EXCESSIVE URBANIZATION IN ROMANIA - A CHALLENGE WITHIN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

CIPRIAN NIMARĂ, GABRIELA CORINA SLUSARIUC *

ABSTRACT: *Urbanization is one of the most striking social and spatial transformations of the modern era, a complex phenomenon that reflects profound mutations in the structure of economies, demographic development and in the means of organizing geographical space. Far from being just a quantitative expression of urban population growth, excessive urbanization constitutes a profound qualitative process, in which the uncontrolled accumulation of functions, people and activities within a limited urban perimeter determines resource overstrain, infrastructure congestion, social marginalization and ecosystem degradation.*

KEY WORDS: *urbanization, sustainable development, overcrowding, social inequality.*

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: *J2, J6, R0, R1, Z3.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Excessive urbanization, frequently referred in the literature as urban sprawl, is a particular and problematic form of urban expansion, characterized by the chaotic, dispersed and insufficiently regulated development of built-up areas, especially in peri-urban areas. This urban dynamic reflects a lack of coherence in territorial planning policies and involves the expansion of cities beyond their functional and historical limits, in the absence of clear mechanisms of control, integration and sustainability.

The phenomenon of excessive urbanization should not be confused with the natural and planned process of urbanization, which involves an orderly, coordinated and integrated growth in the existing urban structure. "Natural" urbanization involves intelligent densification, urban regeneration, spatial and infrastructural connectivity, as well as equitable access to public services. In contrast, excessive urbanization manifests

* *Lecturer, Ph.D., University of Petroșani, Romania, cipriannimara@upet.ro*
Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., University of Petroșani, Romania, gabrielaslusariuc@upet.ro

itself through unjustified territorial dispersion, in which built spaces follow each other without a functional or aesthetic logic, resulting in a profound fragmentation of the urban landscape (Cyril et al., 2013).

Among the defining features of excessive urbanization are:

- uncontrolled peripheral expansion of urban localities, which exceeds the administrative, technical and ecological capacities of local authorities, this translates into the emergence of new neighbourhoods, built quickly, without public consultation or long-term planning, which leads to urban chaos and management difficulties;
- disproportionate and inefficient consumption of land resources, often to the detriment of agricultural land or natural habitats, the expansion of cities onto green or agricultural land leads to the loss of biodiversity, the decline of soil quality and the reduction of the food self-sufficiency capacity of the affected regions;
- lack of functional and spatial integration between new developments and existing urban cores;
- structural dependence on the personal car, caused by the insufficiency or non-existence of public transport in the new built areas, caused by the insufficiency or non-existence of public transport in the new built areas. Thus, residents are forced to travel long distances daily by personal car, which generates traffic, pollution and high costs;
- insufficient infrastructure networks and basic services, such as water, sewage, electricity, telecommunications, schools or medical facilities, the lack of these essential facilities leads to a decrease in the quality of life, social dissatisfaction and constant pressure on local authorities, which cannot keep up with rapid development.

A key aspect in understanding excessive urbanization is its connection with peri-urban sprawl, a phenomenon whereby spaces located on the outskirts of cities are transformed into residential areas, without adequate integration into the central urban system. These urban peripheries lack adequate infrastructure, are poorly connected to the city center and often develop under pressure from the real estate market, in the absence of strategic intervention from the public administration (Gu, 2019).

In the case of Romania, excessive urbanization has been evident in the last two decades, especially around large urban agglomerations such as Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Brașov, Iași or Constanța, for example:

Bucharest, urban fragmentation is manifested by the strong contrast between the historic center and the extended peripheral areas, such as Popești-Leordeni, Chiajna or Voluntari. These have grown rapidly in the last two decades, without public infrastructure keeping pace: lack of efficient public transport networks, blocks of flats built without green spaces, schools or medical centers, and a strong dependence on the private car. Within the city, functional fragmentation is seen in degraded areas (former industrial platforms) in contrast to premium residential neighbourhoods.

Cluj-Napoca, although a more compact city, has experienced an accelerated expansion in the Florești area, which has become a national symbol of chaotic suburbanization. Fragmentation is felt not only in the lack of connectivity between these peripheries and the city center, but also in the unequal access to public services and infrastructure. While central neighbourhoods such as Mărăști or Gheorgheni are well equipped, the areas on the outskirts have lagged far behind.

