

# SMALL TOWNS AND INTERCOMMUNAL CONSTRUCTION. CASE STUDY: BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA\*

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## Abstract

The present study intends to highlight the way in which the small towns in Bihor County, Romania are trying to find again their place and part in the upsetting territorial construction, through various mutations of their functions, after the fall of the communist regime. The setup of the Territorial Planning Units (TPUs) in the effort to optimize the territorial development through construction of structures of intercommunal cooperation, turned some small towns in Bihor County into poles of local development. The question that this study intends to answer is: Are these towns capable to assume this role, considering the relict structures inherited from the communist past? In order to answer it, we considered the development potential of the small towns as a tool of assessment and validation of the viability of the poles imposed by the intercommunal construction. Thus, we carried out the comparison between the real development poles, highlighted by the analysis of potential, and non-viable development poles, imposed by the intercommunal construction, thus resulting in a typology. The suggested typology identifies three types of development poles: viable, vulnerable and non-viable. Applied to other counties as well, this typology can become a tool of assessment of the functionality of the intercommunal construction.

**Keywords:** Romania, development potential, small towns, poles of development, urban area.

## **1. Introduction**

The urban sector in Romania and mainly the small towns inherited a history tributary to the communist regime whose creation they are in fact. The fall of the communist regime in 1989 and the rigors of the adjustment to the market economy generated other mutations in the Romanian social-economic system at all levels. Particularly, the small towns, especially those developed exclusively on unsuccessful industrial activities, underwent a repositioning both in the national urban hierarchy and in the relations with the neighboring territory. After two decades, the reconversion and revitalization of these settlements continue to be a challenge for the policies of balanced territorial development, through the construction of the intercommunal structures. Such structures were set up in 2005 as Territorial Planning Units (TPUs) in order to optimize the territorial development. Under these circumstances, the small towns turned into poles of local development.

The question that the present study is intending to answer is whether the small towns as poles of development are able to assume this role, considering the relict structures inherited from the communist past. In order to answer this question, we started from the already acknowledged methodology to determine the development potential of a town. The results of the study are suggesting a tool of assessing the scientific validity of the intercommunal construction.

## **2. Theoretical support and methodology**

In the literature, there are several expressions of the idea that small towns may become “hubs” for the rural hinterland and “essential pillars of economic prosperity” (British Department of Environment Transport and the Regions, 2000). Errington and Courtney (2000) stated that small towns may become attractive, at the same time creating the opportunity to encourage and diversify the rural economy. For the towns which assume the role of development centers of rural areas, one must ask how powerful the links between them and their hinterland were, and how these links were affected by the recent socio-economic transformations. Also, one should ask if these relations developed uniformly at the level of different types of towns. The continuous globalization, the people’s increased mobility and the emergence of new communication and information technologies facilitate the “flow” of economic development benefits assumed by small towns towards the neighboring rural space. Indeed, if the links town-hinterland (Murdoch, 2000) would prove weak, the extension of economic activity in a town might lead to an increase of imports and commuter flows from other regions and towns, with relatively small benefits for the rural areas. This is why it is necessary to understand and assess the links between small towns and their surrounding areas before considering them as having a potential for becoming “growth poles” (Perroux, 1955) in the territorial development.

The development potential of a town is defining for its role in the neighboring territory. In order to identify it, we have used the methodology suggested by Ianoş (1987, 2000).

*“The ascertainment of the hierarchy structures of settlements is a pre-requirement of any analysis in the field of settlement systems, because, depending on the place they have in a ranking which takes into account the geographic location, human potential, economic potential, the political-administrative power and the social-cultural and urbanistic facilities, they build up their own systems or subsystems” (Ianoş and Humeau, 2000, p. 84).*

Ever since 1987, based on the aforementioned categories, Ianoş carried out the hierarchy of the Romanian towns on seven levels. In Bihor, a county located in the North-West part of the country, one could find: Salonta, Beiuş and Ştei, of rank V, Aleşd and Marghita, of rank VI, Vaşcău and Nucet, of rank VII (Ianoş, 1987, p. 109). In 2006, in the Spatial Plan of the North-West Region (Cocean, 2004, p. 66) in the regional hierarchy of the influence centers, Beiuş and Salonta rank VI (as towns with zonal influence on 8-16 communes), Aleşd, Marghita and Ştei, local influence I, and Nucet and Vaşcău, local influence II. Valea lui Mihai is placed in the category of agricultural towns with areas of influence under consolidation.

