



# Legislation as a Tool of Urbanization. Some Considerations Regarding Act No 351/2001

Nóra-Csilla VERESS

PhD, Assistant Lecturer

Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Geography (Cluj-Napoca, Romania)

e-mail: nora.vicsai@ubbcluj.ro

**Abstract.** Following the revolution and regime change of 1989, Romania's urban system underwent an important reshaping in a short period of time: between 1993 and 2006, in less than 15 years, 60 rural settlements were elevated to urban status. The legal basis of this change was Act No 351/2001, which created a determined procedure and a list of indicators with precise thresholds that had to be fulfilled in order for a commune to become town. However, most of the new towns were granted urban status predominantly without fulfilling the legal requirements on different quantitative and qualitative criteria. Moreover, even the law itself has its own shortcomings, first of all regarding criteria which are inappropriate, but also in terms of the procedure of changes in the ranking of settlements. In this study, I will analyse the extent to which the legal criteria address the geographical functions of an urban settlement.

**Keywords:** urbanization, regime change, national spatial development plan, town declaration

## 1. The Concept of 'Town'

International literature recognizes two main forms of urbanization: through the establishment (also called incorporation) of new urban settlements and through the growth of existing urban settlements.<sup>1</sup> However, in the Romanian literature, a third means appears: that of the 'transformation of rural settlements into urban centres'.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the reclassification of rural settlements into urban ones appears as a separate form, indicates the importance of this practice in shaping

1 Tisdale 1942, cited by Kulcsár–Brown 2011. 480.

2 Ilinca 2011. 60. Translation by the author. Unless otherwise stated in the footnotes, all translations of non-English sources are by the author.

the Romanian urban system. The product of urbanization, the town, and the city ‘remains one of the most difficult concepts to define’, argues Ioan Ianoş.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of urban settlement gained different meanings over time (the idea about what is a city changes from one generation to another) and in space (the various criteria that exist in the world for the declaration of cities is a proof). What is ‘urban’ also differs depending on the approach we adopt (archaeological, administrative, functional, demographic, social, economic, etc.).<sup>4</sup> The essence of the city is different for any of the disciplines,<sup>5</sup> while the concept and the content of city as a notion has always generated discussions. The concept of city from a legal point of view is relatively simple: a city is a settlement that has been granted city status. Usually, the law clearly delimits the range of settlements that can be called cities (or even lists them explicitly).<sup>6</sup> According to architects, a city is a settlement in which the built-in area can be characterized with adequate horizontal and vertical measures. Statisticians connect city status to a population of a certain size. Geography, including the geography of settlements, approaches the issue from the point of view of urban functions/roles.<sup>7</sup> The administrative-legal-political concept of the city differs at all times and in all places from the definition given by geography, as different approaches emphasize different components of this complex entity, the city.<sup>8</sup> From a functional point of view, ‘a city is a human settlement whose inhabitants cannot produce, within the city limits, all of the food that they need for keeping them alive’.<sup>9</sup> This definition leads us already to the topic of the relationships of a city to its surroundings.

The meaning of the word ‘function’ is task, role, duty. All the settlements have their functions, and these functions can be divided into two groups: basic functions and core functions. Basic functions are those that the inhabitants of the settlement need in their everyday life (housing, basic infrastructure, basic educational, healthcare, and cultural services, etc.). If a settlement can provide only basic functions (partly or entirely) it should be considered a village.<sup>10</sup>

An overview of the definitions of foreign researchers is offered by Judit Pál.<sup>11</sup> Even the Sumerians were preoccupied by urban settlements: ‘the city is a gathering place for good things’ – states a Sumerian regal document in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.<sup>12</sup> However, the view which identifies cities as sites for renewed economic dynamism, engines of national prosperity, as well as sources of innovation and productivity

3 Ianoş 1987.

4 Neacşu 2010. 27–28.

5 Beluszky–Győri 2006.

6 Pirisi–Trócsányi 2007. 2.

7 Csapó–Kocsis 1997.

8 Tóth 2008. 241.

9 Toynbee 1970. 8.

10 Csapó–Kocsis 1997. 187.

11 Pál 1999.

12 Beluszky–Győri 2005. 9.

growth which secure competitive advantage is a relatively new one, preceded by a period in the literature and research in which the discourse was dominated by the idea of urban crisis and decline, and in which cities were identified as places facing the greatest economic and social problems, at least in Europe.<sup>13</sup>

In Romanian literature, Cucu defines the city as a populated centre, a human settlement with a high level of development and organization, respectively as a result of the deepening social division of labour, an economic-geographical phenomenon making its appearance for the first time in history in the ancient period.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, cities or urban settlements are distinct spatial formations, characterized by an increased density and a special position in the process of exchange of values, as a whole and in territorial profile. Urban settlements manifest in space through a multitude of economic, social, and political functions, which make a certain territory gravitate around them to some degree.<sup>15</sup>

Mihăilescu argues that the city is – from a geographic point of view – a form of organization, procurement, and use of a territory (conditions, resources, workforce) in order to concentrate, transform, distribute, and redistribute, the goods necessary for the sustenance, recreation, and progress of a population from a varied area (from the immediate surroundings to the entire Earth, in some cases).<sup>16</sup>

In the opinion of Ioan Ianoş, the city represents a system with a certain content, structure, and spatial organization, being a definite manifestation of the effect of the interaction of demographic, social, and economic spaces in time, projected onto the physical space. Geographically, the city represents a semi-open thermodynamic and informational system between itself and the other systems, which are located at variable distances, with numerous mass, energy, and information exchange relations taking place. Within the ‘city’ system, two subsystems may be distinguished, with various relations between them: the city itself and its area of influence. The area of influence has the role of blurring the territorial imbalance determined by the appearance and development of the respective city and of attenuating its centripetal forces towards the surrounding space.<sup>17</sup>

Ioan Ianoş defines the town in comparison with the villages, which stands out from a morphological, demographic, and functional point of view and appears as a community with specific problems.<sup>18</sup>

Cities are sources of economic, social, ecological, and technological opportunities. In this way, they may act as self-perpetuating engines attracting even more people.<sup>19</sup> They ‘act as technological, social, economic, and political

13 Turok–Mykhnenko 2007. 165.

14 Cucu 1968. 1.

15 Id. 2.

16 Mihăilescu 1971. 112.

17 Ianoş 1987. 28.

18 Ianoş 2004. 2–3.

19 JPI ‘Urban Europe’.

powerhouses and will become key actors for [the] sustainable development of our urban world'.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. The Path from Rural to Urban. The Creation of New Cities

In Europe, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most developed countries had reached high levels of urbanization, and, consequently, urbanization ceased to be a policy goal to drive socioeconomic development. Although the urban rank still has a symbolic importance, local governments generally have equal rights. Therefore, urban reclassification has become a 'statistical exercise' which acknowledges that settlements have met certain development criteria.<sup>21</sup> Because of the symbolic nature of the town status, urban reclassification has become a marginal area of public administration across Europe. In several countries, reclassification is a technicality, while in some countries, such as in Norway, Germany, or Austria, this was even delegated to regional governments.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the United States, such 'promotion' as well as 'demotion' is determined by (not) satisfying a set of technical criteria, which are periodically reviewed. The process leaves little room for political considerations.<sup>23</sup>

A European panorama is offered by Kocsis.<sup>24</sup> He briefly describes the practice of awarding the rank of city in 13 European countries, which varies, but it is convergent under many aspects. The author outlines the similarities and differences. One important feature is that the degree of urbanization is high – usually, there are no areas with a shortage of towns. While infrastructure facilities are not an important issue, achieving the population number is the goal. Generally, the town status is a question of honour, so it is important from a local point of view. In some of the countries, a settlement can lose its town status if the conditions set forth are no longer fulfilled.

