



Differentiations in Spatial Polarisation Capacity of Rural Settlements from South-West Development Region

Amalia Vîrdol, Lucian Dobraca
*Geographical Institut of the Romanian Acadimy,
Bucharest, Romania*



Abstract

Diese Mitteilung setzt die vorherigen Forschungen zum Studium der dörflichen Zentralorten mit einem Fallstudium der Süd-West Entwicklungsregion fort und hebt jene Siedlungen dieser Region mit der besten ökonomischen Entwicklung, die Zentralfunktionen besitzen, hervor. Es ist die Rede von der Dörfer, die zur gute Verwertung der lokalen Unternehmungselegenheiten, der menschlichen Ressourcen und Dienstleistungen fähig sind. Unseres Erachtens kann diese Analyse uns bei der Detektierung der „städtischen Embryos“ helfen, die das Regionalstädtesystem in der Zukunft ergänzen werden. Der Beitrag analysiert die geographischen Differenzierungen der ökonomischen Dynamik im dörflichen Raum (ökonomische Betriebe, periodische Handelstätigkeiten und soziale Dienstleistungen) und schlägt eine Typologie dieser Zentralorten vor.

Introduction and Methodological Remarks

The present study tries to make known some partial results of our previous researches concerning the urban embryos to come belonging to the Romanian settlement network. So, this analysis represents only a further step in our geographical interest materialised in some several valuable scientific presentations (Urucu. 1985, Ianoş, 1994, Turcanasu, 1998, Dobraca, 1998).

The prime aim of our investigation was to single out those rural settlements with a centrality function (demographic size and services accounting for their polarising force and local economic potential), to highlight geographical differentiation due to economic and entrepreneurial initiative in the countryside in general and in these localities in particular, and last but not least to elaborate a typology of this category of settlements according to their economic situation.

South-West development region (Oltenia) is one of the eight development regions set up by EU and the Romanian Government under 1996 Phare Programme. It represents both a component part of the present framework for implementation of regional development policies, and a territorial statistical unit. All in all, one can speak about a deficient urban regional system, proved both by the urban population percentage comparatively with the national average (45,5 % against 54,9 %), by the average number of towns per 1 000 sqkm (which is below the national average), and especially by the unequal spatial distribution of the urban centres, which would request some new cities. The neighbourhood of Bulgarian and Yugoslavian borders could be a complementary factor for the socio-economic development of the villages on both sides and for a better spatial polarisation capacity. Another reason in choosing this region is that of the well-known traditions of the entrepreneurial dynamics of this region.

Villages with the greatest economic development prospects in recent years have been selected by their demographic size. The beginning was made with the large settlements having over 2 000 inhabitants.

VÎRDOL and DOBRACA

Next in line stood the settlements with over 3 000 inhabitants, a number approximating the average population of the last ten towns of the urban hierarchy (minus their component villages), and finally settlements with a population of over 5 000 (approximating the average of the last 20 towns' population)¹.

The criteria used to evidence the most viable rural settlements, fully deserving the central place attribute, follow two objectives:

- to highlight the local entrepreneurial initiative and acknowledge the local economic potential – number of SRL units (limited liability companies), organisation of markets and fairs or other periodical trading events, presence of banks;
- to assess the degree of social services – proportion of high-schools and of health-care personnel.

The first category mirrors the current economic processes that are dynamic, favours decentralised spontaneous development and makes use of local resources. The second category is largely the expression of the quality of life in the countryside.

Rural Settlements and Fairs – Territorial Differentiations

The current upsurge of commercial activities in the rural area is visible in the range of trading units, the higher number of employees, the big volume of agricultural products and other items, as well as greater demand.

Our analysis of the space distribution of rural settlements that hold daily markets, weekly and periodical fairs proceeds from the large villages, with over 2 000 inhabitants.

Out of the 113 territorial units listing in this category a number of 13 organise daily markets (cca 6 % of the total). Therefore these settlements are important because they ensure the everyday supply of staple foods for their own inhabitants and for people in the neighbourhood. It is a sign of their power of attraction and prospective promotion to township rank (fig. 1).