The recently produced mutations in the urban hierarchy of Bihor County triggered changes from the previous studies. The updated hierarchy allowed the ascertainment of the high, average or low development potential of the small towns of Bihor County, based on which they can or cannot assume a part in the territorial construction. Following the comparison between the real or imposed development poles by intercommunal construction, it resulted in a typology which can become a tool of territorial construction validation.

### **3. The communist heritage in the characteristics of small towns in Bihor County**

Starting with the setting up of the communist regime (1945-1989), the type of country evolution meant its rapid turn into a modern competitive economy. Under these circumstances, in the process of social-economic development there appeared profound and irreversible mutations. According to the principles of socialist construction, the development of the country meant extensive industrialization and forced urbanization policies, the heavy industry towns being considered engines of development and the representative type of town being the industrial town. The implementation of these policies triggered the explosive burst of the “socialist-type urban structures” (Săgeată, 2002, p. 61), small or medium towns, mostly monofunctional and artificially supported by massive investments in the detriment of the traditional urban centers, thus confusing the natural urban hierarchy and triggering territorial imbalances.

The most important part in the setting up of the urban network was played by the political factor which directed investments to certain rural settlements considered as having higher development opportunities, therefore helping their evolution up on the urban ranking scale. The involvement of the political factor due to the centralized development planning was crucial in the distribution of towns by size, the balanced territorial repartition and the setting up of an urban network according to the objectives

of the central power. One aim of the urban policy of that period was the fast development of small towns and the increase of their territorial importance (Ianoş, 1987).

In Bihor County, from 1945 to 1989 there were set up six new towns: Ştei, Nucet, Vaşcău in 1956, Marghita and Aleşd in 1968, and Valea lui Mihai in 1989. Their subsequent evolution followed the general economic trend and mainly the industrialization process, increasing between 1970s-1980s and stagnating between 1980s-1990s. After the fall of communism, the 1990s brought a sharp economic and socio-demographic decline, as a result of the slow process of communist-type industry restructuring and reconversion of the territories affected by deep imbalances. These imbalances are less visible in the case of Marghita and Aleşd. At present, most of these towns are going through a new restructuring process, aiming at diversifying their economic profile towards the tertiary sector, the most vulnerable being Ştei. The towns of Nucet, Vaşcău and Valea lui Mihai are the most disadvantaged in this regard. They form a particular category of settlements, assimilated by the urban sector only generally, but inferior when it comes to facilities or urban culture, thus being named socialist-type urban structures (Săgeată, 2002).

#### **4. Intercommunal construction in Bihor County**

Romania's territory comprises 12,956 rural localities (villages), 320 towns and 41 counties (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2010). The rural localities are grouped into 2,861 communes, each one of them comprising an average number of 5 villages under the same administration. The administrative power in Romania is divided between state public authorities (central) and authorities of the local public administration (towns, communes, counties). The central authorities are the government and ministries, and the local authorities are the county council, the local council, the mayor and the local public services. One should note that, although the regional level exists (set up by Law no. 315/2004 regarding the regional development in Romania), its activity is limited, the administrative attributions being divided between institutions from central level and local level (counties, towns, communes).

