

Research Article

Urban Plurality Without Polycentricity: A Cross-Dimensional Analysis of Albania's Deviation from the Polycentric Urban Region Model

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Abstract

The topic of polycentricity remains dominant in European urban planning discussions; however, previous studies have focused only on larger, wealthier, and administratively divided metropolitan areas. There has been little research conducted to date exploring the dynamics of the failed emergence of polycentricity in small-scale, centralized, and newly urbanized countries. This article will fill the void by analyzing the Albanian case. Rather than applying the European approach to testing, the Polycentric Urban Region concept will serve as a theoretical framework for analysis across six aspects: plurality of centers, complementarity, inter-urban relationships, hierarchy, coordination, and matching scales. Based on three propositions, qualitative analysis will be undertaken through three periods of Albanian politics. According to the findings, morphological plurality can be observed in Albania, but not functional polycentricity, as metropolitan primacy, lack of differentiation, radial connections, fragmented governance, and scalar mismatches maintain the stable monocentric order. Two terms will be introduced as outcomes of the study: structural scalar lock-in and pseudo-polycentric equilibrium. Comparative assessment with Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia supports the hypothesis.

Keywords: Polycentric Urban Regions; Late-Urbanizing States; Urban Plurality Without Polycentricity; Pseudo-Polycentric Equilibrium; Structural Scalar Lock-In; Functional-Institutional Mismatch; Albania; Western Balkans.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'polycentricity' has emerged as one of the most hotly debated concepts in urban and regional studies today. Evolved from the descriptive understanding of the spatial organizational form, the polycentric urban region (PUR) has been increasingly embraced within the European

spatial planning tradition as the normative ideal of territorial coherence and equilibrium [1–3]. Following its incorporation into EU spatial policy, particularly under the rubric of the European Spatial Development Perspective, subsequent territorial policy programs and cohesion instruments, the concept has functioned both analytically and politically/spatially [4–8]. In the two-fold capacity of being conceptual and ideological at the same time, polycentricity tends to be defined in terms of functional interdependence, relative connectivity, moderated hierarchy, and multi-level governance [9–11].

The case of Albania offers a valuable perspective for reassessing these assertions. Since the post-socialist transition, EU integration has influenced national discussions about institutions, territory, and development, and the concept of polycentricity has been introduced into the planning discourse of Albania, the process of decentralization, and the administrative-territorial reform of 2014 as an external example and a policy guide [12–14].

But it is precisely this deviation from the required prerequisites that makes the Albanian case an analytical insight. Despite the country's small size, its high population density, and relatively short distance between its urban centres, no well-defined polycentric cluster has developed, nor any system of interdependent cities. The capital city of Tirana accounts for more than one-third of Albania's total urban population, while Durrës, Shkodra, Vlora, and Korça are deficient in infrastructure, capacity, and institutional power [15,16]. In other words, Albania is characterized by urban pluralism rather than polycentricity.

Recent contributions to PUR theory have expanded the field's conceptual, methodological, and governance knowledge frontiers, notably with the emergence of the relational turn in polycentricity studies [17]; the discovery of the scalar politics of polycentric region governance [18]; and the definition of key methodological hurdles in measuring PURs [11]. Nevertheless, these theoretical innovations have emerged mainly in relation to metropolitan spaces where there exists a minimum threshold of integration, interactions among urban centres, and dense regional governance. What has not yet been theorized, however, is how PUR theory works or fails to work when this baseline does not apply.

This is no mere rhetoric. There are three crucial examples from which one may draw the above statement. Firstly, authors in [3] postulates the notion that urban pluralism yields synergy only when the flows between the respective cities are mutual and consistent. This theoretical framework assumes the actual existence of flows, their measurability, and significance. Secondly, according to Parr [9], the formation of a PUR presupposes a differentiated functional distribution among the cities prior to the formation of such a network, without which the development of complementarity as a systemic characteristic is impossible. Finally, authors in [11] take yet another step by suggesting a methodological guide for detecting polycentrism, with empirical proof being required based on commuting patterns, trading linkages, and service flows significant enough to constitute networks. Table 1 provides the diagnostic application of the above preconditions in the context of Albania.

Table 1 makes the structural character of the divergence explicit: the three models fail not at the level of outcomes but at the level of analytical preconditions, which the Albanian case violates by constitution rather than by degree, placing it outside the explanatory scope of frameworks built for already-integrated urban systems.

The value of this table for diagnoses lies in its identification of the domains where current theories of PUR development do not apply in Albania, not on the output but on the precondition side. Current models consider differences within existing or partially integrated urban systems. On the contrary, they have been constructed on the idea of the opposite: the one in which inter-urban exchanges are

absent, asymmetrical, or non-existent from an analytical perspective. Instead of asking why Albania does not fit into the European picture, we should ask why the small, relatively late-urbanizing, centralized countries did not develop polycentric conurbations despite all the factors present [19–21].

Table 1. Analytical preconditions of leading PUR models and their structural violation in the Albanian case.

PUR Model	Analytical Precondition	Expected Outcome if Precondition Holds	Albanian Condition	Analytical Consequence
[3]	Reciprocal and sustained inter-urban flows between multiple centers	Plurality produces functional synergy and agglomeration benefits beyond the individual city	Flows are structurally radial toward Tirana, not circulating between nodes	Synergy is assumed, not conditional; the model cannot theorize plurality without exchange
[9]	Stable, differentiated functional profiles across cities	Specialization produces a territorial division of labor and interdependence	Differentiation outside Tirana is shallow, unstable, and converging on low-order functions	Differentiation is an input the model requires but does not explain when it fails to develop
[11]	Empirically observable functional integration through flow data	Quantitative analysis reveals the degree and structure of polycentric integration	Systematic municipal-level flow data are absent or, where present, record dependence on the metropolitan core	The methodological apparatus lacks an object of measurement — a structural absence, not a data gap

This structural non-arrival has continued even through a series of reforms to the political system and institutions, rather than dissipating through them. Instead of questioning the degree to which Albania can be considered a European case, this paper seeks to analyse the structural reproduction of Albania's deviation from the PUR configuration along six inter-related dimensions: plurality of urban centres, functional complementarity, trade and labour mobility connectivity, relative hierarchy, institutional coordination, and scale compatibility between functional and administrative scales [3, 7]. Rather than viewing Albania as a country that has failed to achieve a proper transition to polycentrism, or has failed to meet the expectations of the European spatial model, the paper views Albania as structurally reproduced in such a way that there is urban plurality [12, 14], but a relational insubstantiality wherein there are no functional synergetic relations, insufficient population, or institutional relevance among secondary cities, and decisions, investments, and activities all tend towards a metropolitan centre [22, 23].

These gaps have been explored in the paper using the following three analytical propositions, formulated with reference to the literature on PUR.

- Proposition 1. Where there is no differentiation of functions among cities and no interaction between them, morphological diversity leads to functional monocentric rather than functional polycentrism.
- Proposition 2. Where urban interactions occur at a level between or above the local level, where no institutional space of action is available, reforms of governance that shift control upwards to the state or downwards to municipalities reproduce scalar mismatches.
- Proposition 3. In cases of scalar mismatches and poor coordination of cities, infrastructure investment, decentralization, and Europeanization will contribute more to metropolitan dominance than to regional development.

This is done using a characteristic-oriented ideal-typical analysis of the propositions within the political period in which they were formulated, while avoiding regime determinism [24, 25]. This process repeats for each synthesis at the dimension level, and the cross-dimensional analysis in Section 9 considers their cumulative evidential value. The Albanian case is not used to demonstrate conformance with a prescriptive ideal but to understand the theoretical boundaries of PUR theory when the relational prerequisites of polycentricity are weak across the whole [9, 26, 27].

This article proceeds as follows. It first outlines the analytical framework, then examines the six dimensions in turn, before discussing the results of the cross-dimensional analysis and their theoretical implications. It subsequently situates the Albanian case within a comparative Western Balkan perspective and concludes with the main findings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE POLYCENTRIC URBAN REGION AS AN ANALYTICAL MODEL

From Monocentric City to Polycentric Urban Region

Urban theory had traditionally relied on a monocentric concept to study city systems, whereby the spatial structure of cities followed a hierarchical pattern determined by markets and a centre-periphery model [28–30]. Traditional theories such as central place theory and spatial economics depicted city systems as hierarchical, with higher centres organizing subordinate ones.

These concepts were increasingly found insufficient in the decades after World War II, due to increased mobility and transport networks linking cities into a network of interdependencies that extended beyond the boundaries of the city proper [31–33]. The focus of the studies moved from viewing the city as an isolated location to viewing it as a node within an interconnected system of other cities.

Indeed, during this transition, the concept of the polycentric urban region (PUR) came to replace a morphological with a relational conception of urban geography. In PUR conception the urban system ceased being described in terms of hierarchy of centres, but came to be seen as a system of centres connected by functional relationships in which hierarchical differences were relative, achieved through specialization, complementarity, and interactivity at a larger territorial scale [34–36]. So, instead of abolishing hierarchy, polycentricity reconfigured it, keeping unchanged the size and weight of each centre and enabling operation of same-ranked urban systems by functional specialization, instead of rationalization [23, 37, 38].

This analytical framework was gradually turned into a policy prescription in the EU context through the development of the ESDP, followed by discussions around Territorial Agendas and cohesion policies [2, 6, 39]. Yet all such prescriptions depended on a set of rather challenging assumptions about functional integration, institutional capacities, and trans-scale governance [23, 40].

The Polycentric Urban Region: An Operational Definition

In addition to its normative application, the PUR should be understood as a relational conceptual abstraction rather than a preconceived physical entity. It is neither a phase in the development of urban systems nor a structure that is used for economic, social, and functional interactions [1, 3, 9, 41]. The existence of more than one urban pole does not indicate the emergence of polycentricity; polycentricity arises only when these poles are connected through interdependencies [11, 42].

The most important contribution of the existing literature lies in differentiating between morphological and functional polycentrism. The dispersed distribution of cities indicates the presence of several centres of urban growth, but it does not ensure the systematic integration of the entire structure. The thing that drives the relational integration of an urban system is the flow of labour, services, capital, and decision-making between urban centres [37, 36, 43].

Polycentricity entails neither the complete abolition nor the establishment of a total hierarchy since disparities in the size and economic importance of cities do exist. It rather relativizes the hierarchy due to functional specialization and the mutual dependency of cities; otherwise, morphologically polycentric systems remain functionally monocentric [23, 35].

Indeed, polycentricism, for the purposes of this article, refers to functional territories – territories of labour markets, travel, and activities, which hardly ever coincide with institutional borders. This discrepancy, then, becomes not merely a practical question but also a theoretical problem, arising in the study of polycentric urban systems [44–46].

Core Analytical Characteristics of the Polycentric Urban Region

Six characteristics widely recognized in the literature are used here as the core conditions for assessing a PUR as polycentric.

The plurality of urban centres is the most fundamental condition; nevertheless, plurality should be conceptualized structurally rather than quantitatively. To be relevant, urban centres should work as nodes within a larger territorial system; otherwise, secondary cities have no regional roles and plurality is morphological or locational rather than relational [3, 17, 35, 47, 48].

Functional complementarity is the differentiated yet complementary roles that cities undertake in the economy, administration, and culture. Without this, cities fight over the same resources, thereby reinforcing traditional trends and accentuating them [9, 22, 40].

Connectivity and flows are also of equal importance, since functional integration cannot be achieved solely on the basis of geographical contiguity, but must be established on the intensity and direction of flows of commuting, trade, migration, and investment [37, 49, 50].

Hierarchy is not absolute but relative within a polycentric system. While differences in size and function will still persist, an excessive concentration of functional and institutional weight in a single core will jeopardize the balance in territorial development processes [22, 42, 51, 52].

Institutional coordination at the governed level for polycentricity to manifest [18] must be present in order to function; however, since planning and development need to be coordinated across administrative borders to achieve polycentric character [53, 54].

Finally, scale and territorial congruence relate to the disjuncture between functional urban areas and official-administrative regimes. As polycentricity is an issue of labour markets and journeys on a daily basis, the disjuncture of such geographies constitutes a structural barrier to integration more than a practical issue [44, 45, 46, 55].