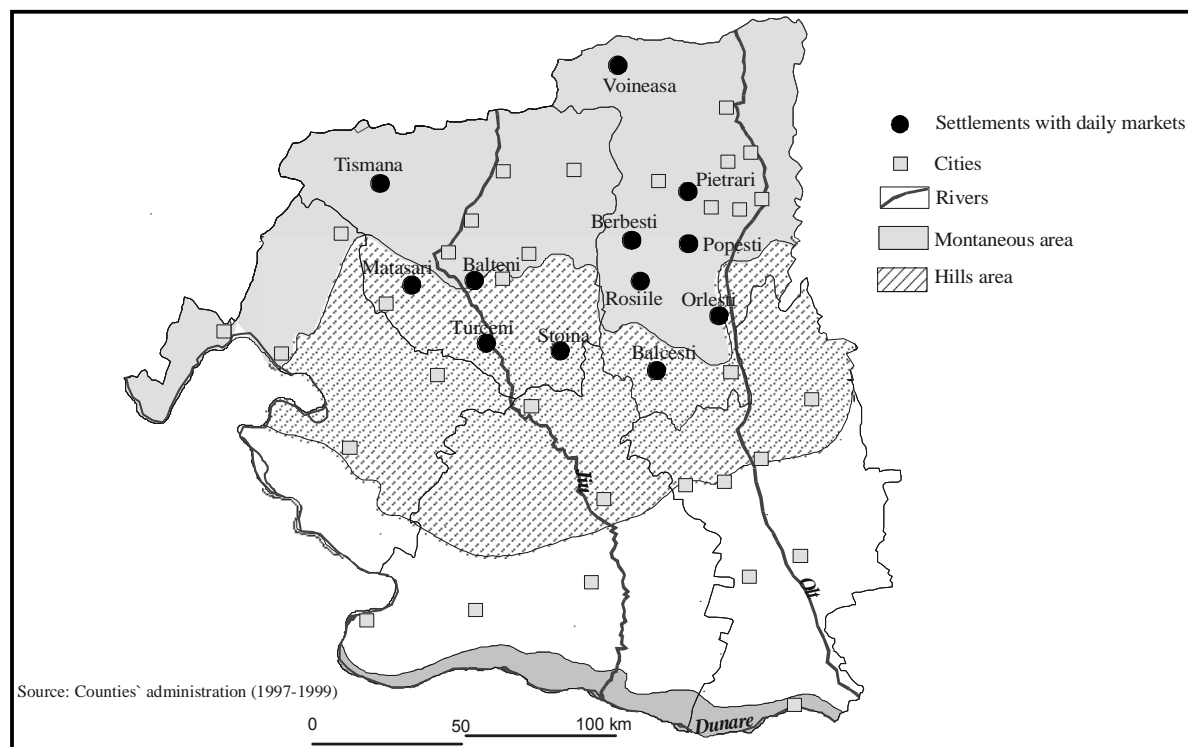


Figure 1. Rural settlements hosting daily markers.

¹ All selections are based strictly on the population number of the respective settlement (communal seat, or component villages, as the case might be).

Differentiations in Spatial Polarisation Capacity of Rural Settlements from South-West Development Region

All the villages that hold daily market-places are situated in the counties of Gorj and Vâlcea. The majority supply mining zones or spa-and-health resorts. A special situation has Bălcești Village lying at the crossroads of the influence (in theory at least) of two large cities (Craiova and Râmnicu Vâlcea). Its daily market supplies also the surrounding localities. Surprisingly is the absence of a daily market in the villages of Dolj, Olt and Mehedinți counties, compared to the multitude of their weekly market-places and fairs. The explanation would be the dominantly agrarian profile, geographical isolation near the state border and the intense polarisation exerted by Craiova city.

Daily and weekly markets are old forms of exchanging goods. Some settlements used to organise both daily markets and weekly fairs, thereby combining a semi-urban character with traditional practices. From the over 50 villages that have more than 2 000 inhabitants and hold weekly fairs and market-places, 60 % are situated in the rural areas at distances above 30 km from town (fig. 2).

