URBAN AND RURAL SPACES OF WESTERN ROMANIA. TRANSFORMATIONS AND EVOLUTIONS

Sorin PAVEL

West University of Timișoara, Department of Geography

Abstract: In this paper the authors will try present the state of the urban and rural spaces (environments), taking in consideration not only the situation after Hungary’s accession to the EU and the vicinity of the new EU-border, but also the processes of the transformation period (which is going on form 1990), with their spatial impacts (influences and changes) and their social and economical actors. Since the transformation is not yet finished and Romania must rapidly undertake the needed steps (reforms) towards accession, it is necessary to identify the problems (if possible with their causes and impacts), to see what remains to be done and to seek out the suitable and applicable strategies of mid- and long term development. Creating the premises of regional development must be done in accordance with all other requirements of the integration process and its “road map” towards sustainable and equally distributed development.

INTRODUCTION: URBAN PATTERNS IN WESTERN ROMANIA

The Romanian town has, generally speaking, a short urban tradition. Unlike the rest of the country, the settlements in the west of Romania – closer to the central-European model - had a constant evolution, on historical cycles, and from the economic point of view, were based equally both on agriculture and on the handicraft production and later on industry. These conditions encouraged the commercial exchanges, and with these opportunities were also developed intense social relations between village and town. Thus appeared the markets, in the center of the settlement, surrounded usually by shops, handicraft workshops, inns, etc., functioning as distinct entities of a town and ensuring thus the pre-requisites of a natural centrality of the urban space. The roads direction was initially free and untidy, and the collective space was distributed through capilarity in the whole town. Later an order appears, by the fact that the important streets are orientated...
consistently toward the meeting place – the market – usually dominated by the church. The built frame of the market surrounded both the church, the main element of emergency not just of the market, but also of the town, and the people during the public gatherings. This way it was formed an urban environment, which stimulated the spontaneous mutual relations of the inhabitants among themselves, as well as between them and the activities of the built frame.

The market polarity generated by commercial, creed and fun activities, etc., becomes the main reason for the order of the central-European town, which later also created the polar tension or the centrality of the collective space. This centrality was actually ensuring the private and relations space polarization.

1. URBAN SPACES: TRANSFORMATIONS AND (CONTRADICTORY) EVOLUTIONS

1.1. Contrasting within the built-up areas in western Romania

If until the middle of the twentieth century, the center-outskirts pattern had its specific character in the urban space in the west of Romania, after this date, the socialist town makes considerable efforts toward the local specific nature of cancellation and of the identity of the Romanian towns. The blocks of flats built in the years of communism bring a new element in the Romanian specific character, identical in all the Romanian urban spaces, namely: the obvious contrast between the façade and the non-façade of the block.

The “socialist” town had, at least as the initial project, the utopia of cancelling the outskirts. “The proletarian colonies” and “the palaces for workers” of the ’50s, the great districts begun in the ’60s, the flanked arteries of blocks of flats in the ’70s, the civil centers of the ’80s, some built in the old outskirts of the towns, had at least the intent of cancelling the flagrant opposition that existed until then in the Romanian towns, between the center and the outskirts. Just that the immense social and demographic mutations, occurred with the occasion of these constructive efforts, could not replace automatically the outskirts, even through a changed scenery, as that of blocks of flats. By a common law whose roots remain to be examined, even in the socialist centers projected in this way, it has transmitted the compulsory device of the traditionally Romanian space, that of contrasting opposition between the center and the outskirts. Any lucid observer of the collective dwelling in the “socialist” town cannot avoid seeing the aggressive differences between the façade and “the rear of the block”. Immense resources were directed toward the main façade – that of the stairs, of the block, of the street, of the town. Any resource that could have civilized the non-façade was withdrawn.

The Romanian urban society functions at present in contrasting spaces, situated in the immediate proximity – the more and more sophisticated façade as you approach the top of the social arrangement and the non-façade, frequented by everyone and deserted, irrespective of location.

