

Urbanisation and the Urban Network in South Eastern Europe

The level of urbanisation in South Eastern Europe, particularly in the Balkan states is well below the level of urbanisation of Western Europe, and it does not even reach the standard of the Central Eastern European countries that joined the European Union on May 1, 2004. (By urbanisation we not only mean here the number of towns or proportion town dwellers, but also the general spread of urban infrastructure and an urban lifestyle). While in other parts of Europe the rate of urbanisation is 70–80%, in the countries of South Eastern Europe the proportion of urban dwellers amounts to a mere 40–50% of the population, showing the lowest figures throughout the continent. The low level of urbanisation is primarily due to historical reasons, and it is an important measure of the poorly developed nature of the region. From the middle of the 15th century to the end of the 19th century, the Balkans were under the control of the feudal Ottoman Empire, and therefore its industrial development and modern urbanisation had been delayed, these processes only starting

after the nations concerned became sovereign, in effect, after World War I. Even then the pace of urban development lagged far behind that in Western Europe.

The period between the two world wars was the time of spectacular modernisation for the Balkan states, now free after five centuries of Turkish oppression. This was an era when Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria embarked upon creating their domestic industry, which gave a boost to the development of urban areas, albeit one that was confined to a few cities, mainly the capitals. However, the greater part of the Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Dobruja – remained stuck in the pre-industrial phase of economic development. In these regions, industrial development and urbanisation in the modern sense of the word did not start until the Communist era. An indication of the low level of urban development is that, by the end of World War II, none of the Balkan cities had a population exceeding 1 million.

Urbanisation in the Communist Era

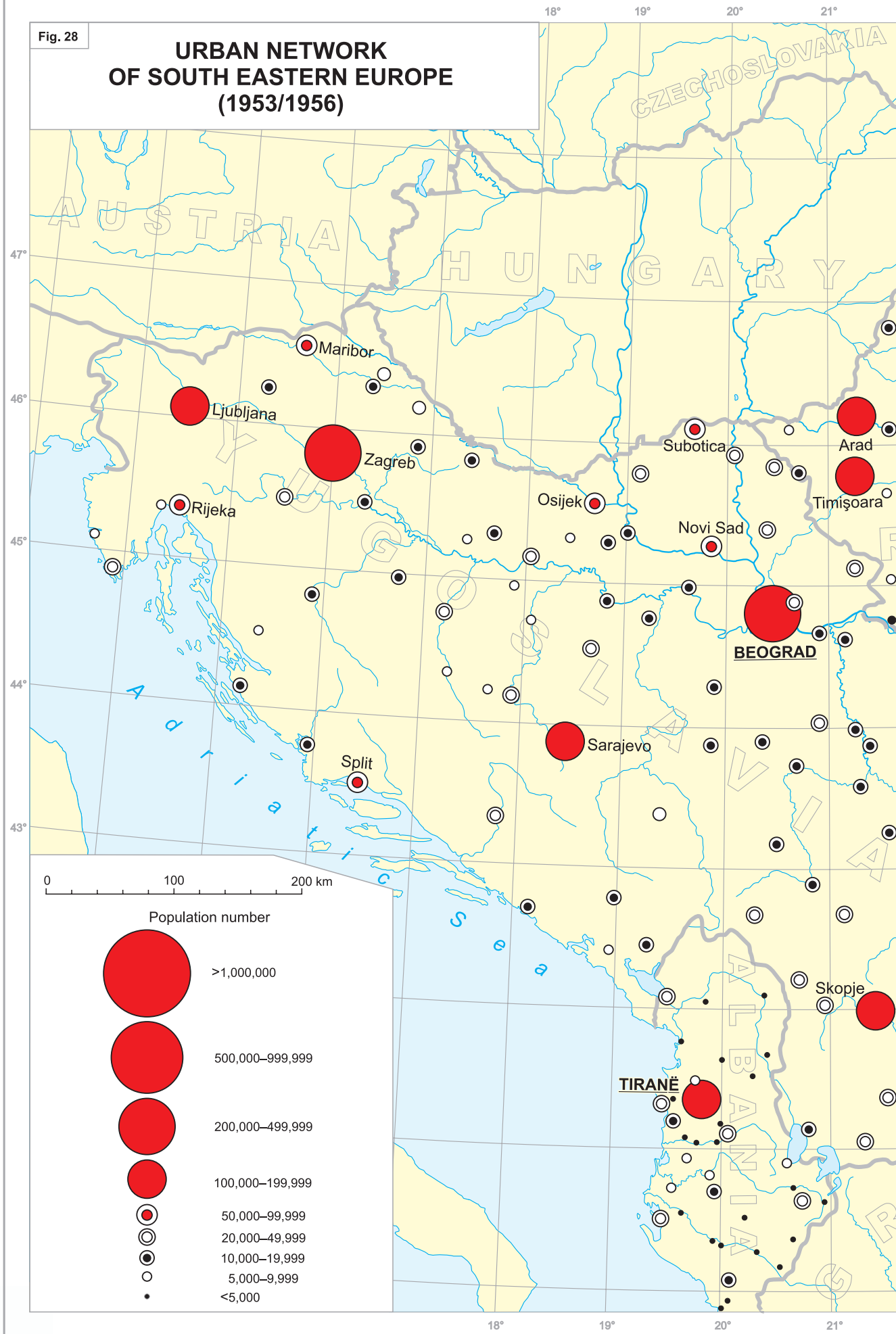
The devastation of World War II, and the subsequent population exchanges and deportations, which affected a great number of people, also hindered balanced urbanisation. At the end of World War II, the Balkan countries were still characterised by a clear predominance of rural areas and agriculture. More than 80% per cent of the population of Yugoslavia lived in villages, and this ratio was very similar in Albania (75%), Romania (77%) and Bulgaria 75%. In the mid-1940s there were only 358 towns in the 4 states of the Balkans, the majority of which owed urban status to being traditional administrative centres and to their population exceeding that of the surrounding villages. The typical Balkan town of the era had a population of 10–20 thousand, its central functions were limited, and it was rather village-like in appearance.