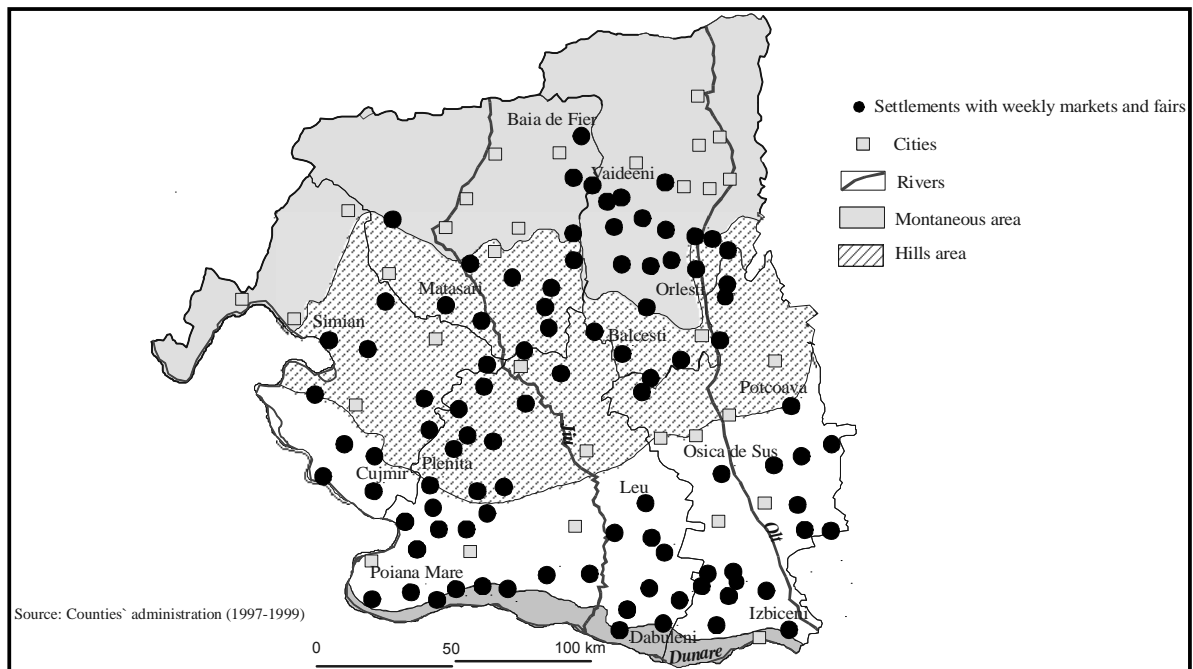


Figure 2. Rural settlements hosting weekly markets and fairs.

Topping the weekly fairs table are the counties of Dolj and Vâlcea, most of the fairs being placed alongside the state border and in-between the urban localities (Craiova-Râmnicu Vâlcea, Craiova-Caracal etc). The vast majority of villages holding weekly fairs lie at the crossroads of town influence areas, illustrating the inter-town competition for increased local space polarisation.

Entrepreneurial Dynamic in the Rural Area

Since a market economy has struck roots, the free economic initiative in the countryside has taken several forms: individual activities (registered physical persons), family associations and limited liability companies (SRL). Their emergence was favoured by a permissive legislation, setting loose criteria for the establishment of a company. Over 60 % of all SRLs in Romania are engaged in trading activities, fact that makes them dependent on potential outlets. Functioning freely the SRLs represent a very relevant element in assessing local entrepreneurial initiative and its main effect, that is, to sustain local development.

The present analysis of the economic dynamic focuses on two categories of units: SRLs and the banks. In our view, the former concentrate, individual entrepreneurial initiative, being the driving force behind local development. The latter are an important synthetic indicator of the

VÎRDOL and DOBRACA

local economic potential. Apparently, there are sufficient economic units in the area and a fairly high purchasing power to sustain banking activities. The average number of liability companies (SRL) in the 113 villages with over 2 000 inhabitants in the South-West development region is about 29. Since more than 100 such units operate at Turceni, Potcoava and Băbeni, these villages might, in theory, compete with the small towns for greater polarisation and enlarged territorial influence.

In terms of the concentration of settlements boasting numerous units, of distance from the large cities and of functional profile, the following characteristic situations occur (fig. 3).