The territorial cooperation in Romania is more of an emergent process, the specific legislative framework being insufficient and it was set up relatively late. Thus, the territorial collectivities freely associated initially based on the right of the municipalities to free association, this being tangentially mentioned in the updated Government Decree no. 26/2000, regarding associations and foundations. Law no. 215/2001 of local public administration completed by Law no. 286/2006 for amending the local public administration Law no. 215/2001 improved the framework for the association between the local collectivities by introducing terms such as metropolitan area, urban agglomeration and association of intercommunal development. The association of intercommunal development is defined as “a structure of legal entity cooperation, private, set up according to law by the administrative-territorial units in order to jointly accomplish local or regional projects of development or to jointly deliver various public services”, and the metropolitan area as an “association of intercommunal development

based on the partnership between Romania's capital or the first-ranked municipalities and the administrative-territorial units in the near vicinity". The law mentions the urban agglomerations as well, as "associations of intercommunal development based on the partnership between municipalities, other than the first-ranked ones and towns, together with the localities situated in the area of influence".

Although the aforementioned laws allow the territorial collectivities to associate and set up the structures of cooperation, yet, presently, Romania does not have a law of intercommunal cooperation. The direct consequence is an unclear view of the structures of territorial cooperation, with multiple configurations (microregions, associations of intercommunal development, metropolitan areas, urban agglomerations), with multiple names (such as The Association of Cooperation and Development of the Microregion Tășnad, The Rural Association of Carei and Ierului Valley, Vlădeasa Huedin Microregion) and different goals from case to case (social-economic development, sustainable local development, the Local Agenda 21, water supply, sanitation, social public services etc.), this being a hindrance to understand this phenomenon and to draw other territorial collectivities towards the associative process. In Bihor County, the emergent territorial cooperation has triggered a number of 24 Associations of Intercommunal Development (Manualul Asociațiilor de Dezvoltare Intercomunitară din România, 2011), but there are only 2-3 communes for concrete projects firstly related to development of the infrastructure, the Oradea Metropolitan Area being the only valid actor of the territorial development created around the city of Oradea, which is the administrative capital of Bihor County.

The optimization of the territorial development in Romania has triggered at the same time a process of imposed territorial cooperation by the process of strategic development run at the level of regions of development. Thus, beside the aforementioned configurations of territorial cooperation, based on free association, and functioning according to a rising democracy, another configuration was shaped up through the plans of regional development. Limited by a methodology which implies the identification of the municipalities that individualize themselves by a joint cultural identity, relations of economic cooperation, the redevelopment around common poles (Planul de Dezvoltare al Județului Bihor 2007-2013), these associations named Territorial Planning Units (TPUs) intend to accomplish the goal named: The policentric spatial development and a new urban-rural relationship. Eleven TPUs were set up: seven of these have as poles of development towns of Beiuș, Ștei, Marghita, Aleșd, Salonta, Valea lui Mihai, Săcueni. Other three were set up around rural communes, which function as local centers (Tinca, Ceica and Salard). The Oradea Metropolitan Area is assimilated to this type of structure. Actually, since they were not set up based on free association, they appear only "on paper", without a real functionality.

The analysis of the ability of the seven small towns in Bihor county to play the part of a pole of development artificially imposed by the setting up of the TPUs represent the scientific foundation from which one should establish the viable poles of development.

## **5. The analysis of the development potential of the small towns in Bihor County**

The network of settlements in Bihor County is made up of 10 towns, out of which 4 are municipalities, and 90 are communes comprising 429 villages.

The small towns of Bihor County (Salonta, Marghita, Beiuș, Aleșd, Valea lui Mihai, Ștei, Săcueni, Nucet and Vașcău) are subordinated to the regional center with macroterritorial functions, Oradea. Lying almost at the basis of the national urban pyramid, with less than 20,000 inhabitants, these towns have a polarization area that extends only to the neighboring communes. The urban tradition is specific for only two towns: Beiuș and Salonta. The former is mentioned in the documents as having an urban status since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, while the latter since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The other small towns of Bihor County gained the urban status only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Nucet, Ștei and Vașcău (1956), Marghita (1967), Aleșd (1968), Valea lui Mihai (1989). In this century, only one town is added on the urban map of Bihor County: Săcueni, in 2004.

