

# FORMS, AREAS, AND SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERMUNICIPAL COOPERATION IN THE LJUBLJANA URBAN REGION

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ALEŠ SMREKAR

Ljubljana Marsh Nature Park extends across seven municipalities and promotes their cooperation.

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## **Forms, areas, and spatial characteristics of intermunicipal cooperation in the Ljubljana Urban Region**

**ABSTRACT:** This article studies the strength, forms, and areas of intermunicipal cooperation, and their advantages, disadvantages, and spatial characteristics based on the example of the Ljubljana urban region. Surveys, interviews, data analysis of joint administration and joint companies, and analysis of joint development projects show that cooperation in joint municipal administration is limited to parking authorities and the intermunicipal inspectorate, joint companies dealing with communal infrastructure and traffic, and joint projects mainly focusing on economic infrastructure, tourism, mobility, spatial and development planning, and applying for EU projects. The areas of former municipalities, the municipalities in Ljubljana Marsh Nature Park, and the municipalities that are part of the Development Partnership of the Center of Slovenia connect more often than other areas. The advantages of cooperation include better opportunities for EU funding, economizing, and joint representation of municipal interests, whereas disadvantages include problems with coordinating funding and a lengthy coordination period, which is additionally hindered by unsuitable legislation and a lack of financial incentives, human resources, time, and ideas.

**KEY WORDS:** geography, local government, functional region, intermunicipal cooperation, joint municipal administration, Ljubljana urban region, Slovenia

## **Oblike, področja in prostorske značilnosti medobčinskega sodelovanja v Ljubljanski urbani regiji**

**POVZETEK:** Namen prispevka je na primeru Ljubljanske urbane regije preučiti jakost, oblike in področja medobčinskega sodelovanja ter njegove prednosti, pomanjkljivosti in prostorske značilnosti. Sodelovanje v skupnih občinskih upravah je omejeno na področje redarstva in medobčinske inšpekcije. To smo ugotovili z anketami, intervjuji, analizo podatkov o skupnih občinskih upravah in skupnih podjetjih ter analizo skupnih razvojnih projektov. Skupna podjetja opravljajo naloge s področja komunale in prometa, do projektne sodelovanja pa prihaja na področjih gospodarske infrastrukture, turizma, mobilnosti, prostorskega in razvojnega načrtovanja ter prijav na evropske projekte. Povezujejo se zlasti območja nekdanjih občin, občine v Krajinskem parku Ljubljansko Barje in občine, ki tvorijo Razvojno partnerstvo središča Slovenije. Prednosti sodelovanja so večja možnost kandidiranja za evropska sredstva, racionalizacija stroškov in skupno zastopanje občinskih interesov, slabosti pa težave pri usklajevanju financiranja in dolgotrajnost usklajevanja, kar dodatno ovirajo neustrezna zakonodaja ter pomanjkanje finančnih spodbud, kadrov, časa in idej.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** geografija, lokalna samouprava, funkcijska regija, medobčinsko sodelovanje, skupna občinska uprava, Ljubljanska urbana regija, Slovenija

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# 1 Introduction

Various development processes (Figure 1) are transforming territory into increasingly more complex and dynamic spatial units that are not limited to a specific area, but connect or divide the space of flows into logical, functionally connected units (Tomaney and Ward 2000) known as functional areas. These often extend across multiple administrative areas, such as municipalities, regions, and countries, which leads to tension and problems in planning their development (Karlsson and Olsson 2006). In order to solve these problems, the administrative areas need to cooperate because only then can a new and efficient form of governance be established – one that ensures social ties and reduces economic disparities and social ostracism (Drobne, Konjar and Lisec 2011).

The cooperation of administrative areas is especially important at the local level because various functions (e.g., labor, supply, and residence) demand different functional areas (Kokole 1971) that transcend administrative borders. In the past twenty years, there has been significant improvement in the development of various forms of cooperation that have contributed to more efficient public services and solutions, especially at the local level (Hulst et al. 2009). In Europe, predominantly four different strategies are used to deal with pressures on municipalities that are the consequence of development, increased production, social and economic processes, and the impact of markets (Hulst and Van Montfort 2007):

- Territorial reform: merging municipalities into larger local administrative units (e.g., in the UK, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Sweden);
- Operational and autonomous restrictions imposed on municipalities or reallocation of responsibility among different levels of administration (e.g., in France and the Netherlands);
- The inclusion of private and public organizations in carrying out public tasks;
- Intermunicipal cooperation that includes arrangements between municipalities, groups of municipalities and municipal bodies, and agencies at different levels of government as well as the municipalities and the private sector.

