THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GEOGRAPHIC POSITION IN THE APPARITION AND HISTORIC EVOLUTION OF TIMIȘOARA

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Abstract. The geographic position of a place represents a permanent influence factor in the apparition and development of cities, determining various connections between the urban centre and other centres or surrounding areas and influencing its evolution. Timișoara is one of the most important cities of Romania, with a rich history, dictated mainly by its position, which left a mark upon its urban evolution and present aspect. Timișoara, the most western of the major cities of Romania is situated near the border with Hungary and Serbia at a distance of less than 600 km of 13 European capital cities on the junction of important circulation routes that facilitate communication between Central and Western Europe and South-East Europe. Timișoara is situated in an area of cultural and religious interference that grants the city an multicultural character.

Key words: strategic position, defence, historic geography, swamps, evolution, multiculturality.
Cuvinte cheie: poziție strategică, apărare, geografie istorică, mlaștini, evoluție, multiculturalitate.

The geographic position of a place represents a permanent influence factor in the apparition and development of cities, determining various connections between the urban centre and other centres or surrounding areas and influencing its evolution. Vintilă Mihăilescu said that “a specific task for geography is the obligation to identify, investigate and explain urban settlements as undissociated systems, i.e. elements of the landscape and functional entities integrated in the territory and this cannot be done without reporting the urban complex to its position”. Timișoara is one of the most important cities of Romania, with a rich history which left a mark upon its urban evolution and present aspect.

Timișoara, the most western of the major cities of Romania is situated at the intersection of the 45°17’ lat N parallel with the 21°17’ long E meridian, at approximate
equal distances of the North Pole and Equator, near the border with Hungary and Serbia. Its mathematic position determines the proximity of the city to the major cities of Europe, being situated at a distance of less than 600 km of 13 European capital cities. The importance of this position is that much higher because Timișoara is situated on the no. 4 Paneuropean circulation route that facilitates communication networks between Central and Western Europe and South-East Europe of which two sideroutes (to Sofia and Bucharest) will make junction at Timișoara. The construction of the Arad, Timișoara, Lugoj, Deva highway will increase this capital of position. This highway, together with the two European routes that already serve the city, E70 and E671 and the international airport, the second in size from Romania will increase the accessibility rate of the city. Timișoara is an important railway knot, being situated at the crossing of 12 railway routes.

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The existence of the town depended over centuries mainly on natural factors that determined its apparition and evolution. The most important physical geographical components with role in its evolution were the relief and the hydrograph of the region. The city is situated in the western part of the Pannonian depression, in the low fields of the Timiș river, at an altitude of 80-90 m, on the course of Bega channel, in a sector drained by the waters of Bega and Timiș rivers which before the major hydro technical works from the 18th century had sinuous courses and united their riverbeds in a multitude of branches and swamps forming an immense floodable area, named by the inhabitants “of the Timiș”, that spread from the west of the present town of Lugoj to Tisa river so that the inhabitants did not distinguish which branch belonged to the Timiș and which to the Bega. The name of the river that flows through the town was in fact till 300 year now Little Timiș, Timișel, different from the Big Timiș, and then it changed into Bega. Thus Timișoara is the city on the Little Timiș, Timișel. The swampy terrain was that which led to the apparition of the initial settlement and to its development on an unfloodable area crossed by several water branches and which is considered to be the major crossing route of the swamp. The situation in the middle of the swamp granted the town a special strategic importance because the settlement was difficult to besiege being surrounded from all parts by water, the enemy being forced to build wooden bridges around the castle to get near it.

The strategic importance of the settlement was recognized even by the Romans. Proof for this stand the three hedges of earth which cross Banat from Mureș to the Danube and which form a true defensive system. Timișoara is situated on the middle hedge which traverses the present Mehala and Iosefin. Preyer considers that the origin of Timişoara can be directly linked to these hedges because the Romans used to build behind such defence lines their forts from which they controlled the entire region. The settlement develops into a town due to its strategic position and acquires an important economic, military and social-cultural function.

There are many events in the history of the town that underline the strategic and military importance of the position of Timișoara, first mentioned in 1266 as “Castresis de Thymes” and its capacity of resistance in front of invaders. This becomes evident at the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century when Timișoara gets directly involved in the internal conflicts of the Hungarian Kingdom, as a necessity to control the annexed territories by the Hungarian Kingdom and as an increase of the Ottoman Empire
menace. These would lead to the development of the fort and its turning into a very important political and military centre of the period.

An important stage in the development of the citadel is when the king of Hungary, Charles Robert of Anjou settles its court in Timișoara. The king recognizes the favourable position of the town and will stay in Timișoara with the entire court between 1315 and 1323, naming it castrum nostrum regis de Thumuswar. It is not the presence of the royal court that made the place important, as in the Middle Ages the dwelling place of the monarch had totally different role than modern capitals, but its location in a hard to reach place. Nevertheless, the presence of Charles Robert of Anjou and his court make Timișoara be the first and only town of Romania to be mentioned on medieval maps, being mentioned in 1339 on the map of Angelino Dulcerto. Charles Robert of Anjou orders that in the place called the Island the royal castle to be built with Italian builders between 1307 and 1315, this determining an important economic and social growth of the town as many workers and merchants came to the town.