However, there is a significant difference between Western and Eastern Europe. From a historical perspective, Eastern European cities remained mostly underdeveloped compared to their Western counterparts, and, more importantly, they were not primarily economic but rather administrative centres. As a consequence, the development of cities at the eastern end of the continent was largely driven by administrative functions instead of economic conditions. In the West, the administrative functions of cities accumulated as a result of economic

---

20 Kourtit–Nijkamp 2015. 2.

21 Kulcsár–Brown 2011.

22 Kocsis 2008.

23 Kulcsár–Brown 2011. 482.

24 Kocsis 2008.

progress, while in Eastern Europe this was done in the reverse order: the status of cities promoted economic development. So, the problems of the urbanization are not merely planning and administrative issues but the products of social development in a given historical context.<sup>25</sup> The explanation is as follows: although in many countries the proportion of urban residents is a measure of economic development, in others the higher-than-average rate of urbanization is intended to promote economic development.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the order is reversed. In the competition for resources, the tools of the settlements are limited (this is especially true for smaller settlements), so the acquisition of urban status seems to be an effective tool that is believed to bring along these benefits over time and can ultimately be converted into economic development.<sup>27</sup>

In Hungary, a very similar process took place as in Romania and yielded a vast literature on the subject, the findings of which could be useful in researching Romanian issues of a similar nature. In Hungary in 2008, an intense debate took place starting with a keynote paper by Tóth, who argued that the content and nature of the urbanization had changed. The transformation of the roles of the towns (non-basic functions) can be observed, together with their downward slippage on the hierarchy of settlements. There is a degradation of urban quality, and the quantity–quality dichotomy is reproduced on another level.<sup>28</sup> Csapó and Kocsis also speak about a devaluation of the town status. A town inauguration is a symbolic action because it does not result in any major advantages, only in recognition of the inhabitants' development (a reward in itself). If we accept the emptying of the title, then the acquisition of this title is unnecessary, but if we want that title to indicate a rank, we must rethink the conditions of gaining it.<sup>29</sup> The main topic of discussion is thus the contradiction between quantity and quality, that is, between awarding town status and real urbanization.<sup>30</sup>

Kulcsár places the discourse in the context of belated societal development. There is a preference for the urban, stemming from the historical image of rurality. Rurality, rural conditions, and rural development are preferred topics of both Romanian and Hungarian scholars and researchers, since almost half of the population is still living in rural areas, and there is an evident urban–rural disparity in the economic situation and living standards. Kulcsár<sup>31</sup> argues that the preference of the city as a social psychological phenomenon has gained a

---

25 Kulcsár 2008.

26 Szepesi 2008.

27 Kulcsár 2008. 512.

28 Tóth 2008. 238.

29 Csapó–Kocsis 2008. 645.

30 See: Szigeti 1997, Csapó–Kocsis 1997, Beluszky 1999, Győri 2006, Győri 2008, Dövényi 2006, Dövényi 2008, Csapó O. 2008, Lenner 2008, Pirisi–Szabó–Trócsányi 2008, Szébényi 2008, Kulcsár 2008.

31 Kulcsár 2008.

continuous confirmation through the very reason of the views regarding the countryside. Rurality was a symbol of backwardness for 200 years. By the last years of the socialist dictatorial regime, the superiority and desirability of urban life had firmly evolved in the Hungarian society. And these historical processes strongly influenced city formation (declaration) after 1990.<sup>32</sup> As Csité and Kovács<sup>33</sup> noted, the oftentimes negative image of rurality stems from the current negative views that range from traditional populism through the archaic underdevelopment to the notion of ‘the rurality as an obstacle to modernization’. But the paradoxical situation is that, according to migration numbers, cities have been constantly losing their population to the benefit of the countryside since 1990. This suggests that the preference for the city and the countryside’s negative image are not entirely clear.<sup>34</sup> While theoretically and politically cities are the more preferred option, the population still chooses villages because of the better subsistence.

Hungarian scholars have introduced some notions that could be appropriate for Romania too: ‘barely-town’,<sup>35</sup> ‘village-town’,<sup>36</sup> ‘the artificial bloating of the town stocks’, ‘the dilution of the urban network’.<sup>37</sup>

Although cities and urbanization have an immense Romanian literature, the issue of transforming rural settlements into urban ones is rarely addressed. In most of the works, transformation of rural settlements into urban centres appears only as one of the three main pathways of urbanization, next to the development of existing cities and the creation of new towns.<sup>38</sup> In Romania, the issue of urbanization of villages, and even that of towns, was taken up especially in the period after 1970, when the methodological basis had already been laid.<sup>39</sup> Of course, this meant the urbanization process of the communist regime. After the fall of the socialist system, urban development took place in a new context, and thus urbanization was looked at from a different perspective.

Ianoş and Talanga argue about why it is desirable to declare new towns. They considered in 1994 that the Romanian urban network was underdeveloped and that two solutions existed in order to balance the entire system. The first would be the boosting of small towns and increasing their population – but this is hard to achieve and does not lead to the diminution of all areas without an urban polarization. The second is multiplying the number of small towns – and this is one of the most important measures for the reconstruction of the lower levels of the urban system. The question is, of course, whether the lifestyle in certain rural

32 Id. 511.

33 Csité–Kovács 2002.

34 Kulcsár 2008.

35 Beluszky–Győri 2006.

36 Ibid.

37 Kulcsár 2008.

38 Ilinca 2011.

39 Cucu 1981. 28–29.

settlements is similar to the urban one or not. Ianoş and Talanga observed that some communes were superior to some small towns declared in 1968 or before, from the point of view of economic, demographic, and physical features.<sup>40</sup> In their opinion, it appears as absolutely necessary to move some rural localities with central settlement functions in the category of cities in order to ensure the urban polarization of the entire country, 'as Romania should have a number of 400–450 cities'.<sup>41</sup> The emergence of new cities is necessary also because of the existence of vast areas that are 'deeply rural', which are poorly polarized by the existing urban settlements. Ianoş and Talanga bring also some examples of rural settlements that already have territorial roles similar to the one of the cities, with evident central functions.<sup>42</sup> Besides multiplying the number of towns, the integration in the urban system of rural localities with 'central place functions' is also a desideratum that will contribute to a unitary evolution of the entire settlement system (they will achieve the 'welding' between the urban and rural system).<sup>43</sup>

The authors give important recommendations to a correct assessment of the urbanization process, such as establishing a clear criteria for defining a town and for particularly highlighting the thresholds, from which a rural settlement can be considered as meeting all the attributes of a town, as well as making a distinction between the population of the town itself, the only one to be statistically reported as an urban population, and the population of the other rural settlements in its administrative territory.<sup>44</sup>

The former was met in the declaration process of the transition period; the clearly demarcated thresholds were developed but were not complied with by the new towns: the inhabitants of the composing settlements were accepted into the calculations of the population of the towns.

Very similar ideas were formulated by Ilinca, who enumerated some rural settlements with over 5,000 inhabitants, which are superior to small towns declared in 1968 or 1989 and have similar territorial functions to the towns: Bozovici, Lechința, Podu Turcului, Bechet, Răcari, Băneasa, Otopeni, Voluntari.<sup>45</sup> Some of these towns were declared urban in the transition period. Ilinca enumerated also some rural settlements with central settlement functions which should be integrated in the urban system, *inter alia*, Bechet, Drăgănești, Răcari, and Ardud, which subsequently gained urban status.

A very important issue is addressed by the same author: the attribution of urban status to a rural settlement presupposes the granting of investments in order to modernize the locality. The tertiarization of economic activities by including the

40 Ianoş–Talanga 1994. 71.

41 Id. 101.

42 Id. 71. For example: Bozovici, Lechinta, Balcesti, Podu Turcului, etc.

43 Id. 106.

44 Id. 105.

45 Ilinca 2011. 169–170.

active population in the sphere of services is a chance of transforming some rural localities into urban settlements.<sup>46</sup> The subject is addressed by Benedek, who recalls the conditions for achieving urban status and drawing the map of new Romanian towns after 1989.<sup>47</sup> However, the only researcher whose main research field is constituted by newly created towns is Berekméri.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, the political, economic, and social circumstances in which these towns emerged cannot be compared to those after 1989, and the evolution in rank of a settlement does not cover entirely its development, but even so, the conclusions of Săgeată and others are noteworthy: post-revolutionary urbanization, just like the urbanization pursued in the years of centralized economy, had an extensive, quantitative character rather than intensive, qualitative attributes capable of creating greater urban comfort and functional convergence between the top and the bottom of the urban hierarchy.<sup>49</sup>

Multiplying the number of cities tends to become only a declarative action in the context of an inability to transform themselves into real local polarization cores.<sup>50</sup> 'It is positive to declare new towns in large areas that are not at all or little polarized by an urban core, but it tends to remain simply declarative if these towns are not capable of growing into real local polarization nuclei and play a coagulating role in the territory.'<sup>51</sup>

Săgeată suggests that the solution would be to establish an intermediate category between the urban and rural for these settlements, to serve as 'nurseries' for the new urban settlements. Once these have indeed met the legal requirements, they will attain the new status. This way, the negative effects of 'legislative urbanization' (the loss of EU funds for rural development programmes) could be averted.<sup>52</sup>

Berekméri stresses the political motivation of the process: the government created the legal framework for the declaration of new towns, and then used it to consolidate its power.<sup>53</sup> In the case of 'winners', the parliamentary lobby was the key to success, rather than the meeting of real criteria, as there were also rejected requests (for example, Band and Gurghiu in Mureş County) with the argument of non-eligibility, while in general the selected settlements also did not fulfil the criteria entirely.<sup>54</sup>