There are several forms of intermunicipal cooperation, such as cooperation with one joint task, multipurpose cooperation, joint consultation, joint intermunicipal agencies, or cooperation between a smaller

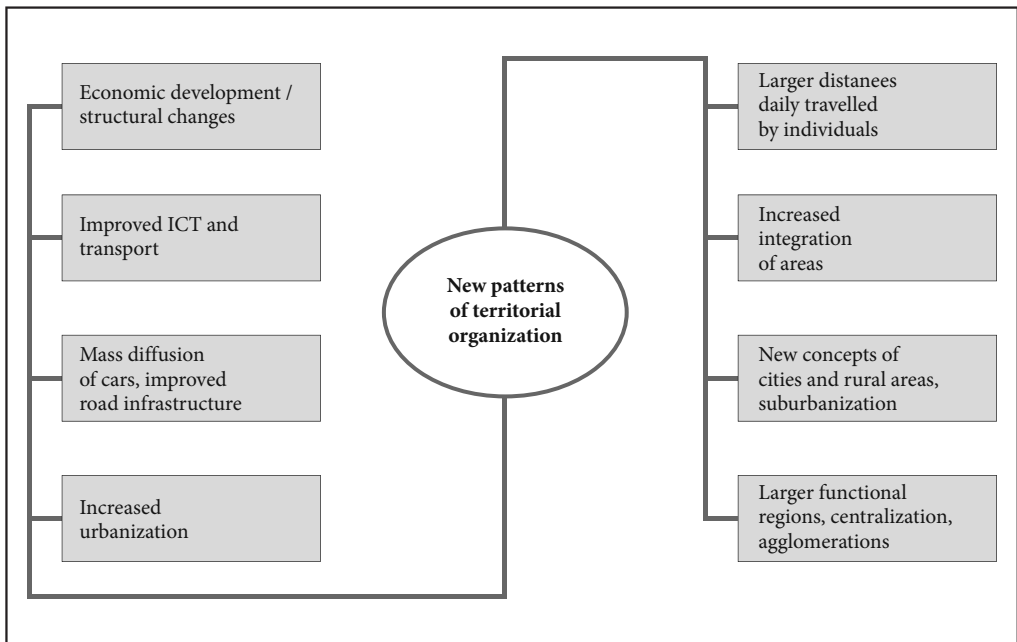


Figure 1: Processes impacting spatial transformation in recent decades (Veneri 2013).

number of municipalities, a larger number of municipalities, different territorial levels, the private sector, and upper levels of authorities. Cooperation may be statutory or informal, but always with the purpose of addressing the challenges that surpass the borders of municipalities, while remaining within their responsibility and controlling the policies and tasks. European governments encourage intermunicipal cooperation because it combines two important values of European government systems: local self-government and rational governance (Hulst and Van Montfort 2007).

Three main intermunicipal cooperation models have been developed in European countries: a highly formalized model with a clear formal legal structure, a flexible model with pragmatic connections between autonomous municipalities, and a combined model, which is common in the majority of the countries with established intermunicipal cooperation (Žohar 2010).

Governance of functionally connected areas in Slovenia is especially challenging because regional government has not been established. Regional development is therefore the responsibility of the national and local levels; the council for regional development is responsible for the program level, decisions are made by the mayors from all the municipalities of the region on the regional council, and regional development agencies are responsible for carrying out regional development programs. Even though these institutions should act as coordinators of regional interests, in the past the decisions were often influenced by the mayors' considerable influence and were thus based on local interests (Nared 2004, 2007).

Examples from abroad (Hophmayer-Tokich and Kliot 2008; Romanczyk 2015; Ioan-Franc, Ristea and Popescu 2015; Pöldnirk 2015; Pérez-López et al. 2016) and from Slovenia (Marot 2010) show that the governance of functionally connected areas is more successful when there is cooperation between authorities. This is especially true for Slovenia because of its small size and its human resources and financial limitations, which could be solved through various forms of intermunicipal cooperation. This article studies the Ljubljana urban region and establishes how municipalities are connected. It focuses on finding answers to the following research questions:

- How is intermunicipal cooperation organized?
- What are the areas of intermunicipal cooperation?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of cooperation?
- Which Ljubljana urban region areas stand out in intermunicipal cooperation?

There are twenty-six municipalities in the Ljubljana urban region. It is an extremely centralized and attractive environment for investment and development (Ravbar 2009, 2011). Ljubljana's rapid development, which is reflected in investments, the labor market, and residents' mobility (Ravbar 2009; Bole 2011; Bole et al. 2012; Gabrovec and Razpotnik Visković 2012), was followed by suburbanization (Nared 2007; Nared et al. 2012). This creates new challenges mainly for sustainable spatial planning because the region is increasingly functionally connected.

The research was conducted at the municipal level. The term »functional area« is used for municipalities that form connections based on common goals and challenges.

## 2 Methods

Analysis of intermunicipal cooperation in the Ljubljana urban region was conducted with a survey, interviews, project proposal analysis, and analysis of the joint municipal administrations and companies (Table 1). Joint companies are public companies with joint management authority owned by municipalities, and public or private companies that cooperate with several municipalities.