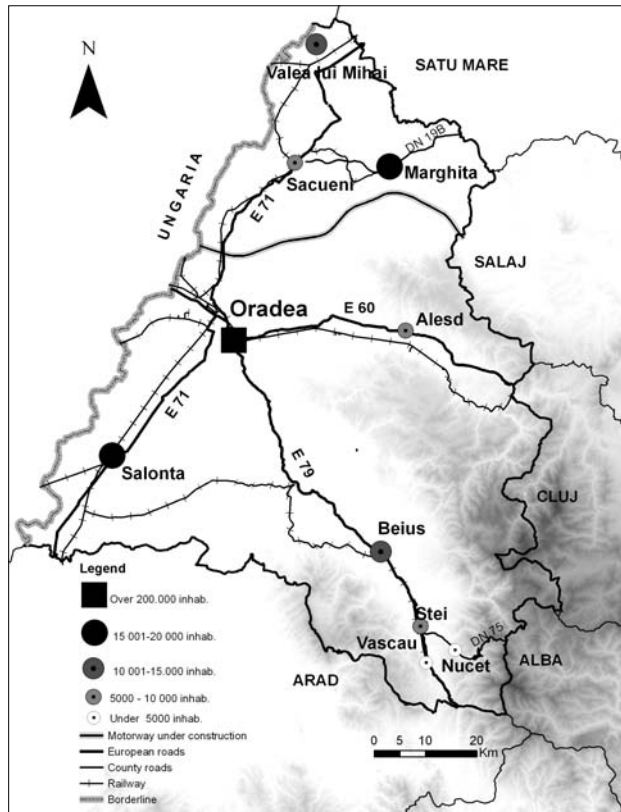
During the communist period, in order to report a higher urban population, rural settlements located more than 10 km away were artificially added to the town itself, using various terms such as: component villages or villages belonging to towns (Ianoș, 1994). As a consequence, the towns of Aleșd, Beiuș, Marghita, Nucet, Săcueni and Vașcău administratively include such villages, located at various distances from the town itself, which led to the establishment of large administrative areas, extended especially in the hilly and mountainous areas.

The geographical position of small towns is determinant for the position potential and has repercussions on their evolution due to three components: the position within major landform units, the access to existing raw materials and the distance to major communication lines.

Salonta, Valea lui Mihai and Săcueni are located in the plain area of the county, so the natural factor does not restrict the opportunity for these towns to extend. For the towns located at the contact of landform units (Aleșd, Beiuș, Marghita, Ștei and Vașcău), less opportunities exist for extending their built-up space. The most obvious restrictions are to be found at Nucet, due to the direct neighborhood with the mountain edge (Petrea, 1998).

Position also influences the functional economic profile of these towns, as a result of their access to the natural resources provided by the territory. In this respect, it must be mentioned that all small towns depend on regional raw materials, and not on local ones, that are insufficient for their urban development.

The towns of Aleșd, Beiuș, Salonta, Săcueni, Ștei, Vașcău and Valea lui Mihai are located along international important highways, European roads that facilitate the transport of people and merchandise, with direct implications in their economic development. In the case of Marghita and Nucet, the main roads are represented by national roads, linked to the European ones. The town of Marghita is favorably located at the shortest distance from the future motorway, which will connect City of Brașov, located in the center of the country, with the border with Hungary, passing through Bihor County. The towns of Valea lui Mihai, Săcueni and Salonta are also cross-border



**Figure 1:** The small towns of Bihor County

points with Hungary (Figure 1). The railway network provides an advantage for the towns of Aleşd, Salonta, Săcueni and Valea lui Mihai, which benefit from the presence of international or national railway lines. The towns of Beiuş, Marghita and Ştei are linked to the national railway network by means of secondary rail lines.

