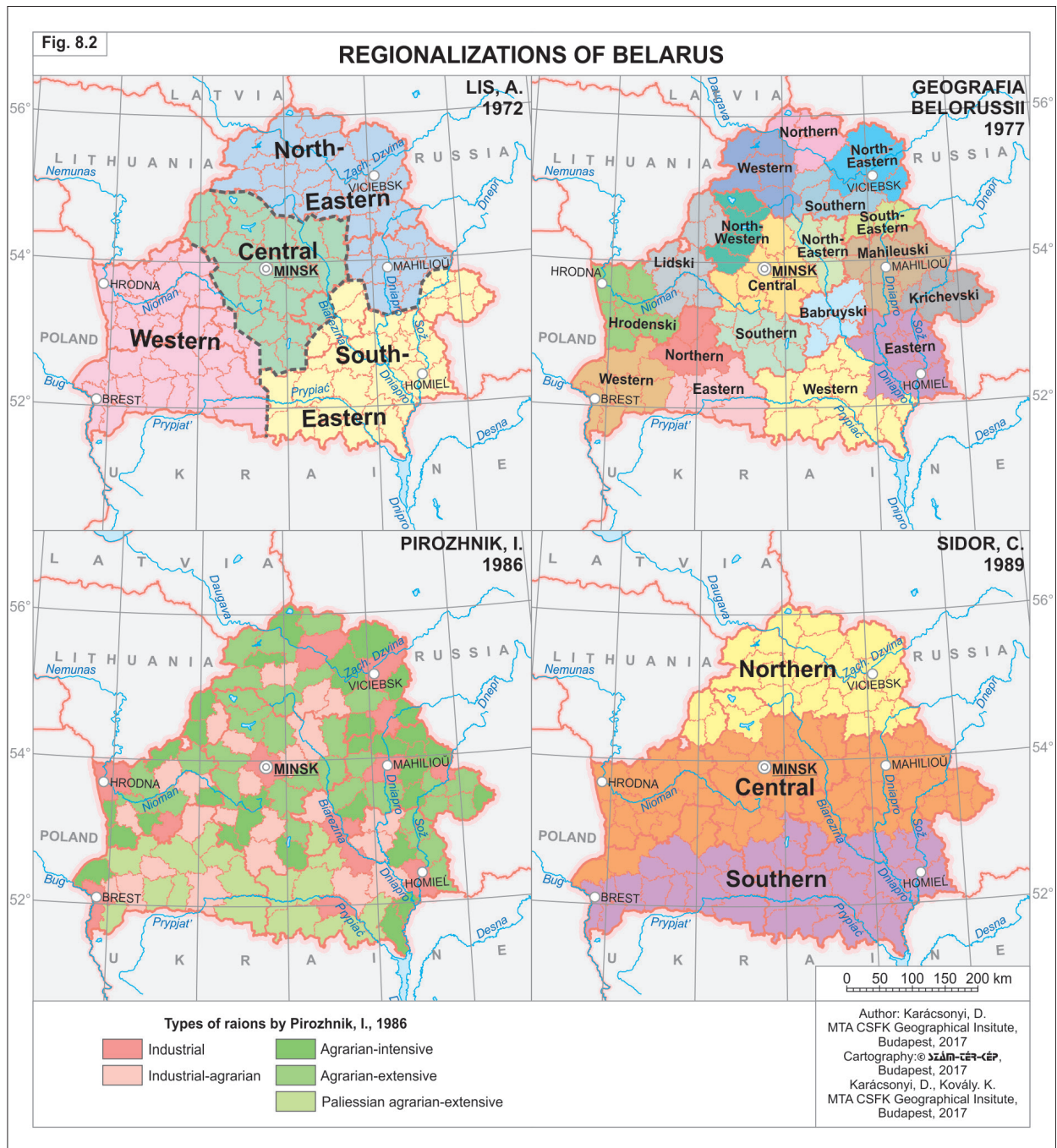
In the Soviet era, Belarus – which was known at the time as the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) – was one of eighteen major economic regions within the Soviet Union since the 1960s. Its internal regionalization, or “*raionization*”, followed the uniform Soviet model from the 1920s (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). With a view to optimizing the region’s economic potential, the Soviet Union sought to measure its natural, social and economic resources, whereby Soviet geography played a pioneering role. Yet, the general principles of centralized Soviet regional development, which were elaborated by the School of N. Baransky and then applied throughout the Soviet Union, ignored in many cases the natural and economic attributes of what was an enormous country (Dudko, G.V. 2007).