The military role of the citadel, mentioned as civitas in 1342 becomes more important with the increase of the Ottoman menace after the battle of Kosovopolje in 1339 when Serbia becomes under Ottoman suzerainty and the Ottoman troops settle at the border of Banat. Timișoara becomes now outpost and centre of resistance and concentration place for Christian forces in the anti-Ottoman battle. John Hunyadi becomes Count of Timișoara in 1441 and concentrates his army at Timișoara and transforms the town into a military camp. Helped by Vlad Dracul Voivod of Wallachia starts from Timișoara his long campaign against the Ottomans and has celebrated victories, conquering Sofia in 1443 after which he crosses Bulgaria as a victor and conquers Niš. John Hunyadi rebuilds the castle and settles with his family in Timișoara in 1446.

The military and strategic importance of the town in the anti-Ottoman war is evident as well in the time of Count Pavel Chinezul, entrusted with the command of the Danubian fortresses and the defence of the southern border of the Hungarian Kingdom. Born at Satchinez, Pavel Chinezul won every battle he led against the ottomans. Before becoming Count of Timiș he fought against the Ottomans with Vlad Țepeș in 1475 and 1476. Pavel Chinezul will make a series of transformations to the castle and builds a new line of defences in front of the existing ones. The first round bastions for artillery are built.

The citadels capacity to resist invaders successfully is proved during the rebellion of Gheorghe Doja in the summer of 1514. Due to its position the citadel is difficult to siege and in order to get near it the rebels dug a ditch to detour the river that surrounded the citadel and placed wooden pillars, twigs and branches to divert the water. The citadel was unconquerable.

After the fall of Belgrade to the Ottomans in 1521 the role of Timișoara in the defence of the Kingdom was even greater, the citadel receiving money and troops to ensure the defence. At Timișoara gathered mercenaries from all over Europe. Timișoara was under siege in 1551 and 1552. Ahmed Pasha came to conquer it together with an army of 160000 people. Timișoara was surrounded and to get near the walls a long wooden bridge is build over the swamps and river. The built was enhanced by the fact that the summer of 1552 was extremely dry. After the Ottoman conquer the citadel was very important for the Ottomans for the control over Transylvania and Hungary. Due to its position Timișoara was just as important to the Ottomans as Belgrade and Buda. In the Turk Chronicles the Turk Historic Mehmed Rasid underlines the importance of Timișoara in the Ottoman
Politics saying that: “the Eyalet of Timişoara, being an important landmark, was of utmost importance from all points of view”. Even Mihai Viteazul wanted Timişoara and Banat very much understanding its strategic importance in the defence of the country and anti-Ottoman fight. But Timişoara was always in the interest of the Christian Europeans who had numerous attempts to reconquer it, such as the sieges of 1596 and 1597 which were repelled with high losses. In the 17th century Timişoara is no longer assaulted but continues to have an important military role for the Ottomans. Here came the ambassadors of the Habsburgs and of the Transylvanian Kings to negotiate with the Ottomans. The conquering of Timişoara by the Habsburg Empire becomes a major military objective after the defeat of the Ottomans at Vienna in 1683 and the annexing of Hungary. The citadel was under numerous assaults but as it was the major retreat place for the defeated Ottoman armies these assaults were not successful. For the Ottomans the preservation of the citadel was of utmost importance as of it depended the preservation of the entire strategic system oriented towards the centre of Europe. Timişoara is unsuccessfully assaulted by the imperial in 1695 and 1696 but after the victory of Zenta of 1697 the Ottoman army is defeated permanently. The Sultan together with 3000 soldiers seek refuge in Timişoara. In 1716 price Eugene of Savoy conquers Timişoara after a 48 days siege. Timişoara belongs again to the Christians after 164 years.

Timişoara and Banat were of utmost importance to the Habsburgs who granted the city in 1719 the special status of capital of „absolutum, inalienabile dominum vel peculium regni” (Province of the Crown). The importance of the town for the Habsburgs emerges from the major building projects carried out by the Empire for Timişoara and Banat. Starting with 1723 is built for a period of forty years the new fortress in Vauban style which functioned until 1892. The most important projects are the hydro-technical works of the rivers and the draining of the swamps. Between 1728 and 1723 the Bega river is channelled from Făget to Timişoara and downstream of Timişoara is built a channel navigable all year round and thus Timişoara becomes connected to the entire naval system of Central Europe through Tisa and the Danube. This channel was used for commercial shipping until 1954. The importance of the channel persists today, now it links Timişoara to the 7th Naval Corridor Daube Main Rhine and its importance is recognized by the local authorities who started a rehabilitation project for the channel.

