



Peripheral Regions in Romania

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Introduction

Romania's main goal during the next few years is a real European integration. This is to be achieved only if a sustainable strategy for regional development is implemented and a great responsibility is needed in order to determine which regions of the country should benefit from European funds. Decision-makers should take into account various factors and this paper represents a step forward in the materialization of such regions that are most severely hit by crisis. For this purpose, a centre-periphery model is used. The most important centre is the country capital, Bucharest, which controls most of the southern, south-eastern and central parts of Romania. Regional capitals are Iaşi, Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara, polarizing former independent or autonomous provinces. The peripheral regions usually lie at some distance of the above mentioned cities and coincide with former mining areas, struck by the economic recession of the last decade, or they may represent traditional rural areas. Their underdevelopment is due to the lack of a coherent strategy and the shortcut of the facilities once promised to foreign investors. Several examples may be given: Jiu Valley (Petroșani Depression) and Hunedoara County, Apuseni Mountains, most of the Moldavian Plateau, Transylvanian "Plain", parts of the Romanian Plain, Lipova Hills, parts of the Sub-Carpathians.

Romania lies in the South-Eastern part of Central Europe, within an area of contact between Western European, Eastern European and Balkan cultures. It covers an area of 238.391 km², that is 4,8% of Europe, and it has about 22.600.000 inhabitants. Romania's boundaries encompass the best developed sector of the Carpathians and the Lower Basin of the Danube, down to the Western coast of the Black Sea. The relief presents three distinct steps – the Carpathians and the Transylvanian Plateau in the centre, the Sub-Carpathians and other hills and plateaus surrounding them, while the plains form the outer ring. Since 1968, with small and insignificant changes, the territory of Romania is divided into 41 counties plus the Bucharest City Municipality. The country's capital, Bucharest, is, by far, the biggest city and has more than 2.000.000 inhabitants. The county ("județ") will be the basic unit of analysis in this paper, as it is the largest statistical unit. The term "region" has been long debated. However, the title of the paper refers to any area, of various extension, that has "peripheral" features, contrastive to "central" ones. Usually, the central regions are strongly linked to important urban centres, which exert a polarizing action. Instead, peripheral regions are mainly **isolated rural areas**, far from any important urban centre, or **former industrial regions**, which experienced a severe decline during the last decade. Relevant data are provided by the 1992 Census, the Report on the Human Development in Romania (1996) and the Green Chart - the Politics of Regional Development in Romania (1997).

Regional strategies in Romania

Before 1990. After the Second World War, the communist regime considered industry as the main factor of development. New factories were built all over the country, and the process was remarkably accelerated after 1968. Every urban centre in Romania had an industrial function and it was considered that this was the most important one.

The politics of territorial balance sustained an equal development of each county, without taking in consideration the economic results, so the investments were mostly directed towards the less developed, less industrialized counties, like Bistrița-Năsăud, Sălaj, Ialomița, Călărași, Vaslui, Mehedinți, Olt, Buzău, former rural, agrarian areas, which had no industrial tradition.

The reason for these measures was to use completely the labour force and to reduce regional disparities, which were significant at that time. However, economically speaking, the initiative was a failure and the developed regions had to pay the losses registered at these factories. They were artificially maintained during the communist period. The equalitarianist conception was identically implemented without great success. People living in the peripheral, poorer, regions, continued to migrate towards the more developed areas and did not want to change their profession, from peasant to labourer, in a “golden age” when food was the most important problem.

Since 1990. In December 1989, democracy was restored in Romania. Nevertheless, the transition period from a communist, centralised economy, to a free market economy, proved to be painful and endless. Each year the crisis is deeper and Romanians have no patience anymore. Many of them are now longing for Ceaușescu and the stable, calm living they had before.

The counties which experienced an artificial industrialisation suffered the most severe impact in recent years. Most of the factories implemented in the last decade of communist regime went bankrupt and have been closed and some of them sold for scrap iron. The unemployment rate increased from theoretically 0 to about 10% and it is still increasing, at the national level, but in some areas the rate exceeds 30%. The black market is more and more present in the everyday life and many Romanians are attracted by it. The extractive industry underwent a relevant decline, especially after 1995, and the ‘90s were dominated by miners’ strikes, the so-called “mineriade”, one of them devastating the capital.