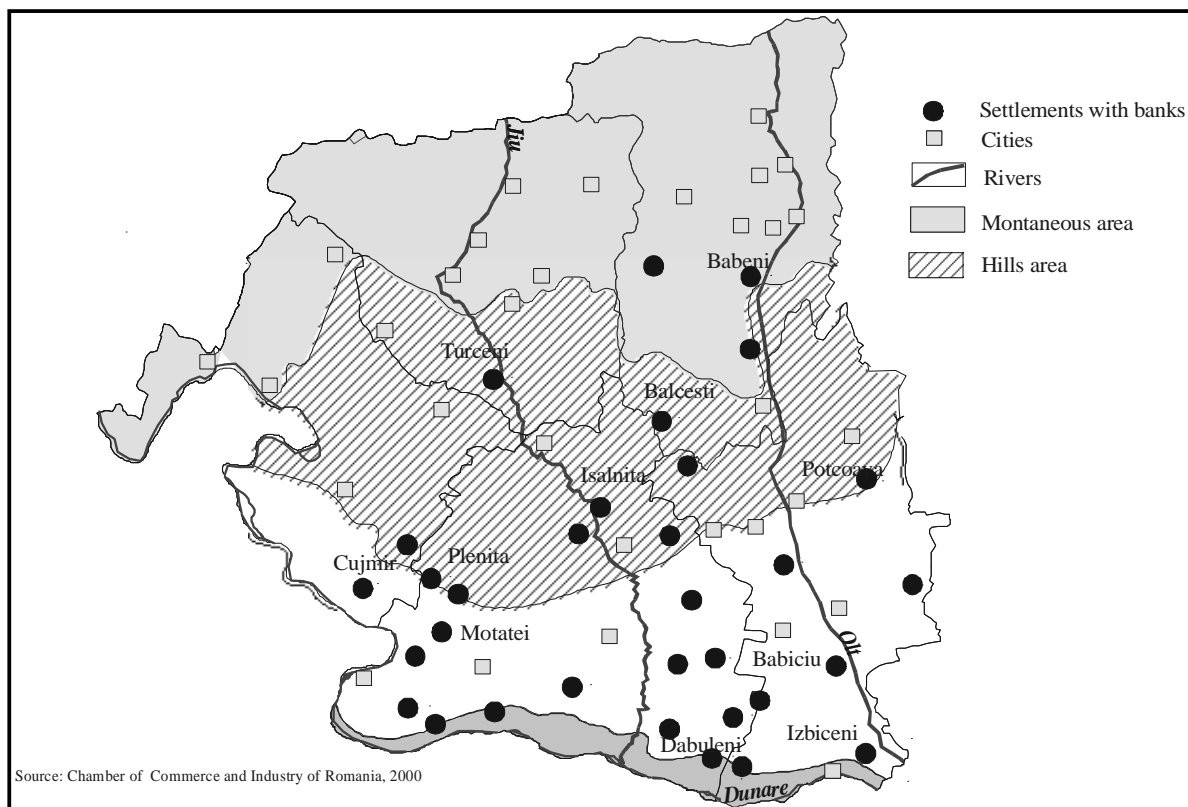


Figure 3. Banks in villages with over 2 000 inhabitants.

A city-to-countryside proximity diffusion of forms of economic initiative has materialised in the large number of SRLs set up in the villages adjoining big cities (Coșoveni and Ișalnița near Craiova) or located in industrial zones (mining areas: Gorj – Motru-Rovinari coal basin – Turceni and Mătăsari and oil drilling sites – Potcoava). Most of the urban centres with a dynamic economy are surrounded by villages that have recorded an inflow of commuters or pensioners from the town industry or in which manufactures from the urban parent industry, are operating. This category of villages have a large number of SRLs.

A best indicator of the presence of SRLs in the countryside are the hinterland villages, situated at great distances from the big cities, and which have a fairly high potential for increased local polarisation, e.g. Bălcești, Băbeni and Vaideeni (Vâlcea) and Dăbuleni and Poiana Mare (Dolj).

The greatest advantage have those settlements located in homogeneous natural geographical areas, and holding a central position in terms of the local settlement system, e.g. Băbeni in the Olteț Piedmont, or Cujmir in Blahnița Plain).

The presence of banks in the countryside means a recognition of the local economic and development potential. An exception make the small popular banks organised as cooperative-type associations with subsidiaries in some counties (Dolj, Vâlcea). Of all the villages with over 2 000 inhabitants, 30 have banking units on their territory, more than half operating in Dolj County alone (fig. 4). However, one should be very careful when commenting on their location, because they may sometimes correspond to the subsidiaries of cooperative associations or of

Differentiations in Spatial Polarisation Capacity of Rural Settlements from South-West Development Region

credit units with SRL status.

