



## EVOLUTION OF URBANISATION AND METROPOLITAN DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA


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### Abstract

The study summarises the main features of the urban structure of Romania, with a special focus on metropolitan development. Romanian settlement development since the regime change has been essentially urban-focused. Concentrated social, economic and environmental problems are identified at the urban level, which have facilitated the regional division and the designation of regional centres. These specific development areas have identified urban and rural problems for which coherent solutions have been sought. Urban areas of attraction are considered subordinate to the centre, with the exception of tourist destinations, where the geographical location of *natural*, historical, architectural or artistic assets opens up development opportunities for rural areas independently of cities. The Romanian system provides a starting point for further reflection on the spatial categories of Hungarian spatial development, as it considers the urban-rural functional area as the basic unit of development policy and does not rigidly adhere to the existing administrative structure. The paper presents a specific example of a regional centre, the gateway cities, as a changing development path.

**Keywords:** growth-pole, urban network, Romania, metropolitan structure, population change

### INTRODUCTION

Romania is located at the meeting point of three major regions – Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. Its geography is dominated by the Carpathians, the Danube and the Black Sea (Săgeată, 2010). The country is geographically highly fragmented, with the Carpathians running through its central areas, dividing it into two large units: the part within the Carpathian Basin and the part beyond the Carpathians. The topography is extremely varied, with almost everything from high mountains to lowlands.

The reorganisation of the territorial-administrative system has been a serious economic-social and political issue since the period of state socialism and the unification of Romania.

With the establishment of modern Romania after the First World War, geographic and historical regions with very different levels of development and spatial structures were brought together in a single state. Despite almost a century of homogenisation, these historical differences persist to this day (Miklósné Zakar, 2015). Transylvania, Moldova and the Wallachia are the three large regions of the country, which can be divided into several smaller geo-historical regions: Banat, Partium, Maramures and historical Transylvania; Bukovina and Moldova; Oltenia, Muntenia and Dobrogea (Cocean, 2008). In general, Partium is more difficult to demarcate than Szeklerland, Dobruja, Bukovina, where clear borders can be drawn (Szilágyi & Elekes, 2020). There are many historical interpretations of Partium. Today, the western and northern borders of the Partium region are stabilised by the state border (western Hungary, northern Ukraine), while the southern (Mures Valley) and eastern (Transylvanian-Higher Mountains, Transylvanian Plateau, Eastern Carpathians) borders are partly natural (Szilágyi, 2013, 2019a, 2019b). Natural geography is an essential and fundamental asset, both in terms of socio-geographical distances and transport infrastructure.

The Administrative Union Act of 1925 provided for the centralisation of four major territorial units: Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia and Romania. On the one hand, the administrative network of Greater Romania carried the system of the Hungarian duchy system, the Romanian “judet” mega-system, the district-based (bezirk) system of Bukovina and the rural (tinut) system of Bessarabia. In the Romanian redistributions of administrative units, the local levels - the village and town units - were left unchanged, while the district and county levels were merged and divided up on several occasions. After the Second World War, the spatial structure (industrial, economic, administrative and partly ethnic) and the settlement network of Romania developed in a way that was completely subordinated to political expectations. Territorial policy was the result, almost of necessity, of changes in borders, of the considerable differences in development between the regions and of the ideological foundations of the system. The dynamic (and controlled) post-war population growth in itself required a comprehensive settlement policy, which in the case of Romania meant a full-scale systematisation: socialist urbanisation (industrialisation, urban development and redevelopment), controlled internal migration (in Transylvania, consciously changing the ethnic composition) and village restructuring (Hajdú, 2012; Horeczki & Nagy, 2017). The municipal policy of the socialist era in Romania was predominantly urban. One of the consequences of the economic, social and regional policies of the socialist era was a high level of internal migration. Due to the extent of internal migration, at the end of the period, one third of the country's population and half of the urban population did not live in the

municipality where they were born. Romania's population grew from 15.8 million in 1948 to 23.2 million in 1990, thanks to sometimes harsh state population policies, which in itself raised the question of economic, social, urban and housing development (Hajdú, 2013). By 1997, the redistribution of the territory of the counties resulted in the creation of 41 medium-level territorial units in the country. The 'drawing' of development regions took no account of cultural, historical or geographical traditions. The current administrative system is made up of 8 development regions, 41 counties and Bucharest, 319 towns and 2686 municipalities. The Romanian territorial-administrative system is based on the tripartite division of municipalities, cities and counties. The municipality is an administrative-political unit comprising several settlements. Originally, the number of municipium was much lower, and although in legal terms it does not mean exactly the same as county seat in Hungary, it is also a privileged level of towns and many authors translate municipium (perhaps incorrectly) as county seat. Even if this is not correct in terms of the level in the hierarchy of municipalities, there is a parallel between the two systems.

## **SPATIAL CATEGORIES IN SPATIAL PLANNING DOCUMENTS IN ROMANIA**

This paper will look at the problems of public administration and the design of territorial units eligible to receive EU Structural Funds. In almost all countries, the division of administrative territory has been specifically linked to the creation of statistical regions and the establishment of a territorial structure for regional development. Since the early period of EU integration, as in all countries, the issue of the interrelationship between administrative division and regional development has become an important element of domestic policy debates in Romania. An understanding of the historical processes is an important element of this (regions can only be based on a county-framework). The basic units of the Romanian public administration are the counties, partly in terms of their boundaries and partly in terms of the competences assigned to them. In fact, Romanian regional policy is highly concentrated, with neither regions nor counties having significant development competences and, above all, the resources to implement them.

