

URBAN SPRAWL AND WEAK REGIONAL TRANSPORT IN “DURANA”

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Abstract

After the fall of the communist regime, a substantial amount of residential and commercial sprawl has occurred in the Tirana metropolitan area, especially in the western and north-western side, in the direction of Durrës. The Tirana-Durrës region has become Albania's economic powerhouse. Some urban planners are now talking about the eventual fusion of Tirana and Durrës into a new metropolis called “Durana”. Notwithstanding the importance of this region as a whole, the political power is fragmented among several municipalities, with no regional coordination. The area is served by a poor-quality regional transport system, mostly based on private cars and informal minivans. This paper provides a brief overview of regional transport issues in the Tirana metropolitan area and in the Tirana-Durrës corridors. The authors argue that strengthening the regional transport system is crucial in order to ensure a healthy future economic development and a sustainable physical growth pattern in “Durana”.

1. Introduction

After the fall of the communist regime, the combination of substantial remittances from an enormous wave of emigrants, primarily to Greece and Italy, and the transformation to a market economy led to an enormous infusion of new wealth in Albania. As a result of densification and the economic transformation, inner Tirana has become a vibrant city, packed with pedestrians, new condominium and office buildings, nightlife, crowded cafés and restaurants, and shops. Due to increased wealth, car use has also exploded; the city is in a gridlock much of the day.

Residential and commercial sprawl, coupled with a poor public transport system, exacerbate traffic jams. The revitalization of the inner city happened in conjunction with the development of large retail stores along the main intercity roads and a considerable amount of informal housing construction in peripheral locations.

Sprawling squatter areas have played a major role in Tirana's development. These often very large settlements outside the City of Tirana boundaries were constructed mainly by poor migrants from the north-east of Albania, who occupied agricultural land in the city fringes. This was generally land which had been expropriated by the communist government and no longer had any residents

when the squatters arrived, but in the 1990s became subject to restitution claims which still remain largely unsettled. The land was often entirely devoid of infrastructure and had poor access to formal public transportation lines. Although outside the city's boundaries, peri-urban settlements are now an integral part of the Tirana's physical tissue. Recently the government started taking steps to legalize squatter housing.

A large majority of residential and commercial sprawl outside Tirana has occurred on the north-western side, in the direction of Durrës (a coastal city 35 km away). The Tirana-Durrës area is Albania's economic powerhouse, containing 35% of domestic enterprises, 60% of foreign investments, the country's largest markets, the only international airport, and the largest seaport. Notwithstanding the importance of this region as a whole, the political power is fragmented among several municipalities, with no regional coordination (GTZ and IOER 2002). This has facilitated sprawl as permitting requirements are lax outside the City of Tirana administrative borders. Some urban planners are now talking about the eventual fusion of Tirana and Durrës into a new metropolis called “Durana” (Fig. 1; see Dharmo 2007, Declerck 2004).



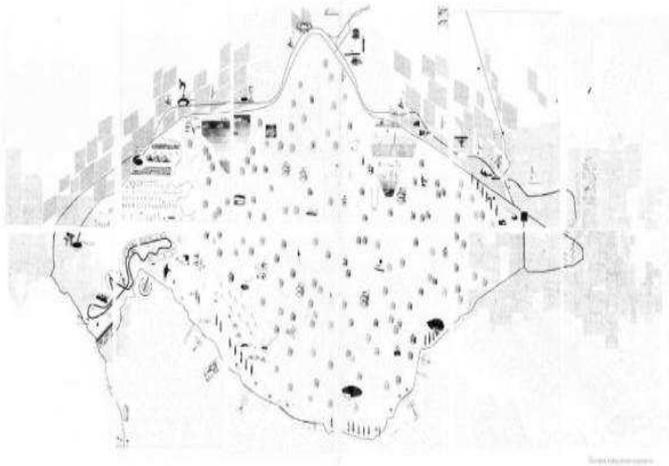


Figure 3. Mid- and long- term development in “Durana”. Green areas and recreational activities would be accommodated between the northern and the southern corridors that connect Tirana and Durrës. Source: Berlage Institute.