Table 1: Methods used by research question

Research question	Survey	Interview	Project proposal analysis	Institution analysis
How is intermunicipal cooperation organized?	x	x		x
Which are the areas of intermunicipal cooperation?	x	x	x	x
What are the advantages and disadvantages of cooperation?	x	x		
Which Ljubljana urban region areas stand out in intermunicipal cooperation?	x	x	x	x

## 2.1 Survey and interviews

In the first half of 2014, a survey on intermunicipal cooperation was conducted in the municipalities of Ljubljana urban region, followed by interviews with municipal officials in May 2015. Seventeen electronically completed survey forms (corresponding to 65% of municipalities) were received from municipal officials (i.e., mayors, directors of municipal authorities, and advisors). Because of the low number of forms completed, twenty additional interviews (corresponding to 77% of municipalities) were conducted with mainly mayors and directors of municipal authorities to complement the data. It was decided to conduct interviews because of the scale and complexity of the functional areas, and to efficiently complement the survey data.

## 2.2 Project proposal analysis

The priority projects described in three regional development programs of the Ljubljana urban region (Regionalni ... 2002; Regionalni ... 2007; Regionalni ... 2015; Izvedbeni ... 2007; Izvedbeni ... 2011; Izvedbeni ... 2012; Izvedbeni ... 2014) also indicate intermunicipal cooperation. All of the project proposals that involve more than one municipality and clearly define the municipalities involved (111 projects) were included. For analyzing the cooperation area, twenty-seven projects were included (regional projects that involve all municipalities were excluded from this).

## 2.3 Joint municipal administration and joint company analysis

The joint municipal administration analysis was conducted based on the list of joint municipal administrations for 2016, published on the Ministry of Public Administration website, providing all data about the head municipality, founding municipalities, goals, and areas of work by joint municipal authorities (Skupne ... 2016). Information on the characteristics of joint companies, the municipal bodies, and the area was collected from their webpages (Internet 1–12).

# 3 Results

## 3.1 Organizational forms of intermunicipal cooperation

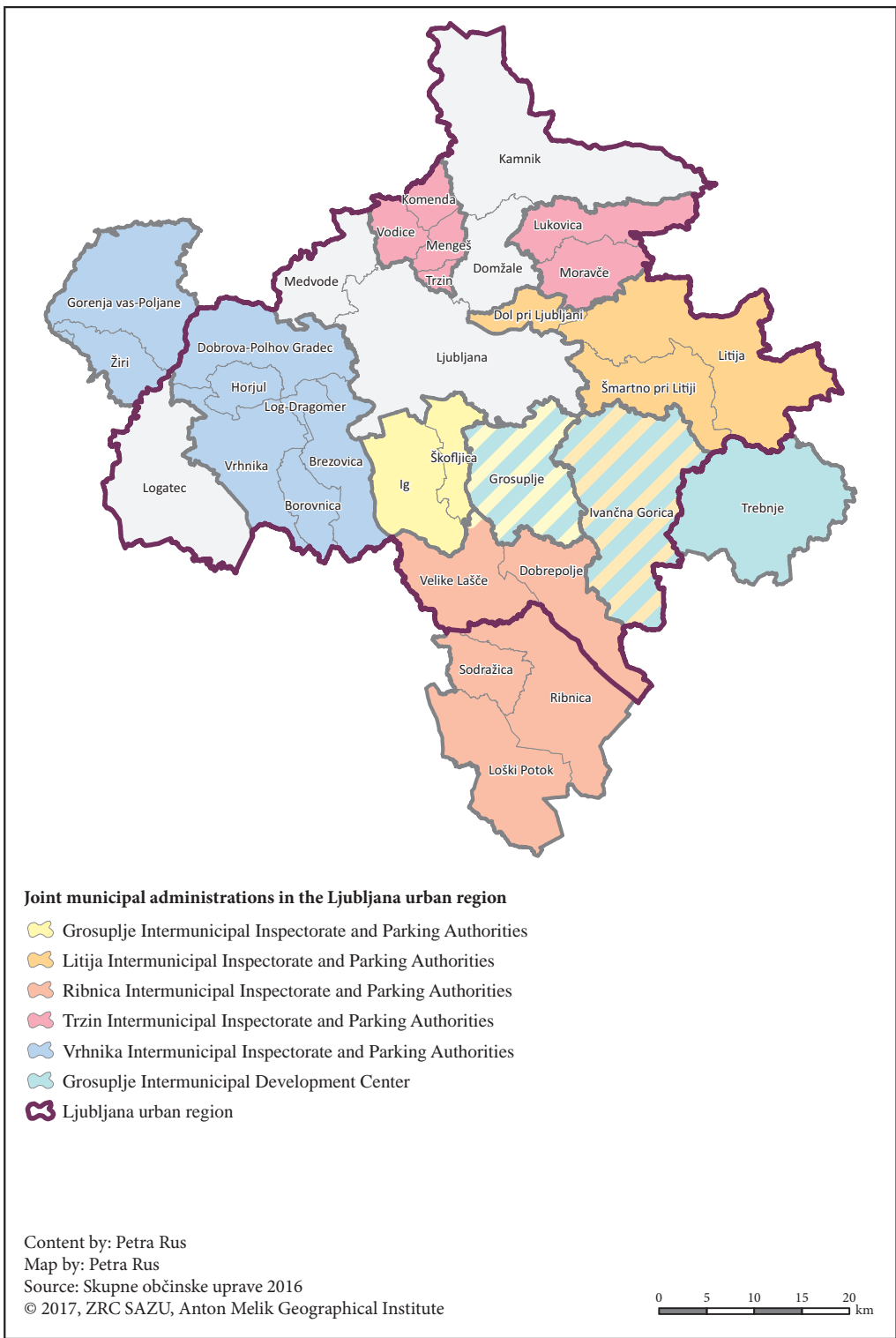
The joint governance of municipal tasks that by their nature surpass the municipality's borders can be informal, contractual, or institutionalized; in Slovenia, this encompasses joint municipal authority bodies, bodies of joint management of public institutes, public companies, public funds and public agencies, and interested municipal associations (Zakon ... 2007).