The direct consequence of the project of the “socialist” town, which followed the cancellation of the outskirts, by the constructions of the quarters of blocks of flats, was, by a strange historical artifice, the clear outlining in the towns of the moment of the typical outskirts. The majority of the districts of blocks of flats in the towns of Romania function, presently, as outskirts, with all the disparities and the social phenomena that accompany these spaces.
Here takes place, at a small scale, the recovery of a certain economic activism, which, in these spaces lacking in administrative vigilance and aesthetic restrictions, makes itself feel much quicker. More and more frequently at blocks of flats, the ground floor is converted, for example, by transforming the windows into doors with small staircases that drive to the street. Here are installed pharmacies, stomatologic rooms and warehouses. The destructurated spaces among the blocks of flats are requested by the new entrepreneurs, and the outskirts of the districts are extended through new constructions: mansions or palaces with towers¹.

In this way, the Romanian outskirts entered in a natural process of urban evolution. More than the centers of the towns, which still benefit by the priority of the investments for modernization, the outskirts demand an intelligent and complicated project of rehabilitation. The substantial modernization of the Romanian urban space, and implicitly of the society on the whole, can be but an organic outcome of this project.

1.2. Current evolutions of the inhabited space within the built-up area.

Example: the city of Timișoara

After 1990, in România takes place a continual degradation of the inhabited places both quantitatively and especially qualitatively. From this last (qualitative) perspective, the situation in the western part of the country appears to be more serious than in other regions also because of the fact that the greater financial possibilities of the people have allowed ample mutations in what concerns the preferences for the new private places of dwelling. Actually, we witness a passing from a system of dwelling exclusively collective to a type of dwelling exclusively individual. The style of the traditional houses is abandoned in favour of foreign models, of mansion kind, with as many rooms as possible, irrespective of the size of the family. Besides the waste of space (of which should be taken care in a town), this fact also leads to the overthrow of the natural relations between the house and the courtyard, between the house and the street, and finally between modern and traditional.

The situation in Timișoara is a good example for all of the western part of Romania. Although the town has a good experience in the town-planning field, being the first town in Romania which has accomplished a general urbanistic plan, after the year 1989, was outlining an attempt of chaotic expansion of the within the built-up area space toward the outside of the town, coupled with the tendency of neglecting the central within the built-up area spaces. Timișoara disposes of ample spaces of doubtless architectural and historical value being in an advanced state of degradation and for which there weren’t found the necessary financial solutions. On the other hand, the spaces of living appeared in the years of communism also require a rapid effort of rehabilitation. In front of such complex problems, the urban evolution of the town tends to become contradictory. Even though there are within the town numerous abandoned economic platforms, it prefers the placing of new industrial or commercial objectives either in the squares and parks of the town, or on periurban agricultural fields, causing this way the uncontrolled territorial expansion of the urban territory. In the last 15 years, the plan of the town has already acquired a

¹ The appearance of the palaces with towers, belonging mainly to the Gipsies, is one of the most blatant urban phenomena which have marked the west of the country (and especially the city of Timișoara) after the year 1989. The respective constructions have appeared without the observance at least of a minimum set of rules of town-planning.
tentacular look, the next step being the occupancy of the tentacular spaces and the appearance of new tentacles.

2. RURAL SPACES AND THEIR CONNECTIONS WITH THE URBAN ONES

2.1. Geodemographic relations between land and city

The genesis of the relations between the rural and urban settlements was represented by the difference of potential between the two categories in relation to the capacity of its valorification "in situ". On the one hand, we talk of covering the urban deficit in food and agrarian products, raw materials and workforce, and on the other hand of the rural deficit in industrial products, services and information. The laws that governed the urban-rural relations until 1989, disregarded almost entirely the rural space, the town being considered prioritary. The massive investments made especially in the urban industry have structured the rural and periurban space, modified the use of the fields and intensified the commutation, which had multiple economical, social and cultural implications.2

Within these relations, an important place was held by the demographic, economic, political-administrative and of services relations.