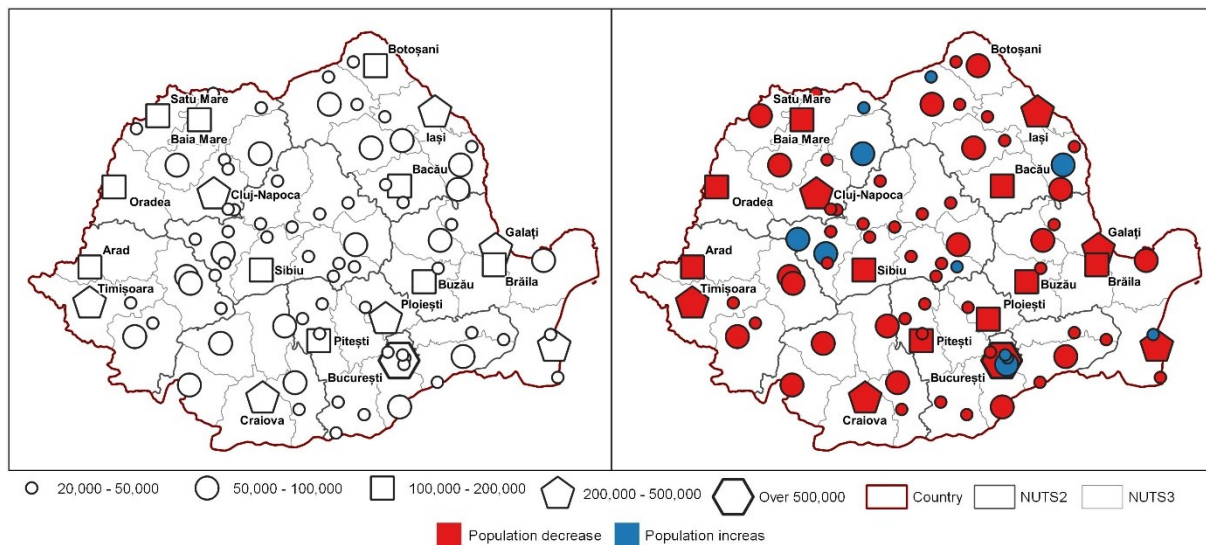
No legal framework was found to promote territorial concentration in the country. Law 151/1998 sets out the general framework, institutions, objectives, competences and instruments of Romanian regional policy. It is complemented by Law 315/2014. The development objectives and beneficiary areas are mainly listed in the National Development

Plans, but it is important to note that the beneficiary areas refer to disadvantaged and underdeveloped rural areas, priority recreation areas and rust belt areas.

Romanian regional policy has recognised that territorial disparities within the country are most sharply accentuated along the municipal hierarchy, with the undoubted existence of a capital-rural dichotomy. The National Spatial Development Plan was established by Law No. 351/2001. Part IV of the 351st Regional Spatial Plan established a five-point scale for the settlement network:

- Rank 0 municipalities (1 city) - the capital, Bucharest;
- Rank I municipalities (11 city) - municipalities of national and European importance;
- Rank II municipalities (81 town) - regional and county-level municipalities and smaller centres with a role in balancing the settlement network;
- Rank III municipalities (172) - towns with micro-regional influence;
- Rank IV municipalities (2,686) - villages with a role as a seat of communes;
- Rank V settlements (10,408) - villages which are part of communes.

**Figure 1** The population dynamics of the cities and towns\* in Romania (2011-2021)



\*above 50,000 dwellers

Source: own editing based on Census data

The importance of the scaling of the settlement network is that it was later used as a basis for the designation of metropolitan areas and the definition of the so-called "growth poles". The classification criteria are: geographical location, accessibility, economic functions, amenities, level of services. For the reasons that follow, the methodology for the selection of the municipalities of order 0 and I is of most importance to us. These were as follows:

- easily accessible towns located on transport axes of international interest;
- with a population of at least 200,000 and a flexible, highly skilled workforce;
- their economy is dominated by secondary and tertiary sectors;
- they have a well developed institutional system.

A new criterion for the definition of Rank II settlements is the existence of a regional centre, the area of development units. The category is divided into two main groups of cities, with separate subgroups for county capitals and other municipalities. In the case of the county capitals, in addition to the large population of the catchment area (200-500,000 inhabitants), a living urban-rural link of 60-80 km was required. For other urban centres, the catchment area has a population of only 30-100,000 while its extent is fixed at around 20 km. The basic principle of ranking, as can be seen above, is size, the ranking of cities being directly related to their population. The second important criterion is the presence/absence of administrative functions, with a high weighting being given to the availability of public institutions locally.

The primary level and purpose of territorial planning during the period under review was the country. In the process of territorial planning, the aim was to develop the country in an integrated and harmonious way, and to plan the economic, social and cultural functions of the country as a whole in proportion. Territorial planning meant complex, comprehensive planning, including the territorial aspects of the industrial, agricultural, transport, communications, social, etc. sectors (Horeczki & Nagy, 2017).