The first attempt at dividing the republic into **economic and administrative regions** was made in 1923–24 (Kireenko, E.G. 2003). When designating the so-called *okrugs*, Soviet planners considered the size and population of territories as well as their economic integrity. As far as the creation of economic geographical regions was concerned, an important role was played in the 1920s by Smolich, A.A. (Economic geographical raionization of Belarusian ethnic territories, 1919–1923), who elaborated the ethnic, economic and agricultural regionalization of the country (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005) (*Figure 8.2*). The typology created by the agronomist Yarosevich, N. (1923) considered such factors as agriculture, natural and demographic attributes, and the distance from the potential markets, for at the time Belarus was still an agrarian country (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). In 1924, Bonch-Osmolovsky, R. proposed the division of the country into seven regions based on the regional organization of agricul-

ture (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). Ultimately, when the new administrative structure was introduced in 1924, there were 10 countries (or *okrugs*), 100 districts and 1,202 local councils, all of which appeared to reflect economic attributes and administrative criteria.

In the post-war period, staff at the Institute of Economics, Academy of Sciences of BSSR, elaborated a **regionalization plan** for the administrative division of the country within the framework of Soviet economic planning. The **Geography of Belarus**, which was published in 1977, identified six economic regions (Brest, Viciebsk, Homieĺ, Hrodna, Minsk, Mahilioŭ) and nineteen subregions, which have not changed since the 1960s and are still valid today (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). The major industrial towns were organized around these regions (Kireenko, E.G. 2003). Despite their many similarities, the various regions exhibit significant differences in terms of population density, workforce qualifications and skills, natural resources, history, economic development, and the structure of the economy. Each region constituted an economic core and a territorial-production complex (the territorial organization of productive forces in Soviet geographical terminology) specializing in one sector of the economy (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). Likewise, the subregions also had their economic specializations, but unlike the regions they did not form a level of public administration and their borders did not always correspond with the district boundaries (Kireenko, E.G. 2003). The main parameters by which a subregion was defined included population size and the presence of a regional centre and a broader gravity zone. In turn, the subregions determined the specialization of regions and the direction of their future development.

The **regionalization proposed by Lis, A.** (The Problem of the Development of Productive Forces in Belarus, 1972) was based on the theory of territorial-production complexes and ignored administrative divisions (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). Lis identified four separate areas in Belarus, based on the fuel and energy base, the transport network, the gravity zones of the major economic hubs, natural and human resources, and the specialization of the agricultural sector. The Central area included Minsk and was the country’s most advanced region. The South-East area was centred on Homieĺ, had an abundance of forests and



mineral deposits (petroleum, coal and potash), and specialized in the processing of raw materials. The North-East area specialized in the production of flax, was poor in raw materials, and therefore its industry mainly processed imported raw materials. The West area, with its favourable soil and climate conditions, specialized in agro-industrial production (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005).

Beginning in the 1960s, advances were made in regional and urban development. For

instance, an urban development plan for Minsk was introduced in 1965, and this plan served as a model for urban development in Belarus's other major urban centres. The first Belarusian regional planning policy paper in the field of tourism was published in 1960 and concerned Lake Narač (Dudko, G.V. 2007).

In the 1980s, the focus switched to **integrated natural and economic regionalization**, the basis for which was the relationship between

natural geographic divisions, economy and population, and the geographic location of natural resources and mineral deposits. Based on these factors, Sidor, S. (*Geografia Belarusi*, 1989) identified three major natural-economic regions within the country: Northern (Lake District), Central, and Southern (Paliessie) (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005, Kireenko, E.G. 2003). The Northern region was characterized by moraine soils, numerous lakes, dense forests (with many health resorts and a developed tourism sector), and a cool and rainy summer climate. Additional characteristic features were the presence of many small villages, an underdeveloped agricultural sector, and low population densities in rural areas. The Central region had a varied topography with various soil types, a high population density and a diversified agricultural sector. The Southern region was densely forested, with a relatively low share of cultivated land. Local industry was based on the mining of potash, petroleum, and imported black and brown coal. The region was sparsely populated and scarce in roads.