By taking into account all these factors, one can notice a difference between the small towns of Bihor County according to their position potential. Salonta is higher-ranked, followed by Aleşd, Valea lui Mihai and Săcueni. Other small towns are lower-ranked.

### *The demographic potential*

After 1990, the demographic component of small towns was more affected than other types of towns. In order to highlight the role of small towns of Bihor County in the intercommunal construction, we analyzed several features: the population number, the age structure and the active population.

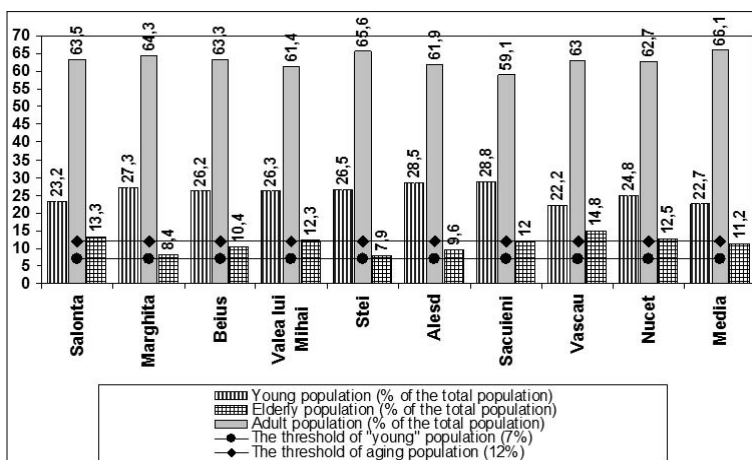
The demographic size allows the ranking of these towns according to their human potential into four different categories: above 15,000 inhabitants, between 10,001 and 15,000, between 5,000 and 10,000, and below 5,000 inhabitants. Thus, in 2002, the town of Salonta had the highest human potential (18,077 inhabitants), followed by Marghita with 15,346 inhabitants. The towns of Beiuş and Valea lui Mihai were

in the second category, with more than 10,000 inhabitants. Three towns were in the third category: Aleşd, Săcueni and Ştei, while the towns of Nucet and Vaşcău, with less than 5,000 inhabitants, lay at the bottom of the ranking.

The quality of the demographic potential, with direct implications in the social and economic development, is highlighted by its age structure and the weight of the active population out of the total population. The percentages of 7% and 12% of elderly population are considered thresholds for demographic rejuvenation or demographic aging, respectively (Vert, 2001) (Figure 2).

From this point of view, none of the small towns of Bihor County fits in the category of towns with a “young” population. The closest to this category are the towns of Ştei and Marghita. At the other end, the towns of Vaşcău and Salonta present an advanced process of demographic aging, followed by Nucet, Valea lui Mihai and Săcueni.

The young population of Bihor County has a similar weight to the one generally registered in Romania. The highest weights of the young population out of the total population are recorded in the towns of Aleşd, Săcueni and Marghita, while the lowest one is in Vaşcău (Figure 2). The high weight of the adult population (over 60%) has an important role in the relations with the neighboring territory. Thus, the towns of Aleşd, Marghita, Beiuş and Ştei are suppliers of labor force for many of the industrial units located in the neighboring villages. The highest weight of the active population (over 36%) is recorded in the towns of Aleşd, Beiuş, Marghita and Salonta, whereas the town of Nucet has the lowest one, 25.7%.



