

MARGINAL AREAS OF THE ROMANIAN BANAT

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ABSTRACT. – **Marginal Areas of the Romanian Banat.** Banat region is historically located between the rivers Danube, Tisa and Mureş, on three sides, and the Carpathians. This analysis focuses only on the Romanian Banat. After the December 1989 Revolution which started in Timișoara, the regional capital of Banat, the transition to the market economy and the recent economic crisis has severely struck the pillars of local economy in many parts of the region: agriculture and mining. According to a number of well-known criteria, the paper identifies and analyzes the marginal areas of the region: rural isolated areas such as Lipova Hills and Almăj Land, mining and industrial regions like Reșița-Bocșa-Anina, Poiana Ruscă Mountains and Bistra Valley. The rural areas lack accessibility and have an autarchic economy based on agriculture. The former industrial regions are characterised by high rates of unemployment and a decline in the living standards. The consequences are mainly the same: emigration, low birth rates, demographic ageing, socio-economic instability.

Keywords: Banat, marginality, rural isolated areas, declining industrial areas

1. INTRODUCTION. MARGINAL AREAS IN A MARGINAL COUNTRY: ROMANIA

Romania is a member of the European Union since 2007 but it still ranks among the least developed countries of the European Union according to various socio-economic criteria, such as the GDP / inhabitant (Ibolya Kurkó, 2010, J. Benedek, Nóra-Csilla Veress, 2013) or the Human Development Index (Ibolya Kurkó, 2011). There are numerous causes for this underdevelopment. The communist rule was harsher in Romania than in other communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and left deeper scars on the Romanian society and economy (A. Sterbling, 1997, D. Turnock, 1997, A.U. Gabanyi, 1998, S.D. Roper, 2000, W. Heller, I. Ianoş, 2004, H.F. Carey, 2004, T. Gallagher, 2005, W.E. Schreiber, R. Rusu, 2014). The period of transition from the centralized system to the market economy was also a difficult process, marked by ambiguity and setbacks (D. Turnock, 2007, J. Benedek, P. Jordan, 2007, D. Turnock, 2009, Anita Szojnik, Kinga Ivan, R. Rusu, 2012). The EU membership, seen by many people as the end of all problems, brought further issues, especially due to the economic crisis which started in 2008-2009 (J. Benedek, Ibolya Kurkó, 2010, H.J. Bürkner, 2011, R. Rusu, W. Schreiber, 2013, J. Benedek, M. Cristea, 2014, Ibolya Török, 2015).

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Geodemographic and socio-economic disparities within Romania have been analysed in detail by Ibolya Kurkó (2010) and focus on the subject has also been provided by Claudia Popescu (2003), M. Bakk and J. Benedek (2010), J. Benedek and Nóra-Csilla Veress (2013), R. Rusu and W. Schreiber (2013). It comes out that București-Ilfov is the only Romanian region whose development is slightly higher than the EU average, as it is a small region around the national capital and it actually reflects the development of the capital city and its immediate surroundings. All the other regions are well below the EU average but there are still important differences between them.

While the mentioned regions are the official development regions (NUTS 2 level), there are also other smaller or larger areas which have been addressed and discussed. Special attention has been given to border and even crossborder regions which are marginal both in location and socio-economic terms: Maramureș (N. Boar, 2006), the Romanian-Bulgarian crossborder area (Georgiana Toth, Alina Huzui-Stoiculescu, 2014), the Hungarian-Romanian border region (E. Nagy, 2014). This is also the case of Banat and the paper focuses on the internal disparities within the Romanian part of this geographical-historical region.

2. METHODOLOGY

The criteria used to delimit marginal areas in Banat are quite various and they might be differentiated according to the type of marginal area. Two different types of marginal regions in Banat have been taken into consideration:

- Poor rural isolated areas. Among the rural isolated areas, one should emphasize the Lipova Hills and Almăj Land (including Bozovici Basin and Almăj Mountains, until the Danube Gorges);

- Industrial areas severely struck by economic recession. The industrial areas in recession are those centered on Reșița, whose metallurgic industry recorded a strong decline manifested in higher unemployment rates and affected the entire county, and Oțelu Roșu, a smaller metallurgic town on Bistra Valley. The privatization of these two giant factories represents one of the most widely known cases of failure in capitalist Romania. More than that, the other industrial enterprises located in Bocșa, Anina or Nădrag, followed the same pattern of decline and unemployment. This finally led to their former status of “critical area”, where a number of facilities were given to potential investors.