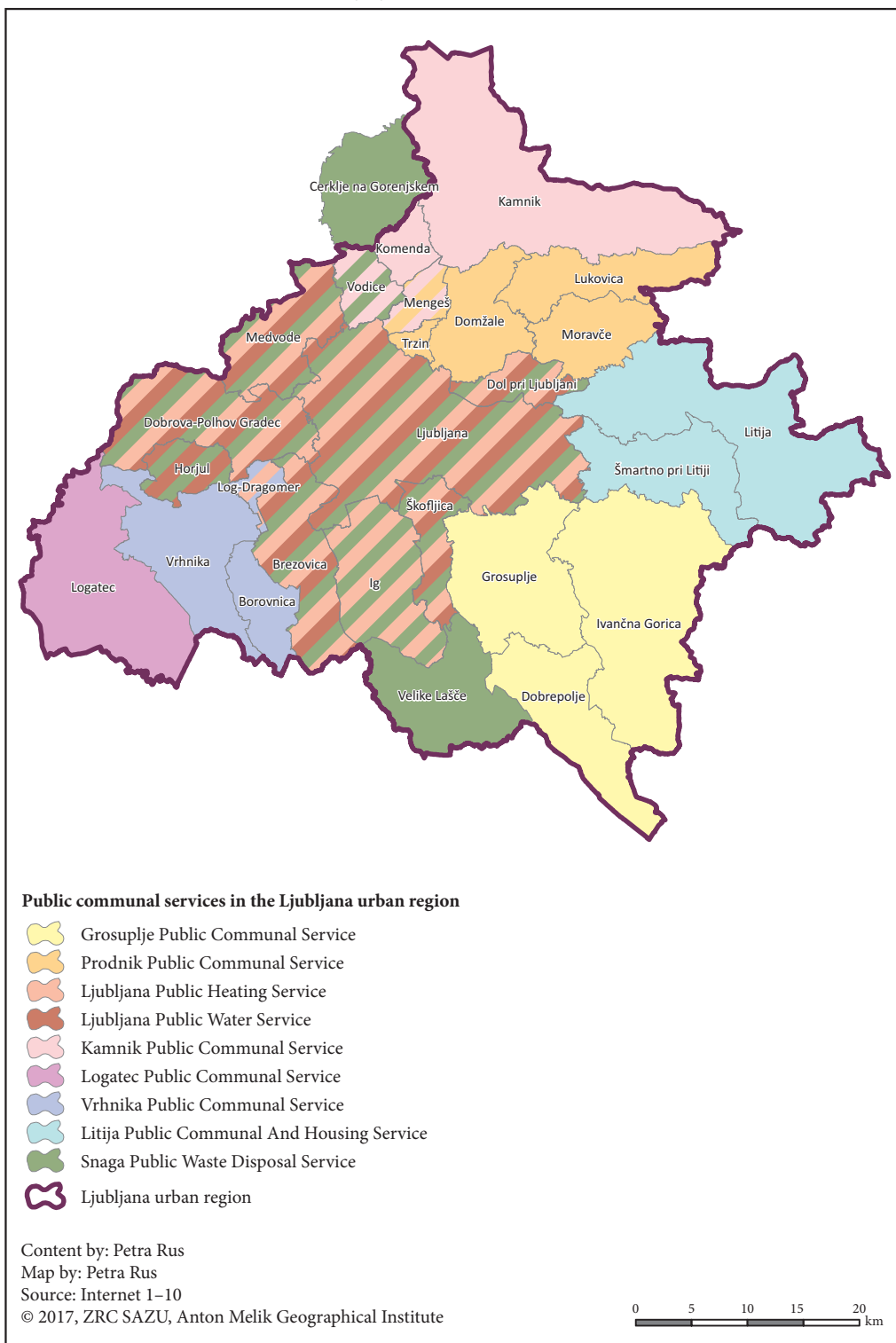
Twenty-one municipalities are connected in six joint intermunicipal administrations in the Ljubljana urban region. Five larger municipalities – Ljubljana, Kamnik, Domžale, Medvode, and Logatec – are not connected to any joint intermunicipal administration as they have sufficient funding and staff to manage municipal tasks independently, or they outsource certain tasks; for example, to public companies. The municipalities of Ivančna Gorica and Grosuplje are connected into two joint municipal administrations because, in addition to the existing intermunicipal inspectorate and parking authorities, the Grosuplje, Ivančna Gorica, and Trebnje Intermunicipal Development Center was established in 2016. Its task is to monitor calls for tenders, spatial maintenance, environment preservation, and preparing projects for applying for EU and other funds.