Brașov, with a geography constrained by mountains, has experienced another form of fragmentation: the great differences between the well-preserved tourist center and the new residential areas developed on former industrial or agricultural lands, outside the city. The lack of coherent planning has led to the emergence of residential "islands", poorly connected to each other, with accessibility and utility problems.

Constanța, on the other hand, combines classic urban fragmentation with one specific to port cities: the separation of port, tourist and residential functional spaces. Areas such as Mamaia have experienced accelerated tourist development, while the traditional neighborhoods of the city have been largely neglected. The periphery has grown in uneven directions, without urban integration, creating a fragmented landscape, with unequal access to infrastructure (Nimară, 2021).

Table 1. Comparison of large cities (population, area and density)

City	Urban population	Area (km^2)	Densitaty (inh/ $km^{2)}$
Bucharest	1.758.600	228	7.531
Iași	316.343	94	2.891
Cluj-Napoca	308.304	179.5	1.597
Constanța	283.782	124.89	2.112
Brașov	253.200	267.32	889

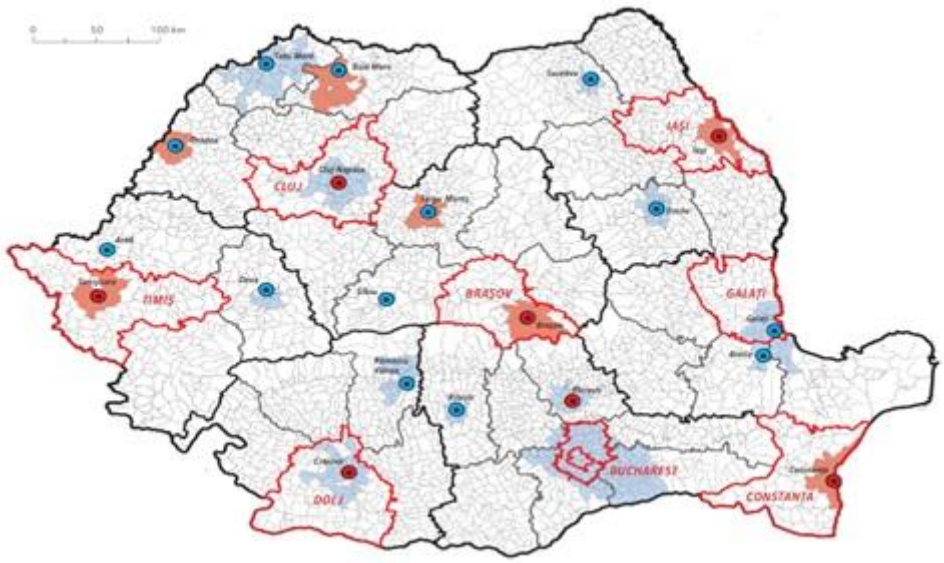


Figure 1. Assessing spatio-temporal dynamics of urban sprawl in the Bucharest metropolitan area over the last century (after Grigorescu et al, 2015)

In all these cases, urban fragmentation is not just a visual or spatial effect, but has profound social implications: inequalities in access to education, health and quality housing, high administrative costs and a low quality of life for many residents (Li et al., 2022).

Managing these problems requires strategic interventions. The reasons why constructions are expanding chaotically outside the cities are related to both the financial accessibility of land in peri-urban areas, the degradation of the existing built stock in urban cores and the lack of coherent fiscal and urban policies.

The lack of regulation, the absence of updated general urban plans and weak administrative capacity have favored an unbalanced development, in which the priorities of economic profit of real estate developers have prevailed over the criteria of sustainability, equity and urban functionality (Slusariuc, 2015).

2. THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF EXCESSIVE URBANIZATION

Excessive urbanization exerts a profound and complex impact on urban social structures, generating a series of dysfunctions that affect the balance and stability of communities. While planned urbanization can support economic progress, social diversification and the strengthening of community ties, chaotic and uncontrolled expansion of urban areas intensifies socio-spatial imbalances, deepens disparities between different population groups and undermines the social cohesion necessary for harmonious urban development.

In particular, excessive urbanization leads to residential segregation and exclusion from certain spaces, pushing especially vulnerable groups to peripheries poorly connected to infrastructure and services. Living in these areas means not only limited access to education, health and jobs, but also a withdrawal from civic and community life, which weakens social ties in the city and accentuates socio-economic differences.