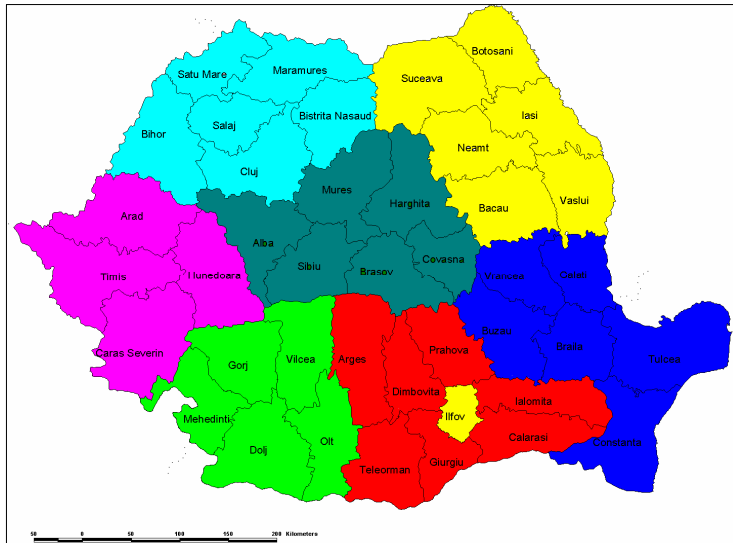


Figure 1. The development regions in Romania.

On the other hand, Romania received an important support from the EU and financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. All the governments, unresponsive of their political colour, had an external policy biased towards the EU and NATO and continually affirm their want for Romania to be a part of them. So, the harmonization with the European stipulations is a major objective and one issue is related to the regional strategies

of development. Another objective declared is the reduction of the regional disparities, and the means would be, for instance, restructuring the industry and stimulating other economic activities, such as commerce or tourism. As counties are too small to receive important international funds, eight **development regions** were approved by the Government, on the basis of the Green Chart (1997). They consist of four to seven counties (figure 1) and may include **areas of priority** (figure 2) where there is a complexity of problems to be solved and indeed there is a strong need for an intervention. The most frequently encountered problems are the demographical aging, the low level of instruction and education, the remote location and difficulties of transportation, the underdevelopment of the superstructure, industrial decline, low incomes of the population working in the agriculture, high emigration rates. Such areas are: the rural part of the Moldavian Plateau, the Romanian Plain, the Someș Plateau, the Transylvanian Plain; areas of industrial change and restructuring, like Hunedoara and Caraș-Severin

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counties; areas of soil degradation, for instance in the Curvature Sub-carpathians, in parts of Buzău and Vrancea counties (where the danger of earthquakes may be added), or areas of high remoteness like the Apuseni Mountains and the Danube Delta.