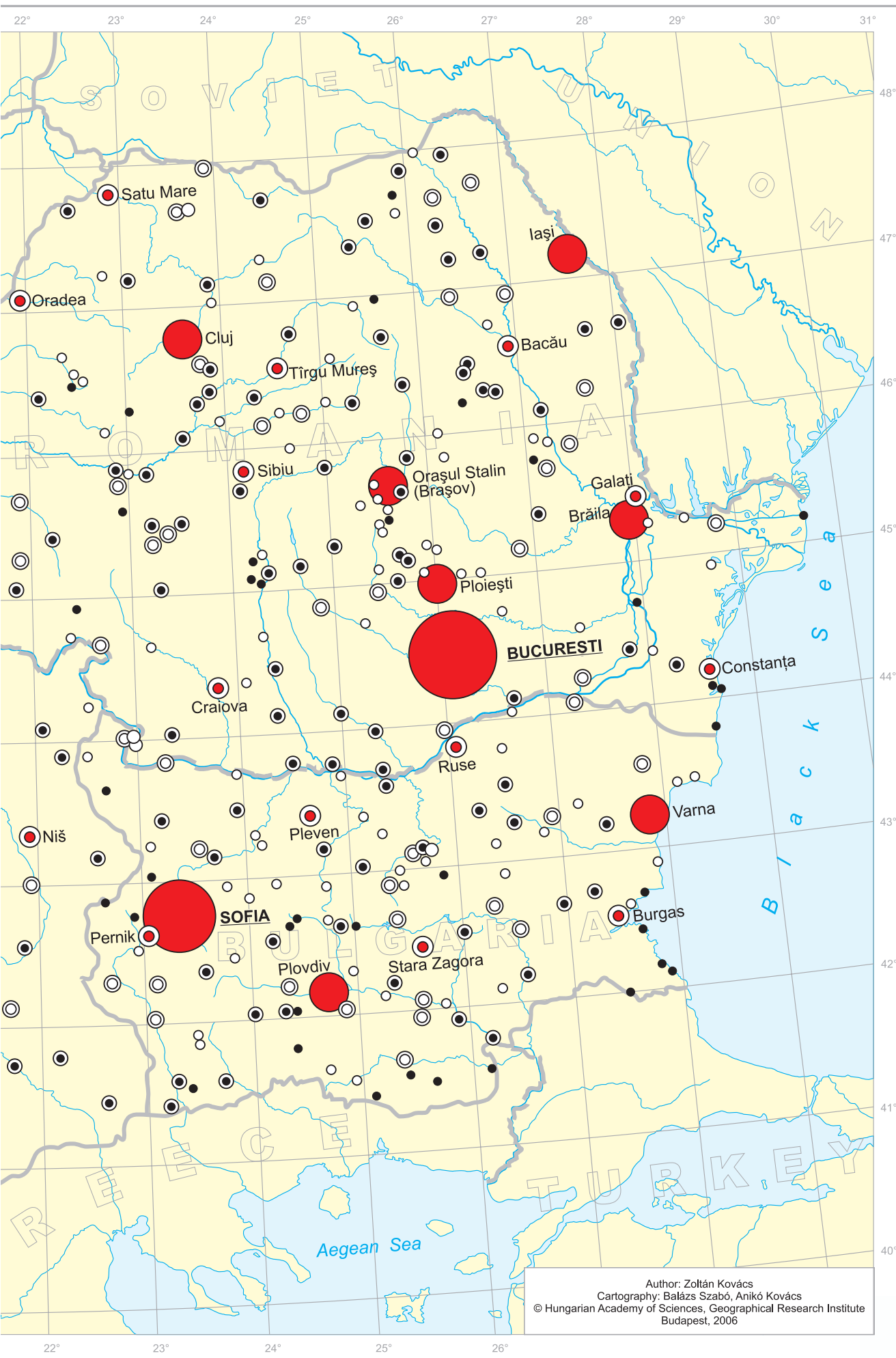
For the period after World War II, reliable data on the composition of the urban network were provided by the first “Communist” censuses. Although held in different years (the 1953 census in Yugoslavia, the 1955 census in Albania and the 1956 censuses in Romania and Bulgaria), they gave a comprehensive and sufficiently detailed overview to the network of towns in these countries (*Figure 28*). These censuses revealed that, of the 402 towns in South Eastern Europe, Bucharest was the only one which had a population of more than 1 million, and a further 16 had a population exceeding 100,000 (*Table 12*).

