

Urban dipoles of Thessaly



More than forty years after the concept was first proposed, the 'dipole' strategy for regional development in the Thessaly region of Greece is finally coming to life. Future regional development of the region will depend on complementary and coordinated development of the four main cities in the region, backed by improved transport networks between them – a polycentric metropolitan zone of connected cities.

The sites where the Mediterranean Games take place in Larissa (left) and Volos (right).

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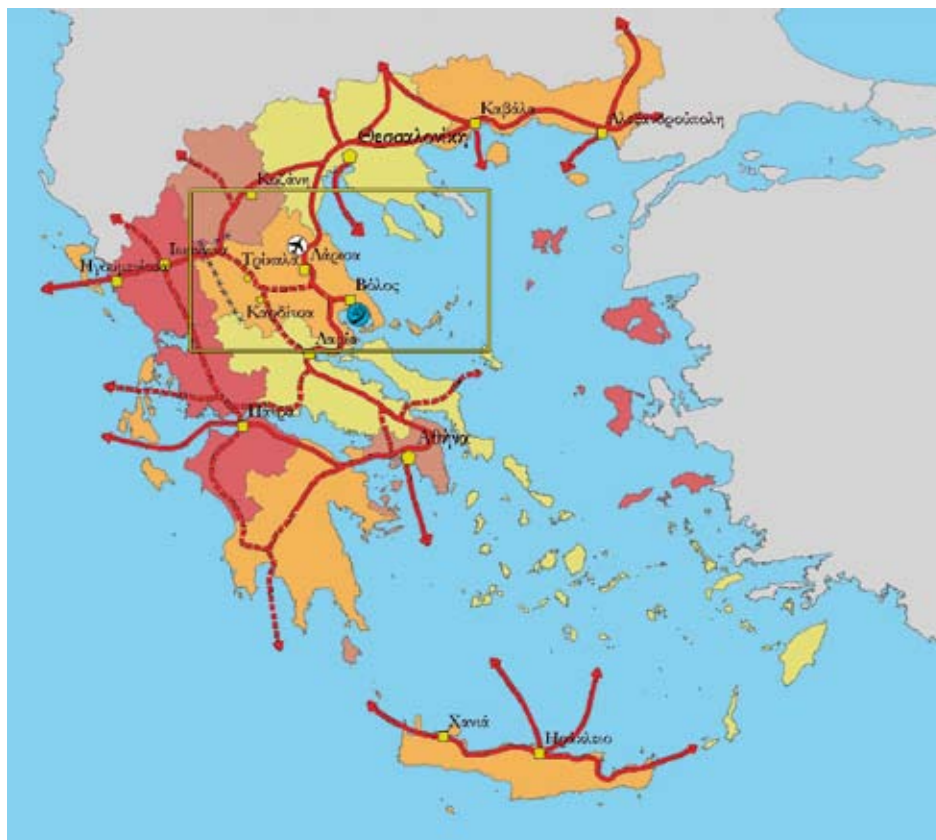
In November 2007 the Greek region of Thessaly organised a conference in the town of Larissa, with the mayors of its four main cities present, to debate the development of 'dipoles', or bipolar urban networks. After the opening of the meeting by the secretary-general of the region, a fierce debate between Larissa, Volos, Trikala and Karditsa followed. The issue of dipoles had been discussed before, but this time things were finally moving. Volos and Larissa teamed up for a joint candidacy to host the Mediterranean Games and won the bid. This was the first tangible proof that two rival cities could achieve something together. It placed the dipole discussion in a new perspective, pulling it out of the academic sphere and shifting the focus to realisation.

However, during this meeting Thessaly's four mayors could not come to full agreement. The most challenging opinion was expressed by the mayor of Trikala, Michael Tamilos. Trikala has traditionally had close ties with Larissa and the town seemed to feel threatened by the development of stronger ties between Volos and Larissa. Mr Tamilos argued that the dipole would work to the advantage of Larissa, the regional capital, at the cost of Volos, which would have to cope with stagnating growth. Whether Mr Tamilos is right or not, his opinion reflects a strong belief that dipoles will have a significant impact on a sustainable territorial balance between the cities in the Thessaly region. As such it deserves a closer look.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIPOLE CONCEPT