The key flaw of joint municipal administrations in the Ljubljana urban region is that they are limited only to an intermunicipal inspectorate and parking authorities, with the exception of the Grosuplje Intermunicipal Development Center. Elsewhere in Slovenia, they are also active in the environment and road maintenance, spatial planning, environmental conservation, applying for projects for Slovenian or EU funding, financial and accounting services, civil protection, and fire safety.

Figure 2: Joint municipal administration in the Ljubljana urban region. ► p. 52

Figure 3: Municipalities connected in communal services. ► p. 53





The Ljubljana urban region's municipalities are also connected through joint companies. They cooperate especially closely in communal services (there are eight companies serving twenty-five municipalities), and these companies share municipalities that were formerly part of the same municipality before the local government reform (Figure 3).

Examples of such intermunicipal cooperation operating in an area wider than that of the former municipality are the Ljubljana Public Transport company (LPP), which provides public transport in the municipality of Ljubljana and sixteen suburban municipalities, and the Ljubljana Regional Waste Management Center (RCERO), the largest environmental cohesion project in the country, processing waste for one-third of the Slovenia (including thirty-seven municipalities).

The municipalities are satisfied with the work of joint municipal administrations, and they also support other intermunicipal organizations such as local action groups, the regional tourism organization, joint projects, and informal meetings. All but one of the municipalities support voluntary intermunicipal cooperation based on their wishes and needs, and they do not want their cooperation to be defined by law.

### 3.2 Areas of intermunicipal cooperation

When considering all of the proposed projects in the three regional development programs in the Ljubljana urban region, the cooperation between the municipalities in the Ljubljana urban region is the closest in entrepreneurship (e.g., an entrepreneurship training program, access points for business registration and taxation, and a regional scholarship scheme) and economic infrastructure, where the number of such projects increased especially after 2014 (five for 2002–2006, seven for 2007–2013, and fourteen for 2014–2020). Next are sustainable mobility (seventeen), communal infrastructure (fifteen), spatial planning (seven), and promoting regional cooperation (six).

The respondents emphasized tourism as important part of intermunicipal cooperation. For example, the municipalities and the public company Ljubljana Tourism cooperated to prepare Slovenian tourism development and a marketing strategy for the Central Slovenia region for 2012–2016 (Strategija ... 2011). The benefits of municipalities' cooperation with the capital was emphasized in the strategy. In tourism, the local action group for the Ljubljana Marsh and surroundings, which includes the municipalities of Borovnica, Brezovica, Dobrova–Polhov Gradec, Horjul, Log–Dragomer, and Vrhnika, was mentioned because of the tourism potential due to the proximity to the capital and interesting geographical features (i.e., the Ljubljana Marsh and Ljubljanica River). The respondents also emphasized communal services and traffic. In the future, they would like to see more cooperation in spatial management, tourism, an intermunicipal public defender's office, waste management, traffic, watercourse management, elementary and preschool education, and applying for projects and EU funding.

### 3.3 Advantages and disadvantages of intermunicipal cooperation

The main advantages of intermunicipal cooperation are forming a larger functional area and better opportunities for EU funding, economizing, and the opportunity to present a unified front in municipal interests. Among the disadvantages, the respondents emphasized problems with funding coordination, completing the more complex goals and problems with human resources, and a long period needed to complete the tasks. As the most significant obstacle to more efficient intermunicipal cooperation, the municipalities cite a lack of financial incentives, unsuitable legislation, and lack of human resources, time, and ideas.

Regarding funding for intermunicipal cooperation, the largest amount of funding is provided by the municipalities involved. EU funding, however, is much more important than Slovenian funding.

The smaller and more recently created municipalities are fighting for their independence and against an unequal position compared to larger municipalities. Even though they are aware of the importance of cooperation, they want to prove their ability to be independent and thus justify their existence (e.g., Šmartno pri Litiji, Horjul, Borovnica, and Log–Dragomer). The larger municipalities could increase their cooperation with the smaller municipalities. The belief that a municipality can best take care of itself is still prevalent. The mayor's party affiliation is still an important factor in intermunicipal cooperation.



### 3.4 Areas of more significant intermunicipal cooperation

Functionally connected areas were classified according to whether they participated in the proposed projects (Figure 4). The municipalities in the southwest part of the Ljubljana urban region (Borovnica, Brezovica, Vrhnika, and Ig) are the most closely connected. Regarding the frequency of participating in the proposed projects, on a slightly smaller scale, Ljubljana and Škofljica participate as well. Close cooperation is also noted in the northern part of the region, expanding across the municipalities of Kamnik, Domžale, and Trzin. These municipalities also cooperate with the municipality of Litija and the municipalities in between. The municipalities of Horjul and Dobrova–Polhov Gradec cooperate with Brezovica, Ig, and Borovnica in the southeast and with Vodice and Medvode in the north. In the southeast, the municipalities of Grosuplje and Ivančna Gorica cooperate in five joint projects. Ljubljana also participates in the proposed projects; it most often cooperates with the municipalities of Borovnica, Vrhnika, Brezovica, and Kamnik.