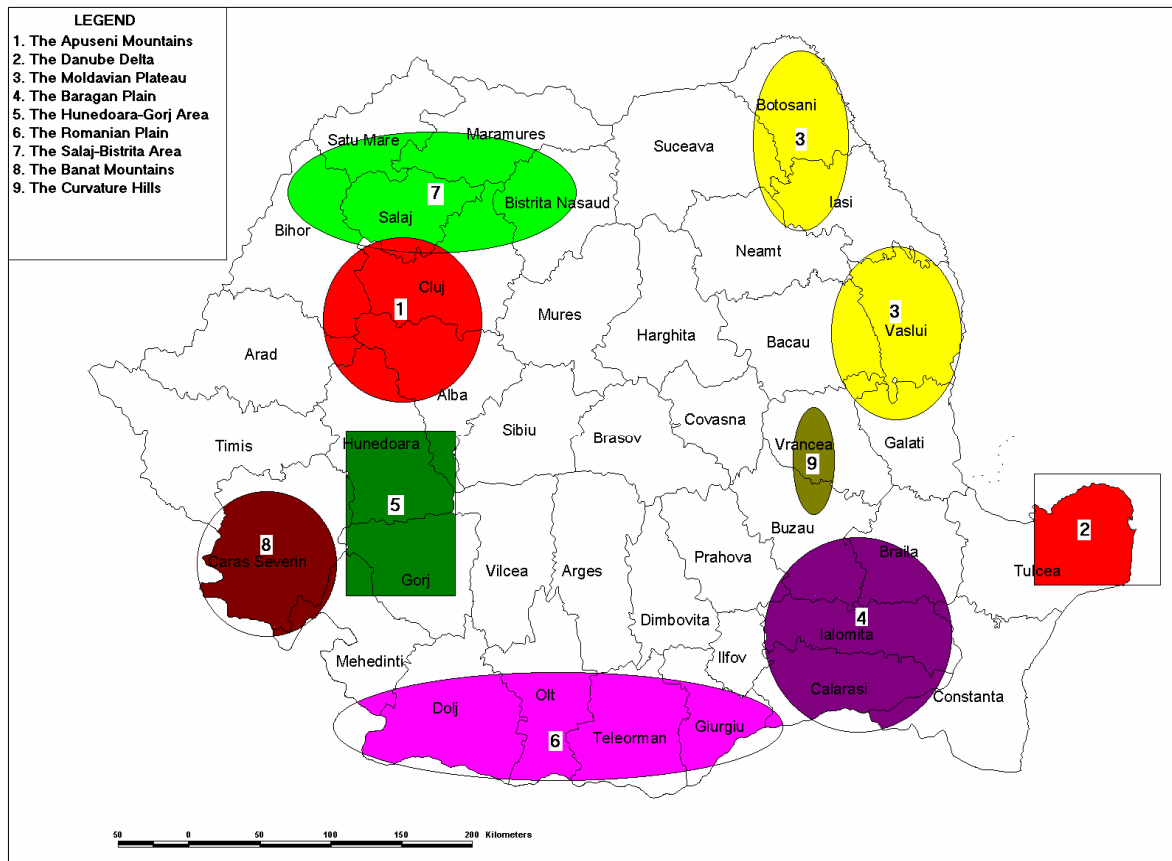


Figure 2. Some proposed areas of priority.

A geographical approach to the issue of Romania's regions

Geography is taught in Romania for more than a century at the universities. From the very beginning, the lectures about the geography of Romania described the “natural”, “homogenous” regions, like the Carpathians, the Sub-carpathians, the Transylvanian Plateau, the Romanian Plain and so on. Today, although much has been changed in what geography is concerned as a science, the lectures are, generally speaking, the same. It seems that physical factors, such as the relief, climate, vegetation or the soils, are of utmost importance in determining a “region”, seen as a natural unit of analysis, without a specified purpose.

Nevertheless, at present, more and more Romanian geographers are attracted by the functional regions, or the planning regions, regarded as operational concepts to be worked with in various aspects and by people from other branches, too. For instance, historically there are three main divisions of the Romanian territory: Transylvania, inside the Carpathian arch; Moldavia, east of the Carpathians; and Walachia, south of the Carpathians. In this case, the mountains form the limit of the region and they are seen as a discontinuity. The idea was also used in establishing the development regions – none of them comprehends counties on both sides of the Carpathians. Such a division appeals to the common sense, as most Romanians have a “regional awareness” corresponding to it. Of course, each historical region may be further divided; some smaller historical regions would be Banat (west of the Carpathians) and Dobrudja (between the Danube and the Black Sea). On the other hand, an eminent geographer (G. Posea, 1999) proposes three variants of regionalisation, each of them presenting at least one Trans-carpathian region (the “Curvature” region).

A quantitative analysis. In order to understand better the peripheral regions in Romania, a number of rates are used, basically from the “Report on the Human Development in Romania” (1996), where one may also find a composite rate, called the “Human Development Index” (HDI or IDU), based on the 1995 statistics and using the county as a spatial unit of analysis. Numbers may have changed in the last five years, but such cases will be pointed out.

The HDI consists of three main rates: life expectancy, educational level and GNP/capita. At the national level its value is 0,794, but varies from 0,887 (Bucharest) to 0,680 (Giurgiu county). The “Report...” divides the counties into those with a high human development (10 counties), those with an average human development (21 counties) and counties with a low human development (10 counties, figure 3). It is noticeable that the last three counties by HDI, Giurgiu, Călărași, and Ialomița, lie nearby the country’s capital, which has the highest HDI, while other two of the last ten, Teleorman and Olt, are also in the neighbourhood. In the first ten counties by HDI there is no Moldavian county, but six from Transylvania and other three of the Southern Sub-carpathians. However, the HDI of Hunedoara and Gorj counties does not correspond to the present reality, due to the economic recession of the mining activities and the metallurgic industry.

