

Serbia's experience in landscape character assessment – Implementation of the European Landscape Convention

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The Republic of Serbia ratified the European Landscape Convention (ELC) in 2011. The ratification had brought new demands, potentials and challenges in the field of spatial planning in Serbia, especially in terms of the integral approach to spatial planning and the necessary improvement of planning related to landscape ecology. Two ministries have been placed in charge of the implementation of the ELC: the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection and the Ministry of Culture and Information. In the period following the ratification of the Convention, and in cooperation with the Institute for nature conservation of Serbia, the two ministries have endeavored to promote and present the ELC on the entire territory of the Republic of Serbia. Further progress in the implementation of the ELC came in 2014 with the preparation of two documents: Draft Action plan for the implementation of the European Landscape Convention and Draft Rulebook on criteria for identification of landscapes and the method for assessing their significant and characteristic features, both awaiting adoption.

The Action plan emphasizes the need to identify the types of landscape characters on the territory of the Republic of Serbia as basis for the establishment of landscape policy and its integration in spatial and sector plans. The Rulebook defines procedures and information support for identifying the types of landscape character in Serbia. Assessment of possible application of the established instruments and landscape character type identification is carried out through different pilot projects.

In line with the said documents, the first pilot project entitled “Improvement of capacities of Sumadija and Pomoravlje regions toward the application of the European Landscape Convention” was initiated during 2015, and so far the first phase of the project entitled “Classification and description of the character of Sumadija and Pomoravlje regions” has been completed. The execution of the project was entrusted to the Regional Economic Development Agency for Sumadija and Pomoravlje, in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Serbia.

Šmadija and Pomoravlje administrative districts occupy the central part of Serbia, spreading over 5.001 km², accounting for 5.65% of the total territory of the Republic of Serbia, with 365 settlements (according to the 2011 census) and 507.884 inhabitants or 101 pop. per km².

Landscapes define the character of the regions of Sumadija and Pomoravlje and influence on everyday life of their inhabitants. It has changed for centuries and it will continue to change / in some places suddenly and dramatically, on the other, gradually and subtly. These changes, many landscape elements and objects, typical for particular regions, are destroyed or irrevocably lost, therefore the peculiar character of the landscape is consequently moderated, that further lead to its uniformity. Therefore, it is important to recognize the diversity of Sumadija and Pomoravlje landscapes, to identify the characteristics that give each area its own, specific spirit of the place and make it different from the others, allowing their recognition, appreciation and conservation in making all decisions that affect on changes in the regions.

The objectives of the pilot project are:

(a) Using the experience gained in the identification process for the Project of establishment of spatial landscape database for the Republic of Serbia and the establishment of spatial landscape database for Sumadija and Pomoravlje administrative districts, which are defined in the Action Plan as a priority;

(b) Using the results and experience gained in the development and organization of the identification and assessment of the landscape character, in order to continue landscape character identification and landscape assessment on the territory of Sumadija and Western Serbia administrative districts in the coming years;

(c) Publication of results in form of a study and brochure, and creation of a website of the competent regional development agency;

(g) Preparation of materials to be used for presentation and promotion of activities related to the implementation of ELC in other districts of the Republic of Serbia, in other relevant planning institutions and institutions covering other sectors (forestry, agriculture, water management, nature protection, environmental protection etc.);

(d) Indirect contribution to the legal recognition of landscape, formulation of a comprehensive landscape policy and its integration into the planning basis, strengthening public awareness of landscape and international cooperation on landscape issues, i.e. the realization of general and specific measures defined by the European Landscape Convention.

The method applied to identify the Sumadija and Pomoravlje landscape character is based on the British landscape character assessment, specifically the Landscape Character Assessment, Supplementary Guidance, Technical Handbook, Worcestershire County Council, of 2013, accepted and applied throughout Europe. The method is based on the spatial approach based on maps, using the geographic information system (GIS). A key aspect of this method is the deliberate separation of the phase of characterization, as value-neutral phase, from value judgments inherent to the landscape character assessment.

The first phase of the Sumadija and Pomoravlje landscape character assessment project started in 2015, which involves three steps. The first step is to gather and review relevant data that provide a preliminary indication of the landscape description units. The second step is field work, collecting photographic documentation, recording both objective data and subjective impressions of the local population of the area, and review of the description of the initial landscape description units. The third step is the integration of the landscape description units into the landscape character types and providing guidelines for the preservation and enhancement of the landscape character.