## 4 Discussion

Even though willingness has been expressed to establish regions in Slovenia and to decrease the number of municipalities, they still remain the only level of local government. Because the municipalities are mainly small and scattered, and lack finances and human resources (Nared 2004; Benkovič Krašovec 2006), they find it difficult to independently solve problems that functionally surpass their administrative borders. Therefore, it is necessary to establish different forms of intermunicipal cooperation to ensure efficient problem-solving at the supra-municipal and intermunicipal levels (examples from Finland, Sweden, Austria). Cooperation might lead to a merger of knowledge and skills, more efficient governance of interdependencies, joining of similar activities, economy of scale, acquiring more funding, and regularly addressing complex problems (Provan and Kenis 2008).

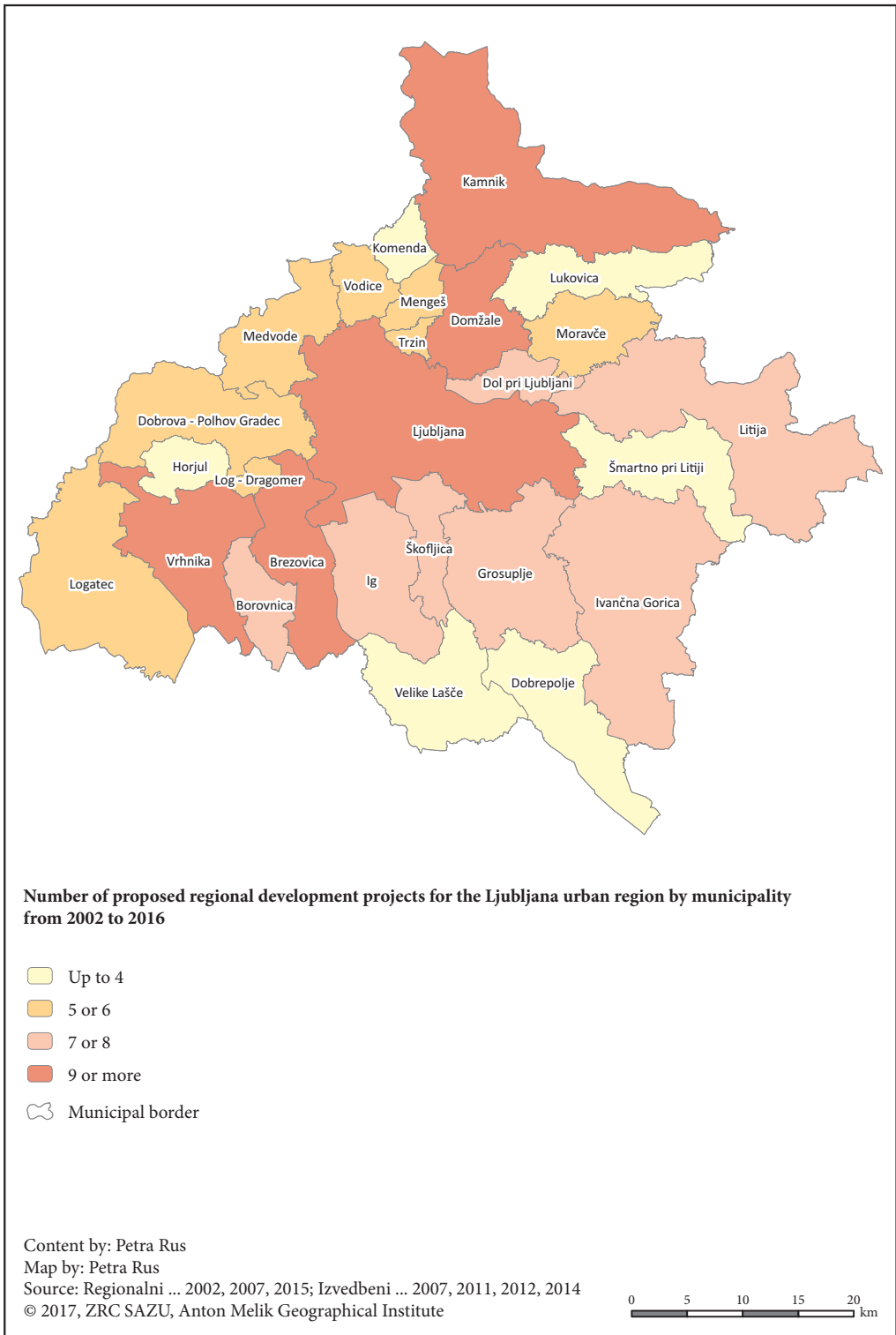
Intermunicipal cooperation could partially replace regions; however, it is a governance instrument that is not used often enough due to problems with financing joint tasks, the complexity and the amount of time needed for coordination, and the fear of losing autonomy. The municipalities could actually use intermunicipal cooperation for more efficient strategic development, project implementation, networking, and presenting a unified front. Although the majority of such networks do not have executive powers, they can still influence policies by offering suggestions, lobbying, and preparing research and programs. Their power lies in coordinating resources and goals, which leads to knowledge, interdependence, and understanding of common goals; their main disadvantage is a lack of resources and political ties (ESPON ... 2005).