Some criteria have been used for both types of marginal areas. However, most of them apply only for one of the above-mentioned types. Such criteria are:

- difficult access to the main communication lines;
- lack of basic modern needs: electric power, water supply, communication lines (telephones), gas supply;
- high or very high unemployment rate;
- repeated states of total isolation during winter;
- autarchic economy based on agriculture and forestry;
- the former status of “critical area” given by the Romanian Government;
- lack of any other choice for a job in the case of the unemployed;
- demographic decline due both to natural causes and high migration rate;
- low sanitary standards;

- the region's economy is based on only one factory or economic activity which has become unprofitable and/or is about to cease its existence.

The criteria were selected according to the recommendations of the best-known international and national examples regarding the subject of marginality (W. Leimgruber, 2004, Ibolya Kurkó, 2010), taking also into account the specificities of Banat region.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Banat was in itself a marginal region throughout the centuries, and even its name means "border region" or "mark" according to linguists, who considered it to be a place name of Slavic origin. Hungarians borrowed the name from the nearby Slavs and applied it to no less than five Southern border regions of their medieval kingdom; but only today's Banat retain this name. It is located between the Danube, Mureş and Tisa rivers, and the Carpathians (R. Rusu, 2007, N. Popa, 2008).

It was inhabited by Dacians when the Romans conquered it in 106 AD. For more than 150 years it was part of the Roman province Dacia, and its borders were the same with those of the Empire on two sides (Mureş and Tisa). When the Romans left around 271 AD, the local inhabitants (Romanians) suffered the passage of nomad migratory tribes for hundreds of years. Among those who settled were the Slavs (today Serbs) around the 7th century, and the Magyars, who established their Hungarian kingdom in former Pannonia and conquered the Banat around the year 1000. It was then when the region received its name, as it was a buffer zone between Hungary and the nearby medieval states of Wallachia, Serbia and later the Ottoman Empire. The Hungarian rule lasted until 1552, when the expanding Turks conquered Hungary, including Banat. Still, the region was again a buffer zone between the Ottoman Empire and the autonomous Transylvanian Principality. Parts of mountainous Banat were even integrated within the Principality until late in the 17th century. The Austrians succeeded in reconquering the former Hungarian kingdom from the Turks. The Karlowitz Treaty (1699) recognized their authority of all the territories North of Mureş, while the Passarowitz Treaty (1718) gave them full powers over Banat region. Until 1778, Banat region was considered as the property of the Austrian Emperor. The Austrians, taking into consideration the depopulation of the Banat Lowlands, colonized the region with Catholic Germans ("Schwabens") and even other Catholic people (Czechs, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Hungarians and even French, Italians and Spaniards). Due to the continuous pressures made by the Hungarian aristocracy in search for new lands and properties, Banat was incorporated in Hungary in 1778, and it was then part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire until the First World War. New waves of colonists (Hungarians mostly) arrived and mixed with the local inhabitants, the Romanians and the Serbs. Although the Romanian population formed a large majority throughout the centuries, Banat region is one of the most interesting examples of ethnic mixture and tolerance in Europe. After First World War, its territory (covering 28,526 km²) was split into three: Romania received about two thirds (18,966 km²), Serbia (Yugoslavia) about one third (9,276 km²) and Hungary about 1% (284 km²).

The historical limits of Banat region tend to decrease in importance, as some of them are now central axes of the region (Tisa and Mureş rivers). Romanian Banat

comprises two counties entirely: Timiș and Caraș-Severin, an important part of Arad County and small parts of Mehedinți and Hunedoara counties.