The concept of a closer relationship between Volos and Larissa is at least 40 years

old. It aims to develop common functions on a wider spatial scale, although the towns lie 50 km from each other. In much of Europe this may seem quite some distance, but in Greece, 50 km is considered to be quite close. In 1967, the Regional Study of the National Network of Urban Centres introduced for the first time the notion of a dipole, with clear reference to Volos and Larissa. The objective was to create a 'multicentred centre' with distinct urban centres.¹ Each of the towns would be specialised in a subcategory of functions at an equivalent level in the urban hierarchy, but would also be closely connected. By the end of the 1970s, a study by the Centre of Intense Development of Volos and Larissa² was officially approved. This study adopted the same concept, projecting a dipole population of about 335,000 for the year 2000 (160,000 for Volos and 175,000 for Larissa). In reality, in 2000 the two cities had a joint population →



The region Thessaly in Greece.

of 240,000. However, it could be argued that the projection was based on the presumption that a dipole policy would be adopted, but that never happened.

At present, the officially approved Framework of Regional Planning and Sustainable Development has clearly adopted the rationale behind the concept of the dipole system for Volos and Larissa. The concept was partly incorporated in the Regional Development Fund 2000–2006. As a consequence, the dipole concept seems to have matured and can count on appropriate institutional support.

STRATEGIC PLANNING IN THESSALY

A strategic plan is needed for the dipole to develop further. Three main planning instruments are available in Thessaly. First, the current development programme is the Regional Operational Programme of Thessaly 2000–2006, which is part of the Community Support Framework for Greece and is co-financed by EU. A Regional Strategic Development Programme 2007–2013 is in preparation and will correspond to a national programme. Planning interventions and

public works in Thessaly are financed through the regional programme and the national sectoral programmes. Second, a statutory Regional Framework of Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development has been available since 2003. This strategic spatial plan provides guidance for the lower level of town and country planning. The third planning instrument is found in the two General Development Plans of Larissa and Volos.

DIPOLE GUIDANCE FROM THE REGIONAL FRAMEWORK

The second instrument mentioned above, the Regional Framework of Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development of Thessaly, contains specific analyses for city networking in this region and specific directions for a dipole strategy. It proposes an improvement in intraregional networking. In parallel with an upgraded urban function for Larissa and Volos, their connecting axis is expected to develop towards a dipole of interregional significance, with a strong concentration of urban and industrial activities in the form of a modestly sized metropolitan zone. The Trikala-Karditsa axis, as well as secondary axes extending eastwards from these towns,

will support the development of the western part of Thessaly.

The Regional Framework also contains directions for each of the towns involved. For Larissa, opportunities will be found in the gradual emergence of a ‘northern development front’ in Greece. Larissa is viewed as the major city ‘behind’ Thessaloniki, and at present complementary functions are arising in the fields of commerce and logistics, and possibly also public administration, depending upon the progress made with the national decentralisation strategy. Such functions presuppose new comparative advantages corresponding to locational requirements. To support such advantages a variety of interventions is required: high-level transport infrastructure, commerce and logistical facilities, a high quality urban environment, development of services, and improved R&D and higher education. To realise such improvements, cooperation with Volos is essential in order to achieve economies of scale. As opportunities for major transformations in the centre of Larissa are limited, it is vital that alternatives options involving new, well planned areas for the location of central functions are investigated.

Volos, with its port, university and tourism, is already playing a role which exceeds the prefectural and, in some cases, regional borders. These three economic activities can expand with the support of better transport, urban facilities and an appropriate strategy for the university (both for education and R&D). Increasing complementarities with Larissa, with the gradual formation of a metropolitan zone, is expected to create opportunities for the two cities, with each taking on a different role.

The currently isolated north-west section of the region, with the towns of Karditsa and Trikala, will assume a radically different role according to the Framework, which proposes the connection of Thessaly to the northern growth front of Greece and its western axis. The north-west will then acquire the character of a supraregional



Urban network in Thessaly.

