

**Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai**  
**Şcoala doctorală de geografie, Cluj-Napoca**

# **TEZĂ DE DOCTORAT**

## **THE YOUNGEST TOWNS OF ROMANIA** **Communes declared urban in** **the transition period**

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**Cluj-Napoca**  
**2020**

**Title of the thesis:** The Youngest Towns of Romania. Communes declared urban in the transition period

**Keywords:**

urbanization, town, commune, declaration of towns, transition period

**Table of contents:**

CHAPTER I.....	4
Introduction, argument, research methods.....	4
1. 1. Introduction, argument.....	4
1. 2. Research questions.....	5
1. 3. Research methods.....	5
CHAPTER II.....	8
Concepts, definitions and theories.....	8
2. 1. Urbanization.....	8
2. 2. The ‘product’ of urbanization: the town/the city.....	13
2. 3. The town from a geographical point of view: the urban functions.....	16
2. 4. Urban hierarchy, urban network, settlement network.....	17
2. 5. Urban-rural dichotomy.....	18
2. 6. Urban and rural in the Romanian scientific discourse.....	25
2. 7. The role of small towns.....	31
2. 8. The road from rural to urban. Declaration of new towns.....	33
CHAPTER III.....	41
Antecedents. The modern urbanization in Romania.....	41
3. 1. Urbanization until the mid 19th century.....	42
3. 2. From the second half of the 19th century to the Second World War.....	44
3. 3. The socialist period (1948-1989).....	50
CHAPTER IV.....	69
Urbanization in the transition period.....	69
4. 1. Transition period - its successes and shortcomings.....	69
4. 2. Economic, social and political situation at the beginning of the transition period.....	77
4. 3. Urban policy and legal framework.....	83
4. 4. The process of transformation of the settlement system.....	89
4. 4. 1. The course of town inaugurations.....	89
4. 4. 2. Regional and county level changes in the urban system.....	95
CHAPTER V.....	103
The criteria of gaining the town status.....	103
5. 1. Fulfillment of the criteria.....	103
5. 1. 1. The population criterion.....	106
5. 1. 2. Economy.....	112
5. 1. 3. Infrastructure.....	115
5. 1. 4. Housing conditions.....	125
5. 1. 5. Health care.....	130
5. 1. 6. Education.....	138
5. 1. 7. Leisure and recreation.....	140
5. 1. 8. Tourism.....	143
5. 2. Conclusions and remarks on the criteria.....	146
CHAPTER VI.....	149
Case studies. The new towns of the Northwest development region.....	149
6. 1. Dragomirești.....	149

6. 2. Sălișteea de Sus.....	150
6. 3. Ulmeni.....	151
6. 4. Ardud.....	153
6. 5. Livada.....	155
6. 6. Săcueni.....	156
CHAPTER VII.....	161
Conclusions.....	161
7. 1. Conclusions.....	161
7. 2. The future of the new towns.....	163
7. 2. 1. Actual problems and development perspectives.....	163
7. 2. 2. Returning maybe to the status of commune?.....	163
7. 3. The future of the Romanian urbanization. Further town declarations.....	165
Bibliography.....	168
APPENDIX.....	190

## **Abstract:**

Following the revolution and regime change in 1989, Romania's urban system undergone an important reshape in a short period of time: between 1993 and 2006, in less than 15 years, 60 rural settlements were awarded to the urban status, predominantly without fulfilling the legal requirements on different quantitative and qualitative indicators. This thesis analysis the fulfillment of the criteria by all the new towns in 2004 (the peak of the declaration process) and compares them with the values of 2018, the latest available statistical data, in order to see to what extent the new towns meet the legal requirements. Quantitative data was supplemented by qualitative ones: the new towns of the Northwest development region were analyzed as case studies through interviews.

Chapter I. includes a presentation of the research questions and that of the research methods. The research questions targeted the social, economic and political context, the ideological basis of the process, the initial motivations, the positive and negative consequences of changing the status, the actual problems and challenges, as well as the possible development perspectives of the new towns. The conducted research had a quantitative and a qualitative part, combining statistical data (National Institute of Statistics and censuses with documents) first of all with interviews, but also with interpretation of certain documents and monographs. Thus, in the case of the 17 indicators set by the law in order to gain urban status, the values of the year 2004 were compared with those of 2018. 2004 was the peak of the process when the urban system has increased with 38 new towns in a "mass declaration". 2018 is the year of the latest available statistical data. Thus, a comparison can be made in order to see the

extent and direction of the development of the new towns in almost fifteen years after becoming urban. In this analysis all the 60 new towns were included for gaining a broad and comprehensive situation report all over the country.

The case studies were selected on a geographical basis. The interviews were held in six settlements of the Northwest development region (Ardud, Dragomiresti, Livada, Sacueni, Salistea de Sus and Ulmeni), between 2016 and 2019.