The top position of the Bucharest Municipality and Ilfov County is caused by its privileged economic position, as a capital, where the main commercial and industrial activities are concentrated. Its contribution is 13,4% of the national production, and it has well-trained personnel and a developed superstructure. The grouping of the countries by HDI partly corresponds to their classification by the contribution to the GNP/capita.

The “Report...” also supplies data on many other geographical and territorial facts, and some of them, considered to be the most significant for the study, are emphasized. These are: the infant mortality rate, the weight of the population working in the primary sector (mainly agriculture), the degree of educational coverage at all levels and the weight of the households connected to the water network. In each case, four categories of 10-11 counties have been segmented, representing a high, average-high, average-low and low development, regarding the phenomenon chosen to be represented.

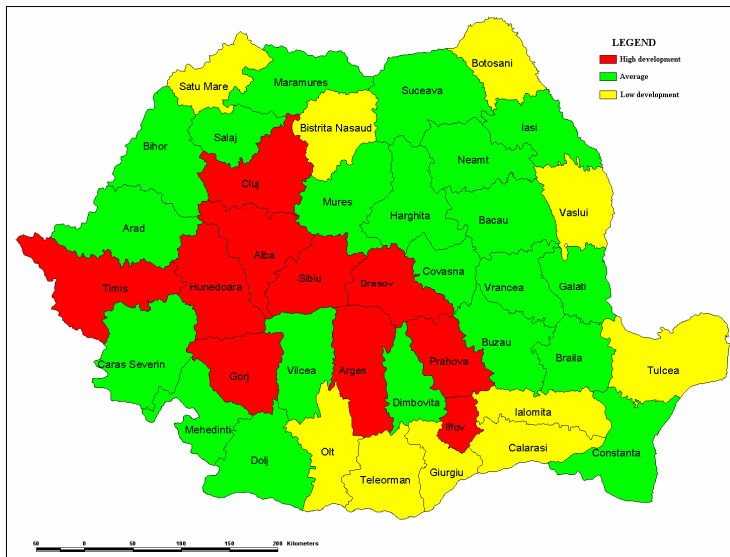


Figure 3. Classification of counties by HDI rare.

The infant mortality rate (figure 4) at the national level (23,9‰) is one of the highest on the continent and the increase manifested since 1990 describes perfectly the degradation of the sanitary system in Romania. Recent reforms in this area are slowly restoring the prestige of the Romanian medical staff. The lowest values of the rate, reaching a minimum of 14,8‰ in Arad county, are registered in the capital, several Transylvanian counties, of which Cluj and Mureș are renowned for their medical institutions and hospitals, and few Sub-carpathian counties, surprisingly Buzău among them. The highest value of the rate has been encountered in Ialomița (36,1‰), but almost similar values are met in other southern and south-eastern counties, and in the Eastern Moldavian counties (Botoșani, Iași, Galați, Vaslui). It is surprising the last but one position of Iași county, because Iași is an important medical centre for Moldavia. The only Transylvanian county among the last ten is Hunedoara, where the industrial environment may have affected the young mothers, who also suffered from the huge emigration rates of the medical staff when the mines began to close.

Agriculture and other primary activities (fishing, forestry, hunting) are now counting 37% of the active population. From the remaining 63%, about a half of the population works in

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agriculture as a supplementary venue. Considering these facts, it may be easily stated that Romania is mainly an agricultural country. More than that, it is dominated by rural-type activities, because 45% of the population lives in villages and another 15-20% in small rural-like towns.

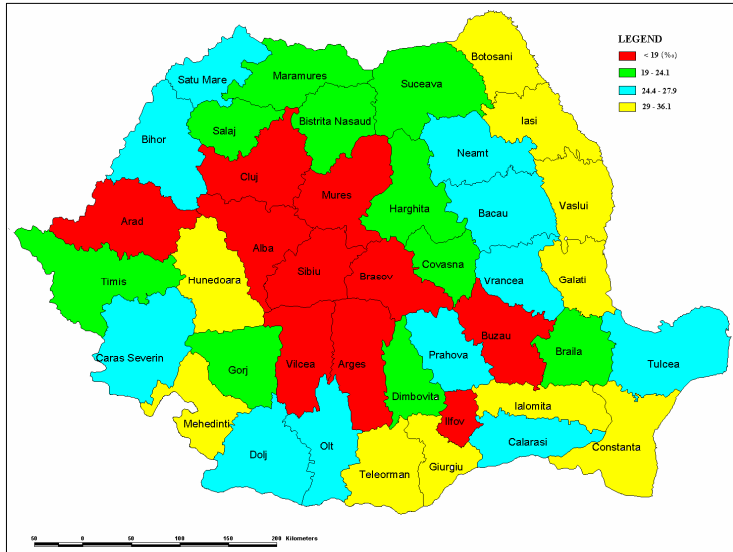


Figure 4. The infant mortality rate by counties.