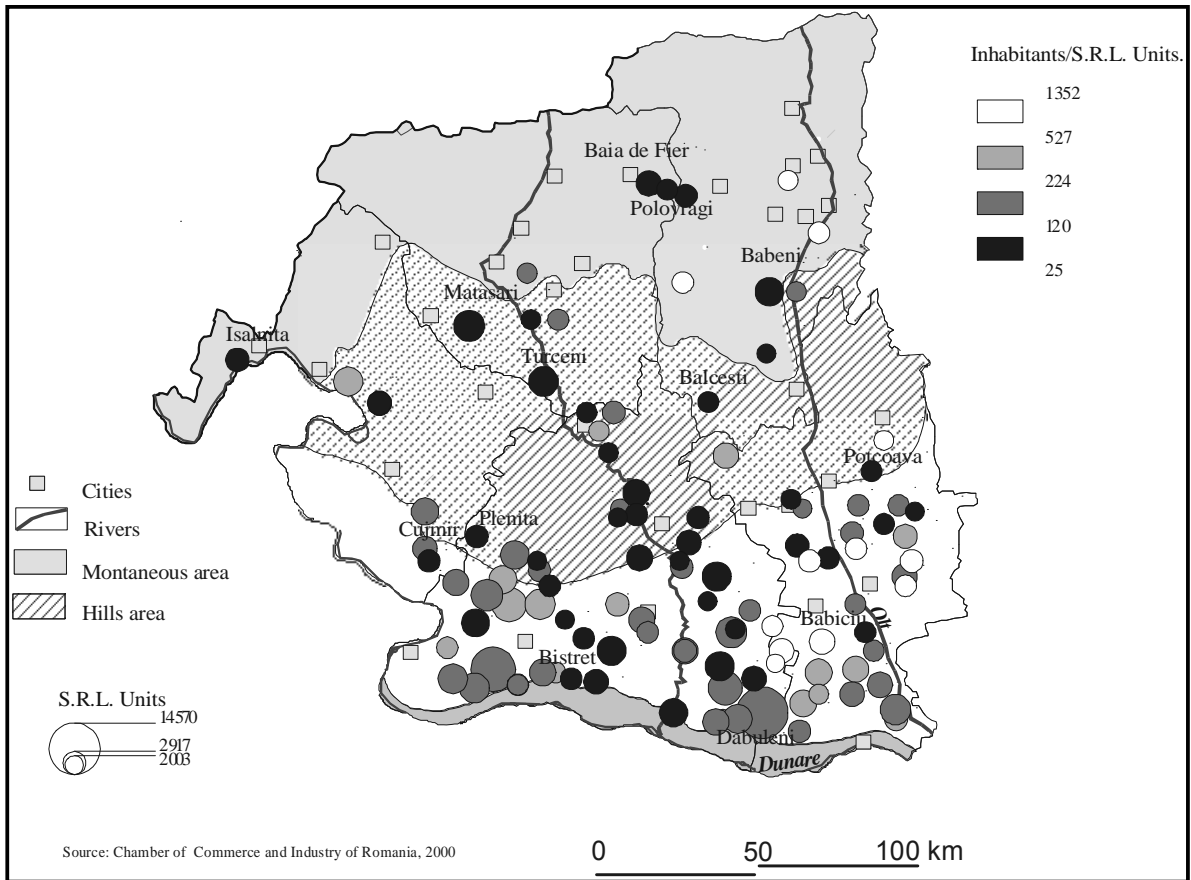


Figure 4. S.R.L. units in villages with over 2 000 inhabitants.

In general, there is a positive correlation between the number of inhabitants and the presence of banks, an indication that their target is in principal the population rather than the economic units.

Social Services in the Countryside – an Indicator of the Quality of Life and of Human Resources

Our analysis of social services in the village focused on two aspects: health-care and instruction.

Health-care – proportion of medical staff. The number of medical personnel relates directly to the total number of salaried people. The medical employees in absolute and relative figures is a relevant indicator in order to highlight the present situation of rural medical services, but also of the importance of the health assistance function in the localities which have been studied through our analysis. The highest values (over 10 %) are recorded by settlements having hospitals (general medicine) or specialist units (preventories, sanatoria) on their territory, the latter in particular securing a wider polarisation area (Caraula, Poiana Mare, Silistea, Castranova and Cujmir) (fig. 5).

Instruction – spatial distribution of high schools. The school infrastructure was developed mainly in the highly populated villages, in which birth rates kept increasing over the time. Because of their isolated geographical position, these settlements had to set up their own schools, while the villages neighbouring the towns were obliged by the past regime to use the town schools. This situation continuing after 1990, the number of school-goers has progressively declined, not least because transport costs kept increasing. Rural localities in which high-

VÎRDOL and DOBRACA

schools function represent 20 % of all the villages with over 2 000 inhabitants, a percentage in excess of the national average. Most of these settlements are found in Dolj County (40 %) where communes are the largest in our sample (fig. 6).