## **THE STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF URBAN AREAS**

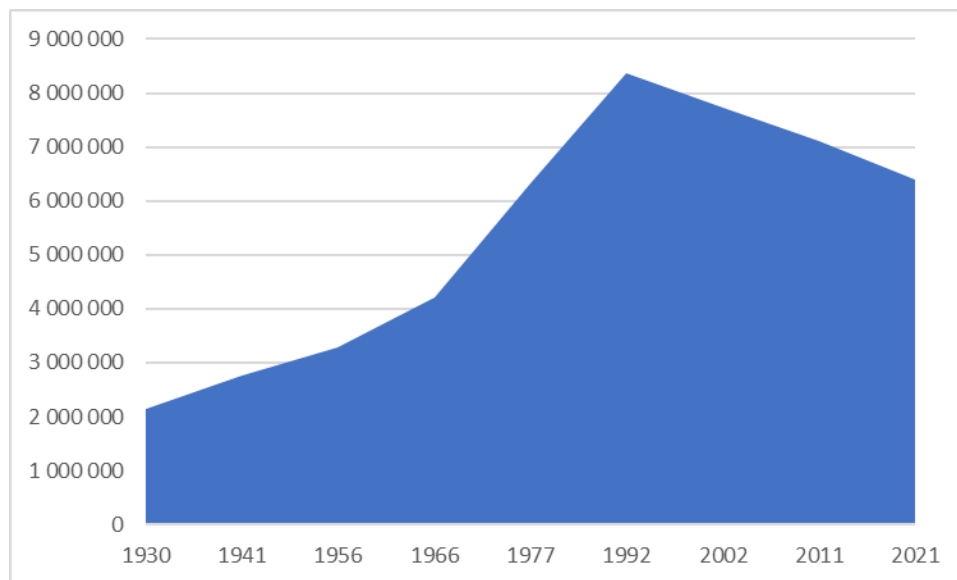
By the end of the socialist period, a network of large cities with a relatively modern industrial base had been created, with seven relatively evenly spaced cities of 300,000 people, in addition to the capital of two million. The hierarchy of cities at the end of the socialist era can be seen in the work of Ioan Ianoş (1987), who used several indicators (demographic, economic, administrative, political, social, cultural and spatial) to construct an eight-level functional hierarchy. Romania reached the threshold of regime change with a ruined economy and a severely deteriorated standard of living. The transition to a market economy was a long and arduous process, and the country faced serious economic problems until the turn of the millennium. The low level of socialist territorial homogenisation was interrupted by the regime change and the emerging market economy, and territorial disparities increased (Horváth, 2004; Benedek & Berekméri, 2009). In 1948, Bucharest was also the most

urbanized city as the capital (1 million inhabitants including suburbs). Only two cities in the country (Cluj Napoca, Timisoara) had a population of more than 100,000. The other cities were more in the medium size category. The proportion of small towns in the urban population was high. The controlled population growth of the previous decades - Romania had a strict abortion ban between 1966 and 1989 (Veres, 2011) - was replaced by a natural decline. Since 1996, the trend of village-urban migration has reversed, partly due to forced migration (many of the unemployed from urban industry have found a living in the primary sector in villages) and partly due to suburbanisation in some large cities. Romania's population declined by 1.13 million between 1992 and 2002 and by 1.56 million between 2002 and 2011. The vast majority of cities - 246 out of 266 (Benedek, 2006a) - lost population. Emigration, which in the previous decades was limited to the Hungarian and German populations, has reached significant proportions after the abolition of the Schengen visa requirement (2002) (Veres, 2011). Emigration takes various forms (e.g. tourist status through undeclared work), with some estimates suggesting that more than 2.3 million people have left Romania in the last two and a half decades.

Cities have responded to radical socio-economic changes differently depending on their endowments and their capacity to adapt and innovate (Berekméri, 2011; Borbély, 2011). A more pronounced differentiation of the urban hierarchy has been initiated, with large cities in a more advantageous position (Ianoş, 2004; Benedek, 2006a). Bucharest was the clear winner in the territorial processes, while Banat and Central Transylvania were able to preserve their relative historical development. The winners of the transition include large cities with advanced or fast-growing service sectors, cities with high value-added productive sectors, the Black Sea and western border regions. In general, the losers were small and medium-sized cities, declining industrial centres and districts that were alienated from local resources and inflated (Horváth, 2004; Ianoş, 2004). Urban depopulation became a dominant trend from the second half of the 1990s, with the largest population losses in the cities of South Transylvania, Banat, Partium, Romanian Lowlands and Central Moldova, and drastic population losses in mono-functional small towns (Elekes, 2008; Mitrica et al., 2014). Romania's public administration has remained unchanged in form, with the number of units in the mega-system varying between 39 and 42 since 1968. The reorganisation of public administration has not brought about real decentralisation. The spatial development institutional system has been developed in parallel with the administrative institutional system, and ethno-cultural and historical aspects have not been taken into account in the delimitation of the planning regions (1998). The debates surrounding the creation of a region

in Szeklerland are a flashpoint for ethnic conflicts, however, the change is not only in the interest of the Szekler counties, but also the big cities aspiring to have their own region and development resources. Several of the country's large cities, which traditionally had strong spatial organising functions – Arad, Oradea, Sibiu, Târgu Mures – have lost their potential role as regional centres. The dissatisfaction of the counties and cities in the development regions is reflected in the fact that in many cases the regional development councils in Romania have been located in smaller county centres. Regionalisation and the reform of the regional division are constantly present in political and public life and in regional research (Săgeată, 2004; Cocean, 2013).