Source: Authors' calculations based on Bihor County Department of Statistics, 2005

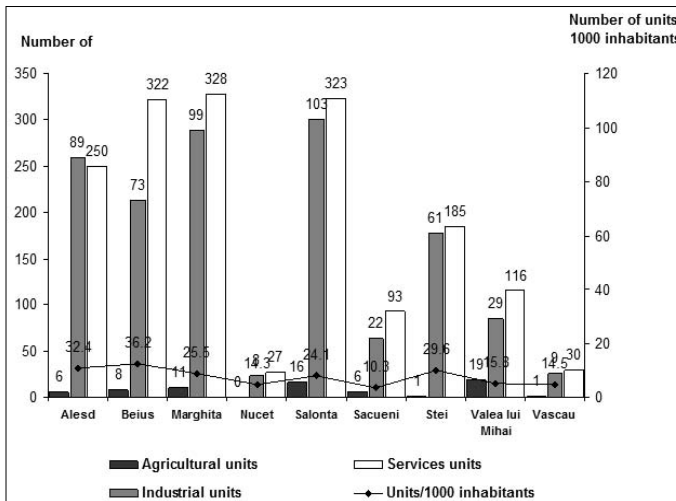
**Figure 2:** The degree of demographic aging in the small towns of Bihor County

Thus, from a demographic point of view, the most important part is played by the towns of Salonta and Marghita, followed by Aleşd and Beiuş, which benefit from a high weight of the active population and an important percentage of young population having an economic value for the future. The most disadvantaged are the towns of Nucet and Vaşcău.



The economic potential of the small towns of Bihor County and implicitly their economic role in the territory is highlighted by the functional profile, the number of existing economic units and the number of economic units to every 1,000 inhabitants. The economic profile of these towns suffered numerous changes compared to what they represented when they received the urban status. The change of the economical and political system, after the fall of communism, triggered a major change in role that these towns played in the territory. The economic function, predominantly industrial, suffered greatly, towns being compelled to readjust “under way”. The dependence on several large industrial units specific for the towns of Ștei, Nucet and Vașcău, and their difficult restructuring generated many economic and social problems. In the town of Ștei, the place of the formerly acknowledged branches (mining, machinery manufacturing) was taken by European Food Corporation. In this case, one notices a high dependence of the labor force on this unit, which fact may generate social and economic problems on the long run, given the possibility of an involution. In Salonta, Marghita, Beiuș and Aleșd, the urban tradition and the more complex functional profile, led to an easier adjustment to market economy, the disappeared economic units being replaced by units of light or food industry. The weight of the active economic units on activity sectors highlights the changes in the economical system of these towns after 1990. Thus, the weight of the industrial sector diminished in favor of the tertiary one (Figure 3). The commercial function of these towns is traditional for Aleșd, Beiuș and Salonta, as they all have “markets” sought over by the population of their area of influence.

Regarding the number of active economic units, the small towns of Bihor County have a total number of 2,293 units, respectively 15.9% of the total economic units in Bihor. The highest number of economic units (Figure 3) is to be found in Marghita, Salonta, Beiuș and Aleșd with more than 340 units, Nucet and Vașcău fewer than 50.



Source: Authors' calculations based on Bihor County Department of Statistics, 2005

**Figure 3:** The small towns of Bihor County: the economic units

The average number of economic units to 1,000 inhabitants (24), specific to small towns, is higher than the county average of 18 units/1,000 inhabitants. The highest number of economic units per 1,000 inhabitants is recorded in the towns of Beiuș and Aleșd, in the top of the ranking, having a value of more than 30 units, followed by Ștei, Salonta and Marghita (25-30). The lowest number is registered in the two towns of Nucet and Vașcău with only 14 units per 1,000 inhabitants.

As a result of the analysis, it comes out that Salonta, Marghita, Beiuș and Aleșd have real potential for development, Ștei, Săcuieni and Valea lui Mihai are in a process of economic restructuring, while Vașcău and Nucet are affected by economic decline.

### *The socio-cultural and urbanistic potential*

Unfortunately, the present socio-cultural and urbanistic infrastructure has not undergone major changes as opposed to the ones in 1987. The socio-cultural and urbanistic facilities, in accordance with the demographic dimension and the level of development highlight the positioning of Beiuș, Salonta, Marghita and Aleșd in front of other smaller towns. Nucet and Vașcău have a degraded and short infrastructure, incompatible with their urban status.