These six PUR dimensions contribute to defining PUR as a multidimensional analytical tool that aspires to overcome morphology in the direction of a more relational and governance-oriented approach to urban systems [56, 57].

Polycentricity as an Analytical Ideal-Type for Comparative Analysis

In this study, I refer to the PUR theory as an ideal type, based on Weber's work, rather than as a normative framework for policy planning [24, 11]. It is not used as a criterion for Albania's performance; instead, it acts merely as a heuristic device that allows us to identify structural deviations from a polycentric state.

This methodological framework shifts the discussion from questions of whether the country was successful or unsuccessful according to European planning paradigms [8] to questions regarding the structural reproduction of certain traits over time and across different periods in which Albania's development has occurred [19].

The issue thus does not revolve around whether Albania's is classified as a polycentric state under a strict definition, but rather why and how it falls short of being polycentric. This approach reflects the concerns raised in the literature about the transfer of policies through a polycentric approach and its failure to achieve the desired effects due to structural conditions that lack functional integration in the periphery [7, 40, 26].

Advancing the Framework for Late-Urbanizing Contexts

These PUR conceptualizations by Meijers [3] and Parr [9], which have been historicized in van Meeteren [58], have appeared in contexts characterized by some balance within urban hierarchies and metropolitan governance systems. Although such conceptualizations are necessary when polycentrism is already manifesting, they are ineffective if the conditions that make polycentrism possible are not met.

The relational perspectives of [17] and [18] are significant insofar as they introduce a novel approach by focusing more on issues of scale, interdependence, and network governance, rather than simply adopting a morphological perspective on urban structures. However, even these approaches presume a high level of inter-urban connectivity and a density of flows that are analytically identifiable. In situations like Albania's, where inter-urban flows are still weak, unidirectional, and empirically sparse [12, 59], the relational nucleus of polycentricity cannot be easily pinpointed [11].

The six-dimensional methodology adopted in this paper addresses this limitation in two ways. Firstly, since the methodology analyses morphological, functional, relational, and governance aspects using a single diagnostic tool, it can differentiate between the absence of certain characteristics, the presence of inactive characteristics, and their interactions to create a particular spatial arrangement. Secondly, the application of the same diagnostic framework to three political eras allows separating structural limitations from the regime-specific results [24], thus eliminating the reductionist perception of Albania's lack of polycentrism as the product of the post-socialist period [19].

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The study uses a theory-driven qualitative case-study methodology. In this regard, the PUR is used as an analytical ideal type, inspired by Weber [24], rather than as a standard. For this reason, my intention is not to measure and describe urban polycentricity using composite numerical indicators; instead, I seek to clarify the underlying structural process by which the structure of urban Albania diverges from ideal-type characteristics within each political-planning regime. The scope of observations is the existence of three political-planning regimes: pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist, because only by examining whether the same structural deviations from the ideal type occur under different institutional circumstances will it be possible to understand the transferability of the deviations [25, 60].

The analysis is guided by three research questions:

- **(RQ1)** How does the Albanian urban system diverge from the PUR ideal type across its six analytical dimensions?
- **(RQ2)** Which structural conditions reproduce this divergence across different political and planning regimes?
- **(RQ3)** What does the Albanian case reveal about the limits of polycentricity as an analytical and policy framework in small, centralized, late-urbanizing contexts?

Proposition Testing Logic

The three propositions put forward in the Introduction are not subjected to statistical testing but are examined systematically on the basis of qualitative evaluation, using empirical evidence derived from the six-dimensional analysis. The first proposition is evaluated in terms of the findings on plurality, complementarity, and flows (Dimensions 1–3), the second proposition in terms of the findings on hierarchy, governance, and scale (Dimensions 4–6), and the third proposition on the basis of the comprehensive configuration outlined in Section 9. A proposition will be considered confirmed if the relevant dimensions lead to a result consistent with the expectations derived from the theory in all three regimes, whereas a proposition will be considered weakened if one or several dimensions provide contrary evidence or yield divergent results contingent on the particular political regime. Every dimensional synthesis ends with an explicit formulation of the evidential link between the respective dimension and the corresponding proposition.

Analytical Replicability and Transparency

A qualitative study of this kind cannot produce results that are replicable in the quantitative sense, since the interpretive coding of secondary sources inevitably involves judgment. What it can produce is *analytical transparency* — the conditions under which another researcher, drawing on the same sources and applying the same framework, would arrive at comparable conclusions. There are three factors that facilitate such transparency in the current research project: First, the six dimensions are developed prior to their application in the Albanian case based on the PUR literature instead of being retroactively created using the Albanian data; second, the semi-operational indicators (in Table 2) indicate the criteria for supporting the existence of each dimension; third, the cross-period analysis (in Table 3) distinguishes the structure from the regime.

Analytical Framework

The analytical approach used for this research relies on the framework based on six dimensions of polycentricity proposed in the previous part, which will be used to interpret the urban system of Albania. These dimensions are: (1) Plurality of urban centres, (2) Complementarity of functions, (3) Interconnection and flows, (4) Hierarchy in relative terms, (5) Coordination of institutions and

territorial governance, and (6) Scale and territorial congruence. The dimensions are based on the PUR approach and summarized from the work of [3, 9, 11, 18].

Operationalization does not take place through aggregation into quantitative indices. Dimensions work as analytical concepts to make sense of the urban system and identify the specific spatial dynamics that support, prevent, or perpetuate polycentrism. A lack, weakness, or inconsistency in each analytical concept identifies a certain deviation from the ideal-type, which takes place at the spatial level. Secondary indicators, if applicable in terms of urban primacy ratios, sectoral employment profiles, fiscal concentration, and cooperation between municipalities, can be employed as qualitative reference points, but not composite scores [61, 62].

The theoretical framework provides an answer to all three research questions. For RQ1, the analysis of each dimension separately helps understand the deviation from the ideal model. For RQ2, using the same framework across different periods enables distinguishing between structural conditions and regime outcomes. For RQ3, the analysis of all six dimensions together reveals that PUR theory has boundaries when relations are not strong enough to sustain polycentricity.

Semi-Operational Indicators and Coding Framework

To ensure analytical coherence, the six dimensions of PUR are reviewed using semi-operational indicators and a shared coding system. Instead of considering the dimensions as abstract concepts, each of them is linked to some empirical variables that can be found within the Albanian context [12, 16].

This is not an operationalization of a quantitative nature. This provides a clear rationale for interpreting the empirical data consistently across different dimensions and time periods. Each dimension goes through a four-stage process of (i) defining the dimension based on the PUR literature, (ii) collecting evidence using the secondary sources, (iii) analyzing the evidence based on the proxy provided, and (iv) identifying whether the condition facilitates, restricts, or misrepresents polycentricity. This process will also support the reasoning behind proposition testing mentioned above, since the results of each dimension's coding are used in its synthesis stage.

Table 2 outlines what type of evidence is required for each dimension and what the coding process aims to achieve analytically, thus making explicit how the semi-operational dimensions are intended to be used to test propositions as part of the synthesis process.

Table 2. Semi-operational indicators and coding framework for the six PUR dimensions.

PUR Dimension	Empirical proxy / indicator	Diagnostic question	Analytical reading / coding outcome
Plurality of centers	Territorial distribution and demographic weight of urban centers	Do secondary cities function as supra-local urban nodes or only as locally significant settlements?	Distinguishes structural plurality from merely numerical plurality
Functional complementarity	Differences or similarities in urban economic roles and sectoral profiles	Do urban centers occupy differentiated and interdependent roles, or do they reproduce functional similarity?	Distinguishes complementarity from functional redundancy

Connectivity and flows	Migration, commuting, and infrastructure patterns	Are inter-urban flows reciprocal and networked, or predominantly radial and center-oriented?	Distinguishes functional integration from radial dependence
Relative hierarchy	Concentration of population, GDP, and higher-order functions in Tirana	Is hierarchy moderated by distributed functions, or does one center exercise cumulative dominance?	Distinguishes relative hierarchy from absolute metropolitan primacy
Institutional coordination and territorial governance	Presence or absence of inter-municipal and multi-level coordination mechanisms	Do governance arrangements enable coordination across urban territories, or reproduce fragmented and vertical control?	Distinguishes coordinated territorial governance from institutional fragmentation
Scale and territorial congruence	Correspondence between functional urban dynamics and administrative-territorial structures	Do functional urban relations operate at the same scale as institutional regulation and planning?	Distinguishes scalar congruence from structural scale mismatch

Case Selection and Temporal Scope

Albania is simply considered a necessary case study: a small, hyper-centralized, late-developing country that has experienced several regime changes and maintained a strongly monocentric urban system. It is of theoretical interest rather than assuming any representativity.

This chronology refers to three time periods: the pre-socialist era (from before 1945), the socialist era (1945–1990), which is characterized here by a centrally planned economy, and the post-socialist era after the transition to a market economy, from 1990 onward, which is defined as oriented towards the European Union. The division into three periods is not used to tell the history of regimes as such, but rather as a heuristic device for delineating regime-specific change from structural persistence and for avoiding regime determination in transitory interpretations of Albania's urban morphology.

Data Sources, Evidence Base, and Limitations

The data used for the present study come from different sources providing qualitative data grouped on five block: (i) demographic and spatial statistics from the INSTAT and the World Bank databases [12, 63, 123]; (ii) fiscal data and governance indicators, from the Institute for Public and Private Policies and from the annual publication in Albanian language “Status Report on Local Governance in Albania” [61, 62, 64]; (iii) performance assessment by UNECE [16]; (iv) official publications and national strategies on spatial and territorial issues [14, 65]; and (v) academics researches on urbanization and governance issues in Albania and the Western Balkans [66, 67].

Sources were selected on the basis of three considerations. The first involved including empirical sources only when the results were directly relevant to one or more of the six dimensions of analysis. Second, preference was given to peer-reviewed articles and publications from known institutions, and the most recent edition was used when multiple editions of the same publication were available. Third, weight was given to results that could be verified by another source, and cases where sources disagreed were highlighted in the text rather than simply reconciled. Triangulation was conducted

by cross-checking demographic data from INSTAT, the World Bank, and UNECE; fiscal and governance data from IP3 and the Status Report on Local Governance and history and structures from documents on Albania and the Western Balkans.

The limitations of this evidence base must be clearly stated. As regards the use of INSTAT data, it is worth noting that this type of data is based on accounting conventions and coverage deficiencies that understate the informal nature of settlements and peri-urban dynamics – a consideration relevant mostly for Dimensions 1 and 4. Institutional assessments conducted at the international level are based on normative assumptions that should be considered alongside the analysis rather than accepted unreflectively. Most importantly, the lack of data on municipal-level commuting flows, trade flows, and service flows between municipalities prevents direct testing of Dimension 3 (Connectivity and Flows) and Proposition 1 based on flow data and requires the use of migration data, the geographical location of infrastructure, and fiscal concentration instead. This limits the scope of the present analysis to detecting structural tendencies of deviance from the PUR ideal type, testing of the propositions, and qualitative evaluation thereof, without allowing for any quantitative assessment of flows that were called upon by [11].

Analytical Strategy

The analysis is carried out dimension-by-dimension, using the four-stage process described above to address each of the six PUR dimensions. This generates three deliverables for each of the dimension-specific assessments undertaken: a diagnosis of the nature of the dimension in question within Albania; a comparison across time periods of the state of the dimension under the pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist systems; and a concluding synthesis with an evidential statement connecting the dimension with the relevant proposition.

Cross-period comparisons serve as a means of verification rather than storytelling. If there is a particular deviation from the ideal type that persists despite the fact that the politics, institutions, and economics of each regime differ greatly, then it cannot be blamed on any one regime's policies; instead, it must be understood as being structurally reproduced. However, when the deviation changes according to regime, then cross-period analysis undercuts this structural reading.

The six dimension-level outcomes are then brought together in the cross-dimensional synthesis (Section 9), which evaluates whether they converge on a single reproducing configuration or remain loosely connected. This synthesis provides the evidential basis for evaluating Proposition 3 and for formalizing the two theoretical contributions structural *scalar lock-in* and *pseudo-polycentric equilibrium* advanced by the article.