This situation is very different from other European countries and it is a sign of economic backwardness. The weight of the active agricultural population is rapidly increasing, as it was only 28% (1992) and the main cause is the industrial fall after 1990. The professional reconversion programmes started only after 1995 and had few visible results, so the former working class became an active peasantry in most cases, a phenomenon which has been

proved by remigrations from industrial counties like Hunedoara and Gorj towards rural areas. Apart from Bucharest (5%), the lowest weight of active population in agriculture is found in Braşov county (20%). The other eight counties among the top ten (figure 5) consist of important Carpathian space, not fit for agriculture (Sibiu, Hunedoara, Cluj, Argeş, Prahova), they have a developed industrial sector (Timiş, Bacău) or develop mainly tertiary activities (Constanţa, on the shores of the Black Sea). The last ten counties have more than half of their population working in agriculture, reaching 62% in Giurgiu and Teleorman, near Bucharest. No Transylvanian county may be found among them and they all lie in the South-East or in Eastern Moldavia. Agriculture in Romania is still an inefficient activity and a source of poverty. Emigration rates of the agricultural counties are high, while the level of urbanisation – low. Except for Botoşani, no county of the last ten has a city of more than 100.000 inhabitants.

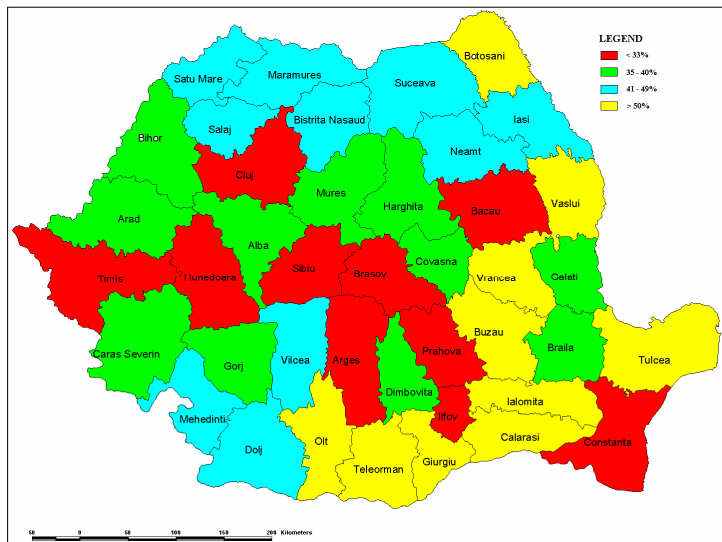


Figure 5. The weight of primary activities by counties.

Educational background

is important for any civilised person. Thus, the degree of educational coverage at all levels (primary, secondary and upper education - university) indicates the interest that people have in getting educated. The highest value has the capital, Bucharest (89,5%), and other traditional university centres contribute to the situation of their counties among the top ten (Cluj, Iaşi, Timiş, Dolj, figure 6). The other top counties lie in Southern

Transylvania (Braşov, Sibiu, Alba) and on the other slope of the Carpathians (Argeş, Vâlcea) where education is highly appreciated. The lowest levels are to be found in the Romanian Plain, reaching 56,7% in Giurgiu, because there are few towns, so there are less secondary or university centres, in the Curvature Sub-carpathians (Dâmboviţa, Vrancea), and in Eastern Moldavia (Botoşani, Vaslui). Excepting Dâmboviţa county, whose position is surprising, the other counties at the bottom of the list are representative for the failure of the educational

system among Romanian peasants, who consider (in some cases) that school plays no part in their future agricultural life. On the other hand, many of those who continued after the primary level migrated to the nearest important city (Bucharest, for instance) to find better opportunities. Thus, a second explanation may be found: these rural counties are mostly affected by demographic aging due to the emigration of the youth; the elder persons are generally speaking less educated, and they transmit this “cultural” feature to their offspring.