---

46 Id. 171–172.

47 Benedek 2006.

48 Berekméri 2006, 2009.

49 Săgeată 2004, 2006 in Săgeată 2010.

50 Săgeată 2011.

51 Săgeată 2010. 86.

52 Ibid.

53 Berekméri 2006. 85.

54 Id. 88–89.



### 3. Urban Policy and Legal Framework

After the collapse of the socialist regime, the urban system of Romania underwent a process of restructuring, and the urban phenomenon acquired new dimensions and characteristics such as the replacement of the industrial town by a multifunctional and service type one, as well as the enlargement of the number of urban settlements through raising communes (viewed as local polarization cores) to urban status.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the spatial structure of towns in Romania has changed significantly, in a very short period of time (within a few years). Despite the fact that the extent of the state intervention in the development processes of the settlement network significantly decreased, and the market, as well as the competition between the settlements, became the major force of urbanization, the declaration of new towns (so-called formal urbanization) was also governmentally designed.<sup>56</sup> In 2001, a new settlement network development strategy was enacted: Act No 351/2001 for the approval of the Development Plan of the National Territory – Section IV, Network of Settlements. This strategy classified the settlements on six levels (ranks) while creating a six-tier hierarchy from 0 (Bucharest) to 5 (villages).<sup>57</sup> The National Spatial Plan (PATN) of 1998 defined the rank as an expression of the current and close future importance of a settlement belonging to a network of settlements regarding administration, politics, social networks, economy, etc., in accordance with the polarized influence zone dimensions and with the level of decision concerning the allocation of resources. This importance must find its correspondence also in the level of modernization.<sup>58</sup>

The new urban development strategy aimed to develop a polycentric and balanced urban system in order to diminish the overwhelming role of Bucharest, as well as to reinforce the second tier of urban centres and that of small towns.<sup>59</sup> In the new hierarchy, the first four (0–3) ranks represent four separate urban categories. The 4<sup>th</sup> rank, the commune centre is an administrative-territorial unit that comprises rural population and is organized according to economic, sociocultural, and geographical conditions. The village (5<sup>th</sup> rank) is the elementary administrative-territorial unit (definitions made by the National Institute of Statistics), which has to be part of a commune or a town.

Through the same law, certain regions that lack urban settlements were also defined, the so-called areas with a shortage of towns. The development of these regions was pointed out as a fundamental goal of regional development. These

55 Mitrică et al. 2014.

56 Kovács 2009b.

57 The six-tier hierarchy of the settlements: 0 – the capital, 1 – municipalities with national and European significance, 2 – municipalities with cross-county and county-level significance, 3 – towns, 4 – commune centres, 5 – villages.

58 Surd 2009.

59 Benedek 2006b. 49.

are rural microregions where there are no towns within a distance of 25–30 km, and a total of 17 such regions were defined.<sup>60</sup> According to the law, the Government consider as a priority (1) modernization of certain rural settlements serving such a role in their area of influence; (2) declaration of new towns (and at the same time the promotion of special programmes for the financial support of the institutional development, required for the setting up of these new towns).

The areas with a shortage of towns crossed county borders and encompassed a total of 435 communes. Out of these, 13 were declared urban (the majority of them in 2004). This means that 47 new towns were located outside the areas with a shortage of towns. The 13 new towns concentrated in 10 areas with a shortage of towns, while 7 such areas gained no new urban settlements. Seven areas gained one new town (area 2 Bănaesa, area 3 Căzănești, area 4 Ungheni, area 11 Ulmeni, area 12 Sărmașu, area 15 Murgeni, area 16 Pătărlagele), while three areas with a shortage of towns gained two new urban settlements (area 5 Bechet and Dăbuleni, area 6 Băbeni and Bălcești, area 13 Flămânzi and Ștefănești).

Act No 351/2001 also defined the procedure of changing the rank of a settlement, as well as the minimal quantitative and qualitative indicators for a 3<sup>rd</sup>-rank town to become a municipality, as well as the indicators to a commune to gain town status. According to Article 3, '[...] transition of the settlements from one rank to another one is made by law, on the proposal of the local councils, with the consultation of the population through referendum and the institutions involved, according to the law, respecting the key quantitative and qualitative indicators [...].'

The promotion from rank 4 to rank 3 is particularly interesting from our point of view because this means not only a simple change in rank but also a change in category, namely from rural to urban, by a simple political decision. It is also important to highlight that the law regulates the status change from rank 3 to rank 4, but there is a lack of regulation for all the other categories.

The 'reshaping' of the Romanian urban system had three directions: declaration of new towns (rank 3), new municipalities (rank 2) and establishing of new communes and villages. The latter meant the establishment of new administrative-territorial structures by detachment from the existing ones. Between 1990 and 2006, 226 new communes were set up, the process having its peak in the period of 2002–2004.<sup>61</sup>

The reshaping of the urban system – the changes of ranks – started in 1993, almost ten years before the law came into force, without a precise set of legal conditions, through acts adopted by the Parliament as pure manifestations of legislative power. Act No 2/1968 defined the town as 'the population centre that was more developed economically, socially, culturally, and in terms of infrastructure and administration' (Art. 4). However, it did not establish clear

60 Id. 63.

61 Săgeata 2011.

criteria for what constituted such economic, social, cultural, administrative, or infrastructural development.

The procedure took place in two modes: transitioning from town to municipality and from commune to town. These two changes in status should be analysed together. Although promoting towns and municipalities to a higher status started almost in the same time, there is a partial shift between the two procedures, so they took place partly in the same time and partly delayed. The number of municipalities almost doubled from 1993 to 2003, in ten years, as 47 towns were promoted to the rank of municipality. The process reached its peak in 1994–1995. As a parallel change, the number of towns started to decrease because the former towns were now counted as cities. While some of the settlements entered the group of towns, others just left it; ‘municipalization’ was more intense than ‘townification’.

The fall in the number of towns turned into a rise from 2002, when the intensity of proclaiming towns overtook the intensity of proclaiming municipalities. The number of towns increased the most between 2003 and 2004.

Before 1990, such administrative decisions were based in general on political considerations, while after 1990 they acquired a predominantly economic component,<sup>62</sup> but in some cases they had an important political character too. This process is one of the most (if not the most) significant administrative changes of the transition period.

Prior to Act No 351/2001, the increase of the number of towns in the transition period was moderate: from 260 to 265. The five new towns – Teiuș, Făget, Baia de Arieș, Geoagiu, and Otopeni – are located in economically developed counties with high levels of urbanization, and all of them have important tertiary functions – for example, Teiuș is a major railway junction, Geoagiu is a tourism centre and spa resort, while the largest international airport in Romania is located in Otopeni.<sup>63</sup>

After this act had come into force, a total number of 55 rural settlements gained town status in the next five (!) years, redrawing the urbanization map of Romania and raising the urbanization level of the country by three percentage points, from 54% to 57%.<sup>64</sup>

According to the 1992 census, 54.3% of the total population was urban, living in a proportion of 3/5 in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>65</sup> The 60 new towns contributed to the raise of the urbanization rate from about 54.6% in 1994 to 56.87% in 2007.<sup>66</sup> This is not so spectacular given that the population of these

---

62 Op. cit.

63 Benedek 2006b. 56.

64 At the beginning of the transition period, the urbanization level was 54% (percentage of urban population on 1 January 1992 by usually resident population), while in 2007 the same indicator was 57%.

65 Mureșan 1999. 101.

66 Own calculation on the basis of the NIS TEMPO-Online database, population by housing on 1 January 1994 and 2007.

towns was, in general, small, and an overall deurbanization trend characterized the country. The population censuses, however, reflect a shrinking urbanization rate: this was 54.33% in 1992, which then shrank to 52.74% in 2002, only to increase by approximately 1 percentage point, to 53.97% in 2011. Other studies also confirmed that between 1990 and 2008 the general decrease of the population was 7.3%, the loss of urban population (in all 320 towns) was 6.1%, while the net loss of the initial 260 towns during the same period of time was 8.0%. In spite of a slight general growth of the total urban population, due to a change of the administrative status of 60 communes, the real trend suggests a decrease of urban population in traditional urban centres, which is higher than the average decrease of the general population.<sup>67</sup>

## 4. The Criteria of Urban Status

Act No 351/2001 defined the minimal quantitative and qualitative criteria for a commune to gain town status concerning population, infrastructure, and socioeconomic situation. The law enumerated 16 criteria (indicators) and assigned to them exact quantitative thresholds that are to be fulfilled in order for a rural settlement to become a town. Since 1945, this was the first time when a law attached the gaining of urban status to particular quantitative conditions.<sup>68</sup> Later a new criterion – the proportion of households with central heating – was added to the list of requirements by Act No 100/2007. The same law modified the population criterion by increasing the threshold from 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants.