Some 39.5% of the urban population lived in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Only a small part (26.8%) of town dwellers lived in urban centres with a population less

Fig. 28

URBAN NETWORK OF SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE (1953/1956)





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Table 12. *Urban Network of the South East European States (1953–1956, 2001–2002)*

| Size categories | Number of towns | | Population number | | Ratio within urban population, % | |
|-------------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------------|------------|----------------------------------|-----------|
| | 1953–1956 | 2001–2002 | 1953–1956 | 2001–2002 | 1953–1956 | 2001–2002 |
| 1,000,000 < | 1 | 3 | 1,177,661 | 4,300,734 | 11.23 | 14.16 |
| 500,000–1,000,000 | 1 | 1 | 644,727 | 779,145 | 6.14 | 2.57 |
| 200,000–500,000 | 2 | 17 | 737,219 | 5,131,212 | 7.02 | 16.89 |
| 100,000–200,000 | 13 | 27 | 1,589,679 | 3,793,547 | 15.14 | 12.49 |
| 50,000–100,000 | 20 | 72 | 1,450,010 | 5,046,814 | 13.81 | 16.62 |
| 20,000–50,000 | 71 | 158 | 2,083,072 | 4,850,601 | 19.85 | 15.97 |
| 10,000–20,000 | 127 | 258 | 1,852,199 | 3,523,874 | 17.65 | 11.60 |
| 5,000–10,000 | 105 | 295 | 780,351 | 2,136,675 | 7.43 | 7.03 |
| < 5,000 | 62 | 267 | 181,727 | 812,007 | 1.73 | 2.67 |
| Total | 402 | 1,098 | 10,496,645 | 30,374,609 | 100.00 | 100.00 |

Source: National censuses.

than 20,000, and small towns below 5,000 inhabitants were practically absent in the Balkans.

Urbanisation in the Balkan states accelerated considerably after the Communist takeover, and throughout the Communist era this rate remained much higher than in the pre-war period. The main reason for this is that towns had been the centres of Communist modernisation, and out of ideological considerations they were given preference over villages in terms of allocating funds for development and in particular infrastructure development. Most of this financial support was distributed to towns, villages or regions through the channels of the central state distribution system.