In what concerns the demographic relations, the ampest phenomen, before 1989, was the commutation, which arose for larger towns up to 30,000-40,000 persons daily. The exacerbation of commutation around the big cities was a proof of the inefficiency of the co-operative system from the Romanian agriculture. The relatively well-to-do villages around the big cities weren’t villages of peasants, but villages of commuters who were completing their incomes from wages with those from agriculture. The reduction of the industrial activities in the urban environment after 1989 and consequently of the workforce occupied in industry has affected firstly these categories of workers, transforming them shortly in rural workforce, who live now, in the conditions of land reform, worse than before.

In what concerns the technological endowments, excepting for the introduction on a large scale of the electrical power and, along with this, the beginning of equipping, at a slow pace, of the rural household with domestic equipment, the communism didn’t bring in the Romanian village too many changes. The outfitting with mechanical means of the co-operative agriculture has remained a lot behind, proof being, in that sense, the huge workforce necessary at gathering the crops, when the state used to appeal massively at pupils, students and even workers.

The market relations were being strictly controlled by the state. The marketing of the agrarian products was state monopoly. The only form of cvasiindependent marketing was allowed only for the products got on the plot of land taken for employment from the A.P.C. (Agricultural Production Cooperative), within the town markets. Here, the lack of any measures of organization, had the consequence of ruralizing the urban consumption (rough agrarian products), the standards (unsupervised trade) and the environment. Not even at the moment exists an independent system of trading the great agrarian production. The system of gathering, storing and marketing of the agrarian production has remained state monopoly, which settles the prices depending on own criteria and buys the products depending on its temporary politics or interests. The specialists with which was endowed

2 I. Ianoș, C. Tâlăngă, 1994, (p. 37)
the agriculture in the years of communism were often associates with the bureaucratic apparatus of leadership of the agriculture. Separated, in their turn, from land, they had no reasons any more to remain at the countryside. As a matter of fact, the peasants didn’t usually have trust in them nor did they have the practical possibility to follow their advices.

The way the urban-rural relations functioned before 1989 shows the fact that the relations between these systems were short-circuited by the decisions of the state and the administration. The interactions, as many as they were, responded to their orders. After 1989, the state role was replaced, somewhat, by the limited financial resources. The market, which should have assumed the regulative role, could not function in the circumstances of a limited interaction between the two systems. The result: the rural environment withdraws within itself, developing its own social structures, values, behaviours, adjustment mechanisms, ideologies and political options, while the urban environment, incapable to ensure the rural modernization, needs to diminish its functions, restricting its capacity of influence.

2.2. Urban – rural disparities: only a problem of the last decades?

For the Romania of the beginning of the 21st century, the statistical data still show notable differences between the urban and the rural environments and that regarding the social indicators. The main problem with these disparities, which firstly affect the rural environment is that, by this situation, it pumps underdevelopment in all the sectors of the social life. Moreover, by this, the rural environment itself withdraws within, building new structures, most of them directly incompatible with the requests and perspectives of modernization.

The peasants anchored in a low technological level and in a work organization based firstly on one’s own work exploitation and on what the statistics name “unpaid family workers” – meaning women and children – are, before everything, poor and generate poverty for all the other professional categories in the rural environment. Usually, the money surplus which appears is absorbed by the urban environment, via the monopoly over the system of gathering, transportation, storing and marketing of the agrarian products. The structure of the total expenses of the households (see the Table 5) shows an unusually great weight of consumption of agrarian products from their own resources (over a third from the total), fact that clearly indicates that the peasant production is not directed yet on satisfying the market requirements.

At this you can add the fact that, despite the great number of the population in the rural environment, the village is still an extremely limited market. In accordance with an investigation made by a marketing company in 1995, one peasant household spends in average, monthly, less than USD 25 for goods other than food and only the equivalent of USD 8 for services (VI. Pasti & co-workers., p. 57). The Romanian village is characterized by a stressed tendency of demographic ageing (see the Table no 1). If in the urban environment the weight of the population over 60 is of 15%, in the rural environment, it exceeds 25%. Too, the village generates a structure entirely special of the workforce. The professional structure of it is plainly different of that from the urban environment. It
eliminates the specializations – it has four times less technicians than the town and two times less “workers-handicraftsmen”.

