

A LOOSING COMBINATION FOR ROMANIAN CITIES? SHRINKING POPULATION AND URBAN SPRAWL

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Abstract: *Urban development represents a key element of the sustainable economic development in all the countries. The cities through concentration of the people, services and business are driven forces for competitiveness of the countries. More than 70% of the EU population lives in urban areas, urban areas generate more than 67% of EU GDP, cities are territories that focuses most jobs, most economic and higher education institutions can be found in these areas which also provides access to services and trade. But also, in urban areas - unemployment, social segregation, environmental or mobility (congestion) are emphasized. According to the 2007 report of UNFPA, entitled "Urbanization, urban expansion potential", the phenomenon of urbanization will be the most important factor influencing development in the 21st century. Apparently the Romanian cities are facing similar problems as the Western European cities: decay of inner urban space and deterioration in the social, economic, political and physical substance of the city. In*

spite of the apparent similarity in the forms of manifestation of these phenomena, their substance is different. After emerging the communism era, Romania had to tackle and overcome all sorts of disparities and to reconnect to current practices and policies developed in Western European countries.

Key words: *challenges, integrated, sustainable, polycentric, urban regeneration.*

1. Introduction

Romanian cities, in less than 20 years, as many European cities, had to cope with two major challenges - industrial restructuring after 1990 and the economic crisis which started in 2008. Additionally, Romanian cities had to adapt to another economic approaches, after more than 40 years with centralized system – in the communist period. With a limited number of economic activities, small and medium towns were most affected.

Their inability to overcome such problems led to further economic and social issues.

2. Urban challenges

One of the most difficult challenge that Romanian towns and cities have to overcome is related to the **demographic challenges** – like most European cities, Romanian cities also have to face this challenge. The difference is that while cities from Western or Central Europe have to deal with the problem of integrating the emigrants, Romanian cities are struggling with population decline, even in large cities.

For example, Bucharest (Romania's most important economic centre) lost more than 200,000 inhabitants during the last 10 years.



This led to important economic problems, namely related to the cities labour force which is predominantly affected by the fleeing of highly skilled, young population towards other cities offering better opportunities, many of them located abroad.

The social problems are also a result of this phenomenon – parental absenteeism caused by the parents who leave their children to work abroad leads in turn to increased vulnerability of the children, school drop off and increased juvenile crime.

Regarding **social cohesion – isolation trend** as result of urban sprawl, represent another important problem for Romanian cities.

The new neighborhoods are built only for wealthy people – this leads to social segregation and gated communities.

On the other hand, lack of interventions in deprived neighborhoods increased the disparities inside the cities and creates deprived communities.

Housing market offer other **challenges** for urban development– the younger people's access to houses is very difficult due to high prices and the insufficient stock.

Additionally, more than 85% of the housing stock – was built before the Romanian Revolution in 1989 – which means that it needs to be improved for better energy efficiency.

At **mobility** field– there is a poor cooperation between urban planning and transport departments at local level.

The cities transport network was improved but it was not extended to the new neighborhoods, thus forcing people to use their personal cars.

There is not enough encouragement for using alternate means of transportation, and a cycling infrastructure is virtually inexistent.

Economic polarization of Bucharest brings large disparities throughout the Romanian

territory – more than 50% of foreign investments are located here. This important difference between Bucharest and rest of the cities cause an unbalanced territory development of Romania and a low urbanization in surrounding area of Capital.

In the last 20 years the big real state pressure together with low control of public authorities affect **the architectural quality**.

In this regard, in Romanian cities the public intervention in the public space or the housing rehabilitation is primarily conditioned by economic factors, and only secondarily by the quality of the intervention.



*Figure 1. An image from Black Sea coastal area
Source- NIRD URBAN-INCERC:*

Urban sprawl is maybe – the bigger challenge for Romanian cities – in the last 20 years the urban territory strongly increased even when the population decreased – from 226,777 hectares in 1993 to 435, 050 hectares in 2011. The pressure coming from the real estate together with a poor control of urbanization negatively affect the local public administration (they have to increase the infrastructures for transport and utilities) as well as entail bigger costs for the population (higher fuel consumption, larger distances to travel). Also, it has a negative impact on the



environment – affecting areas with natural potential, limiting agricultural land, and generating social problems such as isolation. The towns and cities lose their characteristics – the corner shop is replaced by supermarkets, the commercial street is replaced by malls, while public spaces are planned for cars, not for people.

Regarding **the urban governance** – in this field there is a lack in cooperation between local authorities – urban-urban or urban-rural, which allows the development of the urban sprawl.

3. Priorities for urban development

To overcome these challenges - the most burning issues for the Romanian cities, which are also outlined as Europe's long-term goals in the preparation for the next programming period of the Cohesion policy, are:

- **Fostering the polycentric development** through strong cooperation between cities, between city core and surrounding localities. **Defining the urban functional areas is the main issue.**
- **Developing the urban regeneration as a tool for a sustainable urban development** – the city centers, re-conversion of industrial sites, of military sites, urban regeneration of housing blocks.
- **Supporting urban mobility** – connecting the core city and surrounding localities by public transport, supporting the creation of cycling routes in order to limit the use of personal vehicles, developing pedestrian routes in the cities centers, inter-modal transport, parking systems, etc.

4. The role of URBACT Program

URBACT network represent an important issue for Romanian cities which had a good participation in the URBACT projects – 30 Romanian cities were partners in period 2007-2013. For these 30 cities it was a good opportunity to identify concrete solutions to overcome the challenges.

Also, URBACT knowledge through exchange of experiences and good practices helps all Romanian localities to improve their approaches and to develop actions in line with the sustainable urban development.

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