The two major factors that promoted urbanisation after 1945 were migration processes and legal and administrative changes. The new industrial plants set up in the towns appeared highly attractive to the young and educated members of the rural population. At the same time, the re-organisation of agriculture along Communist lines, the shortage of jobs in rural areas and the increasing gap between living standards in towns and villages caused rural people to leave their birthplace. This led to massive internal migration, which was the primary drive for urban growth in the 1950s and 1960s.

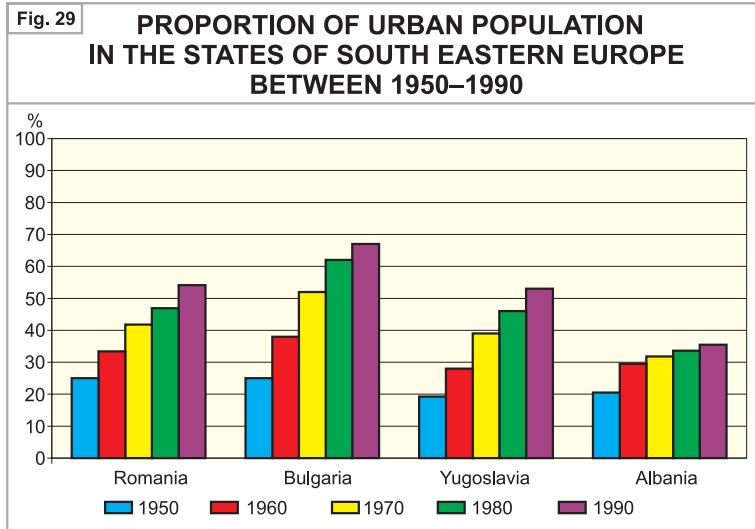
The other main reason for the increase in the proportion of urban dwellers was that a number of villages obtained town status. The legal and statistical definition of the urban settlement was introduced gradually in the Balkan countries, and the leaders of these states started to use such definitions with increasing aware-

ness. (The situation is further complicated, and the poor development of urban areas reflected by the introduction of the notion of ‘urbanised settlements’ – a category between towns and villages – in which context the hierarchy of settlements has usually been examined. In this study, settlements having officially obtained urban status are dealt with.) Due to the more or less deliberate increase in the number of towns, the number of settlements with town status had grown from 144 to 260 in Romania, from 104 to 237 in Bulgaria, and from 24 to 67 in Albania during the Communist era of more than four decades. Central governments were eager to develop settlements into towns, fulfilling central functions in areas void of towns. Urban status meant not only higher prestige, but also more substantial funds for development.

As a result of the migration into towns and the use of administrative methods to increase the number of settlements with urban status, between 1950 and 1990 the proportion of town dwellers grew from 25% to 68% in Bulgaria, from 24% to 54% in Romania, from 20% to 53% in Yugoslavia, and from 20% to 36% in Albania. Over this period, by global standards the Balkan states belonged to the group of countries with moderate urbanisation (*Figure 29*). By the end of the period, the level of urbanisation in all of the Balkan states (with the exception of Albania) exceeded the world average (43% in 1990).

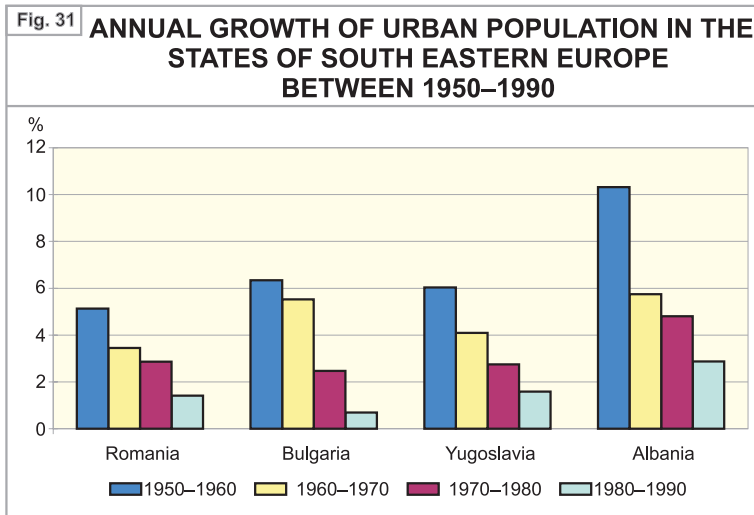
The Communist era was also an era of town foundation. From the 1950s onwards, new industrial towns emerged in these states (*Figure 30*), albeit on a smaller scale than in the Central