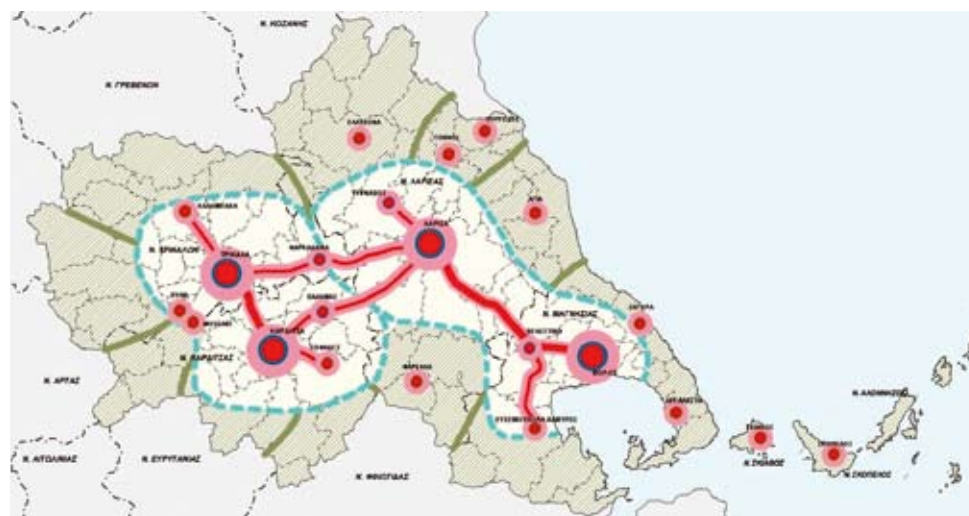
The concept of a closer relationship between Volos and Larissa is at least 40 years old

entry point. This development will open up new possibilities in commerce and services, particularly for Trikala.

THE VOLOS-LARISSA DIPOLE

The proposed Volos-Larissa dipole offers some key benefits. There are several arguments in favour of such a system. First, the dipole is to become a small metropolis, ranking third in the urban hierarchy of Greece behind Athens and Thessaloniki and above Patra. According to the 2001 census, Volos and Larissa together have a population of more than 240,000. If the dipole system functions as planned, the population in 2010 is estimated to be around 300,000. At this level, the small dipole metropolis can acquire an upgraded role in the urban hierarchy compared to the roles of the two cities separately. A growing regional role – which is also indicated by the recent selection of Larissa as the centre of the larger Region of Thessaly, Epirus and Sterea Hellas – would expand the influence of the Volos-Larissa system beyond the current regional boundaries. At an international level, its influence could extend towards the south-west area of the Balkans. Such a role would require new services in the fields of administration, higher education and research. Also a larger-scale

cultural infrastructure, such as a ‘Megaron of Music’,³ is needed to support cultural activities and city marketing. Attention will need to be paid to the location of such flagship projects. A ‘neutral’ choice somewhere between the two cities might avoid tensions and competition between them. Furthermore, a shared labour market could attract private investments in manufacturing industry – a field in which Volos is active – and in the provision of more metropolitan services



Spatial structure of the Thessaly region.

by private companies. With a larger, more flexible and qualitatively differentiated and shared labour market, the competitiveness of Volos-Larissa could surpass its current local limits, as the successful bid to host the 2013 Mediterranean Games shows. Economies of scale would allow (and need) better basic infrastructure, both technical and social, such as regular air transport, better education and health services.

FEASIBILITY

While the development of the Volos-Larissa dipole is in accordance with both existing official policies and has realistic socioeconomic advantages, the concept also needs to address the feasibility of such an operation. The distance between Volos and Larissa is considerable. Currently it takes about 30 minutes to travel the 50–55 km by car, 35 minutes by bus and 35–40 minutes by rail. Further improvements (gradual or drastic) are needed. The existing airports at Anchialos and Larissa do not offer regular scheduled flights to European cities. We consider upgrading of air transport to be essential. While the telecommunications and energy infrastructure is sufficient, the social and cultural infrastructure needs further improvement. In this respect, the role of the University of Thessaly is crucial. On the →

SECTOR	ACTIONS	PHASE 1 CONFIGURATION	PHASE 2 BENEFIT MAXIMISATION
Transport	Suburban railway	x	x
	Regular flight schedules	x	
	Improvements by connecting Volos with the National north-south motorway	x	x
	Significant increase in parking spaces and their management in the areas surrounding the centre	x	x
	Upgrading of quality of bus services and research into the feasibility of alternative forms of public transport service in Volos	x	
	Alleviate traffic problems	x	x
Tele-communications	Further improvements to the networks	x	x
Social and cultural infrastructure of interregional scope	Further development of the University of Thessaly		x
	Upgrading research infrastructure and activities	x	x
	Location and design of major cultural buildings (one or two flagship projects))	x	
Production infrastructure	Logistics Centre	x	x
	New industrial and commercial parks	x	x
Development planning	Schedule actions for supporting the dipole system in the framework of the Structural Funds 2007–2013	x	x
	Use new development legislation (2007) to support the dipole system	x	x
	Elaborate strategy of city marketing for the dipole		x
Spatial planning	Incorporate the Volos-Larissa system into a broader networking policy for the urban system of Thessaly and the central mainland of Greece		x
Urban planning	Coordinate the regulatory plans and general development plans of the two cities	x	x
	Adopt and implement suitable land use policy in the intervening rural areas	x	x
	Regeneration of the existing urban space, especially the city centres	x	x
Governance	Develop mechanisms of metropolitan governance at the level of each single city and administrative organisations at the dipole level	x	x
Private sector	Attract new investments at metropolitan level	x	x
Social consensus	Improvement in the degree of acceptance of the dipole concept by the general public, at the level of the individual cities and the region, by creating participation structures and cultural facilities.	x	x
	Social policies which support sensitive social groups and contribute to demarginalisation, social cohesion, solidarity, education and sustainability	x	x



