

Socio-economic Mutations Occurred in the Evolution of Communist Urban Structures. Case Study: Ștei (Bihor County, Romania)¹

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Abstract: *The establishment of the communist regime (1945-1989) triggered the shaping of a new model of development of the country, by hastening the transformation and construction of a modern and competitive state, based on two major pillars represented by heavy industry and cities. The implementation in the territory of these policies led to the emergence of “socialist urban structures”, often with monofunctional profile and artificially sustained by massive investment at the expense of other traditional urban centers. The fall of the communist regime and the rigors of adapting to market economy have triggered other mutations in the Romanian socio-economic system at all scale levels. The present study highlights the successive shocks occurred in the natural evolution of Ștei (from village to town) in this socio-economic context. In order to highlight the mutations occurred in the studied area there were used a number of demographic and economic markers. A typical exponent of the forced industrialization policies, conditioned by the proximity to uranium resources, it became Dr. Petru Groza town “overnight”, with over 5.000 inhabitants. After the fall of communism followed the progressive decline of the town occurred due to the difficulties to adapt the heavy industry to the market economy, simultaneously with the diminishing of the uranium resources. The socio-economic situation of the last decades illustrates the identity crisis facing the town after the loss of its economic identity. The revitalization of the town of Ștei depends directly on the development policies and the urban regeneration process, based on its real potential.*

Keywords: post-communism, socio-economic mutations, urban decline, Ștei.

Cuvinte-cheie: postcomunism, mutații socio-economice, declin urban, Ștei.

Introduction

Ștei city is located in the South-East part of the Bihor County, surrounded by Bihorulul, Pădurea Craiului and Codru Moma mountains, at the confluence of the rivers Crișul Negru, Crișul Băița and

Sighiștel. The city is crossed by national road DN 76 Oradea–Deva and Oradea–Vașcău railway (Filimon, 2007). The distance from Ștei to the main city of the county – Oradea is 80 km. In the immediate vicinity of Ștei are three cities: Beiuș, Vașcău and Nucet (Figure 1).

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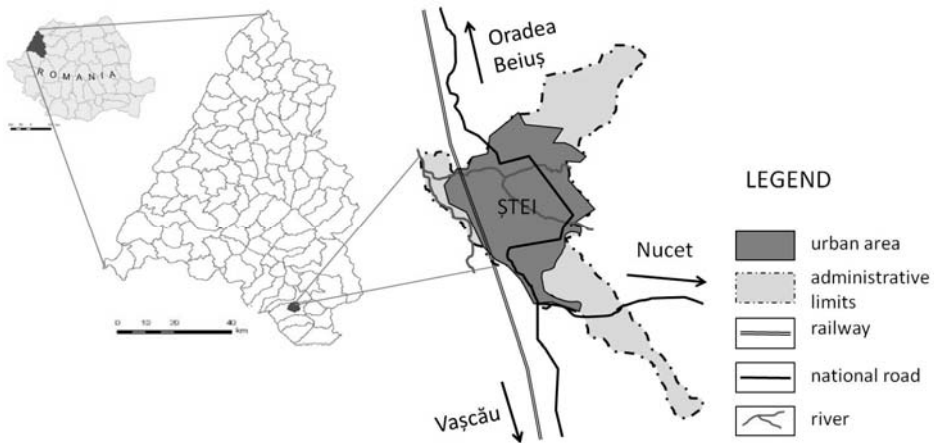


Figure 1: *Localization of Ştei city.*
Source: own representation.

Ştei village created and imposed by polarizing center in the south-east of Bihor County during the communist regime, plays a major role in the rural development of the surrounding area. Through the new status earned in the region, the communist urban structures² have changed the demographic and economic flows within Beiuş Land, previously oriented towards the traditional city Beiuş, towards the Ştei, Nucet and Vaşcău triad. Ştei has assumed the development coordination of polarized area, which, due to economic restructuring occurred in recent years, determined a decline of the city, propagated in the surrounding communes. The decline of Ştei city is analyzed both in terms of the decrease of population, as well as the changes occurred within demographic structures, with repercussions in the economic environment.

In the presented context, the study aims to focus on the issue of social and economic changes occurred in Ştei, highlighting the factors that contribute to the onset of these phenomena, and the limitations of these phenomena, captured in strategic planning documents that concern sustainable development of the city.