and Eastern European countries or in the Soviet Union. Such industrial towns in the Balkans number around 50. Several generations of new industrial towns can be distinguished according to the time of their foundation and their industrial functions. In the 1950s, towns were created for the extraction of minerals, energy production and metallurgy. The towns of Motru and Vulcan in Romania, and Memaliaj in Albania were typical coal mining towns of the era. However, it was metallurgy-based towns that developed particularly fast, for example Elbasan in Albania, Slatina in Romania, Kremikovci in Bulgaria, Jesenice in Slovenia and Nikšić in Montenegro. From the 1960s, owing to the development of hydrocarbon production and processing, a number of new towns were founded, for example Dărmănești, Onești and Victoria in Romania, Devnya in Bulgaria,



and Qyteti Stalin in Albania. Finally, during the 1970s, when nuclear energy production prospered, a few new "nuclear towns" also appeared, including Kozloduj in Bulgaria and Cernavodă in Romania. As Communist industrialisation lost momentum in the 1970s, the development of new towns stopped, and the serious economic crisis





starting from the early 1980s afflicted these towns first of all, due to the highly outdated industrial structure of local economies.

The rate of urban development was relatively uneven in the Balkan states during the Communist period. Urban population growth was most dynamic in the 1950s, with a rate of almost 6% on average in the region (Figure 31). Urban development was losing its momentum steadily, with each passing decade. The slowdown of urbanisation can be attributed to the exhaustion of the resources needed for extensive industrialisation, and the increased degree of the urbanisation itself.

Trends of Urbanisation after 1990

The collapse of Communism effectively curbed the development of towns in the region. After 1990 the growth of towns came to a halt, and the proportion of town dwellers no longer increased, or increased only very slightly. This was due to several reasons. On the one hand, a great number of towns were destroyed or depopulated in the territories devastated by the Yugoslav wars (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo), on the other hand, the direction and dynamics of internal migration had significantly changed.

Following the fall of Communism, migration from villages to towns dwindled, while the flow of people from towns to villages increased, and once the borders were opened, emigration began, which mainly affected cities. The main reason for this was that the reduction in the number of industrial jobs made towns and cities far less attractive. Moreover, the higher costs of living, the resulting uncertainty, and the environmental decay motivated an increasing number of people to leave cities. This led to an "enforced" migration of people back to their original dwelling place or homeland. The rediscovery of the village as one's birthplace was

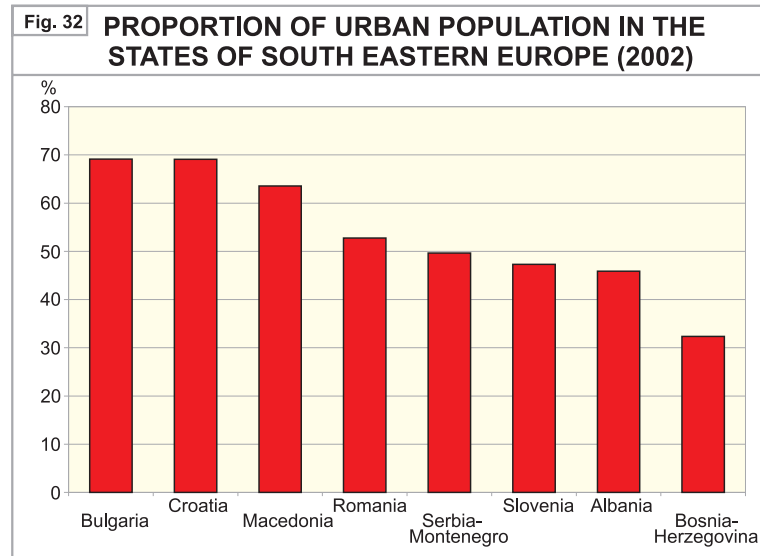
an important element of family strategies, partly because the rural environment enabled survival even without having a secure job, for example by the opportunity of subsistence farming, the lower living costs (heating, transport etc.) and possible help from relatives. It should be noted that urban development in South Eastern Europe has not resembled the suburbanisation process of the Western European type, even though some traces of this can be observed around cities in the more developed western part of the region (e.g. Ljubljana, Zagreb) and Transylvanian towns such as Cluj (Kolozsvár) and Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely).