After the annexing of Banat to the Hungarian Empire in 1778, the significance of the town is preserved and Timişoara becomes in 1781 a free kingly town, as a consequence of which the town benefits of numerous special privileges of which: having its representatives at the Court, the right to collect taxes and duties, the right to establish a budget of incomes and expenses etc. The recognition of the defence capacity of the town is recognized once more in 1809 when the Treasure of the Imperial House of Habsburg is brought to Timişoara for preservation not to fall in the hands of the army of Napoleon. Timişoara is granted the statute of municipality in 1881. The existence of the old fortifications forms an impediment for circulation and development of a modern water alimentation and sewage system for the town and the decision to demolish the fortifications is taken, as once with the hydro-technical works he military defensive importance of the town is diminished.

The importance of the position of the town in the western part of the country near the Border with Hungary and Serbia, its constant connections with the west of Europe, the
social and economic activities turn Timișoara into one of the most developed cities of its periods, maintaining high the interest of other states, interest shown more or less visibly. In November 1918 Serbian armies occupy Timișoara on the grounds of a military Convention that stated that the Hungarian army had to withdraw north of Tisa. Serbian authorities try to stop the participation of the delegates of Timișoara to the Big Union at Alba Iulia, but 40 representatives of Timișoara subscribe to the union with Romania. The Serbian army retreats from Banat and in August 3, 1919, the Romanian troops enter triumphantly in the city.

The social economical development of the city, very superior to other towns of Romania, its national but especially international importance drew the envy of the authorities of Bucharest who after 1918 try to minimize the role of Timișoara and marginalize its position in the public life of the United Romania. Nevertheless, in November 1923 the people of Timișoara organize a sumptuous receiving of the King Ferdinand, Queen Mary, and Prime Minister I.C. Brătianu.

After August 23, 1944 Timișoara was a major military objective for Germany. In September 1944 infantry and artillery troops and tank units approach Timișoara. They assault the town and the tanks enter Chișoda, Giroc, Ronat, Mehala, Freidorf and Fratelia. But the Romanian resistance troops force the Germans to retreat, and the battle for Timișoara was won by the Romanians. September 1944 marks a turning point in the history of the town, the Soviet troops settling in the town for the following 14 years. These will give the town a status of military occupation.

Due to its position in the western part of the country, its multicultural character and permanent contact mainly with neighbouring countries but with other European countries as well, Timișoara becomes a major centre of anticomunist resistance in Romania. Throughout the communist period in Timișoara take place numerous open protest actions against the new political and social state of affairs in Romania. The most important of these actions are those of September 1945 when the students of the Politechnics and of Medicine, supported by the high school students of C.D. Loga College and of the Normal School organised a manifestation to honour King Michael I who became the symbol of democracy for the Romanians. In January 1948 is formed at Timișoara the National Christian Organisation of Fight against Communism, under the command of colonel Ion Uță, which wanted to provoke a major revolt in the west of the country and was repressed in blood. In 1956 thousands of students start an anticomunist manifestation and ask for the retreat of the soviet troops of the country. This manifestation is brutally repressed. This action of the students is one of the most important democratic political rebellions in the communist Romania. These rebellions culminate with the anticomunist revolution of December 1989 when Timișoara starts an anticomunist movement that would involve the entire country and would bring Romania to democracy.

The position of the town in the west of the country, near the border with Serbia and Hungary represents for the contemporary period also one of the strong points of the town in its social economic development, its permanent economic and cultural connection with the neighbouring countries being underlined by the creation in 1994 of the Danube-Crisă-Mureș-Tisa European region which included regions from Serbia, Hungary and Romania. Timișoara is the biggest town of the region with a population of approx. 6 million inhabitants and a surface of 77456 km2. Timișoara, having a central position within the Euroregion and being its most important economic centre, may be considered a polarizing
The Importance of the Position in the Apparition and Historic Evolution of Timișoara

Euroregional centre, especially because of its multicultural character and its role as an important educational and cultural centre.

The position of the city and its evolution underline the multicultural character of the city, proven by the ethnic and religious plurality of the population which at the last population census (2002) is formed of 17 ethnic groups (Romanians, Hungarians, Seklars, Germans, Saxons, Schvabs, Ukrainians, Turks, Tartars, Slovaks, Jews, Rromas, Aromanians, Macedo-romanians, Russians, Lipovians) and 16 religions (orthodox, roman –catholic, greek-catholic, protestant, Augustin Evangelical, Lutheran Evangelical, Unitarian, Armenian, Old rite Christian, Baptist, Pentecostal, Muslim, Mozaic etc).

Because of this pluralism, many cultural and mediatic institutions belonging to the minorities and in the languages of the minorities function in the town.

The rich history of the city, the multiculturality of the population stand as testimony to the rich history of the city and the importance of the position it has within the country but in the natural region as well.

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