The work plan includes theoretical framing of the phenomenon specific of former socialist bloc countries, emphasizing the local specificity through socio-demographic and economic analysis, highlighting the communist heritage and post-communist transitional period effects.

Theoretical background

The post-communism period highlights general issues which primarily concern the economic capacity and performance of firms and markets in dealing with endogenous and exogenous pressures. The transition to open economies is characterized by more intense macro-economic vulnerabilities (Scharpf and Schmidt, 2000). The collapse of the central planned economy has coincided not only with the collapse of the industrial organization, in power for more than 40 years, but has also exposed these emerging markets to a more severe global competition to which they were, from structural reasons, not ready. The industrial production and employment rates dramatically decreased, while inflation and poverty rates systematically

increased. Unfortunately, with the collapse of the central planned economy, the set of existing institutional complementarities in force during the communism also collapsed. The process of capitalist conversion meant a drastic recalibration of the once established institutional structures and associated ties (Cerami, 2009). The companies in post-communist countries were robustly attacked and put under pressure by more competitive foreign firms and products, which found it easy to alter the false stability established by the communist planners. Only a few “communist” brands survived the shock of transition. The emergence of specific forms of clientage as an heritage of the communist past, in order to deal with the shortages caused by central planning, “second” and “informal” economies emerged almost everywhere in the region, affecting the local and regional development (Szélenyi, 1988; Hankiss, 1991; Szalai, 2005). New emerged towns, as Ștei, have developed a local network of parallel services to the model imposed by the central policy, due to close ties with the countryside to which the inhabitants belonged.

The post-communist transition includes changes in multiple layers of economy, institutional and legal structures, as well as politics and society, at large. The transition from a planned to a market economy could be described in terms of the major society changes concerning the social inclusion, the life chances and the life quality of the citizens. In terms of social inclusion, the post-communist period is characterized by a rise in poverty, income inequality, social fragmentation, as well as in material, cultural and social deprivation. Material, cultural and social deprivation, certainly not absent during the communist regime, have now drastically increased (Simai, 2006). In terms of life quality, the major political and economic changes have triggered an increase in social closure, the

deterioration of family relations and traditional family ties, as well as a reduction of the social networking capacity, especially for the poorest social strata, with the consequent diminution of the possibilities to find a job (Cerami, 2009).

The changes in the labour structure have primarily involved:

i) an increase in the number of the unemployed, due to the lay-off of workers in numerous state-owned enterprises;

ii) an increase in employment in the private sector (and in self-employment) due to the privatization of the central planned economy;

iii) a drastic decrease of people working in the agricultural and industrial sector, only in part covered by an increase in the number of those employed in the service sector;

iv) the formation of a new managerial elite (class), formed, however, in a large part, of previous administrators and technocrats (Szélenyi, 1988; Eyal et al., 1998);

v) the emergence of a new middle class, including self-employed people who work in their own enterprises, white-collar workers and intellectuals (Adamski et al., 2001; Machonin et al., 2001; Spéder et al., 2001; Tuček, 2001; György and Róbert, 2003);

vi) and the dissolution of the once crucial social class of the “skilled manual workers” (Slomczynski and Mach, 1997).

Societal transformations possess specific process structures with their own temporalities. The important elements are the dilemmas of simultaneity. These dilemmas refer to the complexity and the attempt of radical, holistic and fast social change the transformations aim at. This idea to change *all* levels and *all* relevant layers (from economy, legislation and policy, up to arts and science) at once with the „old“, i.e. given, individuals into a complete „new“, i.e. radically modernized, way must generate dilemmatic situations of action, with specific (unintended) consequences (Kollmorgen, 2010) (Figure 2).