Methodological Positioning

The contribution of this study does not lie in the construction of a composite polycentricity index or in the identification of causal relationships through multivariate analysis strategies that presuppose both integrated urban flows and the data density to measure them, neither of which is available in the Albanian case [48, 68]. The contribution lies instead in the theoretical clarification of a substantive problem: how and why a morphologically plural but functionally non-polycentric urban system reproduces itself across institutionally distinct regimes.

In this respect, the article addresses a specific weakness in the PUR literature. Most qualitative typologies of polycentricity have been developed with integrated metropolitan regions in view, and they remain better suited to measuring degrees of polycentric integration than to explaining its structural absence [9, 8, 69]. Where integration is weak, radial, or analytically thin, the key question is no longer the degree of polycentricity; rather, it is which structural features inhibit the process of

polycentric formation. The six-dimensional ideal-type system used here is a start along these lines: diagnostic rather than evaluative, cross-temporal rather than cross-sectional. This cross-dimensional aspect offers the methodological basis for the article's two theoretical innovations - *structural scalar lock-in* and *pseudo-polycentric equilibrium* - both of which are theorized on the basis of the cross-dimensional findings, rather than vice-versa.

Tables 3 and 4 summarize this analytical framework and the cross-period comparative logic applied throughout the study.

Table 3. Analytical framework of the study.

PUR Dimension	Analytical definition	Guiding question (Albania)	Evidence base	Analytical purpose
Plurality of centers	Presence of multiple urban centers with relevance beyond the local scale	Does Albania exhibit structural or merely numerical plurality?	Urban hierarchy and demographic distribution	Determine whether urban plurality functions as a system of supra-local nodes or remains morphologically dispersed
Functional complementarity	Differentiation of urban functions generating interdependence between cities	Do cities exhibit complementarity or functional duplication?	Economic structure and sectoral specialization	Identify whether differentiation produces interdependence or reproduces functional redundancy
Connectivity and flows	Intensity and reciprocity of inter-urban linkages	Is connectivity networked or predominantly radial?	Mobility patterns, migration trends, and infrastructure networks	Assess whether flows support reciprocal integration or reinforce center-oriented dependence
Relative hierarchy	Distribution of influence without absolute dominance of a single center	Is hierarchy balanced or characterized by metropolitan primacy?	Indicators of territorial concentration, primacy, and higher-order functions	Evaluate whether hierarchy is moderated through distributed functions or consolidated as absolute dominance
Institutional coordination and territorial governance	Capacity for multi-level governance and inter-municipal coordination	Is there effective coordination or institutional fragmentation?	Governance structures and territorial reforms	Examine whether institutional arrangements enable coordinated territorial action or

Scale and territorial congruence	Correspondence between functional urban regions and administrative-regulatory structures	Is there alignment or a mismatch between functional and administrative scales?	Regional organization and territorial-administrative structures	reproduce fragmented control Detect whether institutional scales correspond to functional urban dynamics or sustain structural scalar mismatch
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Table 3 operationalizes the analytical framework by linking each PUR dimension to its conceptual definition, guiding question, evidence base, and analytical purpose, thereby structuring the diagnostic application of the framework to the Albanian case.

Table 4. Cross-regime comparison of Albania's deviation from the PUR ideal-type.

Dimension	Pre-socialist period	Socialist period	Post-socialist period	Cross-period tendency
Plurality of centers	Multiple centers with weak functional integration	State-directed distribution of urban centers	Persistent plurality with increasing metropolitan concentration	Persistent numerical rather than structural plurality
Functional complementarity	Limited functional differentiation	Centrally assigned functional specialization	Convergence and functional duplication	Persistent lack of inter-urban complementarity
Connectivity and flows	Weak inter-urban linkages	Hierarchically organized connectivity	Radial flows toward the Tirana–Durrës corridor	Asymmetrical, center-oriented connectivity
Relative hierarchy	Emerging centralization tendencies	Strong vertical hierarchy	Pronounced metropolitan primacy	Progressive consolidation of absolute hierarchical dominance
Institutional coordination and territorial governance	Fragmented and locally constrained coordination	Centralized and vertically integrated control	Fragmented decentralization with weak coordination	Persistent deficit of regional coordination
Scale and territorial congruence	Weak correspondence between functional and administrative scales	Dominance of national-scale planning	Functional dynamics exceeding administrative boundaries	Persistent mismatch between functional and administrative scales

Table 4 highlights the cross-period results obtained through the comparative analysis and demonstrates that Albania's distance from the PUR type does not occur sporadically, but rather represents a structural characteristic throughout the three planning systems. In all six dimensions analyzed, the data clearly suggests a consistent situation that generates a functional monocentric system, preventing the development of functional polycentrism.

Taken together, Tables 3 and 4 provide the analytical and comparative backbone of the study. On this basis, the following sections examine the Albanian urban system across six dimensions — plurality of urban centers, functional complementarity, connectivity and flows, relative hierarchy, institutional coordination and territorial governance, and scale and territorial congruence — through a cross-period comparative perspective.

PLURALITY OF URBAN CENTRES IN ALBANIA

The Spatial Configuration of Urban Centers in Albania

On a superficial level, Albania appears as a pattern of concentrated settlements, with a few medium-sized cities and smaller settlements surrounding them. Nevertheless, the disparity in size among these settlements indicates the poorly developed urban structure of the country, due to late urbanization, limited industrialization, and infrastructure deficiencies [70, 71]. The rise in urban development after 1990 failed to yield an integrated, functional urban structure [72–74].

In PUR theory, having multiple urban centres in itself provides no clear analytical value. Having multiple urban centres gains its importance only if individual centres form part of flows that go beyond their geographical borders [11, 22]. Under this criterion, there exists a constant discrepancy in Albania's case between having multiple centres and having real urban weight. This discrepancy holds especially for all centres, apart from the Tirana-Durrës axis, which find themselves trapped in providing local services, playing minor administrative roles, lacking economic diversity, and poor labour market integration.

Thus, what one finds here is not balanced pluralism but a skewed one. As much as one-third of the total population of the country resides in Tirana alone [61] the geography of the space assumes the form of triarchy: that is, a highly concentrated Tirana-Durrës axis, a secondary Fier-Vlorë axis, and eight peripheral prefectures that are steadily losing population [16, 61, 75]. Interpreted in terms of the PUR ideal type, the case shows neither pluralism nor structural stability; instead, one finds cities with a spatial morphology devoid of regional power.

As shown in Figure 1, population concentrations are distributed across a wide portion of Albanian territory, indicating the presence of multiple urban nodes at lower density thresholds.

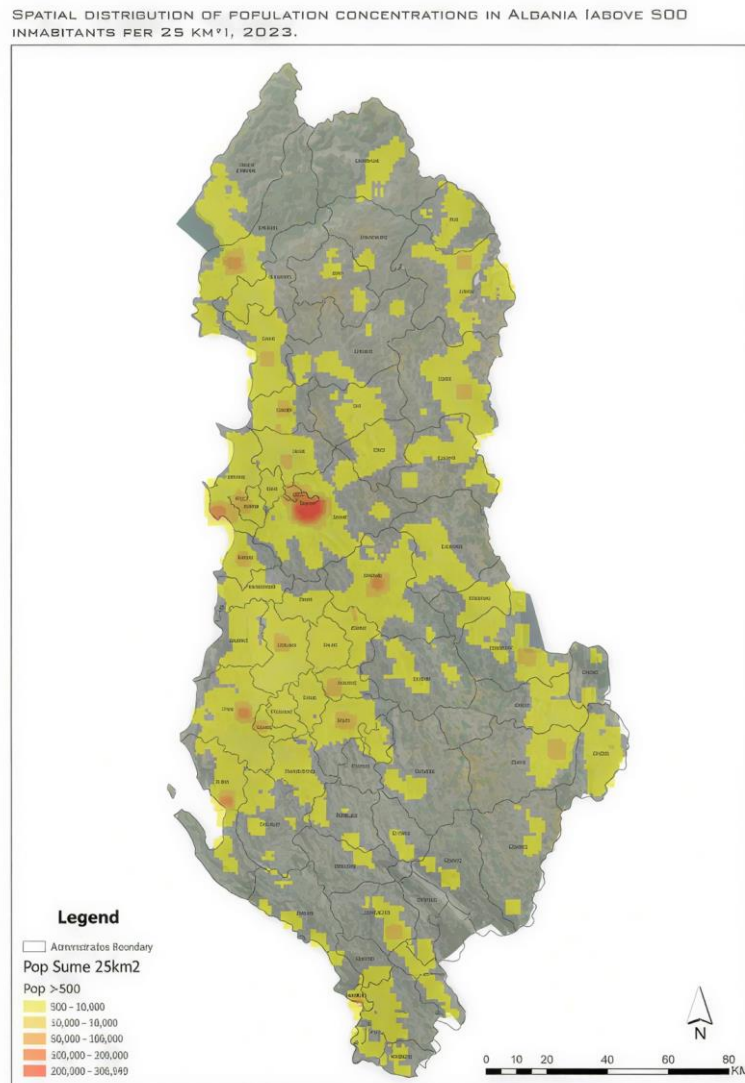


Figure 1. Spatial distribution of population concentrations in Albania (above 500 inhabitants per 25 km²) [123]

The figure shows a dispersed pattern of population concentrations across Albania, indicating the presence of multiple urban nodes at lower density thresholds. Yet this pattern reflects morphological plurality rather than a structurally integrated or functionally polycentric urban system.

The Trajectory of Plurality: Continuity of Structural Weakness

The common feature of all the political regimes that Albania has ever experienced is that the agglomeration mass that would allow the country's small and medium-size cities to function as regional nodes has never been created [76, 77]. There is a long history behind it. Even in the inter-war period, cities such as Shkodra, Korça, Vlora, and Elbasani constituted an isolated network of small and medium-size cities whose formation was determined by late Ottoman trade routes rather than by any contemporary approach to urban planning. However, such a plurality was just apparent as connections among them were few, the infrastructure inadequate, and the economic base agricultural [70, 71, 78].

Yet socialism has reorganized rather than reformed the pluricentricity. The State-directed planning had created a hierarchy in the urban system and altered in a different way the planning for industrial investments into the quality and boundaries of communes based on the output. Regionalism remained irrelevant, as decisions on strategy were made in Tirana [79–81]. On the contrary, the post-socialist transformation has consolidated this approach further. In just one decade, the number of internal migrations registered accounted for 1,357,750 cases at a rate of 36 per 1,000 citizens, and the percentage of the urban population increased from 32% to 44%. Still, the new process of urbanization clustered along the central route instead of promoting a more even spread [74, 82]. Along with the movement of capital and population towards the central line, the influence of other centres decreased significantly [20, 72, 83].

In all three periods, the morphological plurality of the settlement system survived; in none of them did it become a functioning regional structure. The kind of inter-urban relationality and full functional integration that PUR theory expects simply did not develop. What persisted was the spread of cities on the map and their numerical multiplication — but inside a fragile pattern of urbanization that never gained systemic coherence [9, 56].

Deviation: Numerical Plurality versus Structural Plurality

The reading of Albania using the PUR framework highlights the stark contradiction between the actual presence of urban centres and their functional significance. A complete polycentric structure demands the existence of cities with supra-local significance — those that have the capacity to generate flows and organize territory and regionally performances that go beyond their administrative borders [17, 84]. This kind of city is absent in Albania. From both a population standpoint and an economic perspective, at the territorial scale, there are not enough secondary centres to compete with the metropolitan centre.

This gap is becoming increasingly pronounced [12, 85]. Although secondary cities exist within the urban hierarchy, they lack the critical mass of population, economic activity, and institutional capacity required to provide respite for the national urban system. Since the socialist era, roughly 1.8 million internal migration events have occurred in Albania — more than 400,000 in the last ten years — stripping the countryside of its population and capital and concentrating people, resources, and infrastructure at the core [82, 86]. While pluralism still exists geographically, it is structurally untenable.