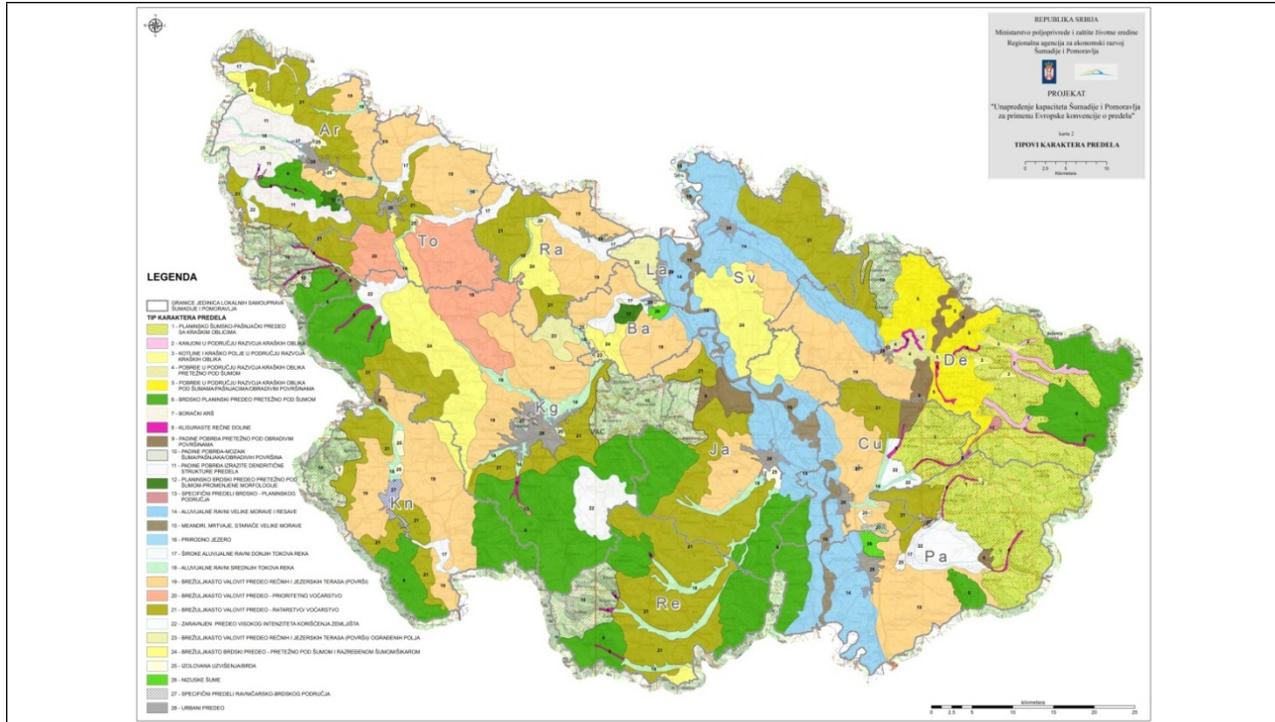
A detailed landscape description unit (LDU) consists of: landscape profile, status, ecological profile, mapped elements of cultural landscapes, areas and objects of nature protection, geomorphological phenomena, spatial changes, field data, and photo-documentation.

After defining LDUs, these are consolidated into a visually coherent "Landscape Characteristics Types" (LCT). A detailed description of the landscape character types contains: a list of LCTs integrated into the landscape character type; key features; description of the character; determinants; contemporary influences on the character; general guidelines for the preservation and enhancement of the character; mapped elements of the cultural landscape and nature conservation areas (Figure 1).

The result of the first phase of the Sumadija and Pomoravlje landscape character assessment project is the creation of 287 Landscape Description Units (LDU) that are integrated into 28 Landscape Character Types (LCT), as well the creation of information database. The identified landscape character types pointed to a large overall diversity of landscapes, contrasting with respect to natural features, the potentials of natural and cultural heritage, resource development, and in relation to the degree of their preservation and recognition.

In practice, a number of landscape character types, preserved historical structures and traditional building heritage, old orchards, rich sources of medicinal and thermal waters, cultural and natural heritage identified in this project are still poorly recognized and promoted.

Expert team's first experiences in working with coordinators and local population went from the initial misconception of the concept of landscape to the understanding and recognition of landscape as a resource for development. Numerous information and knowledge obtained from local population, such as less known sites and buildings, contemporary landscape degradation processes etc., were extremely helpful in the realization of this project.



LCT-02: Canyons in the area of Karst forms



LCT-05: Hills in the area of karst formations under forests / pastures / arable land



LCT-14: Alluvial plains of Velika Morava and Resava rivers

Figure 1: Sumadija and Pomoravlje districts' landscape character types

Identification, classification and description of landscape character types of Sumadija and Pomoravlje is the first step in protecting, planning and management landscapes in this area. This is also the first step in the implementation of the European Landscape Convention in the Republic of Serbia on a comprehensive manner.

The information database on the identified character types of Sumadija and Pomoravlje landscape, which was created in the first phase of the project, is the basis for the continuation of the second phase on a much finer scale, i.e. landscape assessment. The result of the second phase is the assessment of the situation and sensitivity of the discovered landscape character types, separation of valuable landscape, defining the guidelines for the protection, management and planning, and mapping of valuable historical cultural landscapes.

Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection, 2015. “Improvement of capacities of Sumadija and Pomoravlje regions toward the application of the European Landscape Convention”
More information at: www.predeliscasrbije.rs