

Naja MAROT

## How complex is society really?

### Review of *Kompleksna družba v radikalni sredini* (Complex Society in the Radical Middle)

**Title:** *Kompleksna družba v radikalni sredini* (Complex Society in the Radical Middle)

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**Foreword:** Srečo Dragoš

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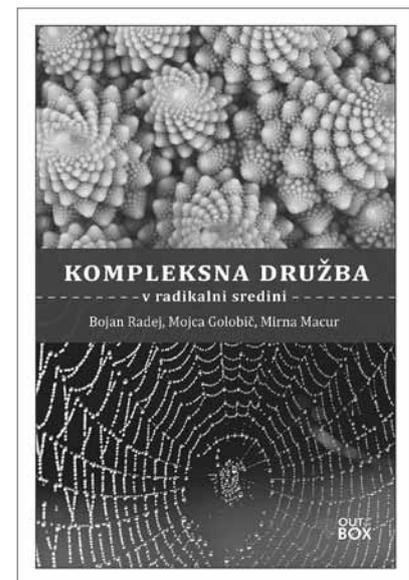
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In December 2012, the University of Ljubljana's Biotechnical Faculty published a book titled *Kompleksna družba v radikalni sredini* (Complex Society in the Radical Middle) in conjunction with the Slovenian Evaluation Society. This book studies society from a different perspective and focuses on the complexity of society and its evaluation. The authors describe complexity in two ways or along two axes. The first one is horizontal and, according to it, various social stakeholders have completely legitimate – but also different – visions of what is good for the community as a whole. An example of this is modern social concepts that combine elements that oppose one another in terms of content and interest; for instance, sustainable development and spatial cohesion. The second, vertical axis indicates the contrast between collective and individual levels of evaluating social matters, or between the incompatibility of findings at different levels of treatment. In simplified terms, what a local community recognizes as good for itself is not necessarily also recognized by the state; or, from the perspective of an individual's relationship to the wider society, "what is good for an individual or a narrow community is not necessarily good for the wider community" (p. 17).

In order to overcome this problem, which can have a negative effect on the

results of evaluating policies and regulations and potentially turn measures in an unwanted or an even less cost-effective direction, the authors suggest the adoption of a new innovative meso-approach. They first present this approach methodologically, and then use several examples to demonstrate its applicability. They first address and evaluate the achievement of spatial cohesion, which is also one of the EU development goals, and then go on to evaluate the effectiveness of the public sector based on the self-evaluation of public administration bodies, also known as the common evaluation framework. In the fifth chapter, the Mura Valley region is selected to demonstrate how modern policies usually specify measures unilaterally in order to meet their priorities, while not taking into account potential side effects that can often be at odds. Judging from the analyses, this proves to be most detrimental to social capital, which is excluded from economic and environmental-spatial measures.

The last chapter revisits new social concepts and their names, all of which are aimed at a comprehensive understanding of society and social phenomena. These are terms such as *synthesis, synergy, integration, cohesion, balance, sustainability, harmony, and excellence*. They are used often, but reflecting on their meaning within the social context can



often be puzzling. The authors find an umbrella term for them: "meso-thinking" or "meso-society", which has been used for quite some time now, but has largely been ignored. They specify its main characteristics: the exchange of opinions and internal evaluation scores leads to the creation of collective and uniform elements; the procedural evaluation that constantly takes place in the middle between two poles, between the cause and effect, factors and results, potential and needs; and the dual synthesis procedure that ensures an objective summary. As one of the radical effects of taking this kind of approach, the authors mention the lack of a need for the macroeconomic approach because the "truth" – or a more reliable truth – can also be learned differently.

The book's cover illustrates the unrevealed and complex world of connections between the "fractals" of society, and in a way also the fact that its representatives are caught inside specific concepts and beliefs. With its extensive list of citations and with practical illustrations and tests, this book seeks to demonstrate that there can also be a different perspective on society – one that we have not even thought about until now.

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**Citations from the book:**

*In evaluating social matters, it is extremely important to distinguish between the truth and the good. Not only because they are constantly interconnected, but also and especially because they do not match at all, at least in and of themselves. (p. 18)*

*Macroeconomists will take this [definition of primary goals and measures at the meso-level] as heresy, and that is also what it is because for nearly a century their indisputable mission has been to ensure macro-balance. From a meso-perspective, the times of macroeconomics in the old sense are irrevocably over. This task is now handed over to the bearers of asymmetrical values at the meso-level. (p. 192)*

*Those that truly wish to make a contribution in complex conditions must – due to the nature of the challenge rather than moral considerations, and for completely (multilaterally) rationally substantiated grounds – first acknowledge their sacrifice and withdraw to the edges of their comprehensive efforts. (p. 194)*

## Review of *Orodja za usmerjanje in nadzor urbanih oblik* (Tools for Directing and Controlling Urban Forms)

**Title:** *Orodja za usmerjanje in nadzor urbanih oblik* (Tools for Directing and Controlling Urban Forms)

**Author:** Kaliopa Dimitrovska Andrews

**Reviewers:** Breda Mihelič and Fedja Košir

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The tools for directing and controlling urban forms are specified in great detail in the applicable Slovenian spatial planning legislation. However, the majority of them are rarely successfully implemented in planning the living environment. There are numerous reasons for this, from political to economic ones, including poor understanding of the legal provisions and a lack of professionalism. Therefore, for quite some time now there has been a need in Slovenian planning practice to determine the impacts of planning decisions on the development of physical structures in greater detail and to establish which elements of the development of physical structures should be directed and controlled from the viewpoint of protecting the cityscape and individual values of the local urban environment. This seems especially important today because in line with the sustainable development paradigm it is the growth of cities “inwards” (i.e., into the urban

fabric) that is being planned, including the expansion, renewal and (re)urbanization of construction land.

In her book, Kaliopa Dimitrovska Andrews studies planning legislation in countries with a developed market economy and engages in an in-depth interdisciplinary discussion on the aesthetics of the built environment in order to define the basic urban-design criteria that are important for the aesthetic development of cities. She develops a methodological framework for directing and evaluating the quality of urban design and the effectiveness of spatial plans. She classifies the urban-design criteria according to the role they play at individual planning levels (general and local) and the complexity of an individual location (from the supervision of the urban plan to architectural details). Many of these design criteria are important for the general layout of the city or urban area, the local composition



and the architectural design of a structure. Andrews substantiates the use of the methodological framework for directing and evaluating the quality of urban design in practice based on two case studies of Ljubljana. In the first case, the method is used as a tool for directing the “reurbanization of a degraded area” (i.e., former military barracks in the Poljane neighbourhood) and, in the second, as a tool for evaluating the urban-design quality of examples of the “internal development of settlements” (i.e., the Trnovski Pristan Condominium and the Gradaška apartment building).

Using text and illustration, and based on an extensive selection of research and scholarly literature, this book illustrates the impact of these criteria on the development of physical structures within cities. In addition, it includes a concise study on the role of aesthetics in the history of city planning and design