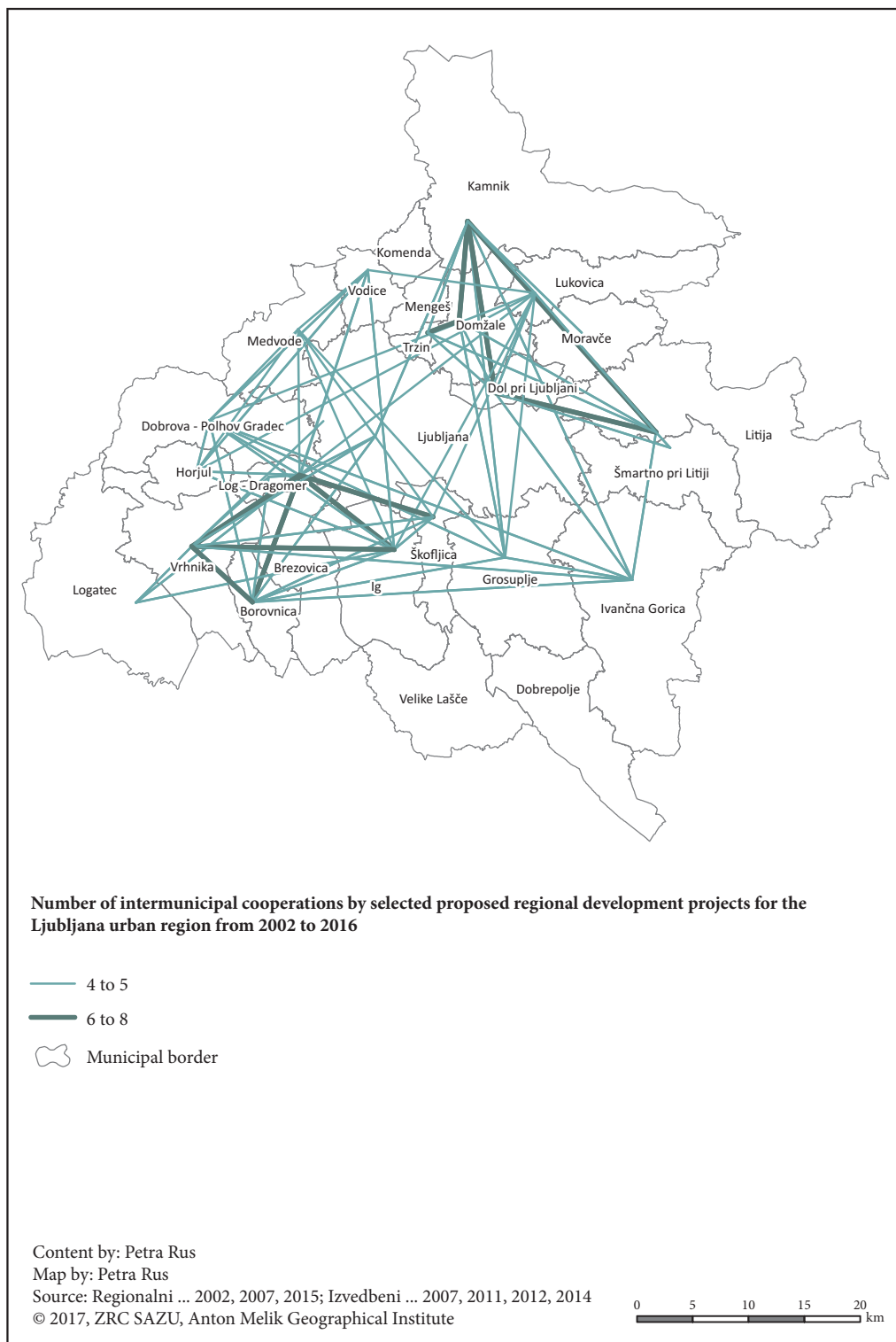
Even though the municipalities in the Ljubljana urban region are aware of the necessity for coordination and cooperation (Bole et al. 2012; Gabrovec and Razpotnik Visković 2012; Nared et al. 2012; Nared and Razpotnik Visković 2012), the intermunicipal cooperation is weak and fragmented. The municipalities mainly connect with neighboring municipalities and with those they shared a municipality with in the past and have a joint administrative unit today. They also form connections based on common geographic characteristics and challenges that come with them, such as the Ljubljana Marsh or watercourses; for example, in the project *Čista Ljubljana* (A Clean Ljubljana River). Regarding the three major European models of intermunicipal cooperation (Žohar 2010), the formalized model of intermunicipal cooperation in the Ljubljana urban region exists in the form of joint municipal administration, that, except for one, work together only in a municipal inspectorate and as parking authorities. The flexible model exists in the form of municipal bodies that manage public undertakings together, mainly public utilities. The municipalities informally cooperate within projects and groups funded by the EU (e.g., within local action groups, cohesion projects, or the regional tourism organization).