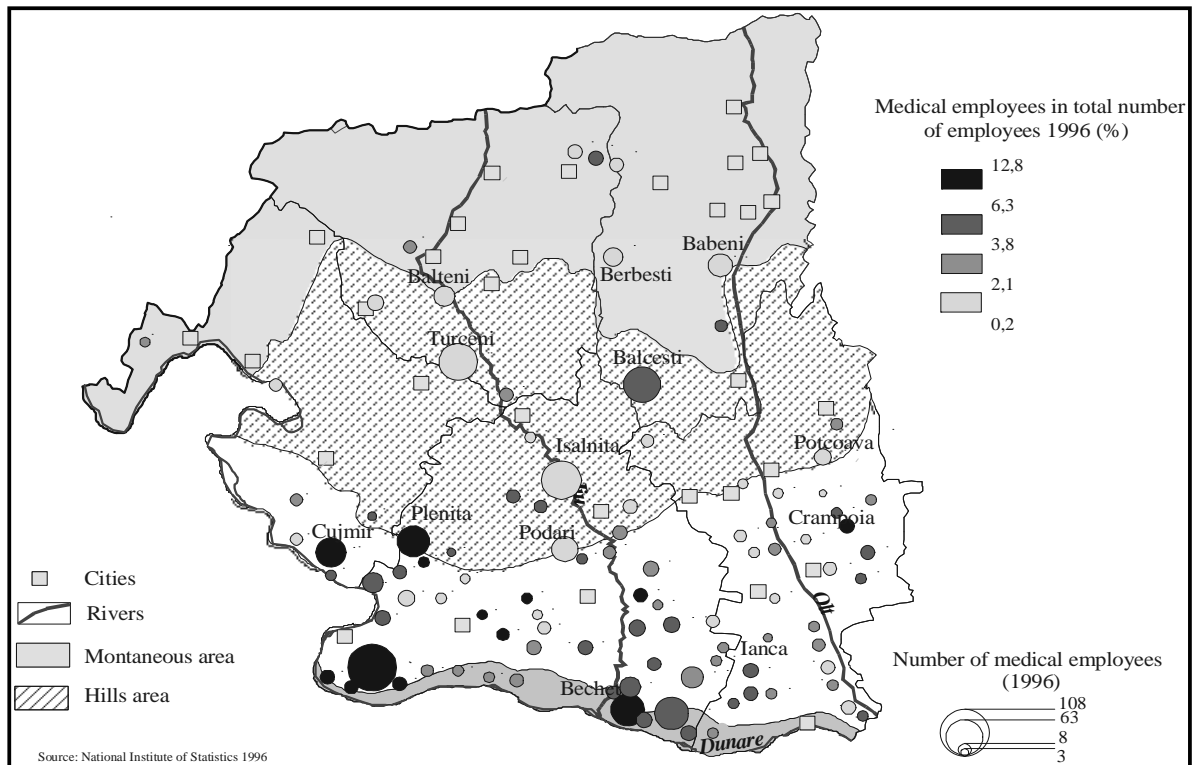


Figure 5. Medical services in villages with over 2 000 inhabitants.

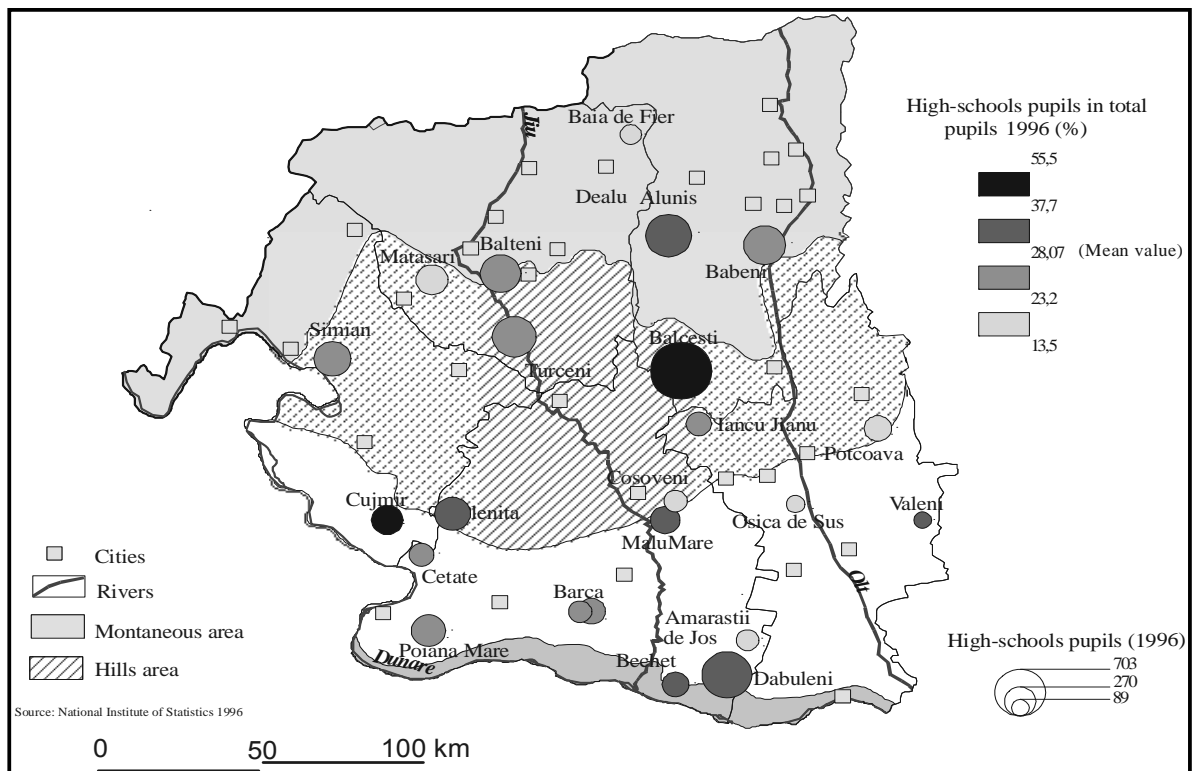


Figure 6. High-schools in villages with over 2 000 inhabitants.

Differentiations in Spatial Polarisation Capacity of Rural Settlements from South-West Development Region

The highest ratio of high-school students / total students have Bălcești (over 50 %), Cujmir, Dăbuleni, Plenița and Malu Mare.