Even the territorial reform of 2014 did not alter this situation. The size of municipal territories increased, but higher-order functions, competences, and development means remained in their old place — highly centralized and not transferred to other secondary centres [59, 61]. It is the persistent creation of the system of settlements that, by multiplying its units, failed to shift the urban mass in any way

Synthesis: Plurality without Polycentricity

In the case of Albania, the morphology of urban plurality has stayed consistent throughout the three different regimes. This is because secondary cities have never been able to gain sufficient demographic strength, economic weight, or institutional strength to offset the gravity of the metropolis [69, 88]. There were many cities; however, there was never an urban system in Albania, which would be a network of urban centres with close and clear-cut links between them [9, 17, 56]. Migration from post-socialist countries has done nothing to change the status quo, but instead has reinforced it by depleting peripheral areas while concentrating the population in the core [10, 89]. In

this regard, Albania has not developed any pattern of urban settlements and lacks any signs of polycentricity under conditions of urban multiplicity [87].

This evidence speaks directly to the first part of Proposition 1: morphological plurality, in the absence of the conditions that translate it into a functioning urban system, does not move the country toward polycentricity but instead stabilizes a non-polycentric pattern. Whether Proposition 1 holds in full depends on the evidence assembled in the next two dimensions — functional complementarity and inter-urban flows — to which the analysis now turns.

FUNCTIONAL COMPLEMENTARITY AND SPECIALIZATION

Functional Structure and Urban Roles in Albania

Functional complementarity, under the PUR approach, is key to transforming a grouping of nearby cities into an urban system. Polycentrism calls for complementary roles in cities that are played in coordination and cooperation [22, 34, 52]. This is not the case with Albania. In the secondary cities outside of the Tirana-Durrës region, low-order tertiary functions such as retail and local governance dominate, while manufacturing activities remain weak, as do high-order functions that include innovation [12, 90]

Instead of evolving into differentiated poles within the broader territory, second-level cities have remained similar in nature, with functions still at the lower order. In fact, most municipalities have not acted as true drivers of local development, controlling only 55 percent of their own budgets, leaving little room for planning differentiated functions for themselves [62, 61]. It is not only an economic issue; it is also institutional.

This is the enduring legacy of late industrialization, state-led planning, and the failure to create stable urban specializations across the nation's territory [76, 91]. However, the question, from the point of view of PURs, is not one of a lack of specialization in itself. Specialization requires reciprocal flows between the economy. Indeed, in Albania, the higher-level functions are concentrated in Tirana, while the lower-level functions are located in other cities, thereby creating redundancy instead of complementarity in an outwardly diversified urban system [11, 92].

The Evolution of (Non-)Complementarity across Regimes

Inter-urban functional complementarities could never evolve consistently under all three regime periods within Albania's urban system. Though functional changes have occurred, they have failed to foster an interdependent pattern of settlement [8, 22]. However, prior to WWII, some forms of differentiation began to appear in towns like Shkodra and Korça, which played a commercial and administrative role during the pre-industrial stage. Nonetheless, the poor infrastructure, low efficiency levels, and predominance of agriculture did not favour the development of any form of interdependence [70, 77, 78].

In socialist Albania, the state assigned specializations, allocating cities to specific economic roles. Specialization thus took place vertically, and not horizontally among cities [79–81]. Similarly, in the post-socialist years, decentralization has only reinforced existing asymmetries: market restructuring undermined the little specialization secondary centres possessed, with their economies declining, labor migrating to Tirana, and most cities specializing in services with a similarly low value [66, 73]. This inequality also exists within the budgets of the municipalities: among 41 public services assigned to local authorities, roughly 30% concern the environment and are inadequately financed [61, 62]. In other words, it is evident that decentralization has moved tasks without distinguishing their functions.

Urban Economy and the Absence of Synergy

According to the PUR approach, synergies occur through the interlinking of differentiated urban activities in a lasting way, such that there is interdependence rather than just physical proximity [8, 22, 52]. However, the Albanian urban economy deliberately avoids such a process. There is fragmentation, low production differentiation, and rivalry between urban centres with very similar economies.

The symptoms are all too common: a huge load of low-level tertiary functions, a lack of industrial upgrading, and an unrelenting trend towards the loss of productive specialization in the hinterland [19, 20, 72]. Far from enabling secondary towns to evolve middle-level functions, specialized or complementary to those in the metropolitan core, the post-socialist structure of economic activities deprived them of that opportunity [66, 73, 93]. On the contrary, restructuring through the market made even smaller towns evolve around similar sets of low-level economic activities rather than complement each other [61, 94].

The insufficiency of local capacity further aggravates the situation. Local authorities can control only around 55 percent of the budget themselves, leaving almost no space for independent or diversified urban activity [88]. Migration movements and transfers follow a similar trend, attracting the labor force and capital to the axis of Tirana and Durrës, leaving the remaining parts of the urban system dependent on consumption-oriented activities only [74, 95]. In this way, one should speak not of complementary relations within the urban economy but of competition-based localism instead.

Synthesis: Functional Similarity and the Absence of Urban Synergy

Throughout these stages, the urban hierarchy in Albania failed to transform functional differentiation into functional complementarity and instead created an enduring trend towards functional homogeneity. In pre-socialist Albania, differentiation was low and poorly developed. Under socialism, specialization was achieved through vertical implementation at the national level. Market reorganization in a post-socialist context has resulted in a downward leveling of higher-order functions towards convergence rather than differentiation & complementarity [12, 86, 91]. In accordance with a PUR approach, this hindered the development of functional & exchange complementarity as a prerequisite for urban synergies [7, 22]. The lack of such synergy becomes clear through the rarity of municipalities which develop to become actual poles of local economy, something we'll demonstrate later when discussing how secondary cities function as parallel entities, and not interrelated nodes [88]. Thus, what we can deduce from this evidence is not the existence of insufficient specialization, but the fact that there is no potential for creating synergy in the structure of an urban system characterized by homogeneity, dependency, and metrocentric [15, 64].

From the PUR framework perspective, this implies the incapacity of differentiation in creating the interdependency among cities that is crucial for synergy [11, 87]. In conjunction with the morphological data presented earlier, this conclusion addresses the second part of Proposition 1, according to which plurality does not create polycentrism when urban functions are non-differentiated and interdependent roles do not emerge. The validity of Proposition 1 will be determined by the findings regarding inter-urban flows presented later.

INTER-URBAN CONNECTIVITY AND FLOWS

Mobility, Migration, and Urban Flows in Albania

In the PUR model, the interaction between urban areas is seen as a prerequisite for functional integration, where the flow itself, rather than just its ease, is important because the strength,

orientation, and reciprocity of the flow become significant [22]. In polycentric systems, there are multidirectional flows that ensure interdependence among the cities. In Albania, mobility remains centripetal rather than interurban.

Since the early 1990s, migration has become the principal force behind urban restructuring in Albania [59, 82, 95]. Migration has not spread the process of urban growth to multiple nodes but has focused it on one single dominant node in the form of the Tirana-Durrës Corridor that accounts for most economic activities and institutional structures [12, 20]. This has resulted in urbanization processes that emphasize one metropolitan centre at the expense of a city system approach [96–98].

The spatial configuration of the flow is no less revealing. It is possible to identify four main axes of migration: three from north to south along the urban axis, and one east to west along the lowlands to the west. The movement between urban areas has thus taken on a radial rather than an orthogonal configuration [74]. Mobility, according to PUR theory, is anything but neutral. It bears witness to territorial dependency and gravitational space. In the case of Albania, the processes of mobility and urban growth have not compensated for the lack of exchange capacity in its secondary cities; they have exacerbated it.

Infrastructure and Inter-Urban Connectivity

In addition to its ability to reduce journey time, infrastructure is significant for PUR theory because it can transform distance into a social-economic relationship. Infrastructure for polycentric networks must be open and connected, meaning that it is able to facilitate circulation between cities as opposed to one dominating city [9, 22]. Conversely, in Albania, infrastructure has been used as a tool for re-centralization.

Transport infrastructure was introduced quite late, and from its very origins, it was influenced by issues of national unification and state centralization [79, 80]. Even during the socialist era, investment covered the entire national territory; however, it was always within the hierarchy, resulting in the failure to develop horizontal and interregional connections [81, 99]. Infrastructure contributed much more to territorial management than to reciprocal city exchange [14, 98].

There was an increase in post-socialist road infrastructure development, although its radial nature was evident, using the Tirana-Durrës corridor as the main line of development. While connectivity within the capital region was greatly enhanced, the other regions were still deficient in both transversal connections and connections from their outer borders to other regions [61]. The decrease in population by 178,094 persons during the period from 2014 to 2022, noted outside the corridors of development [59], clearly demonstrated this.

The collapse of the railway network is no different, just as the limited digital infrastructure continues to revolve around the city centre, doing nothing to foster knowledge exchange between urban centres [12, 96]. The development of infrastructure in Albania, however, did not promote inter-urban connectivity. Instead, it increased connectivity to the urban centre [91, 100].

Proximity without Integration: The Limits of Inter-Urban Connectivity

In terms of PUR, while short distances are an important condition for integration, they are also insufficient, as only continuous exchanges can lead to polycentricity [3, 101]. This is not the case in Albania, where short inter-urban distances coexist with relational deintegration.

Despite its highly concentrated geography, strong regional networks have failed to materialize. There are no relations among the labor process, regional services, and development processes; in other words, the three occur simultaneously rather than interrelating, since there is no complementarity between different urban roles and common development processes in the region.

This corresponds to the notion of a morphological trap in the PUR literature, meaning that the concentration of settlements does not lead to the emergence of polycentrism [23, 41].

The simplest example would be the Tirana-Durrës axis. Despite the geographical linkages between the two nodes, it is not possible to characterize the axis as polycentric. Instead, it may be termed a centripetal axis, with a tendency towards central concentration rather than dispersion along the axis of dependency [25, 97]. Similarly, at the state level, only four migration axes exist internally, three of which are towards the center and one towards the western plain, indicating that migration occurs radially rather than horizontally [74]. Despite the country's advantageous geographical position, it does not leverage it to build an urban network of cities.

Synthesis: Connectivity without Integration

Across all three periods, inter-urban connectivity in Albania has rested on asymmetric, non-reciprocal flows that produce accessibility without urban-system integration. The phenomena of migration, mobility, and infrastructure investments have all contributed to the same process of centration where the Tirana-Durrës axis serves as the primary recipient of people, opportunities, and amenities at the expense of the territory of other cities [20, 82, 100]. Under the PUR concept, we are dealing with an approach that can be described as being radially, rather than networked, as it features the most intense relations between the center and the periphery, but not between secondary centres [3, 101, 102]. Indeed, out of four major migration routes, three connect to the centre – again concentrating connections [86]. Albania, then, is not merely under-connected; it is structurally radially connected.

Taken together with the findings regarding plurality and complementarity, this conclusion provides the basis for validating Proposition 1. In this case, all three elements lead to the same result regardless of regime type – morphological plurality continues, the failure of functional differentiation leads to a lack of interdependence, and inter-urban flows remain radial as opposed to reciprocal. Thus, each of the criteria specified in Proposition 1 as necessary preconditions of polycentric emergence lacks empirical validity in the Albanian context. As such, the conclusion may be reached that Proposition 1 holds true: due to lack of differentiation in urban functions and reciprocal inter-urban flows, morphological plurality failed to create polycentricity but established a functionally monocentric system of cities.

RELATIVE HIERARCHY AND URBAN DOMINANCE

The Structure of Urban Hierarchy in Albania

The single city is not eroded by the PUR concept, but relativized: no urban area should be entirely hegemonic in the system, while it has to leave more space for the various urban regions, which, in the end, constitute a complex web of interdependences [22, 42, 51]. The urban hierarchy in Albania, on the contrary, has shifted to a more and more autonomous and cumulative pattern where one metropolitan pole is concentrating demographic, economic, institutional, and symbolic prerogative on a level of disparity going well over the Albanian national urban system.

This is accounted for by a number of long-term characteristics of the Albanian urbanization process: late urbanization (advanced urbanization has only started occurring in the last twenty years) and low industrialization, as well as the persistence of both political and economic powers in the capital. Although different urban centres had developed gradually, property and power-sustaining resources continued to concentrate in Tirana, and secondary cities were structurally dependent and internally weak [22, 42, 51]. What is relevant in the PUR concept is not hierarchy, but its realized or

absolute form. The accumulation of higher services, political concerns, higher education, and advanced urban functions in the capital resulted in the restriction of successful regional pathways from other urban centres.