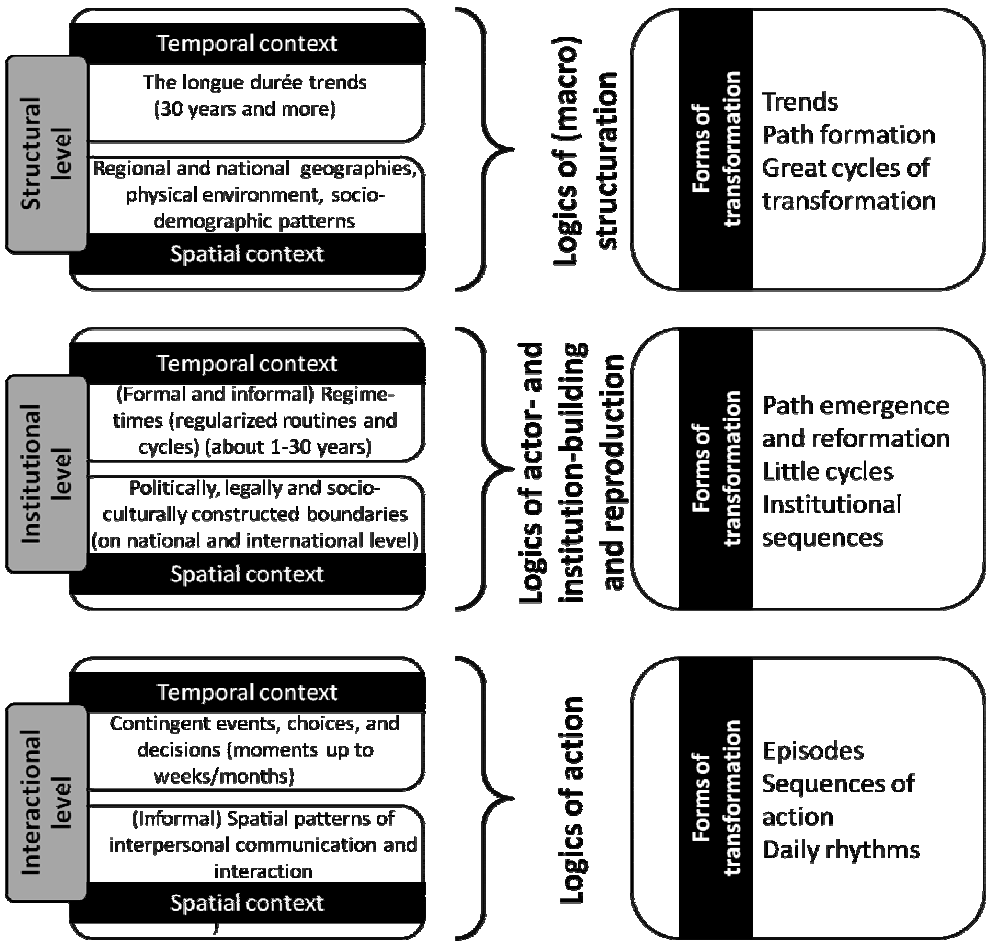


Figure 2: Levels, contexts, logics and forms of society transformation.

Source: own representation and overview partly based on a conceptual idea by Ekiert and Hanson, 2003.

Described processes led to an urban shrinkage which usually are characterized by:

1. out-migration, 2. the change in birth rate, 3. de-industrialisation and 4. suburbanization (Rink, 2011).

The development of functioning market economies posed a serious challenge for the post-communist communities with little or no experience within economy competitiveness, the EU has been instrumental in

fostering the transformation (Iankova, 2002; Bafoil, 2009). During the transition from centralized to market economy, Romania has experienced both growth and economic contraction, the labor market has experienced successive reforms and structural changes (Chelcea, 2008).

The conditionality of EU accession directly influenced the flow and content of domestic public policy shaping the internal market relations as well as the institutional

and legal structures of the candidate states (Cafaggi et al., 2010). The conditionality of accession had also brought changes into the social policies (Turkina and Surzhko-Harned, 2011). The inclusion of minorities, legal protection of human rights and environmental awareness were the main areas of focus (Cerami, 2005).

Communism's shadow

Communism diminished the importance of social origins in the status attainment process, by favoring people coming from farmers' or workers' roots, triggering migration from rural to urban area, being the specific process of the socialist regimes, one that characterized industrialization in general. The expansion of the industrial production is also paralleled by urbanization, as an important segment of the rural population relocates to towns, as future manpower employed by the developing industrial sector. The industrial enterprises and urban centres, through their accentuated need of manpower, attract rural population to towns, thus contributing to the development of urban settlements (Enyedi, 1996). The communist regime interpreted industrialization and urbanization in terms of the dominant ideology of modernization, seeking to create "the new socialist man", and attempting to fulfill quantitatively defined goals: transforming dominantly rural societies into urban ones. In this way, the massive relocation of rural population to towns had, primarily, a symbolic stake – the modernization (Geambașu, 2007). On the other hand, the official encouragement of rural-urban migration was also motivated by the very pragmatic goal of transforming the economy into an industrial one. The agricultural collectivization is the consequence of a political ideology which sought to create a "new society" by