Main Urban Embryos – a Synthesis of the Countryside Services Sector

A synthesis of recent economic developments in the rural settlements playing a centrality role proceeds from the selection and grouping of villages where recent entrepreneurial initiative and social local services are good. While the conclusions regarding each activity reflect its potential and favourability areas, a synthetic view enables the assessment of the village function within the settlement system. The services provided by some settlements are very close to the urban standards. Being able to discharge urban functions, they are best qualifying for a rank in the town hierarchy.

We have selected the top values of each indicator (above the average value + standard deviation sum), or an activity or service, as the case might be, and grouped together the settlements recording the greatest number of top values. In terms of the degree of services provided according to the above procedure, the following categories of villages have been outlined (fig. 7).

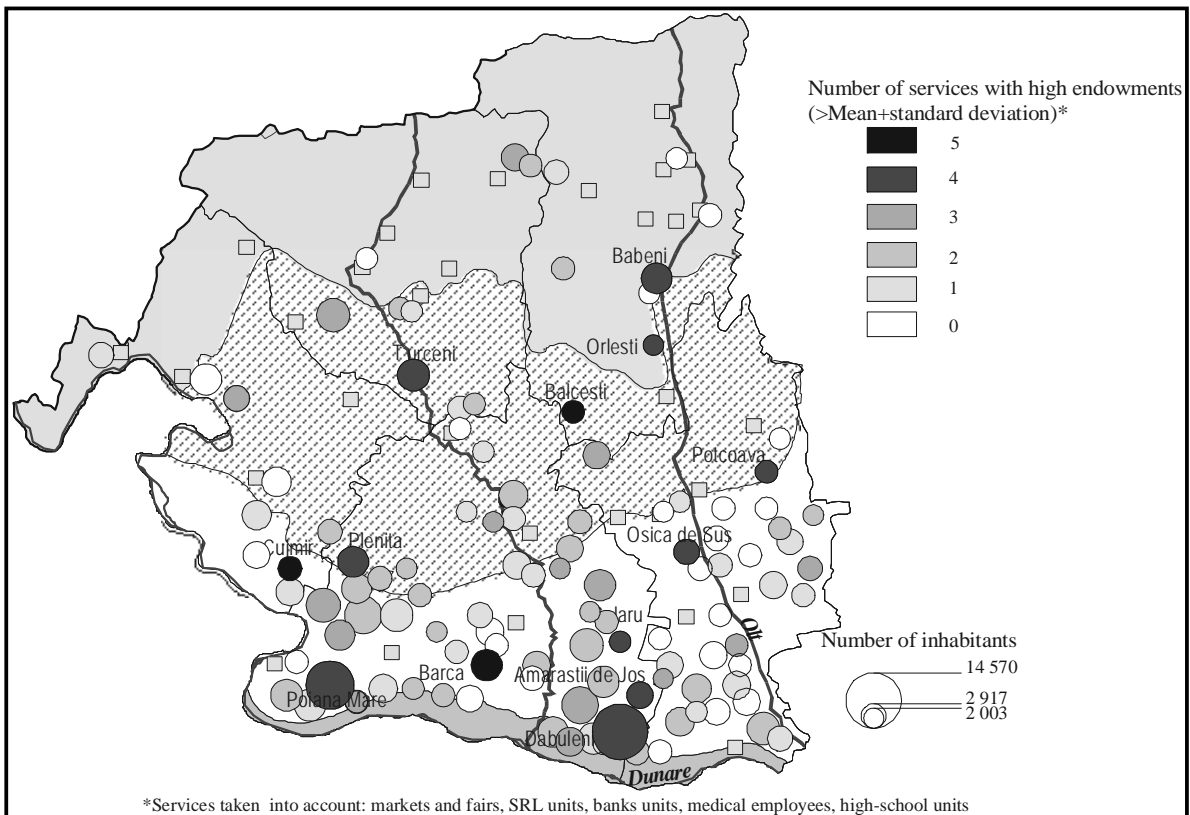


Figure 7. Services in villages with over 2 000 inhabitants.

Rural settlements with urban-type tertiary amenities, and a very high score at all our indicators (5). It is the case of Bălcești, Cujmir and Bârca. The first two have the advantage of a better geographical position, at over 30 km from the nearest town.

Rural settlements with superior tertiary amenities are 10. These settlements have a high score at minimum four of the indicators used, with values above the established threshold. There are relatively few differences versus the previous category, due mainly to mediocre medical amenities (Turcenti, Poicoava, Poiana Mare), the only distinction being the rather small number of SRLs compared to their population.

Rural settlements with mediocre tertiary amenities had to meet at least three criteria with

VÎRDOL and DOBRACA

a high value score. The 15 villages in this category have a mediocre level of amenities, often imbalanced in structure, tipping either towards commercial services (Breasta, Leu, Malu Mare, Baia de Fier and Mătășari) or social services (Sadova, Piscu Mare, Maglavit and Cetate).