The fiscal and functional convergence is also observable. Tirana receives 50.8 percent of all taxes on buildings as well as 72.2 percent of the infrastructure impact tax, which both rely on development potential at the local level. This tends to be replicated in terms of service delivery; the capital has 114 social services working in it, and there are only 12 in Kukës [88]. What this creates is not just a disappointing hierarchy of capital over secondary cities, but the consecutive primacy of metropolitan areas, whereby the second-ranked cities will be socially subordinate without having the strategic capacity to relativize the dominance of the centre.

As shown in Figure 2, the regions of higher population thresholds are extremely clumped together into the view of the spatial pattern of urban centers dominated by the Tirana–Durrës corridor.

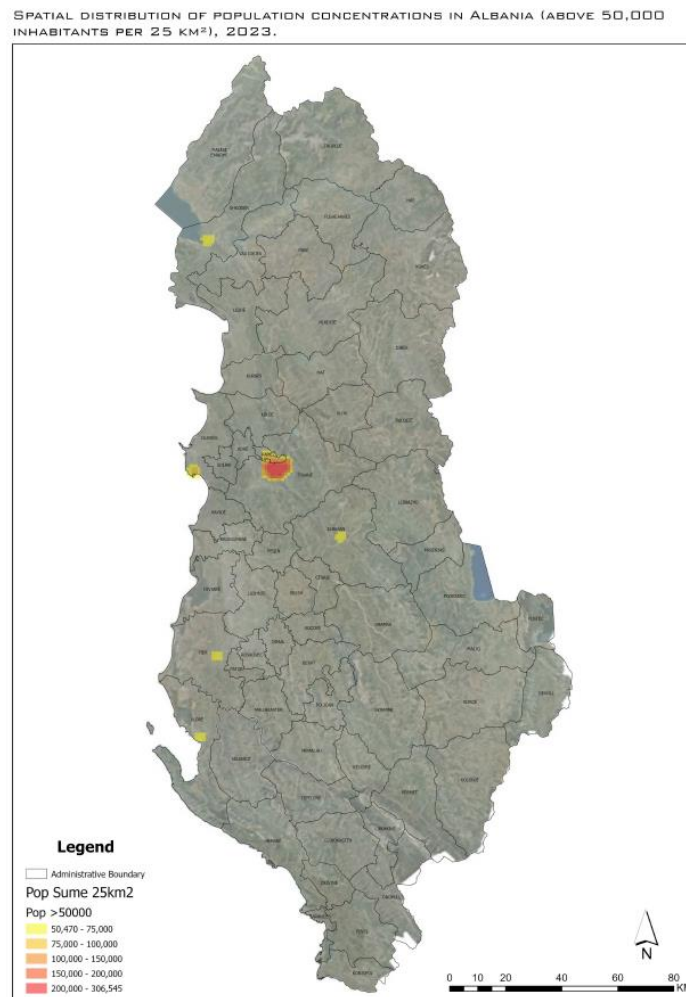


Figure 2. Spatial concentration of population above 50,000 inhabitants per 25 km² in Albania [123]

This figure demonstrates that there is a clear clustering of population within the Tirana–Durrës axis, while the majority of the country’s land mass is sparsely populated or even depopulated. This

map implies that in comparison with other maps that represent a less intensive distribution of people, Albania's urban hierarchy is monocentric.

From Relative Hierarchy to Absolute Dominance across Regimes

In terms of cross-period analysis, it can be observed that there was no trend towards gradual de-hierarchisation of the urban system in Albania; rather, it gained weight at its centre while the secondary cities progressively declined. Although the institutional framework differed between periods, the pattern of development remained unchanging and invariably deviated from the moderate hierarchy characteristic of the PUR model to reach extreme concentration of power in the capital city [16, 70]. While different organizational frameworks were used, the final structure remained constant. The secondary cities failed to gain sufficient status to counterbalance the dominance of the central city.

Several other cities held some significance within their regions, but none served as a counterweight to Tirana's growing centrality on the national scale during the period before the socialist era. The characteristics of hierarchy included poor external connectivity, minimal urban mediation, and increasing political and symbolic centralization. All of these factors made the system highly susceptible to centralization [70, 77, 78]. During socialism, the hierarchical system was reconfigured through central planning, which involved dispersing the population and production while maintaining centralization of functions and authority at the national centre [79–81].

Such trends persist during the post-socialist era. Market liberalization, migration, and differential investment have served to further strengthen metropolitan dominance while undermining the development of secondary cities [12, 100, 103]. In 2023, the budget allocated for Tirana's capital expenditure alone stood at 5.2 billion lek, more than that of any other municipality, thus clearly demonstrating the persistence of the post-socialist hierarchy due to primacy and widening differentials of investment and expenditures [88]. In this regard, no changes in the hierarchies of city functions are observed – only an increase in metropolitan dominance.

Synthesis: Absolute Hierarchy as a Structural Constraint

Hierarchy in Albania is not a relative ordering of urban roles within an otherwise balanced system; it is a stable architecture of metropolitan dominance. Instead of embracing polycentric diversification, the urban system has always kept the strategic activities of the urban network in Tirana, far exceeding the thresholds stipulated by PUR theory as part of an equilibrium hierarchy [22, 51, 52]. Despite the changes in the methods of dominance, the core spatial logics remain unaltered through the various regimes (weak initial centralization, vertical division during the era of socialism, dominance during market reforms) [70, 79]. The difference between the 114 social services in Tirana and the 12 social services in Kukës illustrates that hierarchical reproduction occurs not only through fiscal imbalance but also through the uneven distribution of institutional strength across territories [61, 62]. Absolute hierarchy is evident as both an effect and a method since it emerges from several decades of centralizing processes and also functions as the structure to subordinate the secondary cities to the centre.

This evidence speaks to the structural component of Proposition 2. The persistence of absolute primacy across regimes indicates the absence of a functioning supra-local scale at which secondary cities might form an institutional counterweight to the metropolitan core. The proposition's full test, however, requires the evidence on institutional coordination and on the alignment between functional and administrative scales the dimensions to which the analysis turns next.

INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE

State Capacity, Governance Structures, and Urban Coordination

For PUR theory, institutionally coordinated urban development, as well as territorial governance, is not only a precondition for but actually a component of polycentric development. A polycentric urban form does not have the characteristic feature of being a polycentric city simply by virtue of its multi-cantered character. What makes a polycentric city is the ability to govern planning, investment, and service delivery at different territorial scales [18, 53, 54]. Otherwise, plurality results in fragmentation [104].

The ability of institutions at various levels in Albania has proven ineffective. The development of land use and urban planning in Albania has occurred in a fragmented way, both horizontally and vertically. However, horizontal inter-municipal collaboration and vertical coordination have yet to be developed sufficiently [61, 104]. The territorial reform in 2014 significantly reduced the number of local authorities, and their areas of jurisdiction have been increased accordingly. However, there has been no increase in regional coordination and supra-municipal capacity despite the gain in scale [14, 20]. Under this new structure, each local authority operates as an independent jurisdiction rather than as part of an urban network.

It is important in PUR theory because good governance cannot be limited to jurisdictional planning if inter-urban relationships are to be formed meaningfully. The municipalities in Albania continue to operate with limited capacity and autonomy within the higher-level territorial organization [62]. About 47.6 percent of local government revenue still comes from intergovernmental grants, indicating that subnational governance still depends on the central government even after decentralization [61]. This financial dependency undermines the independence of local governments as territorial entities, thereby weakening their ability to establish an inter-urban cooperation system.

Political Regimes and Territorial Coordination

A cross-regime reading of territorial coordination in Albania reveals a sequence of institutional change without any genuine re-institutionalization of regional coordinating capacity [103, 104]. Formal governance institutions changed substantially over time, but urban development beyond the individual city and below the national level remained weakly organized.

Prior to socialism, fragile state capacity and a complex administrative structure meant that territorial coordination remained underdeveloped. Urban development occurred in an uncoordinated manner without institutions of planning to define the inter-urban relation or to show a functional urban area [70, 80]. Under socialism, territorial coordination was reestablished by means of a hierarchical planning system designed to create administrative uniformity, although this was by no means a coordinative system. It was vertical: cities were merely agents for the delivery of targets set at the centre, acting as separate local units of production, despite their belonging to an urban territory, instead of functioning as urban areas with their internal logic [74, 79].

The post-socialist decentralization simply pushed formalities down without meaningful regional coordination: even with more power, the municipalities' financial, personnel, and technical resources to develop at a wider territorial level were not available [12, 105]. One can see the same inherent weakness operatively and in the institutions: the recent financial assessments for the region registered Kavaja, Vorë, and Dimal as the only fiscally insolvent municipalities, signifying some parts of the local system can still not fund basic territorial functions or trans-urban coordination [88]. The

instruments of control changed through the three stages of decentralization, yet the instability of territorial coordination remained. It is not the impossibility of institutional reforms, but the lack of stable regional governance capacity.

PUR and the Absence of Multi-Level Regional Governance

On the PUR level, the multi-level regional governance is the institutional precondition upon which the urban plurality and the inter-urban connectivity can exist as one territorial system. Polycentricity requires multi-scalar governance schemes capable of bundling infrastructure, economic growth, and service provision outside municipalities' territories [54, 53]. In Albania, the lack of such a capacity is not a second-order institutional weakness but a core structural condition for the realization of polycentric development.

The mismatch is most visible in the gap between the scale of urban processes and the scale of regulation. Economic activity, labour markets, and travel patterns routinely cross municipal boundaries, yet there are no permanently institutionalized mechanisms for inter-municipal cooperation that operate at this wider scale [12, 104]. Regional institutions such as the County Councils possess only a limited mandate and minimal capacity to act at the regional scale that the PUR model assumes as the operational unit of regulation. Urban processes, in effect, run independently of any meaningful regionalization process and remain weakly governed.

This gap still remains much unfilled by the planning instruments. While spatial planning has remained mostly at the municipal level, regional instruments have either been consultative without any enforcement powers or lacked effective inter-administrative coordination mechanisms [12, 15]. Thus, even using modern post-socialist regional planning instruments has been slow and unstable due to the uneven administrative capacity of regions and the absence of a binding collaborative obligation. 18 of the 61 municipalities analysed for transparency of governance can be treated as 'very high', while the remaining 37 are at the medium level. The uneven distribution would seem to hinder the horizontal cooperation at the regional level [62].

Vertical coherence is also limited. The strategic investment choices are determined at the national level, offering no scope for local institutions to develop a more territorial articulation of the decisions. What we lack is not stronger local government but a middle-level structure through which the functional urban regions could be governed at different scales [11].

Synthesis: Institutional Fragmentation and the Absence of Regional Coordination

At every level of analysis, Albania's urban system has lacked the institutions to organize inter-urban relations and the mechanisms to sustain them. Constant waves of formal institutional reform have failed to generate a single organizational logic of horizontal cooperation or regionalized decision-making [12, 104]. In PUR terms, this is not a matter of administrative reform, but rather a structural lack of territorial governance [9, 53], the absence of formal rules and organizational forms at the spatial level where urban interdependence is manifested. What is particularly telling about the transparency score of only 18 municipalities out of 61 is that it reveals an institutional domain in too many fragmented pieces to convey a straightforward account of sustainable horizontal co-operation or regionalized planning [62]. The institutional deficit is then no longer just a deficit of governance, but a structural deficit which infects urban pluralism and inter-urban links as a 'stacked-up', rather than regionally integrated, knowledge base.

This evidence directly bears on the institutional criterion of Proposition 2. Any reform that redistributes authority either upward onto the central state or downward onto local municipalities, without creating the supra-municipal dimension within which the actual urban-institutional

relations take place, maintains the same old structural mismatch across regimes. The elimination of the intermediate institutional level is therefore simply repeated rather than overcome in the Albanian case. The complete test of Proposition 2, then, must await the second piece of evidence, which considers the relation of functional and administrative scales.

SCALE AND TERRITORIAL STRUCTURE

Functional versus Administrative Scales in Albania

Scale in PUR theory is not just a technical or objective issue; it is structural and conditions the performance and governance of urban systems. Polycentricity primarily operates at an intermediate functional scale (between city and state) based on daily mobility, urban employment market integration, and interurban flows [45, 46]. The fact that this functional scale in Albania is permanently disconnected from the institutional-administrative territory represents a significant structural obstacle to the development of polycentricity.