Sprawl has occurred despite a poor-quality regional transport system, which is mainly based on private cars and informal minivans. The mostly informal transportation services between the inner city and peri-urban areas are inefficient, uncomfortable, and costly. Suburban commercial developments are not served by any public transport. Instead, they are served in a fragmented manner by shuttle services for individual enterprises. The large shopping centers along the Tirana-Durrës highway provide either free or inexpensive private shuttle service for their customers and employees, from the city center, while also providing parking lots to accommodate a few thousand cars. Suburban restaurants and smaller stores that specialize in one type of merchandise, such as furniture depots, are only accessible by car.

The regional transport system has remained underdeveloped although Tirana is a major origin and destination point within the country.⁵¹⁵ This paper provides a brief overview of regional transport issues in the Tirana metropolitan region and in the Tirana-Durrës corridors and presents the results of a few studies in this arena. The authors argue that strengthening the regional transport system is crucial in order to ensure a healthy future economic development and a sustainable physical growth pattern in “Durana”.

The issue of regional transport in Tirana remains untackled although a number of urban plans, studies, and strategies for Tirana, which have been prepared by various Albanian and foreign consultants over the last 20 years, have dealt with the sprawl issue. In 1995, Regional Consulting, a Vienna-based urban planning firm, funded by the Austrian government, prepared a master plan for Tirana. Also in 1995, a Land Management Task Force, composed of Albanian urban planners, PADCO (a US-based consulting firm), GHK (a UK-based consulting firm), and the Graduate School of Design of Harvard University, prepared a

preliminary structure plan for the Tirana metropolitan area. This structure plan was updated by PADCO in 2002 into a Strategic Plan for Greater Tirana, which covered the metropolitan area. In 2002, two German consultants, the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the Institute of Ecological and Regional Development (IOER) compiled a regional development study for the Tirana-Durrës region. In 2007, a larger regional strategic plan for this region followed up, prepared by two UK-based firms, Landell Mills Development Consultants and Buro Happold. Two interim reports of the Tirana regulatory plan,⁵¹⁶ which was being prepared by Urbaplan, a Swiss consultant, and CoPlan, were released in 2007 and 2008 (Fig. 2).

⁵¹⁵ Interregional transit traffic does not play a major role in Tirana because other cities in central Albania act as connectors. Corridor VIII runs from Durres via Skopje to Sofia and Varna.

⁵¹⁶ The preparation of a new master plan for Tirana was under way for almost a decade and is now in the approval stages.

grade junctions where grade separation should be used, such as at the Directory of Customs roundabout), and for the fact that the highway crosses residential areas (Landell Mills and Buro Happold 2007).



Figure 6. View of big-box businesses along the Tirana-Durrës highway.

The highway is inadequate in terms of safety. There are too many junctions, including many informal entrances and exits to the wider rural network, with no merging lanes. Their lack is dangerous also because public transport vehicles, which are largely present on the highway, stop at Vorë to pick up and drop off passengers (Landell Mills and Buro Happold 2007).

The traffic volume on the highway sections is considerably below the capacity of the carriageway. High traffic speeds and aggressive driver behavior exaggerate the congestion issue. However, in future years, as motorization grows, more congestion is likely to occur on the highway. Also, the junctions are designed for a relatively low capacity standard (Landell Mills and Buro Happold 2007).⁵¹⁸

The Rinas Airport, which is the only international airport in Albania, is located 25 km from Tirana, and is also accessible through the Tirana-Durrës highway. Until 2006, due to the airport, the road to the north had significant traffic flows on it, which comprised approximately 60% of the traffic flows on the highway. In early 2007 the new road and a grade-separated junction to Rinas Airport was opened, which reduced the traffic levels at the Vorë junction to and from the Tirana direction. The design of the junction is expected to be able to accommodate at least a doubling of

current traffic demand (Landell Mills and Buro Happold 2007).

The second road to Durrës, to the southeast of Tirana is a single two-lane road, generally straight and level but with occasional sharp turns, steep hills, and many substandard access junctions. The road has a low design speed standard as it goes through small towns and villages and has no fences to prevent straying animals. The traffic flows on the route are light in comparison with the highway; they equal about a quarter of the daily highway traffic (Landell Mills and Buro Happold 2007).

Approximately 10% of the traffic comprises goods carrying vehicles, which is a high percentage for a road of this nature. This could be due to the volume of construction in the region, and contributes to the road's deterioration. 20% of all traffic comprises public transport vehicles, which serve local towns and villages but the road lacks entirely bus infrastructure, such as shelters. Traffic from the side roads is very light with the exception of the road at Kombinat, the road to Pezë; and the road to Shijak (Landell Mills and Buro Happold 2007).⁵¹⁹

These strategic intercity roads have recently been reconstructed and clearly signed and lined. However, bottlenecks are ever-present at the points where interurban roads turn into city roads. The main plans regarding intercity roads to Durrës are the re-design of junctions on the motorway and the provision of a more complete secondary road network for the highway (service roads, which are now partly complete) (Landell Mills and Buro Happold 2007).