Act No 351/2001 stated that towns and municipalities maintained their status even if they were not able to fulfil all the new indicators required.<sup>69</sup> But the new towns could not fulfil all the criteria either. There is not a single indicator that was met by all the 60 new towns in 2004 although improvements were made for almost all the indicators, but to a differing extent.

Two remarks on the criteria seem to be pertinent. First, the characteristics of development are changing. For example, 20–30 years ago, the existence of secondary schools was a proper requirement for an urban settlement, while nowadays one cannot conceive a town without a Wi-Fi connection. Second, not all of the indicators fall within the competence of the local government: the establishment and financing of a secondary school is in the shared competence of local governments and the state. It appears unjust to impose requirements on a settlement regarding matters over which it lacks decision-making authority. The

67 Pascariu–Elisei 2012.

68 Benedek 2006.

69 The shortcomings were also presented by MDLPL, Urbanproiect in research on the degree of fulfilment of the indicators in all the towns and municipalities of Romania.

16 + 1 indicators were grouped in the following categories: population, economy, infrastructure, housing conditions, education, healthcare, leisure, and tourism.

#### **4.1. The Population Criterion**

Population is an essential element of a town (regardless of which definition of ‘town’ we take), which represents the quantitative and qualitative measure of the urban phenomenon’s evolution.<sup>70</sup> The ‘population criterion’ – the number of inhabitants required by the law – was one of the easiest to achieve by the settlements that wanted to become towns, and so the great majority managed to fulfil it. That is, at least before 2007, when the threshold of 5,000 inhabitants was raised to 10,000.<sup>71</sup> In fact, the demographic criterion is one of the most commonly used measures for making a distinction between a town and a village, which, despite its arbitrariness, represents a fixed basis.<sup>72</sup> Simple at first sight, its ‘optimum’ value may however differ not only across time but also across space – even within a given country – if we take into account basic geographic conditions (towns are usually larger in open plains than in mountainous regions, between valleys and hills). The Ministry for Development, Public Works, and Administration of Romania considers that a threshold of 15,000 inhabitants represents a limit below which the non-urban character of the Romanian towns can no longer be contested. On the other hand, UN recommendations promote the idea of a 2,000 inhabitant threshold. This is taken into account in most countries. As a result, periodically, certain rural settlements, when exceeding this limit, are declared towns (this is the case in France, for example). But this threshold varies greatly (between 200 and 50,000 inhabitants) worldwide.<sup>73</sup> Differences can be observed even in a European comparison, between Northern Europe and Southern Europe. The limit of 5,000 is relatively high if it is compared to the former but is low compared to the latter.

From the sixty new towns, only five were unable to fulfil the initial criterion (Bechet, Căzănești, Dragomirești, and Miercurea Sibiului – all of them declared towns in 2004, the year of mass declarations, and all of them with population less than 4,000 inhabitants; also, Baia de Arieș, declared town already in 1998, before the law came into force). Most of the new towns, 42 settlements, belonged to the category of 5,000–10,000 inhabitants, 12 had their population between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants, none of them between 20,000 and 30,000, and only one (Voluntari from Ilfov County) exceeded 30,000 inhabitants.<sup>74</sup>

70 Pop–Maier 1988. 873.

71 Veress 2016. 73.

72 Ianoș–Humeau 2000. 20.

73 Ibid.

74 Veress 2016. 73.

It would be worthwhile to examine the demographic processes of all the sixty new towns since their proclamation and to compare the two factors affecting the number of inhabitants: natural growth and migration balance. Natural population growth probably follows the national trends (a negative balance of births and deaths), but if we focus on the address changes, we can get a picture about the migratory movement of the inhabitants, and thus form an idea about the attractiveness of the new towns. The law requires a stable indicator, the number of inhabitants at the moment of applying for the new status, without asking for a stable or growing number of inhabitants over a certain period of time (5 or 10 years, for example).

Another interesting fact is that several new towns have one or more attached villages in their administration. The number of inhabitants is calculated per total, namely the sum of all the inhabitants from all the component settlements, despite the fact that villages are a different category: rank 5. In some cases, the population of the attached villages is equal to or even greater than the population of the main settlement. Moreover, natality-wise, the villages have preserved their identity and independence. This separation can be found also in the mental maps of the mayors.

As the mass-declaration process ended in 2006, not a single settlement has gained urban status in the conditions of the new threshold of 10,000 inhabitants. The new requirement would have been met only by 16 new towns. The new limit of the number of inhabitants introduced by Act No 100/2007 works as a slowing force, although not as a 'freezing' one, for further proclamations, as still 45 large communes have populations of above 10,000 inhabitants, according to the latest census.<sup>75</sup>

As stated before, in Romania, there were and still are many rural settlements that could satisfy the population condition; however, fulfilling the social, economic, and infrastructure conditions constituted the real difficulty.<sup>76</sup>

## 4.2. The Economic Criterion

Opinions vary in the literature on the economy's role in making a city, on whether the economy is an individual, self-sustaining city-forming power, or it exerts an influence only indirectly, through other central functions.<sup>77</sup> Economy is strongly related to population. In the words of Nicoară, 'the analysis of the population–economy relationship highlights a complex interrelation with

<sup>75</sup> The number of inhabitants according to the 2021 census. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of these settlements are just above the limit of 10,000 inhabitants, while some of them have 20,000–30,000 or even 50,000 inhabitants. The latter, however, are 'dormitory settlements' near municipalities without urban functions.

<sup>76</sup> Benedek 2006.

<sup>77</sup> Barta et al. 2006.

important implications for the dynamics of both components. A certain evolution of the population has repercussions on the economic development, while the level of the economic development influences the demographic phenomena and processes.<sup>78</sup>

At the same time, the distribution of the population by economic sectors – primary, secondary, tertiary – is one of the most important and common indicators in assessing the level of socio-economic development of a country: generally, there is an inverse proportion regarding the relationship between the percentage of the people employed in agriculture and the development of the country.<sup>79</sup>

The proportion of employees in non-agricultural activities is the only economy-related indicator from the list. The threshold was set at 75%, which means that a maximum of 25% of the employees should be working in agriculture, forestry, and fishing. This could be a good indicator for differentiating an urban settlement from a rural one.

In 2002, 37 new towns out of 60 (62%) did not match this criterion, while seven of them (Flămânzi, Ștefănești in Botoșani County, Dăbuleni, Dragomirești, Săliștea de Sus, Cajvana, Milișăuți) had an extremely high proportion of above 75% of the employed population engaged in agricultural activities – exactly the opposite of the requirements. Another ten towns had their population employed in agriculture in a proportion between 50% and 75%, thus having a predominantly agricultural profile.<sup>80</sup> Extremely high values – around 97–98% – were measured in certain towns in Ilfov County (Chitila, Pantelimon, Voluntari, Bragadiru) and values above 90% in other settlements (Teiuș, Ghimbav, Turceni, Otopeni, Popești-Leordeni, Băbeni, Berbești). In spite of this ‘outstanding achievement’, the average value of the new towns remains below the minimum criterion (64%).

It is also noteworthy that the majority of towns with a mixed economy come from those with an agricultural function.<sup>81</sup> This may be promising for the new towns declared after 1989: they can diversify their economy despite their current agricultural profile. However, there are opinions claiming that the probability of a diversification of the local economic structure is small in the majority of the newly declared towns.<sup>82</sup>

---

78 Nicoară 1999. 149.

79 Id. 155–157.

80 Veress 2016. 74.

81 Pop 2000.

82 Benedek 2006b. 63.

### 4.3. Infrastructure

#### 4.3.1. Overview

The development of the local economy goes hand in hand with that of infrastructure. The built infrastructure of a town is composed of the drinking water supply network, the sewage system, the heating system, the gas supply network, the public roads, and the telephone networks, and it is a significant factor in the operation of the settlement. On the one hand, it is not surprising that most of the requirements for gaining the town status are connected to the infrastructural condition of the new towns, but, on the other hand, it must be emphasized that these conditions do not depend entirely on the towns themselves. Thus, criteria 10–16 consist in mapping the public utilities of local interest, as well as the environmental conditions of the settlements: the proportion of modern roads, of streets with a water supply, of streets with sewage disposal and wastewater management, and landfills with properly provided access.