The main city of Banat is Timișoara. It has about 320,000 inhabitants and it is a large industrial and cultural metropolis. At the same time, it is the city of the 1989 Romanian Revolution against communism and dictatorship. Reșița is the seat of Caraș-Severin, a county severely struck by economic recession and the transition from a centralized economy to a free market economy and globalization. Its metallurgic industry fails to compete on the market and its population dropped from about 100,000 in 1990 to about 80,000 at present. Other important towns are Lugoj and Caransebeș, both located on Timiș River along the E 70 road and the railway linking Timișoara to Southern Romania and Bucharest. They have between 20,000 and 50,000 inhabitants. All the other towns have less than 20,000 inhabitants, many of them between 5,000 and 10,000. Several settlements have been raised to town status since 1990: Făget (1994), Recaș, Ciacova and Gătaia (April 2004).

The main communication ways are along the rivers. The E 68 road and the international railway from Budapest enter the country near Arad and head eastwards along the river Mureș. Similarly, the E 70 road and the railway from Belgrade pass the border at Moravița and head to Timișoara and then towards Lugoj and Caransebeș along the river Timiș. Other important transportation routes link the main cities of the region, Timișoara and Arad, and then they go northwards to Oradea. Other national and secondary roads make the connection with the other towns.

Lipova Hills

The area located between Mureș and Bega rivers is formed by hills, no more than 300 m high. They have gentle slopes and can be used in agriculture. The villages of this region had a very steep decline in population numbers during the 20th century, and some of them became uninhabited at the end of the century.

The analysis takes into consideration nine communes forming the core of the area, four of them in Arad County: Șistarovăț, Dorgoș (Ususău), Bata and Birchiș, and five in Timiș County: Bogda, Brestovăț, Secaș, Bara and Ohaba Lungă. One may also include several other villages, belonging to communes from outside the region, such as Chelmac, Belotint, Lalașint (in Arad County), Nadăș, Sălciua Nouă, Topla, Bunea Mare, Bunea Mică, Groși and Bulza (in Timiș County).

Their population increased in numbers until the beginning of the 20th century, when they reached their peak. Since the First World War, they began to decrease in numbers, a decline that severely accelerated after the Second World War. Extremely low numbers have been recorded at the 1992 census, and the 2002 and 2011 censuses showed no improvement of their situation. Most of the villages have below 100 inhabitants, and some even below 20 inhabitants.

The main causes of this significant decline are the emigration of the young and adult population to the cities throughout the 20th century, the lack of connection to the main means of transportation and the autarchic agriculture, oriented for the subsistence of the dwellers, not towards a competitive market. All these causes and factors are linked one to the other in a number of ways.