Another important factor in the development of post-communist urbanisation was the cessation of state administrative intervention after 1990. The policy of awarding town status appears to have stopped for good, indicated by the fact that only 3 villages in Bulgaria, 5 in Romania and 7 in Albania have been upgraded to towns since 1990. (No reliable data is available concerning the successor states of Yugoslavia.)

Consequently, the proportion of urban population in Romania is 2% lower now than it was in 1990, whilst in Bulgaria the level of urbanisation

tion is approximately the same. A modest increase of 4% can be observed only in Albania, which is mainly due to the extremely fast growth of Tirana. However, the population in the majority of Albanian towns is stagnating or decreasing.

Among the countries of the region, the following order can be established as regards the proportion of town dwellers and the level of urbanisation (Figure 32). The most urbanised countries of the region are Bulgaria and Croatia; in both of them the proportion of town dwellers reached 69%. Since there is no precise official definition of a town in Macedonia, in the present study settlements with a population exceeding 5,000 were considered to be towns, which results in a 63% proportion of urban dwellers. In Romania, Serbia and Montenegro and Slovenia, this ratio is about 50%, and therefore these countries can be considered to have an average level of urbanisation



for the Balkans. Albania was the next, where 42% of the population live in towns. As regards Bosnia and Herzegovina, the only available data is from the 1991 census, but even this is sufficient to show that Bosnia is the least urbanised country in the region, with only 34.5% of the population living in towns.

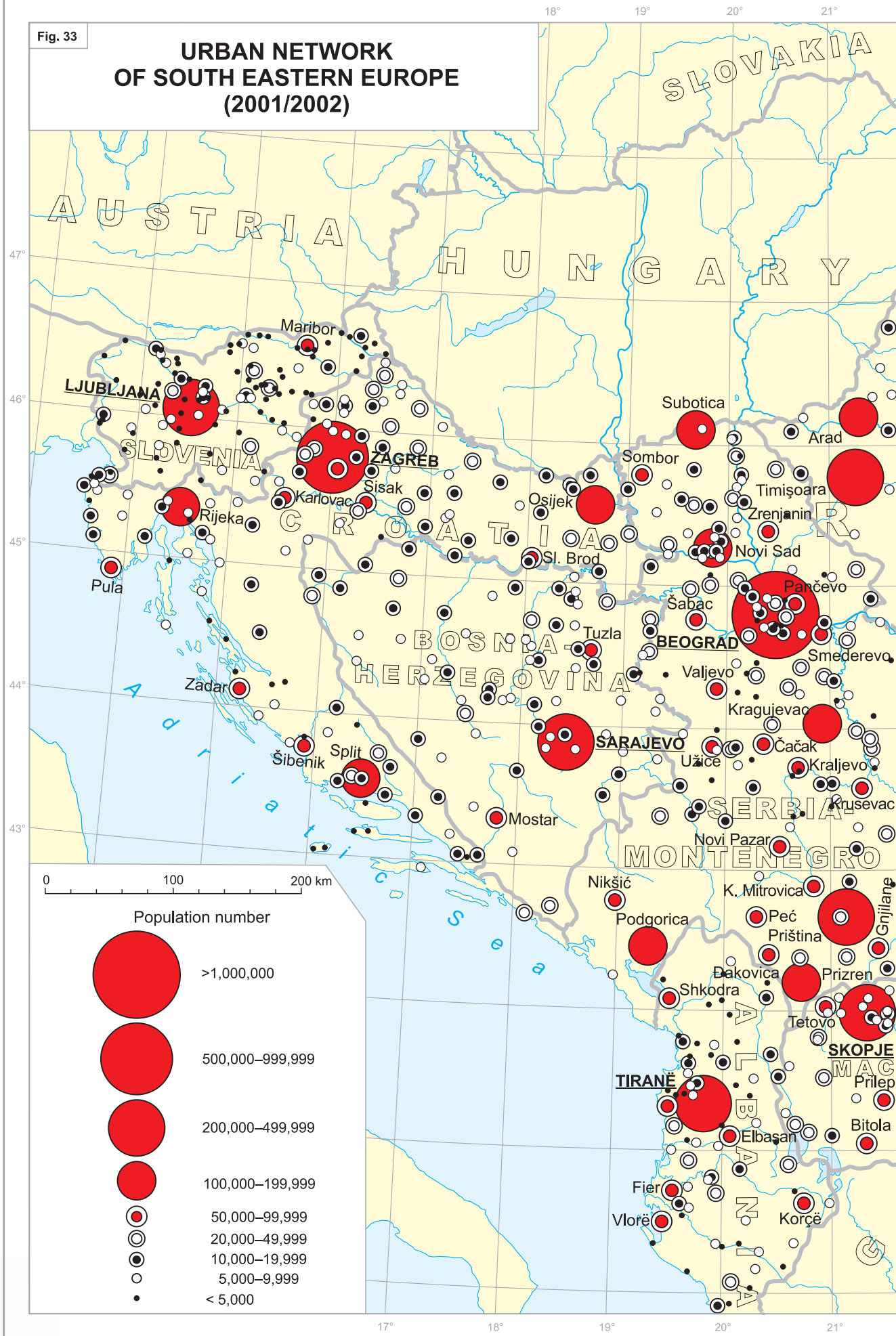
Table 13. Largest Urban Centres of South Eastern Europe