Matching the infrastructural conditions was not easy. The logic of the applicant settlements was even reversed: they had submitted the application not because they fulfilled the infrastructure-related criteria but to fulfil them with the help of the newly gained urban status. The first infrastructure-related requirement was the proportion of modern roads. A road is considered to be modern if it has shaped stone, asphalt, or concrete coating.<sup>83</sup> The law required a minimum of 50%. At the beginning of the century, there was a low public road density and quality in Romania.<sup>84</sup> In 2004, the criterion of the proportion of modern roads (% of total length) was fulfilled by 14 settlements (18.4% of the new towns), out of which two presented 100% – Broșteni and Salcea –, while the smallest ratio of modernized roads were to be found in Săliște de Sus (4.88%) and Bechet (5.63%), indicating huge differences between the new towns.<sup>85</sup> Most of the new towns have evolved since then, some of them in a quite spectacular way (for example, Ardud improved from 26% to 95%).

To analyse the other infrastructure-related conditions – the proportion of streets with a water supply (% of total length), the proportion of streets with sewage disposal (% of total length), and the proportion of streets with external hydrant network system for firefighting (% of total length) – is problematic because of limited data availability. In order to gain some insight into these conditions, the share of the total length of the utilities in the total length of streets was calculated, which resulted in approximate values.

---

83 As defined by the National Institute of Statistics.

84 Mathe 2011.

85 Veress 2016. 76.



#### 4.3.2. Proportion of Streets with a Water Supply

The total length of the simple water distribution network of a town represents the length of tubes and pipes installed in the respective settlement to transport drinking water from the culvert pipes or pumping stations to consumers' connecting points. The network's 'simplicity' means that if a street has two or more lines installed, their summed length will be taken into account in statistics. The network includes service lines, as well as major and secondary arteries of distribution, but the length of ramifications and of culvert pipes are excluded. The length of the culvert is not included even if a number of consumers are connected to.<sup>86</sup>

In 2004, exactly 30 new towns fulfilled the criterion of at least 60% of streets with a water supply. There were also three towns with 0 km of total length of drinking water system (thus, 0 km of streets with water supply), Miercurea Sibiului, Cajvana, and Milișăuți, but low values (around 3%) were also found in Bechet, Bragadiru, and Miercurea Nirajului.<sup>87</sup> The biggest challenge to these towns is asphalt-covered roads, sewage systems, and drinking water systems. Achievements in these indicators were not related to the urban status. On a national level, the proportion of urban streets with water supply was satisfying in 2004 (98.6%), which value, however, dropped by 2018 (96.4%).<sup>88</sup> These reduced values may be a result of expanding the urban network to new towns (which obviously have lower values, thus skews the statistics).

#### 4.3.3. Proportion of Streets with Sewage Disposal

The total length of the simple sewer pipes represents the length of channels (tubes) that collect and discharge wastewater (domestic, industrial, etc.) and water from precipitations within the territory of a settlement and extends from the connection point of dwelling with the sewage installations to the discharge point of wastewater into a natural emissary. The network includes service sewers, as well as the main and secondary sewer, but does not include the length of connections to the buildings. Similarly to the drinking water network, if a street has two or more pipes, their total length will be considered.<sup>89</sup>

The proportion of streets with wastewater disposal theoretically goes hand in hand with the previous criterion. In 2004, nine settlements have passed the

<sup>86</sup> National Institute of Statistics.

<sup>87</sup> Veress 2016. 77.

<sup>88</sup> Own calculation, made on the basis of the NIS TEMPO-Online database. Approximate values: the share of the total length of the water supply network in urban areas was calculated (24,647.2 km in 2004, 30,415.9 km in 2018) in the total length of the urban streets (25,003 km in 2004, 31,548 km in 2018).

<sup>89</sup> National Institute of Statistics.

threshold of 50%. Ten towns did not have any wastewater disposal (out of which five were from Suceava County). It is essential that significant differences can be observed between the central settlement and the attached settlements in terms of infrastructure. While first of all the centre was developed, the composing settlements are lagging behind to various extents regarding one or more public utilities.

#### *4.3.4. Wastewater Management*

The next criterion is also related to sewage. The law required a sewage water cleaning station with mechanical technology from each of the candidates to town status. To determine how many towns fulfilled the requirement became possible only in 2004: 22 out of the 60 new towns.

The lack of data makes the analysis difficult to conduct regarding further indicators, the proportion of streets with external hydrant network system for firefighting (% of total length), and landfills with properly provided access.

#### *4.3.5. Landfills with Properly Provided Access*

In general, landfills in Romania are not conceived as a controlled storage system, thus are hazardous and unsanitary areas and represent a danger of contamination for ground and surface waters and threaten not only the quality of the environment but also public health.<sup>90</sup> In 2002, 265 municipal landfills were registered as belonging to towns and municipalities. There was at least one landfill in every urban settlement, but only 10% of the urban landfills were authorized by the Territorial Inspectorates for Environmental Protection. More than 40% of them did not have any kind of facilities for environmental protection, while more than 45% were surrounded by nothing more than a fence.<sup>91</sup>

The state of infrastructure requires large-scale investments that go beyond the opportunities and budgets of a settlement. It is not appropriate to expect such fulfilment. However, the vast majority of the new towns applied for urban status precisely in order to gain a chance to develop its infrastructure.

### **4.4. Housing Conditions**

#### *4.4.1. Proportion of Households with Drinking Water Supply*

The drinking water supply and its counterpart, the wastewater collecting system, are some of the key elements of an urban settlement's infrastructure. According

---

90 Atudorei-Păunescu 2002. 5–6.

91 Antonescu et al. 2006. 36.

to Trofin, 'People's lives in populated urban centres can be brought in good conditions of hygiene and comfort, and the economic development of the country can be ensured only if the drinking and industrial water supply and the disposal of wastewater and rain is satisfactorily resolved.'<sup>92</sup>

Twort and his colleagues already in 1974 summarized the standard desirable conditions for water supply in eight points. The study stresses, among other things, the following: the supply must be a full 24-hour supply; the distribution system must be in good condition, regularly surveyed for leakage and overflows and regularly maintained; no large number of unauthorized connections to mains should exist, and no large quantities of water should be made available free of charge; the price of water must not be so low that the consumers pay no attention to waste, nor so high that many consumers cannot afford to take what they reasonably require.<sup>93</sup> These conditions may seem utopian if we calculate the proportion of households without drinking water installations in the newly created towns.

In 2002, only two towns managed to achieve the minimum of 70% of households with drinking water supply (Ghimbav – 89.63% – and Otopeni – 73.75%), and an additional nine towns had at least half of the dwellings equipped with this facility. This means that in 49 towns more than half of the number of households did not have drinking water via tap water systems. This indicator has evolved in the most spectacular way since then: according to the 2011 census data, as many as 16 new towns managed to reach the threshold.<sup>94</sup> The average of all the new towns showed a similar upward trend, from 33% in 2002 to 58% in 2011, but still remained below the 70% required by law.<sup>95</sup>

#### *4.4.2. Proportion of Households with Bathroom and Toilet Facilities*

The next criterion, the proportion of households with bathroom and toilet facilities (minimum 55%) is a combined one: there is no official data available for toilets, but we know the proportion of households with indoor bathrooms (provided by the 2002 and 2011 censuses of population and households). From this point of view, the dwellings of the 60 new towns were somewhat better equipped, but the picture was still catastrophic in 2002: only 5 towns managed to fulfil the criterion of 55% of households with a bathroom. These were Ghimbav (77.42%), Otopeni (68.77%), Bragadiru (58.59%), Baia de Arieș (56.85%), and Livada (just on the limit if we round up its 54.63%). Berbești remained just below the limit (51.11%). The bottom of the list was occupied by Liteni (2.67%),

92 Trofin 1983. 3.

93 Twort et al. 1974. 2.

94 Amara reached the threshold just on the limit with 69.8%, which is 70% if we round it up.

95 Veress 2016.

Salcea (3.03%), and Dolhasca (3.38%). By 2011, significant changes had taken place: the biggest shares of households with a bathroom exceeded 90% (Otopeni, Bragadiru, Popești-Leordeni, Ghimbav), and also the lowest values became two-digit numbers: 18.40% in Dolhasca and 18.50% in Murgeni. This time, 22 young towns fulfilled the criterion, and the average also rose from 27.99% to 49.50%. The improvement is not bad, but still insufficient to match the threshold.

#### *4.4.3. Proportion of Households with Central Heating*

The last criterion related to dwellings is the proportion of households with central heating (%). Being added to the system of criteria in 2007, it was not a condition of the settlements wishing to become a town to fulfil it. Nonetheless, we have examined how the new towns look like also from this point of view. Data collected with the occasion of the 2002 population and household census shows devastating results: the number is 0 in more than half of the new towns (exactly 31 of them), meaning that not even a single household was equipped with central heating.