The key is that this mismatch is no accident: commuting, services, economic activity are all global and regional in scope, but planning, policy and administration persist within municipal, regional and national cells, and the two levels of administration cannot be joined, which leaves the intermediate scale weak or non-existent in the understanding of governance [12, 64]. Demographic data reveal that 33.5 percent of the Albanian population resides in the City of Tirana, which comprises 5 municipalities and is a density-graded agglomeration, while just 1.9 percent lives in the City of Gjirokastra, which comprises 7 municipalities [15, 16].

This is an old pattern. In pre-socialist times, administrative borders were built on political and fiscal considerations, neglecting functional urban relations [78, 80]. In socialist times, territorial centralization meant to knit together functional relations in administrative uniformity [79, 74]. In post-socialist times, the reinitialization of urban functions through urban mergers and regionalization did not create an institutional setting capable of managing inter-urban relations at the geographical scale on which they occurred [14, 103]. What was created was multiple urbanities without an institutional network.

Albanian Regions as Non-Functional Urban Units

In a PUR context, regions are not constituted by the administrative borders first, but by the relations of interaction, economic linkages, and flows of mobility. They are supposed to be the scale of organization of the infrastructure, public services, and inter-urban coordination [26, 45, 54]. However, the administrative Albanian regions did not match these conditions.

The selection of the regional map has been carried out at the political-administrative rather than the functional-urban or economic levels. Almost all the regions consolidate fiscally unsustainable territories, with little functional differentiation, remaining apart from the dominant flows, which cross the formal borders of the region [19, 76]. Such a delimitation is justified by the fact that the regions did not develop into units of coordinated action but into administrative units with little influence on broader territorial development [103, 106]. The reform of the water sector is a system of 51 percent state ownership and 49 percent local ownership of regional companies, motivated by the same reasoning: rescaling occurred more as a consequence of decentralization pressures than of capacity-building to strengthen the region [88].

The pattern is decade-long-established. Pre-socialist, socio-political, rationalized, decentralized administrative units were rooted in a top-down political and fiscal logic rather than a functional one [78, 77]. During the socialist period, the areas were more vertical, top-down, and the state included

the urban ties in the state and not on the horizontal negotiation among the cities [79, 98]. Post-socialist decentralization failed to transform the regions into a functional level of governance, either: regional institutions are severely fragile, poorly equipped, and disconnected from the functional geography of the urban system [14, 15]. What remains is more than a non-existent regional tier—it is the systematic lack of a functional meso-level able to coordinate investment, specialization, and inter-urban flows.

The Polycentric Urban Region as a Problem of Scale, Not Only of Form

Polycentricity is often treated in policy discourse as a spatial matter — the existence of multiple urban activity centres or a particular distribution of settlements. From the PUR perspective, however, it is more usefully read as a problem of scale: the mismatch between the territorial extent of urban functions and the institutional scale at which they are coordinated [22, 45, 84, 101]. In Albania, the issue is therefore not a defective urban form but a deeper structural incompatibility between the scale of urban relations and the scale of institutional control.

Albania has a number of characteristics of a polycentric region mentioned above; it is characterized by having several urban cores, short interurban distances, and, in general, a dispersed but dense settlement system. This morphology has not yet created a functional polycentricity because the urban linkages crossing municipality boundaries are not institutionalized at the level at which they actually work [99, 100]. The higher intermediary dimension is crucial in PUR terms: cities must be close enough to maintain productive relations and be institutionalized in order to cooperate and specialize [52, 11].

Unlike the Belgian case, rescaling has thus far failed to produce an institutional scale that might reflect the existing spatial scale. Municipalities were simply too fragmented to take on the governance functions for supra-urban functional regions, and the state was too remote and hierarchical to take on coordination among urban nodes [20, 103]. In 2014, the territorial reform significantly decreased local governments (from 373 to 61), but functional fragmentation remains: administrative rescaling has not yet resulted in a go-between body (meso-institution) to link the cities of the country [62]. To argue so, would be to confuse the issue of administrative rescaling with an actual polycentric restructuring. The process of administrative rescaling has changed the level of jurisdiction, but it has not established the horizontal coordination of territorial spaces, which is however, a necessary condition and precondition for polycentric urban systems. The Albanian case shows that polycentricity cannot take place solely through the informal spatial shape of settlement networks. Urban pluralism provides neither a rich enough empirical structure nor an institutionalized enough organizational force for polycentricity to develop.

As shown in Figure 3, the territorial organization of Albania is structured around municipal centers that ensure administrative accessibility but do not correspond to functionally integrated urban regions.

The figure shows the extent of the territory covered by municipal centers and administrative access. Although this map depicts the continuity of the territory managed by the administration, it also brings to attention the lack of intermediary functional scale levels, thus supporting the claim that the administrative system in Albania is not consistent with the functional urban regions.

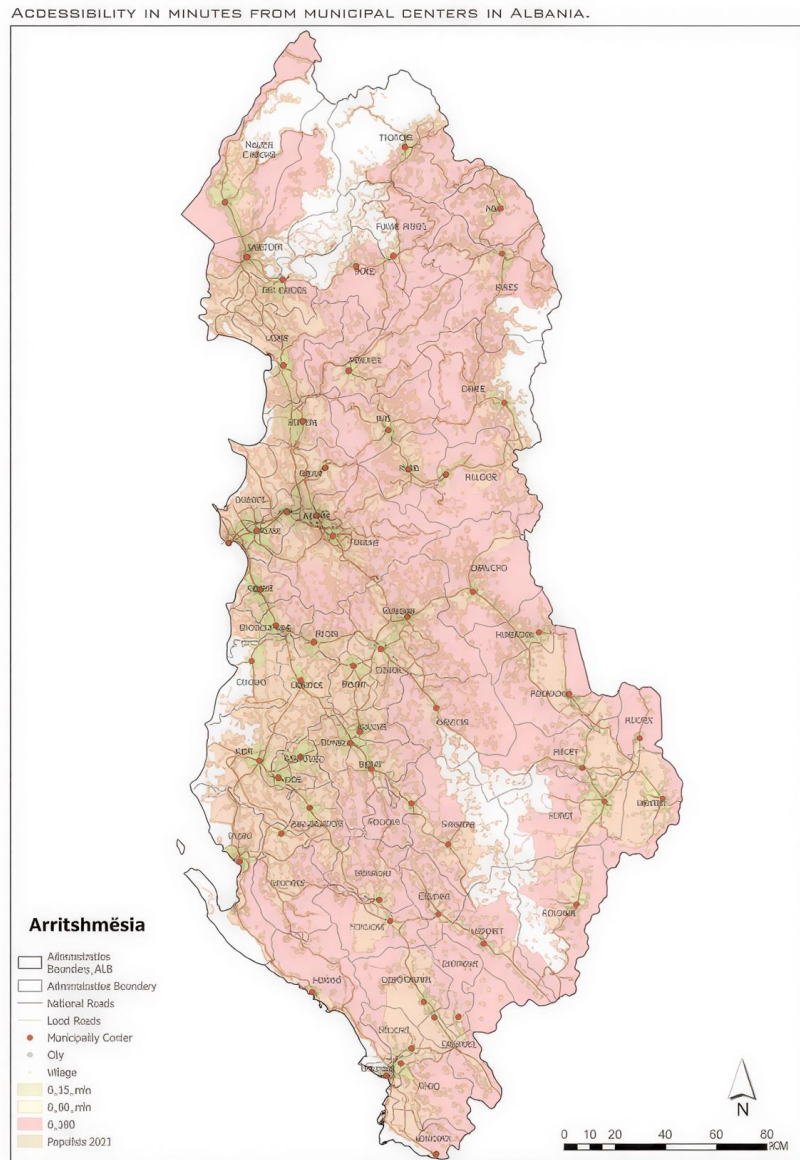


Figure 3. Accessibility in minutes from municipal centers in Albania [123]

Synthesis: Scale Misalignment as a Structural Constraint

The disparity between the level of operation of the urban system and that of governance has persisted structurally as an impediment to polycentric growth in Albania. The system tends to swing between the local level, where functions are divided, and the national level, where they are concentrated, where neither of them is articulated on the intermediate level required for polycentric governance to take place [2, 9]. Frictions of urban labour, urban services and urban mobility, as well as urban governance and urban planning, exceed the municipal authority level in scope, yet there is no established functional region [23, 107]. The 2014 reduction in number of local governments from 373 to 61 proved to be no exception: a mismatch of institutional and functional scales continued to exist, exposing the persistence of domain inconsistent rescaling [62]. Since it overwhelms the shortcomings already pointed out in the conceptual constructs of complementarity, connectivity, hierarchy and coordination, it results in systemic failure rather than simply institutional failure. If

Albania has not followed the PUR aetiology as well, this is not a matter of urban morphology but rather of no institutionalisation of governance at the scales of urban relation development.

This evidence completes the test of Proposition 2. The dimensions of hierarchy, institutional coordination, and scale converge on the same outcome across all three regimes: where urban relations operate at a supra-local scale for which no institutional space of action exists, reforms that move authority only upward to the central state or only downward to municipalities reproduce rather than resolve scalar mismatch. Proposition 2 is therefore supported. The final question — whether infrastructure investment, decentralization, and Europeanization, taken together, reinforce metropolitan primacy rather than diffuse development — addresses the cumulative configuration of all six dimensions and is taken up in the cross-dimensional synthesis that follows.

CROSS-DIMENSIONAL SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

Albania's Urban System in Relation to the PUR Ideal-Type

Integrating the six analytical dimensions, we create a single image of Albania's departure from the PUR ideal-type: rather than a collection of individual shortcomings, an institutional configuration whereby each dimension accentuates the limitations resting upon the others [15, 103].

What results is a delicate form of urban plurality. There are many cities in Albania; however, the areas lack the economic strength and interdependence required to constitute a polycentric urban system. The shallow urban base, combined with low degrees of functional differentiation, suppresses the principle of complementarity and allows the medium-sized cities to carry out a replication of the same low-order functions, as a way of forming separate niches in the economy of the country [42, 91].

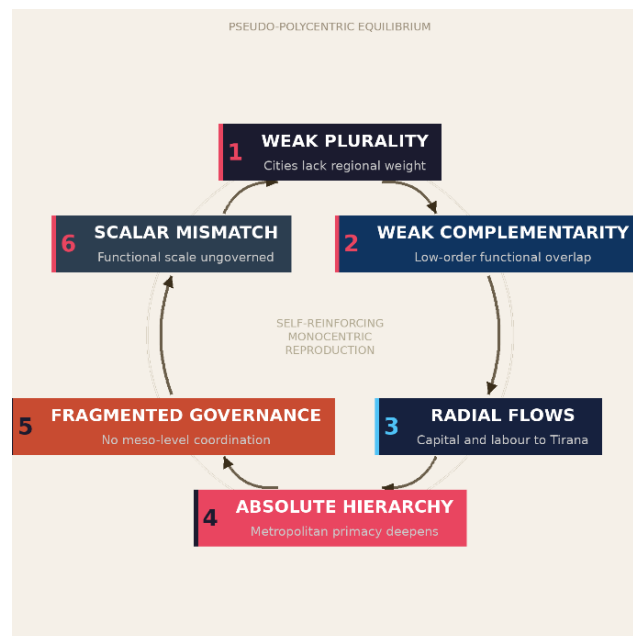


Figure 4. The self-reinforcing causal loop of pseudo-polycentric equilibrium in Albania.

The figure shows the six-dimensional cycle that the Albanian urban system goes through to perpetuate functional concentricity across consecutive political regimes. In each dimension the

subsequent is hindered by the previous one in a closed cycle: in the first place low urban diversity hinder (by codependency) the functional complementarity; the lack of functional complementarity induces the radial flows; the radial flows generate an absolute hierarchy; the absolute hierarchy (through the fragmented administration) maintains the system's strength; the fragmented administration prompts, through the scale-mismatch, the reverse hierarchy; in the end, the scale-mismatch turn back the tertiary towns' role towards historical dimension. Such a paradoxical process is not serial, but circular: the city system in all the dimensions may be only a 'deviation', the crossing of a systematic and of a disordered system.