**Figure 2** Change in the aggregate population of the county capitals, 1930-2021 (persons)



*Source:* own editing based on Szilágyi and Elekes, 2020 and data of the Romanian Statistical Office

Over the past ninety years, the country's metropolitan development can be separated into two major phases; the prosperous period up to the change of regime, with significant population growth, and the years after 1992, which saw a population decline of millions. The number of cities increased moderately in the 1990s, rising from 260 to 266 between 1990 and 2002. In terms of metropolitan population change, in all cases there has been a decline since the change of regime. The cities least affected by population decline are Alba Iulia, Bistrita, Cluj Napoca, Oradea (Szilágyi, 2012; Szilágyi & Elekes, 2021; Zsibók & Egyed, 2022). The settlement network developed in an unbalanced way, with dense urban networks developing in some areas, while larger urban deprivation zones remained (Ianoş, 2004; Benedek, 2011). The declining urban population was boosted by the wave of urbanisation in the 2000s, which brought the total to 320 (Berekméri, 2011). Political voluntarism and the use of urbanisation

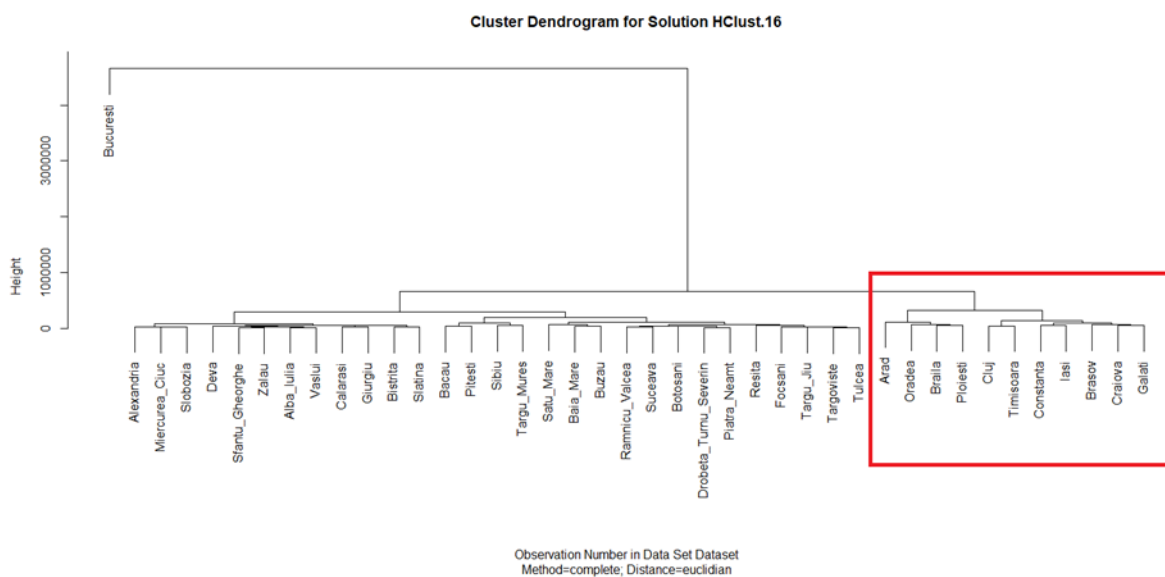
as a policy instrument emerged in the 2000-2004 government cycle (46 new cities), despite the fact that in 2001, for the first time since 1945, urbanisation was again subject to well-defined conditions and urban deprivation areas were also delimited as a target area for spatial development (Benedek, 2006b). The over-dominance of the metropolitan region is also a feature of Romania, despite the fact that its balanced urban network provides a potential basis for polycentric development. In Romania, the declining income generation of rural regions in the 1990s could only be compensated by the growth of the capital region, which is why Bucharest accounted for 278% of Romania's GDP growth between 1995 and 2001. Csák (2015) refers to this period as the second no-planning and development period. For him, the first such period was between 1930 and 1947. Romania has been lagging behind the Visegrad countries for decades, as illustrated by the late re-industrialisation generated by foreign capital investment. Chapter 4 of Law 351/2001 on the National Spatial Development Plan contains Romania's new strategy for the development of the settlement network, which classifies settlements into six categories (from capitals to villages) according to their geographical location, population, accessibility, economic and institutional functions, and level of infrastructure development. Local taxes and duties are set according to this ranking, with higher rates at the higher levels. The conditions for becoming a town or municipality are laid down in this law. However, most of the new towns do not meet the functional requirements of the law (Benedek, 2006b). The Strategic Concept for Spatial Development of Romania has a six-level concept of poles, from the European metropolis to the local level. Despite the fact that the population and the level of urbanisation in Romania have increased dynamically over the last almost a century, the hierarchy of cities based on population has not changed fundamentally (Ianoş, 2004). Eighteen of the twenty most populous cities were included in the list in 1930 and 2002 (Benedek, 2006a). The distribution of the urban population by population category is relatively balanced (Berekméri, 2011). Although the weight of Bucharest in the urban population has gradually decreased over the last four decades, with rural urban growth, urbanisation and suburbanisation of the capital, slightly more than nine percent of the country's population still lives within the administrative boundaries of the capital (Bucharest's population in 2011 was 1.88 million, that of the agglomeration was 2.2-2.3 million). The number and coverage of regional centres has remained unchanged over the last four censuses, with only the order of population changing, with Cluj Napoca and Timisoara having a population of 325 and 319 thousand respectively, the only two cities to boast a growing population in 2002-2011. In 1992, the populations of 300,000 inhabitants in Constanta, Craiova, Brasov and Galaţi were only 249,000-290,000. The total population of



the seven cities still exceeds that of the capital, but the gap has been gradually narrowing over the past three decades. Twelve more cities have a population of over 100,000 (Ploiești is the largest with 201,000), and five others have “dropped out” of the 100,000 category since 2002. The spatial distribution of the larger cities is relatively dispersed, except in mountainous areas. In the larger historical regions (Moldova, Oltenia, Muntenia, Transylvania) there are 3 to 6 large cities. In smaller, peripheral regions (Maramures, Partium there are two, while in historical regions divided by the change of state borders (Banat, Dobrogea, Bukovina) there is only one large city. As in the Eastern-Europe’s countries, the transformation of the urban network is essentially characterised by increasing economic fragmentation and the dominance of the capital, with the cities of certain regions becoming more important. However, the spatial structure does not have the North-South or East-West divisions of most Central and Eastern European countries, but rather a mosaic character (Csák, 2011; Kurkó, 2011, Mitrica et al., 2014).