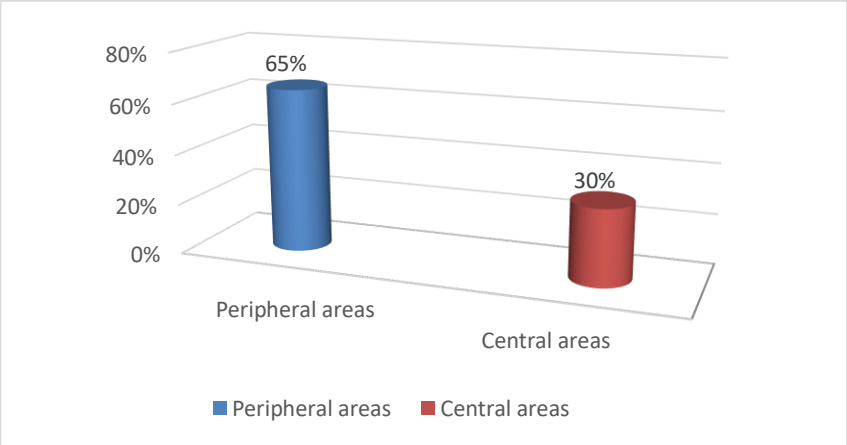
Overcrowding also becomes an inevitable consequence in neighbourhoods developed without a realistic population size in relation to the existing infrastructure. This translates into overloading of public services, degradation of common spaces, increased social conflicts and, last but not least, a significant decrease in the quality of urban life. In Romanian cities, these phenomena are particularly visible in new neighbourhoods developed by private actors in peripheral areas, such as Florești near Cluj-Napoca, Berceni and Popești-Leordeni near Bucharest, or Valea Lupului near Iași. In these cases, the absence of social infrastructure (kindergartens, schools, hospitals), the lack of green areas and the dependence on personal transport lead to the emergence of fragmented social enclaves, isolated from the main city and often ignored in urban development plans.

Another important effect is the perceived increase in insecurity in densely populated areas, urban insecurity refers to the perception of risks and dangers felt by city residents in relation to the space they live in. It does not only mean crime (theft, violence), but also the feeling of insecurity generated by factors such as:

- poor public lighting;
- lack of police presence;

- degraded infrastructure such as: streets, sidewalks, abandoned buildings;
- urban congestion and chaos;
- lack of safe and well-maintained public spaces.

Approximately 65% of residents of peripheral areas in Romania perceive their neighbourhood as unsafe at night, compared to only 30% in central areas. This discrepancy reflects not only differences in infrastructure, but also a weakening of social cohesion in new neighbourhoods, poorly integrated into the urban network. In the context of excessive urbanization, urban insecurity becomes a significant side effect, which must be addressed through integrated measures: adequate public lighting, development of public spaces, police presence and community involvement in the management of common spaces.



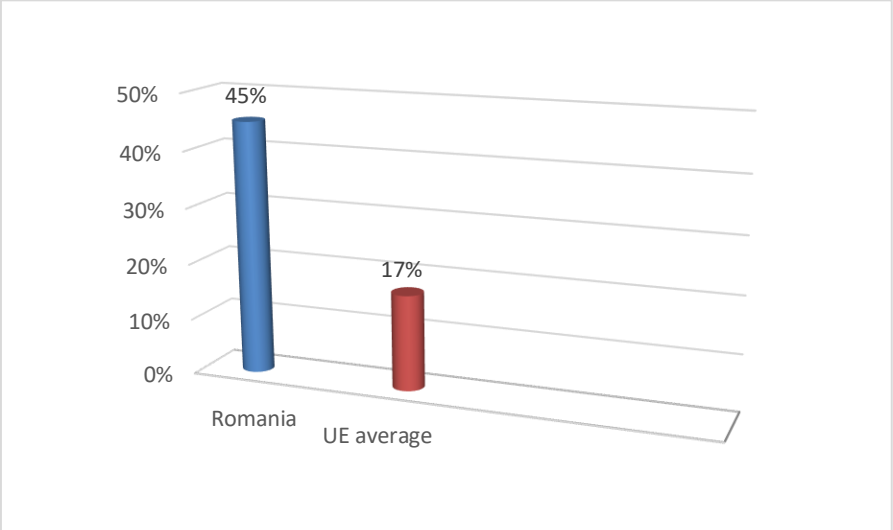
Source: Eurostat 2024

Figure 2. Perception of urban insecurity

The concept of spatial exclusion refers to this geographical separation, which becomes a real barrier to social mobility. In practice, it no longer matters only who you are or what you know, but also where you live. If you grew up in a marginalized area, your chances of accessing quality education or a good job decrease dramatically. A concrete example from Romania is the Florești area in Cluj County. Here, the explosion of apartment building construction has far exceeded the capacity of the local infrastructure. Residents are faced with congested roads, a lack of green spaces, insufficient kindergartens and schools, and difficult access to the city centre. In the absence of well-thought-out urban interventions, these peripheries risk turning into real urban ghettos.