In 2011, already 12 towns managed to match this criterion, the best records being around 80%, in the towns of Otopeni (88.7%), Popești-Leordeni (80%), and Bragadiru (78.2%). The lowest value was 0.8% and was measured in Murgeni, so there is an extremely high disparity among the new towns regarding this issue. Calculating the average, we can notice an improvement from 3.98% in 2002 to 22.03% in 2011, but this latest value – like all the previous ones – is below the actual minimum rate.

The law does not include other installations, such as the proportion of households connected to the public sewage system or with electricity. The public sewage system is present, however, among the settlement-level requirements. Most of the infrastructural requirements are defined in a relation to the length of streets, such as the proportion of modernized roads (% of total length), the proportion of streets with water supply (% of total length), the proportion of streets with sewage disposal (% of total length), and the proportion of streets with external hydrant network systems for firefighting (% of total length).

### **4.5. Healthcare**

#### *4.5.1. Overview*

The criteria related to healthcare was – and still is – the weakest point of the new towns. This is not surprising in a context in which the Romanian healthcare

system is among the worst in the EU, according to different European-level rankings by various indicators.<sup>96</sup>

According to the definition of the World Health Organization, ‘a health system consists of all organizations, people, and institutions producing actions whose primary intent is to promote, restore, or maintain health’.<sup>97</sup> One of the most important goals of the healthcare system is to improve the health status of the population, both in terms of the average level of health and the distribution of health.<sup>98</sup>

One of the weaknesses of the Romanian healthcare system is avoidable/preventable mortality,<sup>99</sup> which places Romania at the bottom of the list of the EU countries and shows the under-performance of its healthcare system. While a study from 2011 stated that over one quarter of all annual deaths would be treatable and avoidable in an effective healthcare system,<sup>100</sup> more recently a Eurostat report pointed out that almost half (49.4%) of the deaths that occurred in Romanian hospitals in 2013 could have been avoided given the current technological and medical knowledge. The Eurostat report put Romania on the last place among the EU members in terms of efficiency of the healthcare system and its ability to save lives.<sup>101</sup> In addition, all latest studies revealed the dissatisfaction of both the healthcare staff and the population.<sup>102</sup> At the same time, the healthcare system is under-financed compared to the European average, and this is one of the main causes of the low performance of the services: while the EU level was 9–10% of the GDP per inhabitant, the same value in Romania was only 4% in 2007.<sup>103</sup>

Vlădescu et al. warn on urban–rural disparities too, emphasizing that in Romania the current model of care creates accessibility problems in rural areas to hospital curative services, but also to drugs, as in these areas the hospital density is low, and the number of pharmacies is much more reduced in comparison with urban areas.<sup>104</sup>

At the European level, there is a constant decrease in the number of hospital beds both for the EU-27 and for each Member State, at least starting from 1990 and up until 2010.<sup>105</sup> One study found that, compared with the European average indicator (5.6 hospital beds for 1,000 inhabitants), Romania has surprisingly high values, varying around 7 beds for 1,000 inhabitants (the same values as Poland,

96 Vlădescu–Astărăstoae 2012, Vlădescu et al. 2010.

97 WHO 2000. For a debate about definitions on the health system, see Duran et al. 2011.

98 Figueras et al. 2011. 6.

99 Avoidable mortality refers to death from certain causes that should be avoided in the presence of timely and effective medical care (Health Status and Living Conditions in an Enlarged Europe – Report, 2005).

100 Nolte et al. 2012.

101 <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>.

102 Vlădescu et al. 2010.

103 Tinica et al. 2008.

104 Vlădescu et al. 2010.

105 Platon–Constantinescu 2013.

while Germany and Hungary have the highest values, and Spain one of the lowest values in Europe).

A recent tendency was on the governmental level to obtain economic efficiency by reducing costs.<sup>106</sup> One of the recent actions in this respect has been the dissolution of a number of hospitals that had proven unprofitable from an economic point of view and which were not able to close contracts with the National Health Insurance Agency.<sup>107</sup> The National Strategy of Hospital Rationalization envisaged the reduction of the number of public hospitals by 15% until April 2011 (Decree No 303/2011), and as a consequence 67 hospitals were dissolved in the entire country (summing up to a total of 9,200 hospital beds).<sup>108</sup>

Recently, Bilasco and his colleagues have made a complex evaluation of the accessibility of the hospital infrastructure in the Nord-Vest development region of Romania by calculating the access time from any location in the region to the nearest hospital, taking into consideration the access ways, the speed of travel, and the hospital types. They have found areas of deficit from the point of view of accessibility to the hospital network; these are situated at the northern and north-eastern extremities of the region (the Maramureş Depression, the Oaş Depression, the Hills of Bistriţa, and the area Oaş-Codru). Many of the newly created towns are located exactly in these areas, so if they had such institutions, the accessibility indicators would improve significantly. Other areas with deficiency are located in the southern part of the region, bordering the counties of Cluj and Bihor, as well as areas in the western part of the region, bordering the counties of Bihor and Satu Mare, both mountainous areas with a low density of main transport roads.<sup>109</sup>

In terms of hospitals, the number of these units in Romania has constantly grown during the past 20 years with 80 units, namely by 18.9%, from 423 in 1990 to 503 units in 2010, and in this period this indicator has increased with the second fastest pace in the Nord-Vest region (with a 24%) after the Bucharest-Ilfov region (66%). This order remains the same if we analyse the regional distribution of all the hospitals in the country in 2010: the Nord-Vest region is on the second place (with 14%), after Bucharest-Ilfov (16%).<sup>110</sup>

While the number of hospitals has increased, the number of hospital beds has decreased with 30% in the period of 1990–2010, from 8.92 to 6.16 beds/1,000 inhabitants but, of course, with different rates on the regional level. In the Nord-Vest development region, this indicator decreased from 9.59 hospital beds/1,000 inhabitants in 1990 to 6.31 beds/1,000 inhabitants in 2010.<sup>111</sup>

106 Vlădescu–Astărăstoae 2012.

107 Bilasco et al. 2015.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Platon–Constantinescu 2013.

111 Ibid.

Some years ago, a complex analysis was conducted by Drăgan (2009) that explored the disparities of the medical-sanitary infrastructure in the Nord-Vest development region by calculating a medical-sanitary infrastructure index on the basis of 14 types of medical-sanitary units. The study concluded that in the counties of Maramureș, Satu Mare, and Sălaj the number of medical staff is insufficient not only in the primary assistance units but also in the on-bed medical assistance units. Low numbers of beds in hospitals were recorded in the following counties: Bistrița-Năsăud, Satu Mare, and Sălaj (below the country's and the region's average). High-performance or specialized hospitals are present only in the towns of Cluj-Napoca and Oradea.<sup>112</sup> The study suggests that needs and problems in this region from a medical-sanitary point of view are not negligible, and they are present on a regional level (or in certain counties at least), not only in the newly declared towns.

#### 4.5.2. Number of Hospital Beds

It must be noted that the number of hospital beds indicator offers limited information about the health infrastructure because health infrastructure includes also medical equipment and techniques,<sup>113</sup> which are, of course, more difficult to analyse and compare.

The indicator number of hospital beds/1,000 inhabitants is inappropriate for the new towns, as the majority of them did not have any hospitals in the year of their declaration. Except some new towns near Bucharest, where the medical function of the capital has been reassigned from the city itself to a nearby settlement, the great majority of the new towns do not have a hospital.

The situation seemed worse in 2014. The National Strategy of Hospital Rationalization foresaw reducing the number of public hospitals by 15% starting from 1 April 2011 (Decree No 303/2011), through the dissolution of hospitals that had proven unprofitable from an economic point of view and which were not able to close contracts with the National Health Insurance Agency.<sup>114</sup> Due to this healthcare reform, 67 hospitals were closed nationwide, out of which 8 were located in one of the newly declared towns (Baia de Arieș, Sântana, Pătârlagele, Băneasa, Sărmașu, Roznov, Ciacova, Bălcești).<sup>115</sup> So, in 2014, only 9 towns managed to fulfil the 7 hospital beds/1,000 inhabitants, 12 had values between 1.03 and 6.07, while 39 (!) did not have any hospital. That year, the highest values were reached by Gătaia (81.67) and Geagiu (65.36). The better values

<sup>112</sup> Drăgan 2009.

<sup>113</sup> Platon–Constantinescu, 2013.

<sup>114</sup> Bilasco et al. 2015.

<sup>115</sup> The hospital from Somcuta Mare was also closed, but it reopened later. Some of the closed hospitals were reopened by the court, others were transformed into elderly homes or into general physician's consulting rooms.

in 2014 compared to 2004 (the cases of Gătaia, Geoagiu, Turceni, Murgeni) are a result of population loss and not of a capacity increase in the hospitals. There are also some shrinking values due to the capacity diminution (Ștefănești from Argeș, Sângeorgiu de Pădure, Făget). New hospitals were established in Otopeni, Voluntari, Răcari, and Fierbinți-Târg, but because of the close-downs, the average of the 60 new towns for the hospital beds/1,000 inhabitants experienced a slight decrease from 5.26 to 5.25, remaining below the threshold set by the law.