The dominance of the capital is shown in the cluster analysis of cities, where a group of eleven cities is second in the hierarchy after Bucharest - in terms of population. The ranking tables show us that the group of cities is fragmented in nature, with hardly any intersection of clusters. Our cluster analysis group only alternates positions between each other, and Bacau is the only other clustered city that in certain years is included in the group of cities we identify as regional centres.

**Figure 3** Cluster Dendrogram for Romanian large cities, 2021



Source: own editing

### **Metropolitan areas as a development policy category in Romania**

Law No 351/2001 on the National Spatial Development Plan creates the possibility of creating metropolitan areas for the capital and the municipalities of rank I. The Zona Metropolitana is a territorial unit created by the association of municipalities with the aim of reinforcing the complementary nature of the territorial development process. The Zona Metropolitana includes urban and rural settlements in the immediate vicinity of the city centre (at a maximum distance of 30 km!), in close cooperation with the metropolitan area in a multi-faceted and intensive way. The legal form of a voluntary partnership is an intermunicipal (development-planning) association between municipalities, as a legal entity. Their creation was made possible by Law No 286/2006 on local administration, and all 12 cities concerned have created their own Zona Metropolitana. Despite the similarity in legal status, the Bucharest metropolitan area is a fundamentally different category. Only this group of municipalities can be considered a metropolitan area in the international (ESPON - Mega) sense, the others only partially meeting the criteria in terms of total population, population density, degree of agglomeration and international importance. Rural metropolitan areas are more in line with the broader concept of FUA (functional urban area) or FUR (functional urban region), also used by ESPON, than metropolitan areas. A legal approach based on a metropolitan centre cannot interpret multipolar city-regions (Galati-Braila, Deva-Hunedoara, Arad-Timişoara) or classical conurbations (Brasov-Jiu-valley).

### **Special categories of development priority areas before the turn of the millennium**

The first identification of problem areas was carried out by the Green Charter for Regional Development (GCRD, 1997). This was used as the basis for the identification and delimitation of the types of spaces requiring different approaches to development:

- Areas with complex problems – difficult to delimit (Transylvania and the Danube Delta). The main problem areas are: high depopulation, difficult accessibility, low level of services, poor use of existing tourism potential.
- Very poor rural regions – high depopulation, poor infrastructure, subsistence agriculture, low income level of the population, regional centre towns rapidly declining after the forced development in the socialist era (Botosani, Vaslui, Alexandria, etc.).
- Declining (traditional) industrial regions - districts resulting from monostructural industrial development, mainly heavy industry. The disappearance or reduction of subsidies has exposed the structural problems of regional economies, outdated service

structures, lack of attractiveness for outside investors, and lack of R&D&I. From a social point of view, the main problem is high and persistent unemployment (-1.5 million industrial jobs between 1990 and 1996 – Popescu, 2014).

- Mining regions - the economy is based on the extractive industry, whose production has been affected by the declining/restructuring demand of the national manufacturing industry, in addition to global market trends. Unemployment is extremely high, transport and communication infrastructure needed for restructuring is lacking, public services are poor and environmental damage is significant.
- Regions with significant environmental problems - these included areas of non-ferrous mining where decades of declining production have had a positive impact on the environment, but where the business environment remains unattractive because new investment is made more expensive by disposal costs. From a social point of view, the biggest problem is the disastrous health of the people living here.
- Regions severely affected by land degradation - mainly hilly and mountainous areas, where slope mass movements due to poor landscape management regularly cause serious damage. Among the problems, intensive deforestation and overgrazing and extensive livestock farming are prominent.

In Romania, the delimitation of areas with special problems, special legal status and a legally defined system of operation was regulated by the Emergency Government Decree No 24/1998 on the system of disadvantaged areas. According to this legislation, disadvantaged areas are geographical areas defined on the basis of administrative units (cities, municipalities) where the unemployment rate is at least three times higher than the national average; the infrastructure is poorly developed.

The creation of areas is the result of a complex, multi-stage mechanism, based on successive, unanimous decisions by three agencies (Regional Development Council, National Regional Development Council, Government). Firms and entrepreneurs operating in these regions are entitled to tax incentives (VAT exemption, flat-rate exemption, etc.) for a period of 3-10 years. 38 areas with a total population of 1.5 million inhabitants have been designated by Government Decree. In principle, the incentives have not achieved their objective, and no significant investment has been made in the areas concerned (Government decision 399/2001). The Report attributes this to poorly developed infrastructure, difficult accessibility of the areas, lack of skilled labour and, finally, lack of confidence in the stability of the legislation. As a result, in the summer of 2002, the preferential scheme was abolished.

## **New categories of development zones after the millennium**

### *a) Industrial restructuring areas*

The old industrial regions have been given renewed priority, and the regional policy for them has been developed on the basis of Government Decision No. 399/2001 (19.IV.). In this Decision, the so-called 'industrial conversion areas with potential for economic growth' were defined. The definition was based on the high number of large local enterprises facing restructuring problems, the presence of environmental problems and high unemployment, but at the same time the regional economy showed potential for development, supported by a well-developed transport and communications infrastructure.