In the 1980s, Pirozhnik, II. (*Socio-economic Typology of the Raions of the BSSR*, 1986) produced a **multi-variable complex quantitative typology** of the raions in Belarus. He used 13 indicators, constituting three factors: socio-demographical, agrarian-landscape, and an industry-related. Pirozhnik identified four types of district. The first type comprised the major industrial cities, with large populations and advanced and diversified industrial sectors. In the second type were the industrial-agrarian raions, with dynamic small and medium-sized towns and intensive agriculture. The agrarian-intensive type was characterized by high percentages of arable land, high production yields, and overall favourable agro-ecological attributes. In the agrarian-extensive type, the centres of the districts were small towns or urban-type settlements, and both industry and agriculture tended to be rather underdeveloped (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005).

The late 1980s saw the publication of the “**Scheme of Complex Territorial Organization of the BSSR**”, which even today is regarded as the most thorough and comprehensive work in the field (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). Belarus’s regional development strategy was published for the first time in 2000, and the strategy was revised and republished by the Belniipgrad ur-

ban planning institute in 2010 (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). Such regionalization was designed to create living conditions of the same quality for most of the population; promote a rational approach to the regional planning of production; utilize natural resources in a reasonable fashion; and reduce regional inequalities. The regional development paper identified 388 economic-geographical territorial units, which were organized around 186 urban and 202 larger rural settlements. Each of these territorial units had a centre that could be reached within 30–35 minutes from the periphery, 60–70 villages, an average population of 25,000, and an average area of 500 square kilometres.

Based on the economic, social and natural characteristics and attributes, these territorial units were grouped into six types. The twenty most developed units comprised the largest multifunctional towns, including Minsk. The second type comprised 37 territorial units that had arisen around the industrial centres. The third type comprised 61 territorial units, formed around the industrial and agricultural centres and where the major industrial enterprises processed agricultural produce. The fourth type (159 territorial units) comprised the areas surrounding small towns and urban-type settlements, typically with agricultural production and the processing of produce. In the fifth type (76 territorial units), in addition to land used for agriculture, there was a high proportion of forest land, grassland, flood plains, and lakes. Tourist resorts were another typical feature. The sixth type (35 territorial units) comprised the nature protection areas and the national parks, with tourism and nature preservation being the main fields of activity.

Regional planning and depressed areas – since the independence

Ideological constraints meant that scant attention was given to depressed areas until the advent of *Perestroika* in the mid-1980s (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). In those regions where industry was preponderant (Minsk, Homiel), restrictions were introduced, alongside measures to promote the development of small towns, a process that had begun in the 1970s (Dudko, G.V. 2007). By the 1980s, **environmental pollution** stemming from

industrialization had become a notable problem. Regions with significant industrial pollution included the Salihorsk area, as well as the major chemical and petrochemical centres (Mazyr, Navapolatsk). The western districts, which were less industrialized, counted as less advanced in terms of industrial development.

As of 1986, a further problem region emerged: the **areas affected by the Chernobyl disaster** (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). In these areas, an important task is the ongoing monitoring of radiation levels in the natural resources (soil, water, forests, etc.). Measures are also required to protect the health of populations affected by radiation and to improve living standards. A major consideration is the need to restore the economic potential of the contaminated areas, to promote investment in the region, and to strengthen small and medium enterprises as well as local peasant farms. The situation of economic sectors (agriculture and forestry) in the most affected areas requires enhancement measures. An important issue for the Belarusian economy is the rational use and protection of the natural resources of the Paliessie region. In addition to the problems stemming from the Chernobyl disaster, a further major concern is landscape degradation caused by melioration measures. Flood protection and nature preservation are additional fields requiring action.

In the Belarusian Lakeland, in view of the economic and ecological factors, the most important development criteria are the rational use of the lakes, the development of tourism and a reduction in the pollution caused by local industry. In the Navapolack area, a key site for the chemicals industry, the level of harmful emissions is the highest in the country.