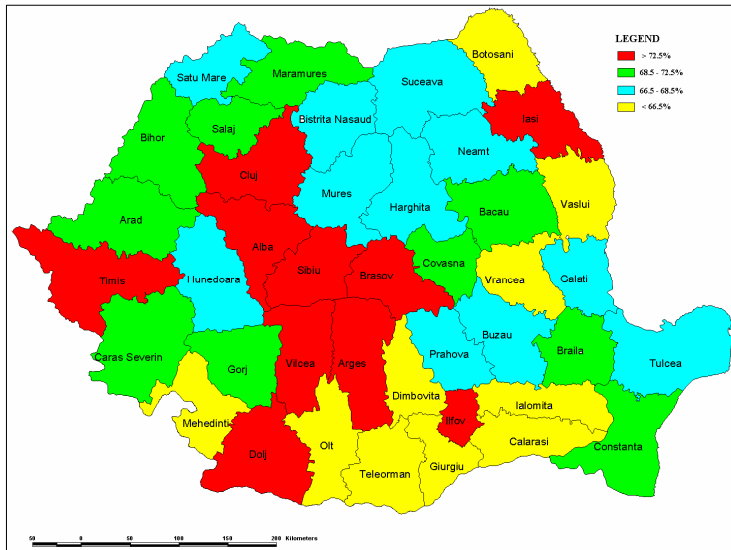


Figure 6. The educational coverage by counties.

Water should be a universal resource and everyone should have unlimited access to it. In Romania, only 54% of the households are linked to the water network, most of them in the urban centres. The rural space is thus controlled by the levels of the phreatic waters or rivers, and a prolonged drought may determine a shortcut of this fundamental resource. Apart from Bucharest and Ilfov county (87%), high numbers of households connected water systems are

found in the Banat region (Timiș, Arad, Caraș-Severin), the neighbouring Southern Transylvanian counties (Hunedoara, Sibiu, Brașov, Covasna) and in counties with a high level of urbanisation (Cluj, Constanța) (figure 7). On the other hand, the lowest percentage is in Giurgiu county (23%), and similar values are found in the vicinity of Bucharest (Dâmbovița, Ialomița, Călărași, Teleorman, Olt) or in Northern or Eastern Moldavia (Suceava, Botoșani, Vaslui). These figures are roughly speaking the same for a vast range of figures concerning the quality of living, measured at household level. The poorest regions are also less endowed with phones, TVs, bathrooms etc., leading to the conclusion that major efforts should concentrate towards them in order to raise their general level to an acceptable one.

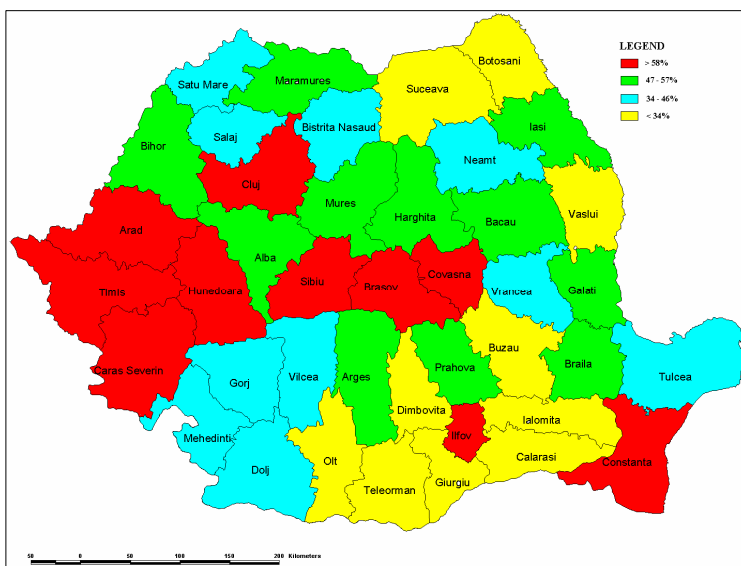


Figure 7. Households connected to water network by counties.