Chapter II. presents the main concepts, definitions and theories: urbanization, the 'product' of urbanization: the town/the city, the town from a geographical point of view: the urban functions, the terms of urban hierarchy, urban network, settlement network, the issue of the urban-rural dichotomy, the appearance of the urban and of the rural in the Romanian scientific discourse, the role of the small towns, respectively the process of the declaration of new towns: the road from the rural to the urban. In this chapter, I argue that the traditional positive image of the urban settlements, in correlation with the negative image of the rural ones, together with a proven poverty of the Romanian rural areas, contributed very much to the formal urbanization of the transition period, shaping its ideological basis.

In Chapter III., I present the modern urbanization in Romania from a historical point of view, and as the antecedent of the urbanization in the transition period: 1) urbanization until the mid 19th century, 2) from the second half of the 19th century to the Second World War, 3) the socialist period (1948-1989). The conclusion of this chapter is, that the way in which the socialist urbanization took place (the "primacy" of the city, political urbanization, mass declarations, "strong pro-urban legacy", according to that urban areas are superior places to live and work) influenced very much the urbanization of the transition period.

Chapter IV. is dedicated to the detailed analysis of the process of the post-socialist urbanization. I present the economic, social and political situation at the beginning of the transition period, the urban policy and the legal framework, respectively, the process of transformation of the settlement system.

In 2001, a new settlement network development strategy has been developed: the Law no. 351/2001 for the approval of the Development Plan of the National Territory – IV. Section, Network of settlements. This strategy classified the settlements in six levels (ranks), while creating a six-tier hierarchy from 0. (Bucharest) to 5. (villages). Law no. 351/2001 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, respectively the indicators to a commune to gain the town status. But the reshaping of the urban system - the changes of ranks - started already in 1993, almost ten years before the law came into force: first, the passings from town to municipality have started, than the reclassifications from commune to town. The process resulted in 60 new urban settlements and in an increased level of urbanization from 54% to 57%. The conclusions are, that this new urbanization wave took place in the context of Romania's accession to the European Union (which expected a higher rate of urbanization, closer to the EU's average), and was characterised by a strong political will, both at national and local level. The process had a reversed logic: the new status was seen not as a reward, but as a chance to prosperity. Local liders wanted to gain urban status in order to achieve urban conditions. Urban status appeared as a path to escape the misery of the socialist past, but the process of urbanization took place in the way inherited from the socialist past (formal urbanization).

The criteria of gaining the town status is presented in Chapter V. As stated above, Law no. 351/2001 defined the minimal quantitative and qualitative indicators for a commune to gain the town status concerning population, economy, infrastructure, housing conditions, education, heath care, leisure and tourism. The law enumerated 16 indicators and assigned to them precise quantitative thresholds that are to be fulfilled in order to a rural settlement to become a town. Later a new indicator - the proportion of households with central heating - was added to the list of requirements by the Law no. 100/2007. The same law modified also the population by increasing the threshold from 5000 to 10000 inhabitants. The analysis revealed that there is not a single indicator that was met by all the 60 new towns in 2004, nor in 2018. There are improvements for almost all the indicators, but to a different extent, between the two analyzed moments. Improvements can be semnaled also regarding the average of the 60 new towns in the case of each indicator.

Starting from the fulfillment of the criteria, three categories seem to emerge:

1. Agglomeration settlements, with larger population, but small central functions. Most of them are to be find around Bucharest.
2. Central places which are located in backward regions, but which have limited central functions (like the region, these are underdeveloped too). Such towns are located in Suceava county, for example.
3. "Model towns" which perform significant functions, respectively have real polarization role (for example, Pecica and Ardud).

Chapter VI. includes a brief presentation of the case studies, the new towns of the Northwest development region: Arduș, Dragomirești, Livada, Sacueni, Salistea de Sus and Ulmeni.

The conclusions of the research are presented in Chapter VII. After an economically, socially and also politically failed transition from the socialist regime, accelerated urbanization seemed as a method for “catching up with the West”, which lied on a traditional supremacy of the town as a settlement type. Creating a new stage of urbanization was meant to escape the misery inherited from the socialism, but the socialist past has reflected in the urbanization patterns of the transition period too: politically increased urbanization rate in order to become similar to the EU-average; there is a very precise criteria for gaining urban status, but nobody fulfills it; the number of town is increasing, but the frame doesn't have a substance.

The new urban status was not a reward; it seemed a chance to prosperity, but it caused rather disadvantages than advantages: increased level of duties and taxes, competition with the big towns and municipalities for funds. The new towns had different developmental paths, some of them had tried to regain the rural status, while others have strengthened their polarising role. The key of success in the case of the latter was not the new status, but the invested work of their leaders and the opportunities of their “playing field” shaped by their spatial-economic relationships.

The actual problems of the new towns are very similar to the rest of the small towns. Despite these, the majority of the mayors would experience a disappointment if their settlement would be downgraded to rural status (the first and so far the single town which regained its rural status is Baneasa from Constanta county, and the probability to follow the path of this pioneer is low).

Concerning possible future town declarations, the new limit of 10,000 inhabitants set in 2007 acts as a slowing force, although not as a “freezing” one of further proclamations, as currently 25 large communes have population above the new threshold, according to the 2011 Population and Household Census. For now, these communes prefer to remain urban in order to benefit from special funds and favorable taxes.