In consequence of the **economic crisis** that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an increase in social and economic inequality in Belarus, with a widening gap between western and eastern regions and between Minsk and the rest of the country (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). As in other post-communist countries, in Belarus the transition from a planned economy to the market economy resulted in a further deepening of the inequalities between major cities and smaller towns; migration increased, with many people moving to the more developed regions (Kireenko, E.G. 2003).

The post-Soviet crisis particularly affected those regions in which industry was dependent on

the import of raw materials and energy resources. The most significant declines in industrial output were recorded in the Viciebsk and Hrodna regions, while the Minsk region survived the period relatively unscathed. The raw material production centres (e.g. Salihorsk) and the single-function industrial centres (Svietlahorsk, Smarhoń, Rečyca, Novalukoml and Mikaševičy) also encountered grave difficulties (Kireenko, E.G. 2003). By 1995, relative economic stability had been achieved, thanks to a series of economic policy-making decisions. From 1996, industrial production increased throughout Belarus, whereby the Viciebsk region was an exception (Kireenko, E.G. 2003).

During the economic transition, a new type of crisis region emerged, where the **unemployment** rate exceeded 10% (whereas in other regions the rate was approx. 3%) and where the hidden unemployment rate exceeded 50%. Such regions tended to be industrial centres that had been based on the defence industry (Smarhoń and Viliejka) and had met demand throughout the Soviet Union before its collapse. The former garrison towns represented a special problem category; they were afflicted by high unemployment as the Soviet army withdrew (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, **depressed regions** also appeared along the **new national boundaries** (Kozlovskaya, L.V. 2005). Social and economic relations with such neighbouring countries as Latvia and Lithuania were broken. In contrast, cooperation with Poland increased. In recent decades the development of border areas has tended to occur with the framework of the Euroregions ("Bug", "Neman" and "Dnepr") or as part of international environmental cooperation. In 1996, a development program for border regions was elaborated under the auspices of the TACIS "Cross Border Cooperation Programme". The program targeted such areas as economic growth, reductions in unemployment, ecological improvements, tourism, the development of the transport and technical infrastructure, and the preservation of the historical and cultural heritage (Dudko, G.V. 2007).