Table 1. Structure of the consumption expenditures (2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expenditure for:</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food and beverages</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-food goods</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payment of services</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchasing animals, poultry, fodder, buildings, lands</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes, fees</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equivalent value of agricultural products consumption from own resources</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the rural environment, the population remains occupied much after the retirement age and, although these situations are not recorded, they start to work much before the age of 16, settled by the work legislation. In return, it becomes acute the tendency to reduce the general level of education of the population. The number of students originated from the rural environment is in a dramatical decline (Table no 6).

Table 5. The structure of the population by age groups (2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-19 years</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-59 years</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 60 years</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 6. The proportion of the students (2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban/Rural</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>497,855</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>66,136</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>563,991</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The statistical data show clearly the huge social discrepancies between the Romanian rural and urban environments at the end of the 20th century. But these disparities have their "tradition" in the Romanian society and they are not a novelty in the recent history of Romania. With all of its efforts, not even the communism succeeded, in over forty years, to modernize the Romanian rural environment and to place it on a route of development. It puts the natural question if, somehow, the causes of this endemic underdevelopment of the Romanian rural environment should be searched out only in the economic dysfunctionalities of the last decades. Isn’t that the Romanian society is still tributary to some representations which are totally outside of what is meant by modernism at the end of the 20th century? The intellectuals from the towns, who produce ideologies, continue to make the eulogy of the patriarchal life and of the Romanian village as the keeper of traditions and traditional Romanian virtues. These ideologies, however, have less a pragmatic orientation and are, in their majority, purely urban. They do not ground programs of action in the rural environment, but legitimate, actually, the inefficiency of the solutions for modernizing the Romanian rural environment.

3. URBAN-RURAL DISPARITIES IN ROMANIA: AN OLD PROBLEM WITH NEW EVOLUTIONS

3.1. The image of the Romanian villages

An unequal spatial development both inside the urban areas, but also between those an the rural ones, isn’t something new for Romania. Not to speak about the regional disparities on national level or of the intra-regional ones.

One of the major policies of the communist regime was to “adjust” those differences, with the ideological aim to realize a socialist society, based on industry and urban development. Romania had to become an urban society, villages had to be “urbanized”. So the existence of such strong differences between the urban and rural spaces of Romania couldn’t be overseen, as this was a constant cause of problems. Therefore, we cannot speak about a completely new appearance, but more of a phenomena with new dimensions. One of the major problems of the communist era was the clear decline in life quality between the towns and the villages. Regarding the standards at that time, life in the towns was relatively of better quality than in the villages. Apartments, provided with running water and heating, were very sought-after. The wish of the younger generation to break up with the traditional and conservative village life and to find new chances in the industrialized society combined itself with the forced (over)industrialization of Romania, promoted by the regime. New factories were built, labour force was needed. Therefore huge quarters made of concrete tower-blocks were built, in order to accommodate the workers. The socialist city-model was born. Later it came to its highpoint when huge urban areas occupied by one to two-levelled hoses were demolished, in order to built more and more socialist architecture. Afterwards came the decline: this compounds not only failed to provide the minimum living conditions (lack off heating and hot water, rationalised electricity-supply etc.) but they turned to a way of life, for those who didn’t have any house in the countryside, a way of life full of frustrations and pressure measures (for ex. the “conditioned” heating of the quarters, during the harsh Romanian winters, or
the lack of private space, due to overcrowding and “thin walls”, lastly developing what is called even until today “block-life”). But this architecture remained until today.