**Table 1:** The socio-cultural infrastructure of Bihor County small towns

Towns	High schools	Museums	Law Court	Hospital
Aleșd	1	-	1	1
Beiuș	3	1	1	1
Marghita	2	-	1	1
Nucet	-	-	-	1
Săcuieni	2	1	-	1
Salonta	2	1	1	1
Ștei	2	-	-	2
Valea lui Mihai	1	-	-	1
Vașcău	-	-	-	-
Total towns	13	3	4	9

Source: Bihor County Department of Statistics, 2005

Following the analysis on the development potential of the small towns of Bihor County a hierarchy has been established, ranking them into three categories: towns with high development potential, towns with average development potential, and towns with low development potential. The first category, comprising towns with an important development potential, includes Beiuș and Salonta, which benefit from the urban tradition, also reflected by a better socio-economic, urbanistic and built-up level of development. They are followed by Aleșd and Marghita. Ștei and Valea lui Mihai are in the second category. In the third category are Nucet, Săcuieni and Vașcău, with a low development potential, which are important only for their component villages.

## 6. Results and discussions

The aforementioned hierarchy highlighted the small towns as real poles of development. As opposed to this hierarchy, by the intercommunal construction in Bihor County, a series of small towns without perspective were imposed as poles of development of the TPUs.

By comparing the real poles of development, highlighted by the analysis, with the non-viable poles of development, imposed by the intercommunal construction, we suggest a typology that scientifically validates or not the TPUs. Its final goal is to highlight the disparity between the real and imposed poles of development, thus explaining the reason why some of the TPUs remained dysfunctional structures of territory.

Thus there have been identified the following types of poles of development:

- *The viable type* represented by the small towns with higher potential of development, real poles of local development, also asserted by the intercommunal construction: Beiuș, Salonta, Aleșd and Marghita;
- *The vulnerable type* represented by the small towns with average potential of development, which have difficulties in being a pole of development given by the intercommunal construction Ștei and Valea lui Mihai; and
- *The non-viable type* represented by the small towns with low potential of development, unable to assume the role of pole of development imposed by the intercommunal construction: Săcueni.

Applied to Bihor County, the typology highlights the political assertion of a much higher number of TPUs around towns that cannot assume their part as poles. Applied to other counties as well, the typology can become a tool of assessing the functionality of the intercommunal construction.

## 7. Conclusions

The results of the present study confirm the fact that the territorial role of small towns of Bihor County is conditioned by their evolving dynamics and by the manner of integration of external aggressions represented both by the planning policies of the communist period and later by the rigors of the market economy.

Some communist-type urban structures experience great difficulties in the process of urban reconversion and remodeling than the traditional towns. Although these structures are territorially expressed from a demographic, economic, socio-cultural and political-administrative point of view, it is very difficult for them to assume any role in the process of intercommunal construction as their power of attraction is limited and manifests itself sequentially.

The performed analysis highlights, especially in the case of Nucet and Vascău, a progressive decline which can ultimately lead to ruralization. When it comes to Ștei and Valea lui Mihai, the ability to become a development pole is limited due to the previously shown vulnerability. A particular situation is represented by the youngest town of Săcueni, imposed as a development pole, although its potential

is low. Other towns capable of fully assuming their role as local development poles given by the setting up of the TPUs are Salonta and Beiuș (traditional towns whose relationship with the adjacent territory is spontaneous and bilateral) and Marghita, respectively Aleșd (communist-type towns, which due to favorable factors, prove to be viable development poles).

In the actual configuration, the intercommunal construction in Bihor, with the 11 TPUs and some other non-viable development poles, is non-functional. To supply for its functional deficiencies and out of practical reasons, the territorial collectivities have freely set up other structures of co-operation such as the Intercommunal Development Associations, thus doubling the intercommunal construction acknowledged by a higher authority.

The implementation of some tools of scientific validation, such as the type shown in this study, could improve and guarantee the functionality of this territorial construction. The suggested model can also be applied to other counties facing similar issues.

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