A total of 11 industrial regions were identified, which together accounted for over a quarter of the country's population. As Romania was not yet a member of the EU at that time, but pre-accession negotiations were already underway, PHARE pre-accession funds were used to develop the regions. The selection of projects was based on a double correspondence between the priorities of the National Development Plan and the PHARE development orientations.

The strength of the selection was weakened by the fact that the Government Decree did not provide a methodology for the delimitation of regions. Those familiar with Romanian economic and territorial processes from the inside believed that many regions or centres that were ripe for industrial restructuring were not included in the list, while a number of local economic centres that were already developing rapidly in 2001 were included among the beneficiary regions. Between 2001 and 2007, a regional policy based on economic restructuring and the complex regeneration of industrial centres, mostly nationally funded, appeared to be the 'mainstream' of Romanian territorial policy, but after EU accession the programme was discontinued and there was no continuation.

### *b) Growth and rural development poles as beneficiaries of support categories*

Following EU integration, Romanian cities were classified in priority categories for assistance. Law No 998/2008 defined seven growth poles, one for each of the large cities (Cluj-Napoca, Iasi, Timisoara, Craiova, Brasov, Ploiesti, Constanta), and one for each of the rural development poles (Csák, 2009; Popescu, 2014). In order to access EU funds, the growth poles had to prepare so-called Integrated Development Plans, not only for the metropolitan area, but for the whole territory of the Zona Metropolitana. The Integrated Development Plans identified the strategic projects to be developed within the three pre-defined priorities (urban infrastructure, development of the local economic environment, social infrastructure). The other urban centres are classified in two additional categories of support, the so-called "urban development poles" (13 cities: Arad, Baia Mare, Târgu Mures,

Oradea, Satu Mare, Sibiu, Deva, Bacau, Braila, Galati, Pitesti, Ramnicu-Valcea, Suceava) and the so-called “urban centres”. This demarcation was a typical example of polycentric urban development, which attempted to counterbalance the dominance of the capital city and to give regional centres the economic weight they deserved (Popescu, 2014). Under the 2007-13 ROP, the 7 growth poles received EUR 621 million, the 11 development poles EUR 248.5 million and the 240 smaller towns EUR 1 391.2 million. Ultimately, the use of ROP funds has led to a stronger development of urban centres and contributed to a widening of the developed-non-developed gap within the country, whereas the priority of Law No. 315/2000 regulating regional policy is to limit the increase of territorial disparities within the country. Of the five development priorities in the NSRF 2007-2013, one is explicitly territorial (support for balanced territorial development) and the priority for infrastructure development has a direct territorial impact. The priorities of the Regional Operative Programme are mainly urban-centred (e.g. existing social and business infrastructure is mainly concentrated in the centres). The fifth axis - tourism - sets the objective of reducing existing territorial disparities through investment, in particular through a more even territorial distribution of natural attractions. However, this axis accounts for less than one-sixth of the total ROP budget, while axis 1 alone, with its direct urban focus, accounts for almost double. The ROP axes have little territorial focus, with only the first axis (Sustainable Development of Cities - Urban Growth Poles) being selective, by excluding small centres of less than 10 000 inhabitants. The implementation of the ROP was highly centralised, with a stronger dependence of the Regional Development Agencies on the central administration than on the regional development councils. There are also few examples of genuine decentralisation within regions, with the secondary centralisation efforts of regional centres being a more common practice. The lack of large-scale projects generating significant regional impact (in Hungarian terms, flagship projects) was identified by experts as the main shortcoming in the use of resources. Benedek (2016) concludes that the regional policies implemented in Romania have failed because they have not achieved their main objective of reducing territorial disparities. Development gaps have increased within the country. There is a strong polarisation, particularly between Bucharest and the rest of the country.

In preparation for the 2014-20 period, sectoral and territorial development programmes were prepared in parallel to the Partnership Agreement, with minimal parallel coordination. As the PM is more limited in scope than in the past, it is not a document covering all territorial objectives, and therefore cannot be expected to cover all territorial specificities and categories of areas to be developed.

*c) Categories of territories defined in the 2014-2020 EU funding period*

Based on a basically functional analysis, the Strategic Concept for Spatial Development in Romania has defined hierarchical levels different from the previous ones: metropolitan MEGA poles; national OPUS (Orizont Potential Urban Strategic) poles (they have considerable urban functional potential, with a population of over 250,000), significant regional institutions and economic, cultural and academic centres.; supra-regional OPUS poles – 50-250. OPUS regional poles – municipalities of regional scope with important tourist and cultural offer; Sub-regional poles: cities of 30-50,000 inhabitants, for decentralisation and deconcentration of administrative and service functions; Local poles: small towns of less than 20,000 inhabitants, with varying levels of development and potential. The definition of the area in the National Rural Development Programme follows a similar trend compared to recent years: the environment of large agglomerations is identified as a metropolitan area, where interaction is common and reciprocal. The peri-urban area is defined as the 30-60 km surrounding urban areas. Functional zones are used to define areas influenced by a specific specialised or dominant activity, with a base area that is not legally defined.