#### *4.5.3. Number of Doctors*

The number of doctors is in correlation with the number of hospital beds: in towns which have hospitals, the number of doctors is higher. In towns with an absence of hospitals, family doctors are operating in medical stations.<sup>116</sup> The analysis of the physicians' density in the WHO European Region reveals that Romania is ranking the 31<sup>st</sup> out of the 33 countries.<sup>117</sup>

In terms of healthcare, it would make more sense to introduce indicators that refer to other healthcare system elements such as the number of general physicians per 1,000 inhabitants, emergency care, number of dentists per 1,000 inhabitants, and pharmacies.

### **4.6. Education**

Criterion No 7 refers to education and imposes upon the new towns to have secondary schools. This is a perfectly agreeable indicator, as small towns do not have universities. In 2004, this indicator was the third most fulfilled by the new towns (after the population criterion and the public libraries), 47 in number. The towns not matching this criterion were somehow concentrated in certain counties, so secondary schools were missing, for example, in some towns from Suceava County (Frasin, Milisăuți, Salcea), Ilfov County (Bragadiru, Chitila, Pantelimon, Popești-Leordeni), and Maramureș County (Dragomirești, Săliște de Sus, Tăuții-Măgherăuș). The majority of the towns disposed by one such school, while Săcueni, Dăbuleni, Ulmeni, and Vicovu de Sus had two of them.

### **4.7. Leisure and Recreation**

#### *4.7.1. Overview*

Indicators No 8 and No 15 were included in this category, as well as cultural and sports institutions and green areas.

<sup>116</sup> Berekméri 2009.

<sup>117</sup> Vlădescu et al. 2010.



#### 4.7.2. Cultural and Sports Institutions

Regarding cultural and sports institutions (criterion No 8), the law required public libraries and spaces for sports activities (it is not evidenced, however, whether both of them or just one of them). There is no available data on sports institutions (very likely most of the towns did not have such facilities, at least not in 2004), but we do know if a settlement has a public library or not. In 2004, every young town disposed of exactly 1 public library, except of four settlements – Chitila, Măgurele, Popești Leordeni, and Voluntari –, which had none. It is interesting that the new towns in Ilfov County have very good results in terms of almost all indicators (and their indicators improved constantly since 2004) but do not excel from a cultural point of view. We consider that they do not have libraries because they do not need it: located next to Bucharest, they can find everything culture-related there, not only libraries.

This criterion does not address the real cultural opportunities of a settlement, such as the number of the cultural or sports events, activities. It does not mention newspapers, for example. In most of the new towns, there is a cultural centre, but it is used only as a ballroom for wedding ceremonies.

#### 4.7.3. Green Areas

The next criterion – green areas – is not so likely to be fulfilled in greater proportion than the previous one. This indicator, related to the protection of the quality of environment, gave an ecological dimension to the accession of the town status.<sup>118</sup> The area of green spaces in urban centres grew continuously between 1980 and 1990, from 169.6 km<sup>2</sup> to 220.8 km<sup>2</sup>, but between 1990 and 1997 a decrease of up to 207.06 km<sup>2</sup> occurred. This was a consequence of the attitude of the local authorities and of the population too.<sup>119</sup> ‘Life in today’s Romanian cities requires an increase in green areas and spaces for recreation, relaxation’ – wrote Ianoș and Tălângă in 1994.<sup>120</sup> This is certainly true for the majority of the towns of the country but less so for the new towns: they are the greenest ones in Romania; however, not due to extended and specially conceived parks but due to the rural shape of these settlements. The youngest towns of Romania are probably also the greenest albeit the most rural ones.

The minimum value of 10 m<sup>2</sup>/inhabitant was reached by 17 new towns out of 60 in 2004. Outstanding values were measured in Amara (86.53 m<sup>2</sup>/inhabitant, 66 ha of green areas) and Miercurea Sibiului (54.15%, 22 ha). One town, Bragadiru, had a value above 30 m<sup>2</sup>/inhabitant and another 5 above 20 m<sup>2</sup>/inhabitant. There

118 Benedek 2006.

119 Atudorei–Păunescu 2002. 1–2.

120 Ianoș–Tălângă 1994. 67.

were four towns without any green areas: Cajvana, Dolhasca, Milișăuți, and Salcea.

#### 4.8. Tourism

The number of hotel beds is related to tourism, and it is the sole requirement that does not serve the wellbeing of the inhabitants but economic development. Tourism is seen as a general remedy for the areas lagging behind (and even more so for rural areas), not only in the regional policies but also in a considerable amount of scientific literature. For example, Matei and her colleagues<sup>121</sup> wrote, ‘In Romania, after 1990, tourism is seen as a universal solution for the economic development of any region. In fact, some areas are appropriate to this.’ At this point, we return to our assumption that these settlements were not awarded the rank of town because they deserved it but in a hope that would facilitate their development.

In 2004, only 7 towns had at least one hotel, out of which only 5 had a number of beds above 50. These were Amara (1763), Otopeni (510), Geoagiu (505), Măgurele (128), and Miercurea Sibiului (101).

It is important that in general there are accommodation units in the new towns, but these are typical for rural areas – pensions, agrotourism pensions, touristic chalets, eventually motels and school camps –, and hotels are rare. It is also interesting that although the law mentions ‘hotel’ beds, this criterion has been broadly interpreted by the authorities in their eligibility documentations, and thus they included all the beds in all types of touristic accommodation units they had in their settlements.

### 5. Conclusions

The current regulation does not entirely reflect the geographical functions of a town. It seems that urban status was not a reward, a recognition of the successful urban development process but rather an encouragement, a new starting point in the life of the settlement. The idea of increasing the rate of urbanization by declaring a settlement as urban, elevating it from a more developed commune, appeared in the context of the accession to the European Union. After an economically, socially, and also politically failed transition from the socialist regime, artificially accelerated urbanization seemed as a method for ‘catching up with the West’, which relied on a traditional supremacy of the town as a settlement type.

Act No 351/2001 stabilized the Romanian urban system in two ways. The new limit of 10,000 inhabitants set in 2007 acts as a slowing force, although

<sup>121</sup> Matei et al. 2013. 163.

not as a ‘freezing’ one of further proclamations, as currently 50 large communes have population above the new threshold, according to the 2021 Population and Household Census. Since 1996, nothing has happened in terms of urbanization because there is no political will.

There is a gap in the current Romanian legislation on how a town could become a commune. The law does not regulate the downgrading of the newly declared towns to rural status (nor does it regulate any other downgrading in ranking). This is another way to stabilize the current urban system of the country.

## References

- ANTONESCU, N. N.–ANTONESCU, N.–STĂNESCU, D.-P.–POPESCU, L.-L. 2006. *Gestiunea și tratarea deșeurilor urbane* [Management and Treatment of Urban Waste]. Bucharest.
- ATUDOREI, A.–PĂUNESCU, I. 2002. *Gestiunea deșeurilor urbane* [Urban Waste Management]. Bucharest.
- BELUSZKY, P. 2008. Maradékolt boltja [Shop of Leftovers]. *Tér és Társadalom* 12(1): 169–172.
- BELUSZKY, P.–GYŐRI, R. 1999. A magyarországi városhálózat és az EU-csatlakozás. [Hungarian Urban Network and EU Accession]. *Tér és Társadalom* 13(1–2): 1–30.
2004. Fel is út, le is út... Városaink településhierarchiában elfoglalt pozícióinak változásai a 20. században [Rise and Fall... Changes in the Hierarchical Position of the Hungarian Cities in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century]. *Tér és Társadalom* 18(1): 1–41.
- BENEDEK, J. 2006a. A romániai urbanizáció jellegzetességei az utolsó évszázad során [Peculiarities of Hungarian Urbanization During the Last Century]. In: Győri, R.–Hajdú, Z. (eds), *Kárpát-medence: Települések, tájak, régiók, térstruktúrák* [The Carpathian Basin: Settlements, Landscapes, Regions, Structures of Space]. Pécs–Budapest: 77–101.
- 2006b. Urban Policy and Urbanization in the Transition Romania. *Romanian Review of Regional Studies* 2(1): 51–64.
- BEREKMÉRI, M.-E. 2006. Új városok Maros megyében [New Towns in Maros County]. *Erdélyi Társadalom* 4(2): 83–98.
- BILAȘCO, Ș.–FILIP, S.–COCEAN, P.–PETREA, D.–VESCAN, I.–FODOREAN, I. 2015. The Evaluation of Accessibility to Hospital Infrastructure at Regional Scale by Using GIS Space Analysis Models: The North-West Region, Romania. *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Geographia* 60(1): 27–50.
- CSAPÓ, T.–KOCSIS, ZS. 1997. A várossá nyilvánítás elvi kérdései, potenciális városok az Északnyugat-Dunántúlon [Principal Issues of the Declaration of