Overcrowding and spatial exclusion inevitably leads to social division. As cities fragment into neighbourhoods for the rich and neighbourhoods for the poor, social cohesion weakens. There are no longer common spaces in which people from different social categories can interact; instead, deep divisions emerge between “us” and “them” (Madlener & Sunak, 2011).

This separation is not just a Romanian phenomenon; it has been widely documented in major European, American and Asian metropolises. In some cases, the separation becomes visible not only in the spatial structure of the city, but also in public policies, budget allocation or urban development priorities. For Romania, the challenge is all the greater as cities grow rapidly, but administrative and financial resources remain limited. In the absence of clear measures to combat social inequalities, our cities risk becoming increasingly polarized, with a "shining" urban centre for some and forgotten outskirts for others.



Source: Eurostat 2024

Figure 3. Housing overcrowding: Romania vs. EU average

The graph above highlights the major difference between the housing overcrowding rate in Romania (45%) and the European Union average (17%), according to Eurostat data. This gap reflects the significant challenges faced by the Romanian urban population, especially in rapidly expanding cities. While in other European countries public policies and urban planning regulations have allowed the development of adequate and affordable housing, in Romania, pressure on the real estate market and poor planning have contributed to the concentration of a large number of people in small spaces. This situation not only affects housing comfort, but also generates broader social effects, amplifying inequalities and reducing equal access to economic, educational and social opportunities. In addition, overcrowding exerts increased pressure on urban infrastructure, affecting public services and the overall quality of life.

3. THE ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF EXCESSIVE URBANIZATION

The general trend in Romania during the period 2000-2024, recorded a slow but steady increase in the share of the urban population, from 52.7% to 54.6%. This increase reflects a gradual urbanization process, influenced by the socio-economic particularities of the country, in particular the high share of the rural environment and the uneven dynamics of regional development. Despite this increase, Romania remains one of the

European countries with the lowest urbanization rates, demonstrating that modernization and urbanization have not evolved uniformly across the entire territory.

At the level of the European Union, during the same period, the urbanization rate remained at a much higher level, oscillating between 71% and 74%. It is worth noting a slight decrease between 2015 and 2020, explainable by methodological changes in statistical calculations, but also by the migration of the population to suburbs or less populated regions, a phenomenon known as peri urbanization. This trend reflects a diversification of residential preferences in the EU and an adaptation of the urban model to new economic and social realities.

Economic effects represent the set of changes produced in the economy as a result of the implementation of a policy, the development of a project or the emergence of an economic or social phenomenon. They can be analyzed both at the microeconomic level, affecting individuals, households and firms, and at the macroeconomic level, influencing indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the unemployment rate, inflation or the trade balance.

From a theoretical perspective, any major intervention in the economy generates both direct and indirect effects. Direct effects are those that can be observed immediately, such as job creation or income generation, while indirect effects refer to changes produced in the chain in other economic sectors, such as stimulating demand for auxiliary goods and services.

On the one hand, urbanization stimulates the growth of aggregate demand, as the migration of the population to cities amplifies local consumption, generating opportunities for business, trade and services. Large cities also allow firms to benefit from economies of scale, reducing costs per unit of output, due to easy access to large markets and a diversified workforce. In addition, urbanization attracts domestic and foreign investment in infrastructure, real estate, transport and telecommunications. The concentration of human and technological capital in urban environments stimulates innovation, the exchange of ideas and increased productivity.

On the other hand, excessive urbanization entails high economic costs. Urban expansion requires huge investments in roads, public transport, energy, water and sanitation, and if these are not well planned, the costs multiply quickly. Overcrowding leads to congestion and productivity losses, with some studies showing that in large cities, congestion can consume up to 2-4% of local GDP.

Also, the high demand for housing overheats the housing market, increasing the cost of living and reducing accessibility for low-income populations. Local authorities feel additional pressure on public budgets to support urban expansion, risking financial imbalances. Finally, excessive urbanization can increase economic inequalities, favoring elites and marginalizing vulnerable groups, affecting social cohesion and overall productivity.