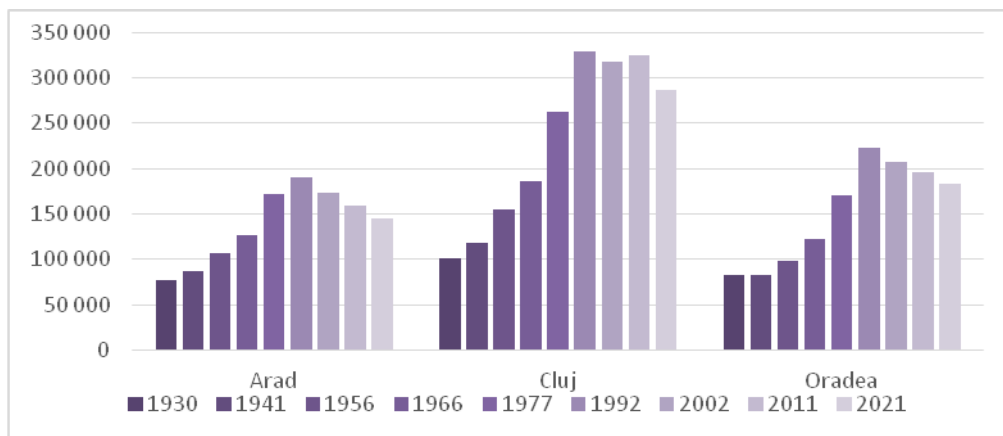
**Cities with a border and/or a gateway role: The case of Oradea, Arad and Cluj Napoca**

Among the regional centres, we first examined those cities with a specific spatial organisation power, which have always played a kind of intermediate, border or gateway role over the past almost a hundred years. Without being exhaustive, we present the cities with just a few facts and figures.

Arad, with its industrial tradition, multi-ethnic and multi-religious, was already a highly urbanised city in the 19th century and is still one of the most developed parts of Romania. The city boasts a diverse and multifaceted cultural, economic, national, religious and architectural heritage, numerous natural attractions, historical monuments, and hosts outstanding economic, cultural and professional events. Oradea, a city with a thousand years of history, is located at the crossroads of East and West. It is a true bridge between the two worlds, which has managed to absorb and transform all the good that the two great cultural plates have brought, based on its own vision of the world. Cluj-Napoca is one of Romania's most important cultural centres and is today considered the capital of Transylvania, not only because of its history but also because of the dynamism that has made it the academic, medical, economic, cultural, sporting and scientific centre of Transylvania. In 2015, Cluj-Napoca was named European Youth Capital City and in 2018 it became European City of Sport.

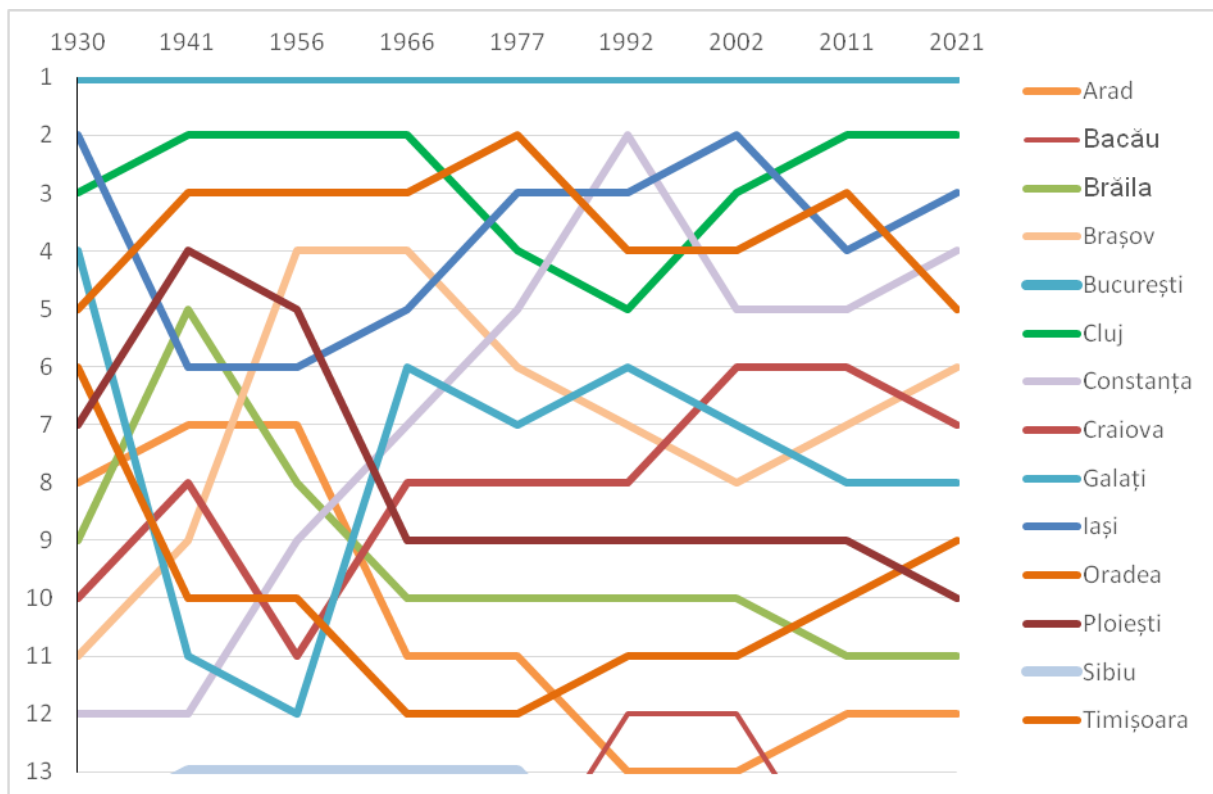
All three cities reflect general urbanisation trends in Romania (Figure 4), especially Arad and Oradea. The population dynamics of the two border cities are very similar, with almost identical populations at the beginning of the period under study, peaking at the change of regime, followed by a slow decline. Oradea's dynamics were more spectacular, the absolute rate of decline was therefore greater than in the case of Arad. Cluj-Napoca's role as a regional centre also brought with it the spread of the city, which led to a surge in population growth both in the 1960s and after the change of regime. Population dynamics are decreasing but remain below the relative proportions of the two cities. Cluj-Napoca is the second largest city in Romania and its attractiveness is still very impressive (Figure 4).