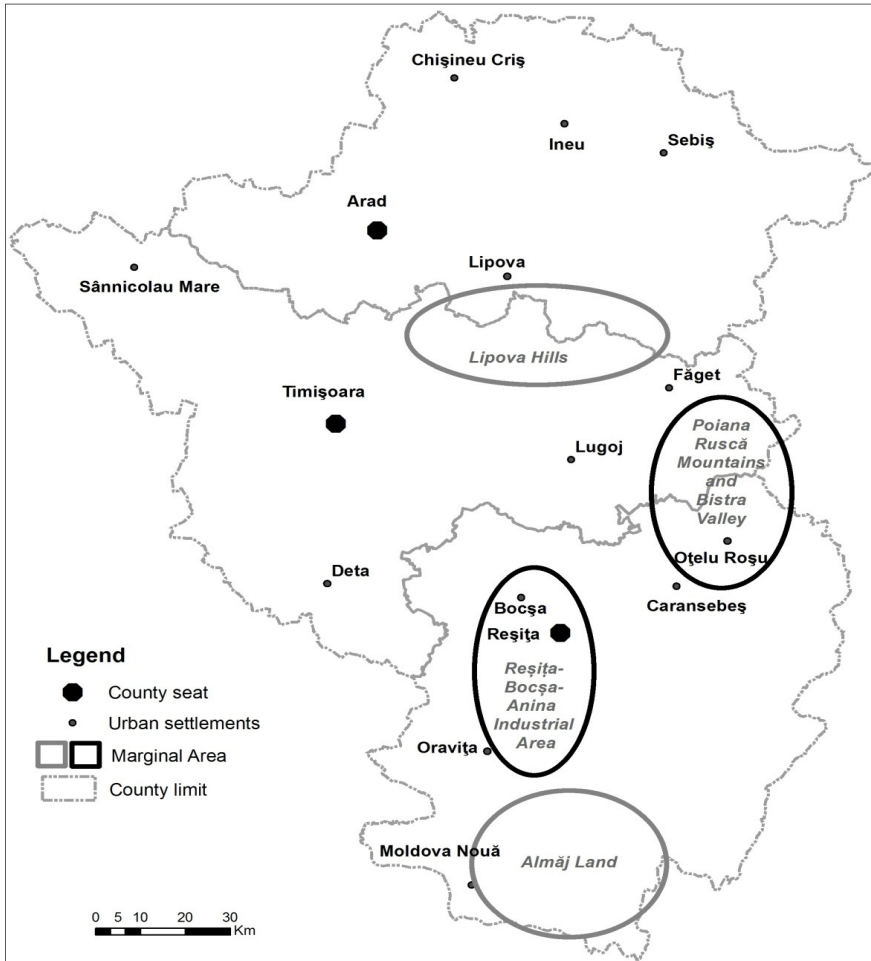


Fig. 1. The location of the marginal areas in the Romanian Banat

For instance, no large city is located nearby. The only town, which lies at the edge of the hills, is Lipova, but it was never a developing urban centre. Two other towns have been only recently declared as such (Făget, Recaș) or they still wait for a decision to become such (Săvârșin). However, all of them failed to attract the population from the hills, who migrated in large numbers to the main cities of Banat (Timișoara, Arad, Lugoj). Because of the distance, daily commuting was not possible, so they finally established themselves in the city. The communist government even encouraged this rural emigration by providing cheap accommodation in blocks of flats for the migrants.

The Lipova Hills are not crossed by any railway, and no national road passes nearby. The only partly modernized road is the one relating Lipova and Făget, while stretches of modernized roads link the commune centres to the above-mentioned small towns.

A very important issue is the lack of bridges over the river Mureş between Lipova and Săvârşin. On its North bank, the river is followed by the international E 60 road and the most important Romanian railway. Only a few hundreds of meters away, on its South bank, the villages of Lipova Hills have no connection to this communication axis. The passage by boats is sometimes dangerous and even impossible, especially during winter (because of the ice floating on the river) and during spring (because of the high level of the waters).

The lack of schools is another problem for the few inhabitants of the hills. Although general education (8 years, to become 9 years) is compulsory for everyone, there are only four communes that have such schools (Birchiş, Ususău, Brestovăţ and Ohaba Lungă), while the pupils from the other five communes have to commute to the nearest general school available. Many villages have no school at all, not even for primary education. This is a very unusual situation, as at least one general school should exist in every commune.

Agriculture is the main occupation of the inhabitants. It has a subsistence character, as no markets are available nearby. Because of the population decline and the high weight of people aged over 60, large portions of land remain fallow ground. Fruit tree growing is a traditional occupation, now also in decay. Forestry is the second activity, but forests are to be found only in a few patches on the highest hills.

Almăj Land

This name usually describes the Bozovici Basin, but we will also make reference in this paper to the nearby Almăj Mountains, which separate the Basin from the Danube Gorges area.

Bozovici Basin is one of the most isolated Basins of the Carpathians (Ana-Neli Ianăş, 2011). It is completely surrounded by mountains; the river Nera, which drains it, makes its way out through absolutely impenetrable gorges. The mountains around it assured the protection of its inhabitants, so the Romanians form a vast majority of the population in this area. However, as a part of the Austrian Empire, it also received emigrants who formed new settlements on the mountains nearby. It were the Czechs who accepted the harsh conditions of the mountainous environment and formed a number of villages as they were employed in forestry and later in coal mining, the most important economic activity of Almăj Mountains. The Romanians also colonized the mountains at the same time, as the Danube became a more important communication axis and the Danube Gorges (the Iron Gates) could be reached and surpassed (although with great difficulty).