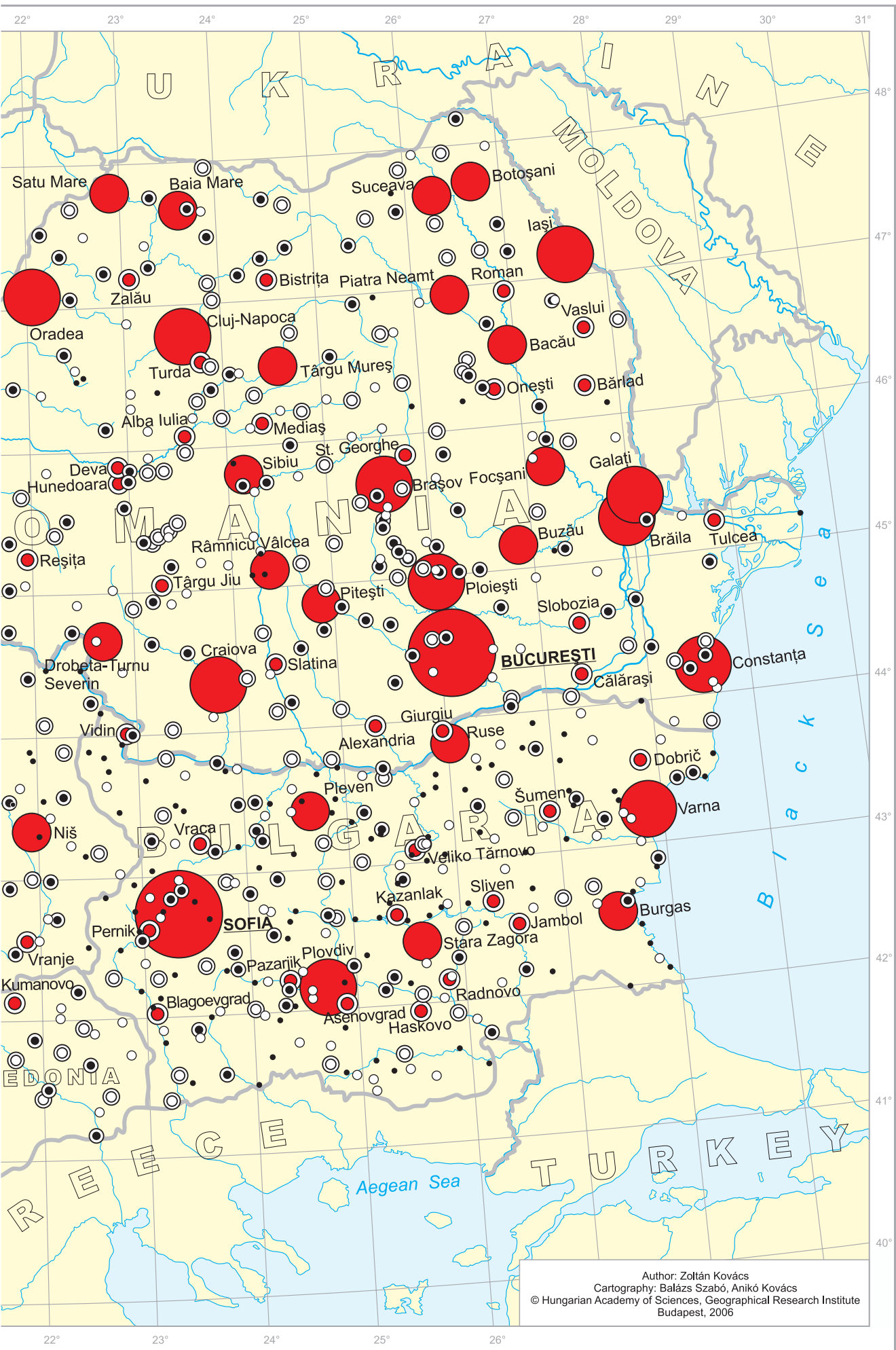
| Cities 1953–1956 | Thousand inhabitants | Cities 2001–2002 | Thousand inhabitants |
|------------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| București | 1,177.6 | București | 1,926.3 |
| Sofia | 644.7 | Beograd | 1,289.7 |
| Beograd | 386.3 | Sofia | 1,084.7 |
| Zagreb | 350.8 | Zagreb | 779.1 |
| Plovdiv | 161.8 | Skopje | 456.4 |
| Cluj | 154.7 | Sarajevo | 416.4 |
| Timișoara | 142.2 | Tirana | 343.1 |
| Orașul Stalin (Brașov) | 123.8 | Plovdiv | 337.0 |
| Varna | 120.3 | Iași | 320.8 |
| Skopje | 119.0 | Cluj–Napoca | 317.9 |
| Ploiești | 114.5 | Timișoara | 317.6 |
| Iași | 112.9 | Varna | 311.2 |
| Sarajevo | 111.7 | Constanța | 310.4 |
| Ljubljana | 111.2 | Craiova | 302.6 |
| Tirana | 108.1 | Galați | 298.8 |
| Arad | 106.4 | Brașov | 284.5 |
| Brăila | 102.5 | Ljubljana | 249.4 |
| Constanța | 99.6 | Ploiești | 232.5 |
| Oradea | 98.9 | Brăila | 216.2 |
| Craiova | 96.8 | Priština | 209.1 |