A Centre-Periphery Model Applied for Romania

A theoretical centre-periphery model (figure 8) has been presented a long time ago and its applications are large – from the local scale to the national level, and even at the European level. In the model, the centre represents the place where decisions are taken, where economic activities are concentrated and highly effective, the last technology is used and

experimented, the population is well-trained, well-educated and adaptable to new situations. In Romania, such a centre is the capital, Bucharest, which really dominates the entire country (fig.9), but a number of regional centres, the “centres of the periphery” or “cities of territorial balance” are also to be found. Some of them (Iași, Cluj, Timișoara) lie quite far from the capital and may exert a significant domination over large areas. They were traditional capitals of their

region, university centres, and their rank cannot be debated. A future cooperation with other cities of their area of attraction (mainly Arad for Timișoara, Târgu Mureș for Cluj-Napoca and Bacău for Iași) may increase their importance. Several cities of the same rank (Constanța, Galați, Craiova and Brașov) are situated closer to Bucharest and their evolution might be determined by events that affect the capital. They now have a function of “centres of the periphery of the centre” and have relevant industrial units, while Constanța is the largest Romanian port at the Black Sea shore. Other possible future regional centres are: Oradea, Satu Mare-Baia Mare, Suceava-Botoșani and Sibiu.

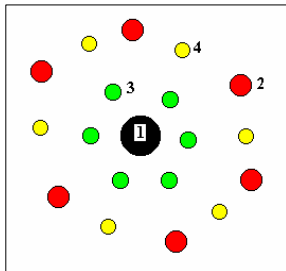


Figure 8. A Centre – Periphery Theoretical Model: 1. Centre; 2. Centre of the periphery; 3. Centre of the periphery of the centre; 4. Other regional centres.

Conclusions – Peripheral Regions of Romania

Reconsidering what has been mentioned above, a map very similar to figure 2 might be drawn, concerning the position of the peripheral regions of Romania. It is clearly demonstrated that the lowest level of development is registered in two major regions: the Romanian Plain, especially the area around Bucharest (“the periphery of the centre”), and in Eastern Moldavia, the area around the city of Iași. There is a general state of poverty, caused by reduced material resources, high levels of infant mortality, emigration rates and unemployment. One can also add: the reduced interest for education, the backwardness of the agricultural activities and precarious sanitary and hygienic levels.

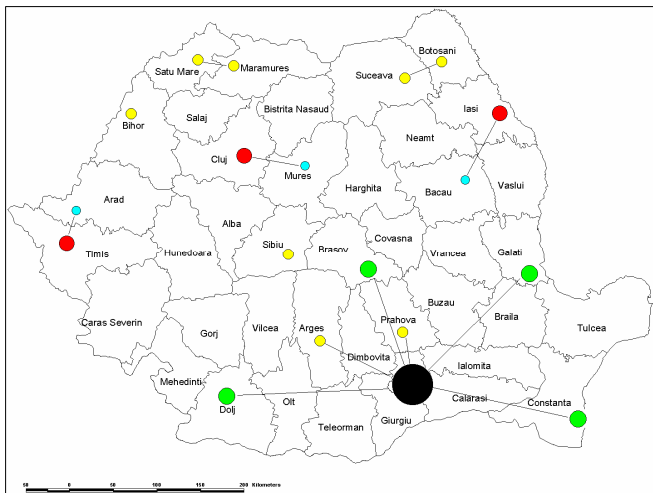


Figure 9. Main regional centres in Romania by rank.

A third area of poverty is in Northern Transylvania, corresponding mainly to the counties of Sălaj, Satu Mare and Bistrița-Năsăud. The level of development is higher in comparison with the two regions above-mentioned, but is extremely low reporting to other Transylvanian counties. To this region one may add the Baia Mare area and parts of the Maramureș county, where mining is the main activity.

Mountainous or hilly regions of high industrialisation are now peripheral mainly due to the closing of factories, which generated raised levels of the unemployment and migration rates. The most characteristic are in Hunedoara county (Jiu Valley, Hunedoara-Călan metallurgic area), Gorj (Motru-Rovinari Carboniferous basin) and Caraș-Severin (Reșița town and the surrounding Banat Mountains). Finally, the Apuseni Mountains and the Danube Delta are traditional rural regions, where the level of development is quite low because of the isolation. Investments in infrastructure are vital for these two regions.

Decision-makers should take into account various factors and this paper represents a step forward in the materialization of such regions that are most severely hit by crisis. It is only a minor sketch and further investigations are to be made.

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