- New Towns, Potential Towns in Northwest Transdanubia]. *Tér és társadalom* 11(1): 183–196.
2008. A várossá válás reformja [Reform of the Incorporation of Towns]. *Területi Statisztika* 6: 645–650.
- CUCU, V. 1968. *Orașele R. S. România. Probleme de geografie economică. Rezumat al tezei de doctorat* [Towns of the Socialist Republic of Romania. Problems of Economic Geography. Resume of the Doctoral Theses]. Iași.
1981. *Geografia populației și așezărilor umane* [The Geography of Population and of Human Settlements]. 2<sup>nd</sup> reviewed ed. Bucharest.
- DRĂGAN, D. 2009. Disparities of the Medical-Sanitary Infrastructure in the North-West Development Region. *Romanian Review of Regional Studies* 5(1): 83–90.
- IANOȘ, I. 1987. *Orașele și organizarea spațiului geografic. Studiu de geografie economică asupra teritoriului României* [Towns and the Organization of Geographical Space. Study of Economic Geography of the Territory of Romania]. Bucharest.
- IANOȘ, I.–HUMEAU, J.-B. 2000. *Teoria sistemelor de așezări umane. Studiu introductiv* [Theory of the System of Human Settlements. Introductory Study]. Editura Tehnică, Bucharest.
- IANOȘ, I.–TĂLÂNGĂ, C. 1994. *Orașul și sistemul urban românesc în condițiile economiei de piață* [The Romanian Town and Urban System in Market Economy Conditions]. Bucharest.
- ILINCA, N. 2011. *Geografia așezărilor urbane* [Geography of Urban Settlements]. Bucharest.
- KOCSIS, Zs. 2008. Várossá válás Európában [Becoming a City in Europe]. *Területi Statisztika* 6: 645–650.
- KOURTIT, K.–NIJKAMP, P. 2015. Cities of the Future: Research Challenges in the ‘Urban Century’. *Romanian Journal of Regional Science* 9(1): 1–16.
- KOVÁCS, Z. 2009b. Urbanizáció és átalakuló városhálózat Kelet-Közép-Európában [Urbanization and Transforming City Networks in Central Eastern Europe]. *Közép-európai közlemények* 2(4–5): 175–182.
- KULCSÁR, L. J. 2008. Rendhagyó gondolatok a várossá nyilvánításról a megkészt fejlődés kontextusában [Unorthodox Thoughts on City Incorporation in the Context of Arrested Development]. *Területi Statisztika* 5: 509–515.
- KULCSÁR, L. J.–BROWN, D. L. 2011. The Political Economy of Urban Reclassification in Post-socialist Hungary. *Regional Studies* 45(4): 479–490.
- LENNER, T. 1996. Központi funkciók feltárása Vas megyében [Exploring Central Functions in Vas County]. *Tér és Társadalom* 10(2–3): 69–76.
- MÁTHÉ, Cs. 2011. Traffic Safety Issues in Romania. *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Geographia* 2: 167–179.

- MIHĂILESCU, V.–HERBST, C.–BĂCĂNARU, I. 1965. *Contribuții la studiul relațiilor dintre factorii economico-geografici și funcțiile orașelor. Extras din Comunicări de Geografie* [Contributions to the Study of the Relationships between Economic-Geographical Factors and the Functions of Cities. Excerpt from Communications in Geography]. Vol. III. Bucharest.
- MITRICA, B. 2014. Changes in the Dynamics and Demographic Structures of the Romanian Urban Population. An Overview of the Post-communist Period. *Revue Roumaine de Géographie* 58(2): 201–212.
- MUREȘAN, C. 1999. *Evoluția demografică a României. Tendințe vechi, schimbări recente, perspective (1870–2030)* [The Demographic Evolution of Romania. Old Trends, Recent Changes, Prospects (1870–2030)]. Cluj-Napoca.
- NEACȘU, M. C. 2010. *Orașul sub lupă. Concepte urbane. Abordare geografică* [The City Under the Magnifying Glass. Urban Concepts. A Geographical Approach]. Bucharest.
- NOLTE, E.–MCKEE, M.–EVANS, D.–KARANIKOLOS, M. 2012. Saving Lives? The Contribution of Health Care to Population Health. In: Figueras, J.–McKee, M. (eds), *Health Systems, Health, Wealth and Societal Well-Being. Assessing the Case for Investing in Health Systems*. Maidenhead (UK): 101–124.
- PÁL, J. 1999. *Procesul de urbanizare în scaunele secuiești în secolul al XIX-lea* [The Urbanization Process in the Székely Seats in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century]. Cluj-Napoca.
- PIRISI, G.–TRÓCSÁNYI, G. 2007. *A várossá nyilvánítás mint a településfejlesztés eszköze? A városi cím elnyerésének területpolitikai változásai* [Declaring Settlements as Cities as a Tool for Urban Development? Changes in Territorial Policies for Obtaining City Status]. *Területfejlesztés és Innováció* 1(2): 2–8.
- PLATON, V.–CONSTANTINESCU, A. 2013. Regional Disparities in Romania. Contribution of the Regional Operational Program to Health Infrastructure. *Romanian Review of Regional Studies* 9(2): 87–98.
- POP, P. G. 2000. Funcțiile și dimensiunile urbanului în România [The Functions and Dimensions of the Urban in Romania]. *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Geographia* 45(1): 69–80.
- POP, P. G.–MAIER, A. 1988. Fenomenul urban în nord-vestul României [The Urban Phenomenon in Northwestern Romania]. *Acta Mvsei Porolissensis* 12: 873–880.
- SĂGEATA, R. 2011. Evoluția structurilor administrativ-teritoriale din mediul rural în România în ultimele două decenii (1990–2010) [The Evolution of Administrative-Territorial Structures in Rural Areas in Romania over the Last Two Decades (1990–2010)]. *Economie Agrară și Dezvoltare Rurală* [New Series] 8(1): 79–88.
- SZELENYI, I. 1996. Cities under Socialism – And After. In: Andrusz, G.–Harloe, M.–Szelenyi, I. (eds), *Cities after Socialism. Urban and Regional*

- Change and Conflict in Post-socialist Societies*. Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470712733.ch10>.
- SZEPESI, G. 2008. A rendszerváltozás utáni várossá avatások Magyarországon [City-Proclamations in Hungary After the Regime Change]. *Tér és Társadalom* 22(2): 53–70.
- SZIGETI, E. 1997. Urbanizáció, városhálózat, várossá nyilvánítás [Urbanization, Urban Network, Declaration of City Status]. *Területi Statisztika* 1: 66–82.
- TINICĂ, G.–BOSTAN, I.–GROSU, V. 2008. The Dynamics of Public Expenses in Healthcare and Demographic Evolution in Italy and Romania. *Revista Română de Bioetică* 6(3): 56–63.
- TÓTH, J. 2008. Meditáció a városokról és a várossá nyilvánítás hazai gyakorlatáról. Vitairat [Meditation on Cities and the Domestic Practice of Declaring City Status. A Discussion Paper]. *Területi Statisztika* 3: 237–244.
- TOYNBEE, A. 1970. *Cities on the Move*. New York–Toronto.
- TROFIN, P. 1983. *Alimentări cu apă* [Water Supplies]. Bucharest.
- TUOK, I.–MYKHENKO, V. 2007. The Trajectories of European Cities, 1960–2005. *Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning* 24(3): 165–182.
- VERESS, N.-CS. 2016. Romania's Youngest Towns – How Urban Are They? *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Geographia* 61(1): 67–88.
- VLĂDESCU, C.–ASTĂRĂSTOAE, V. 2012. Policy and Politics of the Romanian Health Care Reform. *Revista Română de Bioetică* 10(1): 89–99.
- VLĂDESCU, C.–ASTĂRĂSTOAE, V.–SCÎNTEE, S. G. 2010. A Health System Focused on Citizen's Needs. Romania. Situation Analysis (I). *Revista Română de Bioetică* 8(2): 87–96.
- \*\*\* Eurostat. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat> (accessed: 15.11.2023).
- \*\*\* JPI Urban Europe. <https://jpi-urbaneurope.eu/> (accessed: 15.11.2023).
- \*\*\* Romanian National Institute of Statistics. <https://insse.ro/cms/en> (accessed: 15.11.2023).