The difference between the urban and rural spaces became so great, that the communist regime initiated in the 80’s a new plan of “systematisation” of villages. The disparities were certainly in the way of life (the village life based on agriculture and the urban one based on industry and the working class), but also in the appearance, in architecture. There was a need to show that Romania is a modern society, with industrial sites, with buildings made out of concrete, with socialist, sober architecture. Therefore the image of the villages, some of them resembling those from the beginning of the past century, with their “underdevelopment” and the lack of “systematisation”, the primitive subsistence-agriculture, the traditions and the inaccessibility (both by means of transport, but also a cultural inaccessibility, meaning the sealing-off of the cultural sphere as a measure to stop or at least diminish the penetration of the socialist doctrine), were seen undoubtedly as impediments in establishing the “multilaterally developed socialist society”. Thus, the process was started. Peasants were obliged to leave their homes and resettle in new 4-stories blocks built in the villages, new roads were built, villages industrialised. The new buildings, called “batteries” (because they looked like huge car-batteries), weren’t provided with proper infrastructure: there was no sewage, no heating, because most of them were not connected to that infrastructure (for example the electrification was also a big problem, especially in the mountain-villages; some of them are not connected to electricity-supply until today) and building one was too expensive. Fortunately, because of massive international protest (see the action called “adopting a Romanian village”, initialised by some French and Belgian communes) and Ceaușescu’s wish to show himself as a communist with human face (eventually succeeding in fooling the west), this plan was stopped. The actual cause was more a financial matter, as in the late 80s it was clear that the state couldn’t support such spending an the new prime-minister (Ceaușescu’s wife) decided that Romania had to have zero foreign indebtedness. As many of the great communist projects, this was another piece, too big to swallow. But, by the time this project was ended (of course unofficially), some villages had passed through the experiment. Nowadays, those villages look tremendous. The inhabitants couldn’t break up with their village life and grow animals around the blocks, have small gardens, live in unhealthy conditions, with improvised installations for heating and so on. The economic life in the countryside, traditionally based on agriculture and primary processing of natural resources was substituted with “industrialised agriculture” (huge animal farms, kolkhozes, wood-processing-plants etc.). After the fall of communism, those became industrial ruins; everything useful was stolen and used, the food-industry couldn’t stand in front of the competition of the subsidised products from outside. The rural infrastructure was left unmaintained, young people left. The countryside went in a crisis.

3.2. The “new industrialisation” and the problems of the development

In nowadays, the problem of disparities has a different character. Referring to the western part of Romania, we can speak about a space in change, in upheaval. Because of the foreign investments, new industries arose, new factories were built, new services were constituted. It is the period of transformation, were new criteria are used for placing industry and service. The vicinity of the European Union, the “flexible” environment, the well prepared, western oriented, but outstandingly cheap labour force, the low land-prices
and the opening of new markets (especially in the east), are only some of the factors which attract new industries. The industrial boom, the “new industrialisation” (as we may call it) has the same effects on the relation between urban and rural spaces. Migration of labour force, the lack of living space due to overpopulation, the collapse of the state-financed communal infrastructure, the lack of investment and purchasing power of the population, the rise of the prices on the real estate market, are only a few consequences of the “new industrialisation”.

There is a clear preferableness of the foreign investors for the urban areas. The agglomeration factors play a crucial role. In the western part of Romania, there is a true polarisation of the space around the big towns, some of them being also in competition (Timişoara and Arad, for example). Big factories were placed in the outskirts of the cities, thus forming a real “green-filed” investment area. There are constant improvement of infrastructure and the border of the EU is only a few km away. But the fall of income and power-purchasing-parity on the Romanian side of the border is huge. This is what investors look for, especially as the reindustrialisation is being made not with consumer goods, but with light and labour-intensive industry (so called “wage-production”). And there is no clear interest of improving the functionality of the Romanian economy, for example by using autochthon suppliers. Certainly, there are also exceptions. With so low wages, investors allow themselves to attract labour force from neighbouring regions. Thus a new phenomena of commuting takes place. Daily, buses with workers cover distances up to 200 km round-trip, producing a relatively high mobility of working force (after Romanian standards). The towns are unable to provide more human capital, because the living conditions there are not attractive. There isn’t enough housing space, prices on the real estate markets are unaffordable, food and services are expensive. Therefore, many of the workers in the new enterprises make good use of their properties in the countryside, in order to compensate the very low wages (about 100-150 €/month). Each of them has thus a mixed occupation: a job in the factory and work in the agriculture. A personal garden and some animals, in order to assure food-supply. Some of them, who have an agricultural production in exceeding, may sell it to intermediaries or directly on the markets of the towns. Sometimes, duties in a family split: some of the members work in the factories and the other work the land, but with the aim to assure their (extra) income. This happens mostly in the villages specialised in the production of vegetables and who are in the proximity of the towns.