Source: National censuses.

Fig. 33

URBAN NETWORK OF SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE (2001/2002)





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As far as the composition of the town network is concerned, the weight of large cities has grown over the past decades. Today 48 of the 1098 towns and cities of the Balkans have a population over 100,000, and almost half, i.e. 46.11% of urban population live in these cities. In addition to the three cities with a population of over 1 million (Bucharest, Belgrade, Sofia), Zagreb, Skopje and Tirana also have a population of more than 500,000 or close to it. The exact number of population in large cities is often uncertain, due to the informal development of cities and because new addresses are often not declared. Many estimates put the real size of the population of Tirana at around 1 million, owing to illegal home construction.

As a consequence of the fragmented state structure, the "swollen head" phenomenon, i.e. where the spatial pattern of a country is dominated by a big city, usually the capital, has

become more evident. Accordingly, 35.2% of the urban population of Macedonia live in Skopje, and a similarly high proportion of the urban populations of Bosnia, Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia and Albania live in Sarajevo (29.4%), Ljubljana (26.8%), Belgrade (26.8%), Zagreb (25.4%) and Tirana (24.8%). Exceptions to this are Romania and Bulgaria, where the capital is counterbalanced by a sufficient number of countryside cities (*Table 13*).

A study of the present-day pattern of the urban network of towns shows areas void of towns due to their unfavourable geographical features, as well as the occurrence of large urban agglomerations and densely urbanised areas of industrial regions (*Figure 33*). It can also be stated that the density of towns is greater in the northern parts of the region, which used to belong to Austria-Hungary, i.e. in Slovenia, Croatia and Transylvania.