⁵¹⁸ Buro Happold carried out traffic counts in the Tirana Durrës Region in September/October 2006 to supplement information from the Albanian National Travel Plan, in which counts were taken in 2003 and earlier. In total, manual counts of 11 junctions were undertaken on the motorway between and including Kamza junction to the west of Tirana, and the cloverleaf junction to the east of Durrës. The counts were carried out for two days at each junction for 12 hours: once on a weekday, and once on a Saturday.

⁵¹⁹ According to Buro Happold, were narrowings, sharper bends, and steeper curves to be improved, the road could be able to carry three times the current level of traffic.

3. Road-Based Regional Public Transport

Tirana is the headline and destination of the majority of road-based intercity trips in the country, many of which pass through Durrës (Fig. 5). There are more than 150 daily departures from Tirana to other cities, with about 30

departures during peak periods, and these numbers are expected to increase in the future. The Tirana-Durrës-Fier-Saranda is the main transport axis in the country, followed by the Tirana-Shkodër and the Tirana-Krrabë-Korçë axes (Politecnico di Bari 2008).

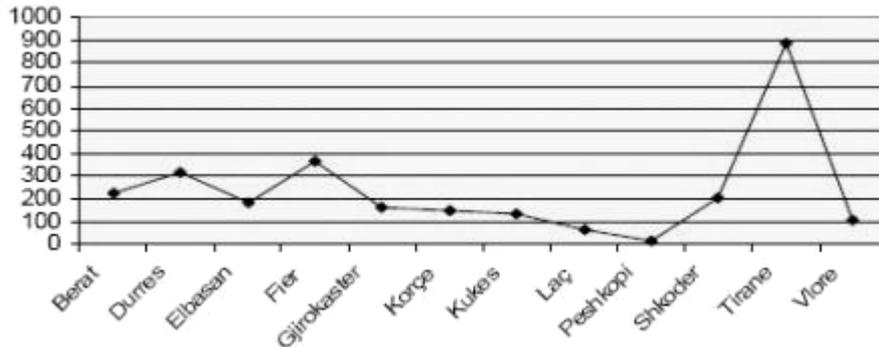


Figure 7. Distribution of intercity bus trips by destination. Source: Institute of Transport Studies.

Road-based intercity public transit service to Durrës is offered by buses and vans, which are privately owned and operated. They are not regulated, except for a licensing requirement. Intercity buses and vans do not run on regular schedules; they stand-by at a station, waiting for customers, and once full, leave to their destinations. Vehicles to Durrës depart approximately every 30 minutes.

A main issue related to intercity transport is the location of the terminal station, which has changed several times in the past two decades. Presently, some intercity vans are stationed in proximity of the train station (Fig. 6); their informal presence deteriorates the train station area and creates congestion. Another station for intercity buses is located at “Parku i Autobuzëve”; this location is easily accessible but the station area is not well designed (Fig. 7).



Figure 8. Minivan station near the rail station.



Figure 9. Intercity bus station in the inner city.

An large study by the Politecnico di Bari (2008) on the location of the intercity bus station, which took into consideration accessibility, economic, and land use issues, and the new regulatory plan of Tirana, proposed that the

new station be near the rail station (Fig. 8). This would create a multimodal node in the city, easily accessible by foot and urban public transport. A large lot is already available for this purpose near the rail station.



Figure 10. Proposed location of a large multimodal intercity bus station.

Source: Polytechnic University of Bari.

Another issue is the location of the stations for the commuter and mall customer shuttles that serve the Tirana-Durrës highway (Fig. 9, see Pojani 2011). These stations need to be distributed among several easily accessible spots, including the city center and the highway entrance, and be provided proper stations (i.e. near the roundabout at “Zogu i Zi” and at the edge of the pedestrian area that will be comprised within the Small Ring Road around Skanderbeg Square.



Figure 11. The numerous and large shuttles that serve suburban businesses do not have a proper station in the center and exacerbate inner-city congestion.