The municipalities are not yet sufficiently aware that they could effectively decrease deficits in human resources and finances, meet challenges that surpass their borders, and coordinate plans (Rus, Razpotnik Visković and Nared 2013), and they still mostly rely on themselves due to their deep-rooted lack of trust. In this, Slovenia and its most developed region lag behind more-developed European regions that are already

Figure 4: Frequency of including municipalities in intermunicipal cooperation. ► p. 56

Figure 5: Number of joint projects among municipalities by selected proposed projects for the regional development program of the Ljubljana urban region between 2002 and 2016. ► p. 57





aware of the benefits of synergetic effects and have been developing various forms of cooperation and networking. This can be seen in Finland, where there is also a two-tiered public administration; however, the missing regional level has been replaced by voluntary intermunicipal cooperation. This is the part of formal joint municipal administrations that has proved to be the most efficient and economically sensible functional approach to municipal tasks (Hämäläinen and Moisio 2015) or other forms of cooperation in the local communities such as joint municipal offices. In this case, the cooperation is organized according to the client–producer model, in which one municipality manages certain tasks for another municipality. This form is called the host municipality arrangement, whereby the clients are municipal administrations and the producers are the host municipalities (Moisio, Loikkanen and Oulasvirta 2010). The municipality also has an option to buy a certain service from the private sector. When providing services and functions, the local municipal bodies increasingly often cooperate contractually, mainly in waste management, water supply, rescue services, building inspection, consumer and debt advising, and education (Moisio, Loikkanen and Oulasvirta 2010). Similar solutions in intermunicipal cooperation are also characteristic for Sweden (Nared and Razpotnik Visković 2012).

The formal model of cooperation in the Ljubljana urban region is limited to joint parking authorities and an inspectorate, apart from one case in which municipalities also cooperate in following calls for tenders, spatial management, environment protection, and preparing projects to apply for funding. With joint companies and through projects, the municipalities cooperate in communal services, business and economic infrastructure, mobility, and spatial and development planning. In addition to the established areas, there are several other areas where cooperation would be beneficial, such as spatial management, tourism, an intermunicipal public defender's office, waste management, traffic, watercourse management, elementary education and preschool, project application, and obtaining EU funding. Although there is variation in the duties of municipal authorities in different countries, international researchers have also noticed closer intermunicipal cooperation, especially in communal services (Hophmayer-Tokich and Kliot 2008; Pöldnirk 2015; Pérez-López et al. 2016) and joint spatial and development planning (Ioan-Franc, Ristea and Popescu 2015; Romanczyk 2015).

The areas of closer cooperation show the importance of institutionalizing cooperation (Kušar 2010, 2011), which has become apparent in the closer cooperation of the municipalities in Ljubljana Marsh Nature Park and the Development Partnership of the Center of Slovenia, and also partially in the path-dependent development (Martin and Sunley 2006; Bristow and Healy 2014) that is seen in the closer cooperation of those municipalities that were formerly in the same municipality.

## 5 Conclusion

This article studied the strength and forms of intermunicipal cooperation, areas of intermunicipal cooperation, and their advantages, disadvantages, and spatial characteristics based on the example of the Ljubljana urban region.

The surveys, interviews, analysis of available data for joint municipal administration and joint companies, and analysis of joint proposed development projects show that intermunicipal cooperation in the Ljubljana urban region is still weak. The municipalities mainly cooperate in their parking authorities and intermunicipal inspectorate, communal infrastructure, business and economic infrastructure, tourism, and mobility, and to some extent in spatial and development planning. Joint applications for European projects are also an important aspect of intermunicipal cooperation.

The areas of intermunicipal cooperation indicate the importance of institutional connections because intermunicipal cooperation is the closest in the area of Ljubljana Marsh Nature Park and in the municipalities connected by the Development Partnership of the Center of Slovenia. Another important aspect of cooperation is its path-dependent character, which is apparent from the closer cooperation of the municipalities that once belonged to the same municipality.

It seems it is unlikely that the municipalities will join and form regions, and therefore intermunicipal cooperation is an important instrument that could be better used in the future. Its importance is indicated by spatial legislation reform (Zakon ... 2016) and the target research project Model of Joint Physical and Development Planning at the Regional Level (Model ... 2016). Slovenia will have to reevaluate the municipalities' tasks and organizational forms of intermunicipal cooperation, and also consider defining these by law, especially in cases when intermunicipal cooperation is necessary for solving shared problems.

The combination of municipal services, joint intermunicipal tasks and contractual/project work could provide municipalities with an opportunity to find a solution for economy of scale and services that surpass administrative borders, and thus add to more flexible and cost efficient governance. These can be further improved and encouraged by suitable legislation and financial incentives that will make the current advantages of intermunicipal cooperation even more convincing.

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