This is exacerbated by polarized connectivity and absolute hierarchy. Population, labour, and service flows are all predominantly directed to Tirana, anchoring in the gravity centre of activity, capital, and institutions. Now, connectivity reinforces rather than diminishes inequalities—nor do flows tend to circulate between secondary capitals but to follow the lead of the centres, reinforcing the underlying disparity that polycentricity ought to rectify [14, 46, 73].

Governance and scale round off this setup. Weak multi-level coordination and institutions that are fragmented result in significantly unguided urban interactions at the functional urban-region scale, and the disjuncture between administrative boundaries and the limits of functional interactions removes the territorial platform for polycentric dynamics [90, 104].

All these elements are not merely co-present; they operate together as parts of a single self-reproducing structure. Weak pluralism produces weak complementarity, weak complementarity produces weak radial flows; weak radial flows lead to weak absolute hierarchy, an absolute hierarchy maintained by scattered governance and scalar fragmentation. In PUR terms, Albania does not represent a partial or island form of polycentricity, but a structurally reproduced mismatch between territorial governance and urban-system interaction [11, 22] and, in the Albanian case, between institutional centralization and the weak relational integration of secondary cities [105, 75]. According to what has been advanced so far, this error would mean that a polycentric urban order, morphologically or functionally, would not come out of pluralism plus a weak balance of the interdependence, radial connectivity, and scalar fragmentation, but the reverse.

This configuration is not just an Albanian anomaly. Rather, it is indicative of the analytical shortcomings of PUR at advanced, small, late-urbanizing, structurally centralized contexts, which continue to have weak relational and institutional pre-conditions of polycentricity across regimes. The following two subsections elaborate on this implication: the first elaborates the process through which the configuration persists and thus tests Proposition 3; the second formalizes the conceptual meaningfulness of the Albanian case to PUR through the definition of two analytical categories (*structural scalar lock-in* and *pseudo-polycentric equilibrium*).

Mechanism of Reinforcement: Why the Configuration Stabilizes

The overall configuration found across all six dimensions is not just described by the cross-dimensional synthesis; it is recapitulated by it. The future shown in Figure 4 loop weak plurality, weak complementarity, radial flows, absolute hierarchy, fragmented governance, and scalar mismatch is recursive because every part both follows from the one before it and generates the one after it. It is this recursive nature that we examine Proposition 3: the predictive power of the assertion that weak inter-urban coordination and scalar mismatch, in combination, encourage infrastructure expansion, decentralization, and Europeanization or metropolitan primacy.

The three forces are analyzed separately. *Infrastructure extension* post-socialism has not created any linkages between secondary towns but has increased the pull of the core city. The Tirana-Durrës highway has been the backbone of the country-wide investment in roads, whereas transversal links

between secondary centres are non-existent or weak. Better access to capital has not created a balanced urban system: between 2014 and 2022, the net population loss in non-corridor areas was 178,094, which indicates that the same infrastructure that reduces travel time has also increased demographic and functional concentration [86]. When flows between urban areas are defined by a radial infrastructure pattern, additional infrastructure is needed to reinforce it.

Decentralization had a similar logic. The 2014 territorial reform reduced the number of local government units from 373 to 61 and enlarged municipal territories, but did not establish an overarching economic-metropolitan scale to coordinate inter-urban activity [91, 20, 13]. Authority was simply devolved downward, without the creation of the meso-level on which functional urban regions would necessarily depend, and municipalities remained dependent on the central state for 47.6 percent of their budgets [61]. While decentralization increases jurisdictional space, it also reenacts the vertical dependence characteristic of even the most successful *structural scalar lock-ins*.

The process of *Europeanization* has taken place through the same logic at a different level. EU integration, IPA funding, and territorial development tools have been filtered through the institutions of the national state level and concentrated on the development needs of metropolises. Instead of spreading capacity, they have reinforced the authority of the centre as an institution both administratively, financially, and symbolically [90, 19]. The rhetoric of territorial balance development is accompanied by a mechanism for delivering the benefits to Tirana.

The three forces alone are not in a vacuum. The concentration of infrastructure reaffirms the radial nature of flows (Dimension 3); decentralization without a meso-level reaffirms fragmented governance (Dimension 5); Europeanization through elimination reinforces the lot-hierarchy (Dimension 4). Each reform therefore enters the T-loop shown in Figure 4 and is percolated through it: instead of ordering the configuration, they add to it. This is why the equilibrium persists: old reforms do not fail due to poor implementation; their impacts are structurally coherent with the initial configuration.

On this evidence, Proposition 3 holds. During the post-socialist epoch, the three policy domains that are most predictably development-enhancing have instead underpinned metropolitan primacy, a result clarified by the six-dimensional framework. For Proposition 3 to be undermined, one would have to record at least one of the three forces' dramatically recalibrating demography, economics, or institutions from the urban center. Infrastructure would have generated a see-saw effect on inter-urban flows, decentralization would have brought about a viable meso-level, and the EU push would have lifted secondary Cities to an autonomous regional status. None of these conditions is established in Albania. The mechanism is therefore not only a description but also an explanation: it indicates the range of conditions that would unbalance the configuration and, by doing so, delineates the scope of concepts advanced in this chapter.

Theoretical and Comparative Implications

The cross-dimensional approach this article develops contributes to the literature on polycentricity, the evolution of the urban system, and late urbanization by shifting the analytical question from PUR-failure to PUR-deviance, a configuration that is structurally reproduced rather than incompletely realized [8, 40]. In this interpretation, the PUR serves as an analytical tool for exploring the various structural logics that reproduce a monocentric result rather than a normative standard for urban success.

The Albanian case confirms the core claims of PUR research: urban morphology alone is insufficient to determine whether urban regions are polycentric. A polycentric urban region is not created simply by having multiple urban centres and short interurban distances. It's the conditions

of relational compatibility between scale, functional specialization, inter-urban flows, and capability (administration) that make the morphology into a systemic unity [2, 3].

However, the argument is also sharper. In small, highly specialized, late-urbanizing settings, the failure of any of those conditions does not simply result in a delay in the emergence of polycentricity; rather, it results in a morphologically plural, but functionally monocentric spatial configuration. This addresses the analytical-normative divergence within the PUR body of knowledge: the framework ceases to be used as a normative measuring stick for Albania 's performance, and instead becomes a tool for diagnosis, revealing the institutional composition and territorial pathways through which monocentricity can occur. The goal would then be to shift from the teleological assumption in some approaches that urban modernization, decentralization, and Europeanization will eventually create polycentric spaces toward a reading of urbanization that takes institutional arrangements and histories into account [2, 8, 52].

The evidence collected in this paper indicates that deviations from the PUR ideal-type can take root as a relatively stable territorial configuration in small, centralized, and late-urbanizing territories. The real polycentricity in the Western Balkans, the persistence of metropolitan primacy, the weak performance of second-tier cities, the governance fragmentation, and scalar mismatch show that the monocentric patterns can still be endogenous to Eastern European conditions in contexts where the language of balanced territorial development becomes institutionalized. Such a suggestion does not mean that the trajectories of other emerging cases will be the same, only that through alternative political lines they are likely to converge in a similar territorial pattern. In this regard, the Albanian case is conceptually less a national case than a pragmatic departure points for a less teleological and more contextually relevant cross-national use of polycentricity in the Western Balkans [40, 67].

The limits of this contribution must be declared upfront. *Structural scalar lock-in* and *pseudo-polycentric equilibrium* seem most analytically tractable in cases that exhibit three particular conditions: a very small territorial scale that is imbued with a high degree of administrative concentration; a late and fast urbanization process occurring within a single metropolitan corridor; and the lack of a meso-level governance scale capable of structuring and mediating inter-urban interactions. In situations where one or more of the three conditions do not pertain in big federal states, urban networks where functional geographies are already institutionalized, or secondary cities that have become large enough, these mechanisms might work differently or need to be adapted. Hence, the contribution of the Albanian case-study does not so much lie in its scope for generalization but rather in illustrating what PUR theory presupposes but does not explicitly state: that polycentric order relies not just on urban diversity, but also on the institutional and functional conditions that render such diversity meaningful.

Advancing PUR Theory: Two Conceptual Contributions

The example of Albania opens two interrelated avenues for further development in PUR theory. Instead of treating deviations from PUR as an indicator of "polycentric failure," the Albanian case demonstrates that such deviations can create a stable territorial form in their own right. As a result, the discussion of the case expands the domain of application of polycentricity theory to non-metropolitan areas of the Global South and reveals peculiarities of this phenomenon that can be identified in small centralized territories that are yet to become urbanized [17, 18, 107, 102].

Structural Scalar Lock-In

The first of these is conceptual. *Structural scalar lock-in* does not imply a scalar mismatch as a phenomenon, but rather the dynamic in which the functional level at which urban activity takes place is institutionally undersupplied during each cycle of reform. Reforms either shift powers up to the central state or down to local municipalities, yet the level at which urban activity, employment, transport, provision, infrastructure, and coordination among urban centers occur is left institutionally neglected [18, 25]. The empirical feature of *structural scalar lock-in* lies in the mismatch between the functional geography of the urban regime and its institutional governance levels.

Structural scalar lock-in occurs where three criteria are simultaneously satisfied: (i) functional inter-urban relations extended beyond the municipal scale but were not institutionally organized at that level; (ii) successive reform rounds precisely bypassed the intermediate scale, shifting competences upward to the State or downward to the municipalities without establishing an inter-municipal governance scale; and (iii) no successful meso-level actor enjoyed the authority and the capacity to govern inter-urban relations. These three conditions are mutually reinforcing: where all three are satisfied, no institutional niche is reached at this scale, and any actor has acquired the prestige to stake his claim to it [12, 61]. This is precisely what happens in the Albanian reform process: by downscaling the municipal level and reducing the number of local government units (LGUs) from 373 to 61 in 2014, complemented also with a significant interprovincial reorganization; there was no created a regional governance tier for the new urban relations that have started working in this scale [14, 88].

The lock remains in place so long as reform is framed as a binary choice between complete centralization and complete decentralization; it begins to loosen only when the intermediate functional scale is institutionally recognized as a distinct level of governance — a recognition that has yet to materialize in the Albanian case.

Pseudo-Polycentric Equilibrium

The second contribution is of a typological nature. *Pseudo-polycentric equilibrium* is the designation of an urban-system pattern that cannot be accommodated within 'classical' monocentric polynuclear typologies. It is characterized by a morphological plurality, territorial agglomeration, and short inter-urban links alongside functional concentricity, radial flows, redundant sectoral structure, and absolute hierarchy. It is not a synonym for metropolitan primacy, but it represents a much broader territorial configuration where a plurality can coexist over time and space with a weak form of interdependence and organized dependence on a single or central city.

The fact that this typological configuration can be found in and across all six analytical dimensions of all regimes suggests that *pseudo-polycentric equilibrium* should be interpreted less as a stage of evolution toward full polycentrism than a stable configuration [3, 23, 41]. This configuration is characterized by the long-term coexistence of several cities and the absence of reciprocity, interdependence, and coordination typical of polycentric metropolitan areas.

Pseudo-polycentric equilibrium is generated by the confluence of three structural forces: the morphological pluralism inherited from a pre-urban or state-socialist foundation, the convergence of secondary-centres around analogous bundles of low-order functions in the course of market-restructuring, and institutional deficiencies that exclude the differentiation and integration that would yield inter-urban comparative advantage. This equilibrium does not constitute an efficient arrangement, but it remains stable because each component of the political economy bolsters the others. Dominance of metropolises monopolizes the mobile capital and labour markets that would

sustain a polycentric equilibrium; weakly developed inter-urban comparative advantage disincentivizes institutional development, which would promote inter-urban comparative advantage, and dispersed governance deprives the urban system of the capacity to transfer economic functions from city to city [20, 104].

The equilibrium disintegrates either from continuous functional differentiation (fiscal decentralization based on differentiated municipal mandates), asymmetric investment policies promoting the primacy of certain secondary poles, or the formal creation of functional urban regions and functional planning and governance scale. It is not particular to Albania. The comparative section that follows indicates that it may also be valid for a larger group of small, few-centered late urbanizing states that have not been endowed with the necessary territorial preconditions for polycentricity to resonate [40, 67].