destroying economic, social and cultural connections, considered too traditionalist (Serbescu, 2009). The collectivization interrupted private land relations by instituting agricultural associations as the primary form of farm production. The communist management aimed at creating an urbanized and highly industrialized society. In this system, the village was to become an annex of the town (a potential source of workers and raw materials). The communist regime succeeded in bringing deep changes and discontinuities in the urban and rural societies. Its tactics were varied: intense urbanization; annexation of villages to towns, or their compulsory transformation into "towns"; annulment of property rights and collectivization; forced changes to local economies and administrations; demolition of private houses and the construction of blocks of flats (followed by the forced relocation of the population to the flats); industrialization and the concentration of the manpower near industrial sites (Gheorghiu, 2008). All these actions had a huge impact on the rural environment and its inhabitants. In an unnatural, forced way, they changed rural ways of life and rural customs, and led to economic stagnation in most rural areas where people built few new buildings. The communist regime also brought deep alterations of the social structure and individual motivation, unsettling almost any system of values based on common sense. In many cases, changes at the individual level — as in each person's ways of living, thinking, and relating to others — had an even more negative effect on the traditional environment than a larger-scale economic or social change (Veres, 1999). The emphasis put on the industrial development created a growing need for manpower, and, in consequence, made the recruitment of rural origin workers necessary. Meanwhile, towns have another ideological significance, as well — they represent the centres of socialist power

and domination, the sites of the creation of the “proletariat”, the working class, and the rightful holders of power (Harloe, 1996). The industrialization meant the modernization of production and the improvement of life quality (Kemény, 1990). However, the socialist regime failed to address one particularly important issue: that of the socialization and integration of newcomers within the urban context. The geographical mobility from villages to towns has been considered both by the official political discourse and the migrants themselves as a form of upward social mobility. The rural immigrants were a special category of the “new socialist men” – one of the primordial modernizing projects of the socialist ideology. “The new socialist man” could only be created through the politics of homogenization and systematization, through the eradication of former social systems and structures, and particularly, through the dissolution of the barriers between different social categories specific to capitalist societies: urban and rural, male and female, worker and intelligentsia (Kligman, 2000).

Research design

Data used to highlight the socio-economic mutations occurred in the evolution of Ştei (a town known as Dr. Petru Groza³ – an exponent of the Romanian Communist Party) were collected from official censuses (INS, 1956-2011), town records (FL, 1994-2005) and extracted from urban and spatial planning documents (PUG Ştei, 2007 and SDDŞ, 2008). In this study was analyzed also data’s extracted from regional planning documents (PDJ Bihor, 2007), in order to emphasize more clearly the transformations of Ştei town. A round table was established during this research, in May 2012 on the topic of Urban

Regeneration of Ştei city with the participation of five local actors (officials from the Urban Planning Department, Economic Department and Social Development Department of the City Hall) and three researchers (two from the University of Oradea and one from University of Hannover). The working meeting highlighted the main issues to which local authorities must address, and some perspective actions toward increasing the quality of life. Partially, data’s from those meetings was used in order to explain the current status of the Ştei, causes of urban decline and socio-economic transformations. The demographic, economic data’s was processed and used in this paper as classic indicators for presenting the evolution of Ştei. Data’s from urban and spatial planning and from the working meeting offered a spatiotemporal perspective of the study, by finding the historical and local factors which contributes to the decadence of a town considered with potential.

Results and discussions

Between 1952 and 1956, the village of Ştei was transformed by the Russians into the town with over 5.000 inhabitants, from 500 inhabitants initially. This was largely a result of the discovery of uranium resources at Băița and the establishment of the Romanian – Soviet Company “Kwartit” for the extraction and exploitation of subsoil resources. The Russians’ appearance in 1952 triggered the construction of a town in Ştei village. In only four years in the town on the Crişul Negru river were built dozens of residential blocks and barracks, an administrative palace, five theaters, three dance floors, two schools (one in Romanian and one in Russian), clinics, a sports complex, restaurants and shops (Simedre, 2003).