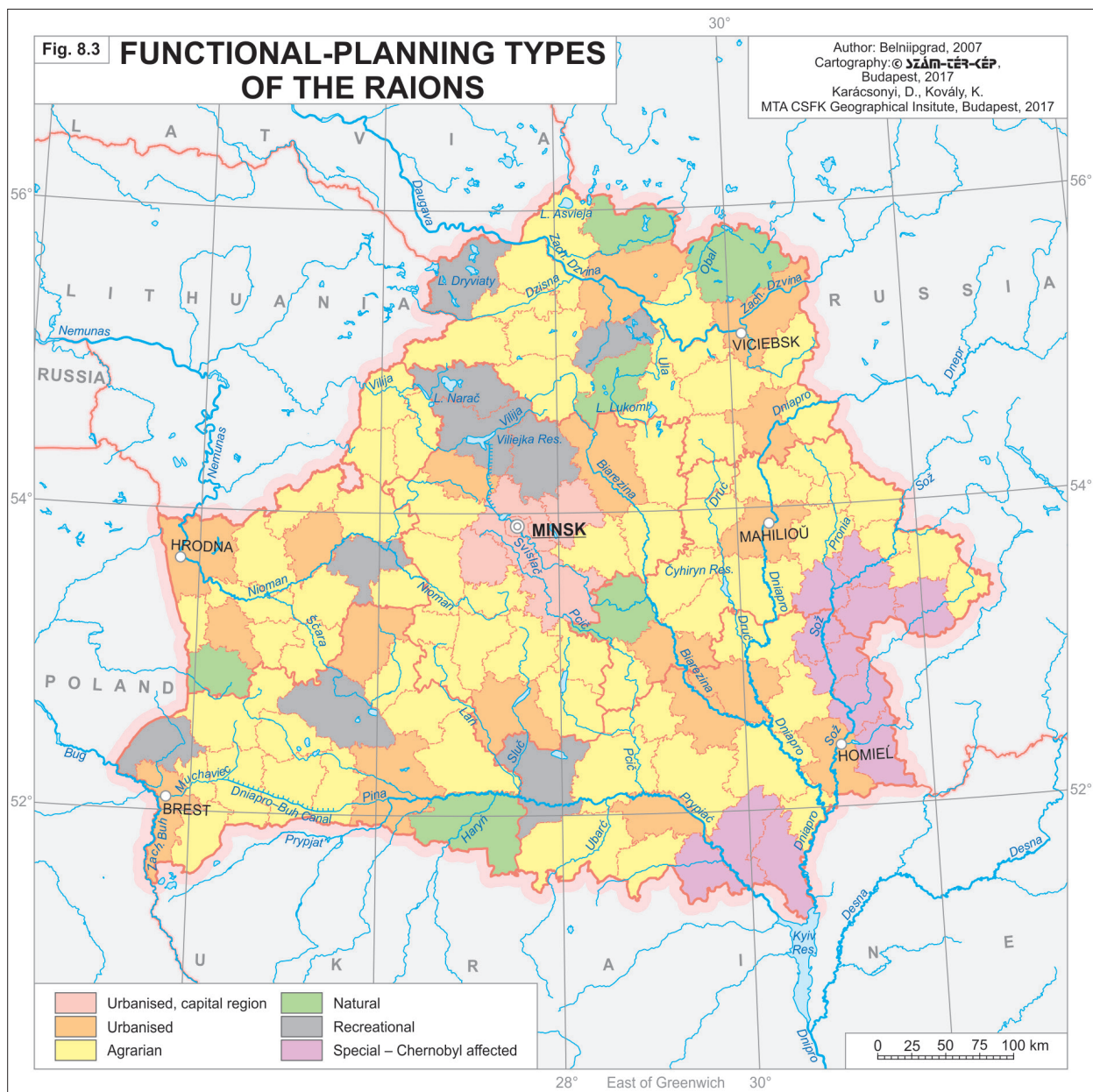
With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the transition to a market economy, regional and urban development faced new challenges (Dudko, G.V. 2007). As the role of the state declined, so the ability to monitor and control regional and urban development weakened. Suburbanization and the

urban sprawl posed an increasing threat to the protective forests around Belarusian towns.

Within Belarus, **regional development planning** has occurred explicitly only since the early 1990s. In the towns and districts, five-year regional planning and urban development programs are elaborated in accordance with the national planning strategy. Between 1991 and 2000, plans for 150 towns were elaborated (Dudko, G.V. 2007). At present, the main regional development plan is the “State Scheme of Complex Territorial Organization of the Republic of Belarus” (National Plan), which was elaborated

in the period 1997–2000 and then revised and republished in 2010. A further significant document is “The National Strategy for Sustainable Development for the Period to 2020 of the Republic of Belarus” (Dudko, G.V. 2007).

The Belniipgrad urban planning institute produced a **functional development typology** for the country’s districts based on their socio-economic resources and development potential (Belniipgrad 2007) (Figure 8.3). Among the four types identified, the first is the city of Minsk, the capital city region, where the principal development priority is the coordination



of the agglomeration process with the adjacent settlements, whereby consideration should be given to environmental aspects and the differing development potential of the various settlements.

Urbanized raions comprise the second type. Their centres are the industrially advanced major cities and the well-developed medium-sized towns. Alongside a large urban population, a characteristic feature is the presence of numerous commuters. Here, environmental improvements constitute a special priority. The centres of districts that are agricultural in nature are small and medium-sized towns, where enhancing the population retention capacity of the area and increasing the standard of living are the main priorities. A characteristic feature of the local economy is the important role played by the agrarian

economy and the processing of agricultural and forestry products.

The third type comprises districts that perform an important function in terms of nature protection and human recreation and which constitute the backbone of Belarus's ecological network. Here, improvements in conservation are especially important.

The fourth type is made up of the special-status districts that were particularly affected by the Chernobyl disaster and dispose of limited natural and human resources. In these areas, the main priorities are to address the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, to improve the socio-economic position of the contaminated areas, and to enhance the quality of life for local inhabitants.



Evroopt – New, European style supermarket in a Belarusian town on the periphery, Lieičy.
(Photo: Karácsonyi, D. 2015)