The development of the towns has led to an increased polarisation force. Not only industry and services are polarised, but also there is a new scale of the migration phenomena. In the beginning of the 90s, migrations from the eastern parts of Romania to the western ones were a common thing. After villages inhabited by Germans had a severe drop in population, the housing potential was soon being used by migrants from the northern and eastern parts of Romania. This wasn’t a process without traces, as in many villages of the Romanian Banat, a separation of the two communities can be seen. On the other side, we can not definitely speak about an increased urbanisation or ruralisation of the society. In the urban areas there was no significant capital resources to invest in building new housing space. Only in the past years, private housing projects and those built by the government started to emerge, but there is still a very long way before the housing shortage can be solved by standards of the EU. There was also a process of returning “back to the roots”, as the mono-industrial towns were deserted, because of the collapse of the
subsidised industry. Inhabitants went back to their home-villages, in the same way they came with the industrialisation. But this was not a significant process, since the balance between urban and rural population remained relatively constant.

CONCLUSIONS

Some theories regard disparities as engines of special development, as they create a spatial dynamic and an increased mobility and flexibility. Also, disparities might bring regions into competition, therefore making them work harder to assure a base for a development, to assure infrastructural assets for competitiveness. This however doesn’t completely apply to the western part of Romania and to the entire county in extend. We can only speak of the applicability of such theories only in developed societies, in service societies, were such factors really make the difference, were competitiveness is the motive force of the economy. We must be realistic and see that this is not the case in Romania. It’s the beginning of such a development, but a start which bares the scars and impediments of the past. Therefore, a certain competition between towns and regions in the west takes place, in order to attract more investors, but the benefits of this developments are only present in the urban areas. If one may go some km away from the towns, were the urban space ends, one may see another world, were such developments haven’t penetrated. Poor infrastructure, unused lands, a week agricultural activity, social problems, lack of adequate health care etc. Those are realities in the villages of Romania and here it must be said, that in the western part of the country, the situation is much better than elsewhere. On the other hand, the villages situated on major roads or in the vicinity of the towns/borders or villages where many have left Romania to work abroad (and thus provide much needed capital), take profit of the new developments in the economy. And certainly, their position in the west will bring more of that. But it is not enough. Villages must be modernised (but not in the spirit of the communist systematisation!), living standards must be improved, infrastructure must be functional. And of course, the basic activities must be reactivated and made profitable, agriculture being the most important of all. Only by this means we can assure a future for the Romanian village: And if we think how deeply enrooted in the rural cultural context the Romanian society is, we realise how important the upheaval of the underdevelopment of the countryside is. Not only that we have to promote a balanced an sustainable development, we must assure that disparities don’t increase to much, causing the spatial, environmental and social systems to crash.

In 2007 Romania must be prepared to join the EU. Therefore, in preparation of the accession, financial resources by means of the Sapard-Programme of the European Commission were allocated to the rural areas of Romania. Beginning with water supply and road-building and ending with the use of the endogen potentials and the rebirth of the village-life, this programme aims to make Romania fit for joining the EU. If it fails, the wild spatial and economical development will be difficult to steer, in order to avoid the mistakes, others made before. Western Romania is a space of high diversity, both what the landscape concerns, but also a cultural and economical one. Keeping a balance between the urban and rural areas and assuring a functional infrastructure and administration is the key to development and increase of living standards. Disparities will never totally disappear, there are more of a natural reality, but their negative effects must be reduced and compensated. Keeping the balance is vital.
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