**Figure 4** Population change in three gateway cities, 1930-2021 (persons)



Source: own editing

Looking at the population ranking of cities, Bucharest's position since 1930 is clear. Cluj-Napoca's position fell by three positions between 1970 and 2000. It was overtaken by Timisoara, Constanca and Iasi; however, from 2005 onwards it regained the second most prominent position, which it has held steadily since then. Looking at the position of cities, we can see that there were two periods of significant urban competition (when the allocation of development resources basically determined the development path of cities): between 1930-1966 and 1992-2011, when there is a significant structural shift, especially between 5th and 11th place. A similar conclusion is reached by Benedek (2006b), who analysed the changes in the ranking of cities between 1930 and 2002 in the light of the urbanisation process. It is remarkable that the two groups (places 2-5 and 6-8) do not converge during the period under study, there are no intersections. Since the late 2000s, three significant groups can be distinguished outside the capital: 2nd-5th: Cluj-Napoca, Iasi, Constanța, Oradea, Timisoara; 6th-8th: Brașov, Craiova, Galați; 9th-12th: Oradea, Ploiești, Brăila, Arad.

**Figure 5** Changes in the ranking of the largest cities between 1930 and 2021

*Note:* The ranking represents changes in the position of cities in relation to their population change.

*Source:* own editing

If we consider the economic gateway role of cities: the two neighbouring county capitals (Arad and Oradea), the logistics activity group is the main source of employment in the cities. They are the gateway cities to the west of Romania; Cluj Napoca, on the other hand, is an east-west border city, with a significant trade and services sector and a centre of higher education. The modernisation of the rail and road infrastructure is ongoing, as is the development of the motorway network, whose planned interchanges near the two cities have not yet been completed. The connection of Cluj-Napoca to the main transport hubs is already in the pipeline, and a number of eastern and southern connections are under construction. The positive effects of this nodality are not yet visible, but are expected in the medium term. These cities are the most dynamic growth poles in Romania: Cluj Napoca has managed the transition from a predominantly manufacturing town to a city with a strong and balanced economic mix (World Bank, 2013). In the cities of Arad and Oradea, the importance of the cargo transport activity group is significant in absolute terms, but in specific terms the outperformance is even more impressive. In both counties, the number of people employed in transport exceeds 10,000 (2021: Bihor – 15,800; Arad – 13,700), which ranks 6th and 9th respectively in the national ranking. In terms of the number of goods transport companies,



Bihar ranks third (2021: 2,914) and Arad 12th (1,688), while in terms of the density of goods transport companies, Bihar has been ranked 2-3 and Arad 7-9 in the last decade among the 42 Romanian municipalities. In terms of aggregate turnover of transport firms, Bihar has fluctuated increasingly around 6-8th places and Arad around 9-10th places over the last decade.

In the pre-millennium development policy documents analysed, these three cities are considered to have a significant regional centre role. Due to their border location, neither Oradea nor Arad were centres of industrial development, Cluj-Napoca being in a much more favourable position. All of them were already identified as urban development poles in the categories established for the use of the 2007-2013 Regional Operative Programmes.

**Table 1** Main figures for the three cities, 2021

	Arad	Cluj-Napoca	Oradea
Population	145,078	286,598	183,105
Number of communes in official metropolitan area	24	19	11
Number municipalities in the real suburban area	11	12	9
Total population of integrated urban area	202,377	408,864	236,329
Number of employees	83,279	200,919	109,925
Number of universities, higher education institutions	2	9	4
Number of nights spent in the city and the suburban area, 2022	258,628	909,752	1,318,927

Source: own editing

## **CONCLUSION – THE EMERGENCE OF SPACE CATEGORIES IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY PRACTICE**

From the above, it is quite clear that the Romanian spatial development system since the change of regime has been essentially urban-focused. It is at this level that the concentrated social, economic and environmental problems have been identified, and it is believed that by addressing these, the problems of rural spaces associated with cities can be largely addressed. Urban areas of attraction are seen as subordinate to the centre, the only exceptions being tourist destinations, where the geographical location of natural, historical, architectural or artistic assets also opens up development opportunities for rural areas, independently of cities. The Romanian system provides a starting point for further reflection on the spatial categories of Hungarian spatial development, defining urban-rural functional areas as the basic units of development policy, whilst not rigidly adhering to the existing administrative structure.

We expect a positive, optimistic vision for the future of gateway cities. The capital-centricity highlighted in the study is also constrained by Bucharest's natural geography. It is located in a part of the country beyond the Carpathian Mountains, far from the European core. It thus offers an opportunity to exploit the locational advantages of western peripheral cities (Arad, Timisoara, Oradea) as well as the autonomous development of remote and partially isolated cities such as Cluj-Napoca. Proximity to borders used to be a weakness, but now it has become an advantage. According to the latest news (clubferoviar.ro), the infrastructure improvements will result in temporary shutdowns. In November, the Oradea-Cluj Napoca railway line will be closed for at least two years while it is upgraded to double track, electric and relatively high speed. Once completed, journey times are expected to be cut by a third – improving the journey time between the two cities from 3 to 1 hour. By upgrading infrastructure and strengthening connectivity, these western gateway cities can gain new dynamism and an advantage in the competition between Romanian cities.

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