At the macroeconomic level, excessive urbanization may initially contribute to GDP growth, but later generate hidden costs, such as efficiency losses and financial risks, including real estate crises. Territorial imbalances between urban and rural regions can hinder the balanced development of the national economy. Hyper-urbanized economies also become more vulnerable to financial, social and infrastructure crises.

In addition to these effects, excessive urbanization directly influences the labor market, attracting labor from rural areas, but not always corresponding to urban skill requirements, which leads to urban unemployment and pressure on social benefits.

Metropolitan areas play a crucial role in the urbanization process, but in Romania, the lack of clear regulations for their coordination has led to uncoordinated developments and dysfunctions in urban planning. This situation highlights the need for effective metropolitan governance to ensure sustainable and balanced urban development.

4. ECONOMIC SOLUTIONS TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF EXCESSIVE URBANIZATION

Although large cities stimulate innovation, uncontrolled urbanization can suffocate small local businesses, which cannot cope with high rent costs and intense competition. In addition, the overheated real estate market becomes fertile ground for financial speculation, with artificially inflated prices, increasing the risk of local economic crises. The economic solutions to reduce the impact of excessive urbanization are:

- **Smart infrastructure investments.** Well-planned infrastructure, including quality public transport, efficient water and energy networks, and modern waste management systems, can reduce congestion, lower public costs, and increase economic productivity. Thus, local authorities should prioritize "green" and sustainable investments, with financing from European funds and public-private partnerships;
- **Rural-urban balancing policies.** To reduce the pressure of migration to big cities, governments can stimulate the development of rural areas and small towns through tax incentives, investment in local infrastructure and support for small businesses. This helps create local jobs, reducing economic gaps between regions.
- **Regulation of the real estate market.** Introducing policies to control real estate speculation, such as limiting speculative investments and supporting social housing, can prevent market overheating and maintain housing affordability. In addition, urban plans should include functional mixes (housing, commerce, services), avoiding ghettoization.
- **Supporting local entrepreneurship.** Small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) support programs can ensure local economic diversity and resilience to external shocks. These programs can include microcredit, tax breaks, and access to affordable commercial space.
- **Education and professional retraining.** To meet the demands of the urban labor market, it is essential that the state invests in education and vocational training programs, especially for rural migrants. This increases the chance that the urban population will integrate productively into the economy.
- **Developing resilient financial mechanisms.** Close monitoring of bank exposure to real estate, the implementation of strict lending regulations, and the creation of financial safety nets can prevent economic crises generated by economic bubbles.

In conclusion, excessive urbanization generates a complex mix of economic effects. In the short term, it can stimulate growth and investment, but in the long term, if not managed effectively, it can lead to high costs, inefficiencies, and economic imbalances. Sustainable urban planning and smart infrastructure investments are essential to maximize the economic benefits and minimize the risks associated with accelerated urbanization.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Urbanization in Romania reflects a complex process, influenced by historical, political and socio-economic factors. In 2024, approximately 70.6% of the European Union population lived in urban areas, while in Romania, this proportion was significantly lower, with over 40% of the population living in rural areas. This distribution indicates lower urbanization compared to the European average.

In terms of demographic trends, there is a polarization between large cities, which attract population and investment, and small and medium-sized cities, which are experiencing demographic and economic decline. This discrepancy is accentuated by internal migration, where the young and active population moves to large urban centers in search of better opportunities. A notable phenomenon is extensive urbanization, characterized by the territorial expansion of cities without a proportional increase in population. This leads to inefficient land use and increased costs for the provision of public services.

Excessive urbanization not only produces visible effects on the urban landscape, but also puts increasing pressure on essential public services, transforming them into a fragile terrain of social inequality. Rapid population growth in urban and peri-urban areas overtaxes existing infrastructure, which was not designed to cope with such a pace of expansion. This pressure is particularly evident in the areas of education, health, social assistance and urban mobility, where demand constantly exceeds administrative and functional capacity.

Public services, vital for ensuring social solidarity and social justice, become unequal in distribution and quality: central areas benefit from investment and strengthened infrastructure, while the urban periphery, where new residential developments are concentrated, often remains ignored or underfunded. This situation creates a vicious circle: residents of the periphery must constantly travel to the center to access schools, hospitals or other services, generating congestion, increasing living costs and intensifying social tensions.

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