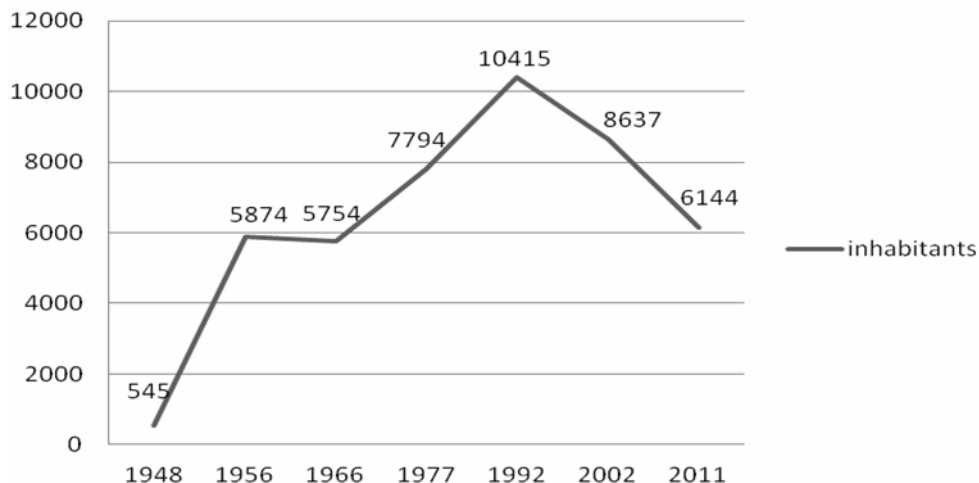


Figure 3: Demographic evolution of the town of Ștei.
Source: INS, 1948, 1956, 1966, 1977, 1992, 2002 and 2011.

The analysis of statistical data at locality level reveals a population growth registered in Ștei. Therefore, from the rural town with 545 people, in only six years, the new declared town in 1956 recorded a 978% population growth. The new city image was determined by the settlement of a new large number of inhabitants. This

implicitly can be observed in the absence of culture and urban tradition. Locals perceive until today Ștei as a city of newcomers *vinituri*. The building plans of Ștei city were made in Moscow, a city originally designed for Russian elites. For locals, the access on the Lenin Street was forbidden.



Figure 4: Two floors block built for the soviet elites – “Lenin Street” nowadays Unirii Street.
Credits photo: Valentin Nemeș.

Between 1956 and 1966, there had been registered a stagnation, due to the lack of central policy intervention, that only

happened during 1966-1977, when after an intense industrialization and urbanization process dictated from the central level, it

was recorded a 35% population growth. In the last decades of the communist era, the regime maintained the upward trend of demographic evolution, the maximum number (10,415 inhabitants) being recorded in 1992, which means a 34% increase of population, compared to 1977 as a reference year. Inevitably, the fall of the communist regime and the transition to market economy rigors have imposed an economic efficiency (extractive industry being the most affected), in this context, the town of Ştei lost 17% of the population until 2002, and 41% of the population until 2011 compared to 1992 (Filimon, 2007).

The post-1989 massive economic reorganization and industrial reform affected, primarily, people employed in the heavy industry, “new workers”, whose

entire urban existence was founded on their workplace, or the citizens of rural origin (Teşliuc and Pop, 1999). Mostly the economic units have narrowed their activities a lot, followed by severe social consequences. Therefore, the Ştei former mining company, from 5.500 employees in 1990 reduced to 1.900 employees in 1995, and only 450 employees in 2000. A consequence of the gradual depletion of the existing uranium deposits and reduced funds for geological prospecting, in 2007 started a process of mine closure (at the *Avram Iancu* mine being registered only 130 employees). Rural immigrants have proved to be one of the social categories most exposed to social risk and unemployment. Under these circumstances, many people have returned to the rural areas.