Comparative Implications

The notions are also carried forward beyond the Albanian case. They serve to disentangle the analytical from the normative, re-establishing the PUR as a category for analytical use rather than a normative prescription [58, 107]. In doing so, they break that paradox of a concept turned policy 'more than deployed despite, even before, the ability of the concept to account for its own explanatory conditions has been secured' [2, 4, 6].

This same pattern of territorial structure is visible elsewhere in the Western Balkans. In Kosovo, the combination of a capital with a dominant, yet weak and functionally disconnected secondary city reproduces the same constraints as in Albania [103, 104]. The important comparative point is not that cases produce similar outcomes, but that the same overall pattern of territorial structure is reproduced independently of the political/institutional pathway. On a more general level, morphological polycentrism combined with functional concentricity is associated with rather small, late-urbanizing, highly state-centered contexts in which polycentricity has acquired the nature of discourse rather than infrastructure.

Contrary to the linear reasoning that the rise of the economy, infrastructure, or EU relations will induce polycentric development, the Albanian case shows that monocentric configurations remain structurally coherent so long as governance arrangements and territorial scales fail to produce functional differentiation and inter-urban integration [61, 90]. From a methodological perspective, the cases exemplify the added value of a cross-temporal ideal-type comparison based on a characteristic, allowing the researcher to determine how distinct causal structures lead to similar polycentric or non-polycentric outcomes and, crucially, to delineate the specific circumstances under which the concepts developed in this paper would not hold. Even the two constructs do not conclude the analysis of Albania but constitute an entry into a comparative agenda that the following section further develops for the Western Balkans.

WESTERN BALKANS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Adding a broader Western Balkan comparison enables to assess whether Albania stands as a first and unique case of an entire non-polycentric phenomenon or as one fragmented instance within a common pattern. Here, the aim of this section is not to fit one narrative on the entire region, but to investigate whether other countries with considerably different political and institutional pathways [67, 108] produce analogous non-polycentric results. Considered together the six PUR dimensions, the Western Balkan urban systems reveal the following common pattern: morphology that is highly

variable and differentiated, yet characterized by weak functional interaction, radial connectivity, the dominance of a single metropolis, segmented territorial governance and a mismatch of scales.

Table 5 structures the comparative analysis of the Western Balkans by linking each case to its dominant causal pathway and convergent PUR-type outcome, thereby clarifying how similar non-polycentric territorial configurations can emerge through different political and institutional trajectories.

Table 5. Western Balkans Comparison: Pathways and Convergent Outcomes

Country	Dominant pathway	Convergent outcome in PUR terms
Kosovo	Externally induced decentralization without effective regional coordination; formal plurality with weak municipal capacity	Morphological plurality, weak complementarity, fragile governance, and continued concentration in Pristina
Montenegro	Passive centralization through fiscal dependence and weak local autonomy	Metropolitan primacy in Podgorica, weak secondary centers, and low regional coordination capacity
North Macedonia	Formal decentralization with weak fiscal-administrative capacity and central symbolic-political concentration in Skopje	Nominal plurality without functional interdependence; weak secondary-city regionality
Serbia	Gradual re-centralization through fiscal dependence, politicization, and state-led megaprojects	Morphological plurality masking functional concentricity centered on Belgrade
Albania	Rescaling without meso-level governance; persistent scalar mismatch and fragmented coordination	Pseudo-polycentric equilibrium: visible plurality with functional concentricity centred on Tirana

Table 6 compares the six-dimensional PUR analysis of a convergent non-polycentric outcome across the Western Balkans. Diagnostically, what is significant is not that the outcomes are similar, but that what this means structurally is different; causal pathways can lead to the same structural outcome.

Table 6. Western Balkans: Six-Dimensional PUR Diagnostic

PUR Dimension	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia	Albania
Plurality of centers	Formal plurality; 38 municipalities without balanced urban structure	Podgorica dominant; 25 weak municipalities	80 municipalities; nominal plurality without regional weight	174 units; morphological plurality masking concentricity	Multiple centers; structurally fragile and demographically declining

Functional complementarity	Pristina concentrates supra-local functions; secondary cities undifferentiated	Secondary centers lack differentiated economic roles	Skopje consolidates functions; weak secondary-city specialization	Belgrade absorbs higher-order functions; periphery converges on low-order activities	Persistent functional similarity; low-order convergence outside Tirana
Connectivity and flows	Radial flows toward Pristina; weak inter-urban linkages	Flows oriented toward Podgorica; limited horizontal connectivity	Skopje-centred mobility; weak transversal connections	Re-centralization reinforces Belgrade-oriented flow patterns	Structurally radial; four corridors converging on Tirana–Durrës
Relative hierarchy	Pristina primacy preserved despite formal decentralization	Passive centralization sustains Podgorica dominance	Skopje 2014 reinforces symbolic and political capital primacy	Gradual re-centralization consolidates Belgrade dominance	Cumulative metropolitan primacy across all three periods
Institutional coordination and territorial governance	Fragile legal frameworks; limited enforcement and coordination capacity	Fiscal dependence on state; recentralized planning competences	Weak fiscal-administrative capacity; no effective regional tier	Administrative politicization weakens local autonomy	No meso-level governance after 2014 reform
Scale and territorial congruence	Functional regions unrecognized; institutional scale misaligned	Municipal scale too local; no intermediate governance level	Ohrid decentralization without functional regionalization	Selective decentralization bypasses intermediate urban scale	Persistent scalar lock-in; functional and administrative scales structurally misaligned

In Kosovo, a territory reliant on decentralization within the Ahtisaari Plan, created by external forces, led to the formation of a constitutionally plural framework, but Pristina retained control over supra-local economic, political, and institutional functions. Consequently, Kosovo has a territorially fractured system in which the 38 municipalities do not provide a balanced urban framework, and towns (including Peja, Gjakova, and Prizren) have not gained the weight to form regional poles [109, 110]. Land-use planning has been further weakened by superficial legal frameworks with insufficient enforcement resources [111], corruption, a lack of formal administrative capacity, and a divided, weak local authority, which has affected the territorial effectiveness of decentralization. Kosovo is

comparable to Albania, but in a different way: external forces created institutional pluralism while in Albania, regional governance occurred [104, 112].

Montenegro is on a different track, best described as a form of passive centralization. The primacy of the capital has been maintained not through a reversal of an apparent system restructuring, but through a limited territorial development of decentralization. At present, the 25 municipalities are only formally decentralized entities and are still very much dependent on the state, with no regional pole actually functioning [108, 113]. The 2017 Law of Spatial Planning reiterated ministerial control and the re-centralization of power, further strengthening Podgorica's rule [113, 114]. The process has proceeded step by step from top down, leaving municipalities as narrow and weak as possible, so as to avoid the development of a strong counterweight to the capital.

North Macedonia is a clear example of formal decentralisation without real regionalisation. Although the Ohrid Framework Agreement devolved competences to some 80 municipalities, these remain without a real fiscal or administrative constitution to allow for real functional differentiation or inter-urban interdependence [115]. Subsequently, the Skopje 2014 Project reaffirmed a capital-centered territorial logic, consolidating the symbolic and political centrality of Skopje while establishing limits to the territorial functions of secondary cities [116, 117]. What then flourishes is rather a situation of legal decentralization and deconcentrating, with remaining concentricity and regional weak capacities [118].

Serbia produces an outcome very similar to Albania. Fiscal reliance, politicization of administration, and fragmentary decentralization have eroded local autonomy over time, despite the existence of 174 local self-governments (145 municipalities and 29 cities) [119, 120]. Megaprojects such as the Belgrade Waterfront illustrate how special legal arrangements can create pathways that contradict regular urban planning procedures and citizen participation, thereby greatly strengthening the capital city [121, 122]. The result is a morphologically plural but functionally monocentric urban system; this has occurred through a trajectory of incremental re-centralization rather than a system transition [67].

In each of the four cases, the pathways were extremely different: the most that could be identified was the term of policy-styling: externally induced decentralization in Kosovo, passive state-centeredness in Montenegro, apparent (yet potentially hollow) decentralization in North Macedonia, and gradual re-centralization in Serbia. The territorial result, however, was similar. Despite morphological diversity, the territorial core remained monocentric; despite governance scales, functional geographies persisted; despite the existence of the secondary centers, no local sub-national regional poles emerged. This similarity of all disruptive paths to the same pseudo-polycentric equilibrium indicates that it is not an Albanian anomaly but a regional trend. Less extensively and less systematically studied than the other three states, the unfailing 'trend' of small, centralized late-urbanizing post-communist nation-states in the CEE region has been that of adopting the discourses of European polycentricity, while either missing the institutional capacity to translate this vision into reality or simply lacking the territory for implementation [67, 120].

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Albania should be understood more as a polycentric urban system, with a number of urban nodes coexisting within a predominantly monocentric structure, rather than as a failed polycentric model for Europe. Though there are many centers of the urban regions of the country, these lack the integrated, functional complementarity and the institutional embeddedness that should characterize a full-fledged polycentric urban region.

Across the three political eras considered, the same configuration re-emerges: weak relational integration, absolute hierarchy, fragmented governance, and the continuous scalar mismatch [20, 61, 76, 90]. Urban plurality, then, does not necessarily reflect an incipient polycentricity. It may simply continue existing in a non-polycentric territorial configuration that reproduces itself for the following decade.

The central theoretical implication is that deviation from the PUR ideal-type should not be read as a failed or incomplete policy by default. In small, centralized, late-urbanizing contexts, the failure of enabling conditions to form can itself become a stable territorial arrangement. Two concepts have been developed here to characterize that condition. A structural scalar lock-in is the self-reinforcing reproduction of any institutional vacuum at the middle scale of urban life, and pseudo-polycentric equilibrium is the territorial condition of current urban pluralism while maintaining spatial-functional concentricity. In combination, the two concepts urge PUR theory to do what it has been reluctant to do systematically: to reach beyond the question of the emergence of polycentricity towards those structural preconditions that don't form and to understand why the failure may be resilient rather than transitional [2, 17].

The boundaries of this argument should be clearly stated. While an analytical case can be made for both kinds of *structural scalar lock-in* and *pseudo-polycentric equilibrium* in situations that have small territorial scale, highly centralised administration, and fast urban growth concentrated in one metro-region corridor, with governance at the mesoscale absent on an ongoing basis, the conceptual power of the argument diminishes in large federal states, urban systems with institutionalized functional urban regions, or situations where the secondary cities have accumulated enough economic mass to sustain autonomous complementarity. Here, though, the role of Albania is not as an 'ideal' but as an historical/structural boundary case: one that reveals what PUR theory takes for granted (but seldom explicitly draws attention to) the 'necessary' condition for polycentricity to matter: the simultaneous presence of an urban plurality and the institutional, functional circumstances that make that plurality meaningful as a complex.

In subsequent work, it would be illuminating to explore it's when(s) and how(s) in this process of scalar lock-in breaking down, whether they have in the redistribution of functional scale dominance, institutional presence of a middle rank, or the accumulation in the long term of economic and institutional mass by secondary cities.

For spatial planning and EU-oriented territorial policy, the implication is that polycentricity cannot be produced by spatial form alone, by infrastructure expansion, or by the rhetoric of decentralization. When governance is not organized around that scale of urban interaction, reforms may merely expand jurisdictional space without actually producing interdependence, thereby serving, in the process, to deepen metropolitan concentration at least in the language of balanced territorial development. The basic idea is that polycentricity is not a spatial prescription to be transferred, but a condition that depends on the degree of governance at the suitable scale in which a city operates. For Albania, and for the family of small, centralized, rural, late-urbanizing states that share a similar structural profile, the road to functional polycentricity does not appear to lie in more infrastructure, nor in more decentralizing language, but rather in the gradual build-up of institutional capacity at the intermediate scale that has been systematically bypassed from the outset and at which urban interaction has long required governance solutions.

NOMENCLATURE

PUR	Polycentric Urban Region
EU	European Union
ESDP	European Spatial Development Perspective
SOTA	State of the Art
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
INSTAT	Institute of Statistics of Albania
WB	World Bank
FUR	Functional Urban Region
FUA	Functional Urban Area
IP3	Institute for Public and Private Policies
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
RQ1–RQ3	Research Questions 1 to 3

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding this study.

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