cultural side, a strategy of city marketing would benefit the dipole, with the construction of flagship projects as boosters. The rail connection between the two cities needs to be improved in preparation for the Mediterranean Games. The peripheral position of the stations in the city deserves a closer look. Upgrading the areas surrounding these stations is of vital importance as well.

International access can be provided by both airports. A strategically important move would be to link Larissa Airport to the main rail connection between Athens and Thessaloniki by constructing a combined station/terminal. The research infrastructure is very limited at present, which is characteristic of the Greek periphery. The manufacturing and other production sectors lack adequate logistics centres and conference facilities, and new types of tourist activities are also needed. The present population of the dipole is 240,000. Although third in the Greek urban hierarchy, it is a relatively small metropolis by European standards. The political will to develop the region has been expressed in official documents, but the public still has to be consulted and brought on board to obtain public consensus. Equally, spatial planning practice needs to adapt to the necessities of the dipole.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

Despite older and recent planning decisions on the Larissa-Volos urban system, dipole policies have not been systematically implemented. A notable exception was the

adoption of the dipole by the departments of the regional administration.⁴ The strategy needs to be incorporated throughout the administration to succeed, with operational planning encouraged. The following table presents basic elements for such a strategy. It indicates first (A) and second (B) priorities for the initial formation of the dipole system (phase 1) and other priorities for maximising benefits (phase 2).

The dipole system will require a complex and multilevel strategy to cover all the above-mentioned issues. The following two sets of actions have strong priority.

The first priority set is concerned with the planning and development of the dipole in the first strategic phase, when priority should be given to the multiple actions of the transport sector (see map of infrastructure and energy networks). Improving mutual accessibility of the two poles is a vital precondition for the 'merging' of each single urban market into a larger and integrated one. To enable economies of scale and agglomeration benefits, several 'transport-accessibility' actions are needed. These include implementation of a suburban railway and upgrading of bus services. Regular flight schedules are needed, as well as improvement of the motorway connecting Volos with the national north-south motorway. Traffic issues need to be confronted and additional well-managed parking space around the central districts of both cities needs to be provided.

The second phase concerns the maximisation of the benefits of the dipole system. However, this phase should start to be implemented simultaneously with the first one, as the main difference between the two phases involves transferring the focus of attention. This second set of actions on 'competitiveness' includes the use of the 2007 legislation for supporting the dipole system. Moreover, mechanisms of metropolitan governance need to be developed at the level of each city as well as organisations and administration instruments at the level of the dipole. The elaboration of a dipole city marketing strategy is also expected to attract new investments. In the meantime, increasing the regional and local public acceptance of the Volos-Larissa urban system remains of high importance.

The combination of the above initiatives into sets of actions is extremely important. Most actions originate from different sectors. However, when mutually integrated, the competitiveness of the dipole system can be increased to interregional and possibly international levels. The development of the Volos-Larissa Dipole can create the conditions required for further regional development in Thessaly.

Notes

- 1 CPEP, National System of Urban Centres Study, Athens, 1967 (in Greek).
- 2 Ministry of Public Works, Organisation of the Intensive Development Centre Volos-Larissa Study, Athens, 1979 (in Greek).
- 3 In Greece a large building accommodating musical events is called a 'Megaron of Music'. The name not only refers to the building but to a whole series of activities and the associated cultural organisation. At present there are two 'Megara', one in Athens and one in Thessaloniki.
- 4 EYDE PEP of Thessaly, 'Regional Strategic Development Plan for Thessaly 2007-2013' and 'Contribution to the National Development Conference', Larissa, 2005 (in Greek).