4. Rail Network

Albania has a small, domestic rail network, which comprises 447 km of main lines and 230 km of secondary lines. The construction of the current passenger network started in 1947 and came to an end in 1987. Most of the rail tracks run through the western, flat part of the country.⁵²⁰ Durrës rather than Tirana is the country's main rail hub (Fig. 60).

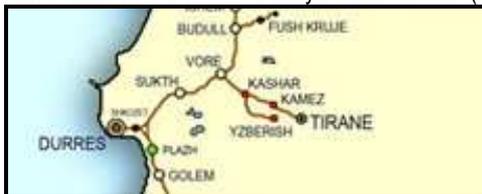


Figure 12. Rail network in the Tirana-Durrës region.

The railway played the main role in intercity passenger and freight transport during communism. Today, railroads account for 1% of passenger travel in Albania as a whole (World Bank 2004). In Tirana, by 2000, trains were used in only 2% of inbound and outbound trips carrying just 2,700 weekday passengers compared to almost 130,000 people leaving and departing the city by road. The railroad, which is unprofitably administered by a state-owned enterprise, is unable to compete for customers with road-based transport in terms of service, speed, and comfort (T.E.C.N.I.C. and Transurb 2000). The Tirana-Durrës line is the most heavily used, with nine trains leaving daily; there are only two trains per day to all the other destinations. The number of employees that commute daily between Tirana and Durrës has substantially increased in the last decade.

While travel by train is inexpensive,⁵²¹ most of the rolling stock is in a dilapidated state. The system uses second-hand passenger cars, donated or sold by other European countries, including Germany, Italy, Austria, and Poland. The entire network is non-electrified and runs on a single-track, with bypassing tracks at various points throughout the system. Trains are pulled by old Czechoslovak diesel electric locomotives (Fig. 11). The maximum operating

speed is 80 km per hour. However, train trips are typically more than twice as lengthy as car trips to Durrës.

The railway station is located north of the city, about 900m from the center (Fig. 12). Two urban bus lines have stops next to the station. There are no park-and-ride facilities near the station. The rail company does not own a parking lot or garage, although there are unbuilt lots flanking the station, which have been taken over by informal vendors.

The station's location has long been a matter of debate among professionals. Proposals to move it farther from the center, in order to relieve congestion, have so far been dismissed as too expensive. In 2003, a revitalization plan was approved for the center, designed by French Architecture Studio, which envisioned the transformation of the existing dilapidated station into a high tech building (Fig. 13). This plan has not been implemented yet and the City is currently considering other proposals.



Figure 13. Old train engines from Czechoslovakia, still in use by the Albanian railroad.



Figure 14. Existing train station.

⁵²⁰ See Hekurudha Shqiptare webpage: <http://www.hsh.com.al/> Accessed on June 13, 2007.

⁵²¹ Discounted monthly passes are offered for commuting students from Durrës.



Figure 15. Train station remodel proposed in 2003 by French Architecture Studio.

5. Conclusion

A large amount of urban sprawl has become evident in the last two decades in the Tirana metropolitan region, especially in the direction of Durrës. A considerable portion of the current population of Tirana lives in peri-urban settlements, patronizes suburban commercial facilities, which offer amenities that central city retail cannot replicate, and/or is employed by suburban businesses with poor public transport accessibility. Peri-urban settlements are served by a few formal public buses and efficient but dilapidated informal minivans. Several suburban businesses provide private shuttle services for their customers and

employees; these services are costly and their road space usage is inefficient. Most customers and many employees reach these locations by car, contributing to traffic jams.

In theory policies and/or laws could be enacted that prevent further construction outside a certain perimeter, in the manner of an imaginary city boundary line or a green belt, instead of planning for a fused Durana metropolis. But many planners argue that such policies might be very difficult to enforce, politically unacceptable in Tirana's context, and detrimental to the city's fragile economy.

Existing suburban developments are too large to be undone. Under these circumstances, a feasible policy would be to stir the demand for suburban residential and commercial spaces in already developed suburban nodes, such as along the highway to Durrës. With increased density in these areas, public transport services might become financially viable. Public transport will most likely be road-based, due to financial constraints, although there have been past proposals for the creation of a suburban light rail line. Alternatively, the City could regulate the shuttle services provided by suburban companies, including the establishment of routes and stops. Efforts to better integrate suburban development into the existing city fabric should be complemented with policies to further strengthen the central city by providing a pleasant urban environment for its residents.

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