The present situation of Bozovici Basin has not changed too much. Although, unlike in Lipova Hills, there are quite a number of big and middle-sized villages, their inhabitants live in a literally state of isolation. The nearest railway station is at 20 to 60 km away, and the same is true of the European road. A national road passes through the Basin and links it to the areas nearby; however, this link relates it to other marginal areas (Reşiţa-Anina area).

There is no town in Almăj Land, though Bozovici might become one in the future. The nearest towns are Anina, Oraviţa and Băile Herculane, all of them small in size. As no markets are available at a reasonable distance, the economy is mainly based on autarchic agriculture, breeding and forestry. Fishing is a traditional occupation for the

inhabitants of the villages on the Danube shores. The most famous occupation of the inhabitants of the Bozovici Basin is fruit-tree growing (plum trees and apple trees, mostly). In the past, the markets of all the major cities of Banat and even farther were provided with fruits by the inhabitants of Almăj Land. Today, only few of the orchards' owners have the financial possibilities to make this kind of deal, and sometimes they record financial losses.

For those living in the mountains, the situation is much more difficult. Many of the villages of Șopotu Nou, Sichevița and Berzasca communes are extremely small in size and they have few inhabitants (up to 100). Some villages became uninhabited (Drencova, for instance, on the Danube). The main reason is the lack of proper conditions for a living, as for example no electric power, although they are less than 100 km from the biggest hydroelectric power plant in South Eastern Europe, the "Iron Gates" ("Porțile de Fier")! Such hamlet-like settlements have not been considered important enough to benefit from the resources that they actually have nearby. There are only minor roads and footpaths, while the "national" road along the Danube is in a poor state, although it is now modernized.

A short period of economic recovery was during the war in nearby Yugoslavia. It was a flourishing time for the illegal commerce over the Danube between Romanians and the Serbian "brothers". Due to this commerce, some people got very rich over night, as it happened in Coronini (Pescari). However, this wealth did not positively affect the region on a long-term. Today, the navigation on the Danube has been resumed but few ships pass by; this seems to be the long-term effect of the war.

Reșița-Bocșa-Anina Industrial Area

It is one of the Romanian industrial areas that have been mostly hit by recession in the past ten years. The area comprises the Romanian oldest mines connected to metallurgic devices that can be surely described as belonging to a new era, that of the Industrial Revolution. In 1717, the Austrians, who took Banat region out of the Turkish hands, quickly resumed production at Ocna de Fier iron mine and established a first metallurgic primitive furnace at Bocșa, where Bârzava river makes its way out of the mountains. Later, as more resources were discovered in the area, they decided to move the entire industry up to Reșița, considered to be a better location. It was in 1771 when metallurgy started to change the life of the inhabitants of Reșița, by then a village of only 62 households. Emigrants came in from all over the Empire and the metallurgic factory grew to such an extent, that it owned a third of the land of Caraș county by the end of the 19th century, including forests, mines of all types and all the communication means (railways and roads). Even the first railway in Romania was built to make the connection from the town of Oravița (1854) to Baziaș, on the Danube, and a few years afterwards, Anina coal mines were linked by railway to Oravița, from where the coal reached the Danube.

The STEG Company changed its name into UDR after the First World War, but major changes became apparent only after the Second World War, when all industrial properties were nationalized by the Communist Government. As Communists thrived for industrialization, all the factories and plants of the area were even more extended; new factories were created at Bocșa and Anina. In 1968, Reșița became a county seat for the first time and it received administrative functions. The town grew to reach even about 100,000 inhabitants in 1990. It has now only around 70,000.

After 1990, recession hit the mining industry and the connected heavy industry. Mines all over the area had to be closed or at least reduce their activity. At Anina, the Power Plant built on coal schists never even produced energy, as the costs of its opening would not have been covered by the energy produced. Dramatic efforts have been made in the 80s to build this power plant, similar to one in China that so much impressed Ceaușescu; however, it was completely unprofitable. Anina became the first town to decay in the region, as it is also located deep in the mountains, and the railway to Oravița has been closed down.