Rural settlements with deficient tertiary amenities, have a high score at two indicators only. This category includes 54 settlements, most of them boasting either good medical services, or a remarkable entrepreneurial activity. One settlement alone – Castranova, has a high score at both.

Rural settlements with a critical situation in the services sector (over 30), scoring low at our quantitative criteria, have no banks, high-schools, or weekly fairs on their territory. They are preferentially spread in isolated areas (Danube Defile, Olt Platform, mountain zone).

The rural settlements falling into the first two categories (13) stand the best chance to obtain a rank in the region's urban network, having a positive economic dynamic, and a services sector with a polarising capacity. They are rural settlements with true central place functions, or, in other words, "urban embryos" of the on going urbanisation process (fig. 8).

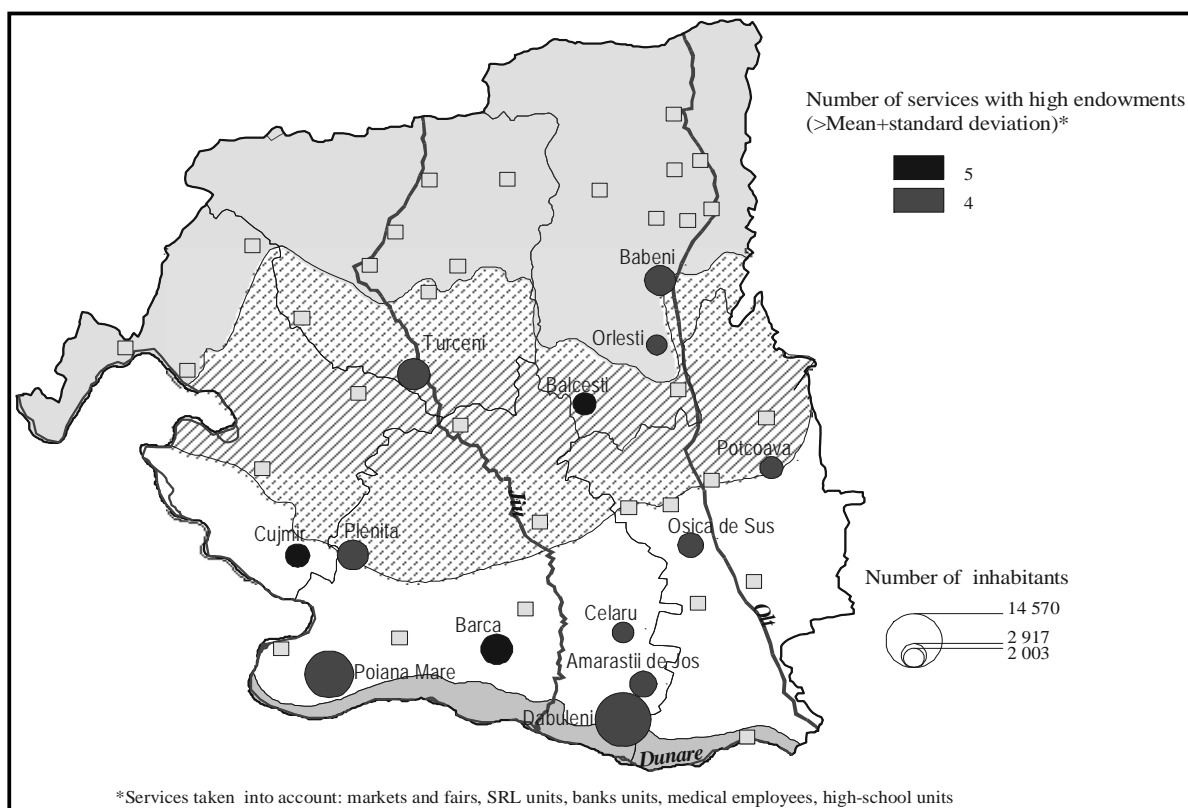


Figure 8. Rural settlements providing optim services ("urban embryos").

References

- Dobraca, L.** (1998), *Localitățile rurale cu funcție de târg – considerații geografice*, Comunicări de geografie, Vol. II, p. 172-177, București.
- Ianoș, I.** (1990), *Satele foarte mari din România. Repere geografice*, Terra, XXI (XLI), 1-4, p. 32-37, București.
- Ianoș, I.** (1994), *On the "central place" functions of rural settlements in Romania*, RRG, t. 38, p. 49-57, București.
- Urucu, Veselina,** (1985), *Centres ruraux de polarisation locale en Oltenie*, RRGGG, Geographie, t. 29, p. 89-92, București.
- *** **Camera de Comerț și Industrie a României – Registrul comerțului** (2000), *Evidența societăților comerciale* (www.rolcq.ccir.ro), București.