Bocșa economy was based on CMB factory, producing all sorts of industrial machinery and metallic constructions (R. Crețan, 2004), but it became bankrupt in 2005. The rate of unemployment in this small town has reached a very high figure. Like Anina, Bocșa together with Ocna de Fier were also considered as “critical areas” by the Government. This status allowed potential investors to have a number of financial facilities but it turned out that not too many real investors came in.

However, the most dramatic incidents took place in Reșița, the county seat of Caraș-Severin County and the centre of the entire area. The metallurgic plant here, CSR, was sold by the Romanian Government in 1999 to an American company, Noble Ventures. This company should re-started production at CSR, but they failed to do that, and the workers did not receive their wages. While the number of unemployed grew as a consequence, street protests followed. The remaining workers organized a strike, which became violent and they thrown the American managers out of the factory, then blocked the roads in order to force the Romanian Government to intervene. The American managers did not come back and they sued the Romanian Government in 2001. However, the dying CSR was finally sold to the Russian Group TMK for 1 (one) Euro in 2004 and most of the debts accumulated by the former metallurgic plant were erased to allow a new start for the factory.

Because CSR/TMK was not the only employer in a town that is also a county seat, Reșița was not included in the large “critical area” designed by the Romanian Government from Moldova Nouă on the Danube to Bocșa. Nevertheless, this status given to this industrial area has not improved the situation, as the rate of unemployment remains high.

Poiana Ruscă Mountains and Bistra Valley

Bistra Valley provides a communication line between Banat and Hunedoara County, historically belonging to Transylvania. It was used even since Roman times, as the capital of the Roman province Dacia was established at Sarmisegetusa, not far away from the pass (“The Transylvanian Iron Gate”) over the mountains. Poiana Ruscă Mountains are rich in mineral ores, which allowed an early industrial development of the area.

Smaller than the one in Reșița, Oțelu Roșu (Ferdinand) metallurgic plant started its development in 1796 based on the iron ores from the nearby Poiana Ruscă Mountains. The communists accelerated its development. After 1990, the factory (SOCOMET SA) encountered the same problems as Reșița and the entire Romanian metallurgic industry. Its privatization by an Italian enterprise, Gavazzi Steel, was also a failure. Thousands of workers from Bistra Valley lost their jobs, without any other opportunity to work. In 2002, they protested along with the workers from Reșița. In 2004, Ductil Steel company from Buzău (Romania) partially restarted the factory, employing 350 workers after investments of more than 3 million Euro. However, due to the crisis, in 2012 the metallurgic works were closed and are to be sold but there is no buyer yet (in 2015), although the price has been reduced at each auction.

Deep inside the Poiana Ruscă Mountains, the small metallurgic factory in Nădrag provided a job for the dwellers of this village since the 19th century. Humorously called "CIOCANUL", it continued its activity until 1997, when it became bankrupt. No investors were interested in buying it and it is now partly demolished and it may be used only for scrap iron.

Except for forestry and tourism, no other activities are possible in the area. The unemployment rate is very high so Nădrag received the status of critical area, as the nearby Rusca Montană commune, once famous for Ruschița marble. This status did not bring any essential upgrade to the socio-economic life of the inhabitants.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The paper describes several marginal areas of Banat, in itself a marginal region of Romania. The peripheral character of these areas, as it is usually the case in Romania, is due to their condition either as a rural isolated area or a declining industrial area. The causes of their underdevelopment have only been sketched and further investigation is needed. Isolation and lack of funding is the main issue in the rural areas while economic recession and decline in mining and heavy industry hit hard the (former) industrial areas. All this happened in the wider context of the Romanian transition to the market economy, the political problems of a postsocialist nation-state, the global economic crisis. However, the effects are rather similar: low living standards, unemployment, demographic ageing, emigration, low birth rates, social tensions.

There is definitely a need for long-term strategies that should be directed towards these kinds of marginal areas, that exist everywhere throughout Romania and other Central and Eastern European countries. In Romania, the eighth section of the National Masterplan, called "Rural Areas", has not been yet finished, although work is theoretically in progress for a few years now. The declining industrial regions do not have any strategic document directed to themselves but their more "urban" character make them eligible for several types of structural funds. For example, the industrial architectural heritage may be turned into a tourist attraction if managed properly and not sold for scrap iron.

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