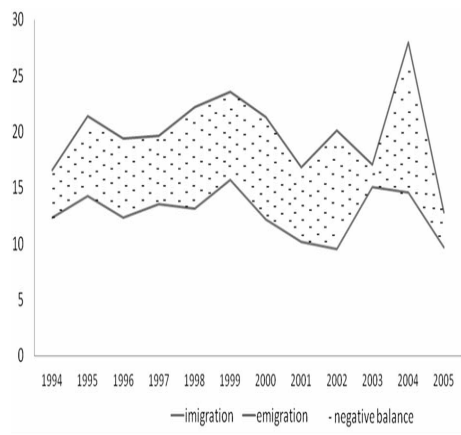
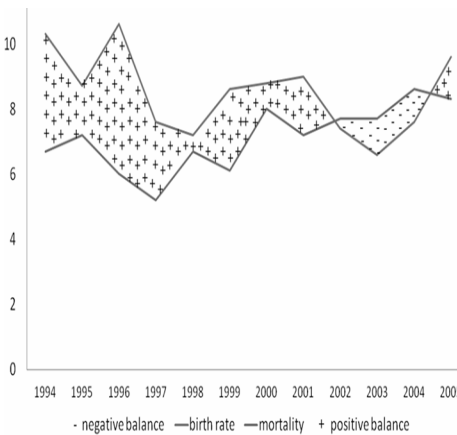


Figure 5: 5a Natural balance, 5b Migratory balance.
Data source: Town Records⁴ 1994-2005.

The analysis of the demographical evolution of Ştei through the indexes of birth, death, immigration and emigration shows a continuing population loss, largely due to a negative migration balance

throughout the post-communist period, and only in small part assisted by alternate positive – negative natural balance, which strengthens the regressive character of the population.

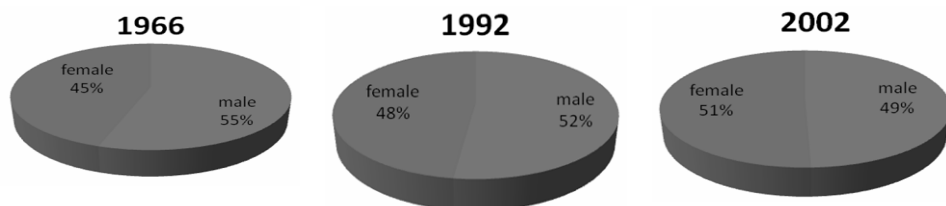


Figure 6: 6a Gender structure in Ștei – 1966, 6b Gender structure in Ștei – 1992 and 6c Gender structure in Ștei – 2002. Data source: INS, 1966, 1992 and 2002.

An obvious transition concerning the inhabitants of Ștei can be seen in the gender structure. Whereas in the communist period the male – female ratio is specific to a town developed around the mining industry, where the share of the male population is higher (55%), in the post-communist period, due to the industrial restructuring and tertialization trends, the male population share decreases to 49%. The postcommunist Ștei is structurally characterized by higher levels of female employment. Moreover, the new challenge that post-communist societies are called to face in this area of social protection seems to be concerned not with a farewell to maternalism (Brainerd, 2000), but rather with the establishment of new forms of the process of becoming reacquainted.

The professional structure of the population is one of the demographic variables, which suffered major changes in the effort to adapt to the socio-economic mutations occurred during post-communism. In a period of only 10 years between the two censuses – 1992 and 2002 – the ratios between the active and inactive population, the employed and unemployed population, as, in fact, the structure of employment and unemployed population have incurred significant changes.

Therefore, in Ștei the share of active population of the total number of population in 1992 was 48%, reaching the weight of 40% in 2002. However, the greatest change is recorded at the level of

inactive population, more specifically, at the level of retired people, where their share was 23% in 1992, doubling their weight in just 10 years, reaching 43%. Thus, the activity rate considered as the share of the active population from the total population analyzed in a regional context, highlights a strong regressive trend. This decline reflects the decrease of the weight of the working age population of the total population of Ștei, mainly due to its regressive dynamics caused by the aging population and migration of working age population.

In terms of employed population, the structure by sectors reveals the maintaining at a low share of the active population in the primary sector, below 2%, and a tertialization tendency to the detriment of the secondary sector. Thus, the share of employed population in the secondary economic sector decreased from 69%, in 1992 to 58%, in 2002. The population employed in the secondary sector had a regressive evolution, industry losing ground to the benefit of the tertiary sector activities, especially in services, following the mutations occurred in the post-communist period and restructuring of heavy industry. On the other hand, the share of tertiary population reached from 30%, in 1992 to 40%, in 2002. The positive changes are due primarily to the trade and construction boom being more representative than other service sectors such as banking, insurance etc. After the fall of communism, local economy diversified due

to the first private companies. Unfortunately, 82% of these have a commercial profile, only 15% provide services and 3% industrial activity (Filimon et al., 2011a).

The population structure by age groups reveals a decrease of the share of young people of the total population, from 36%, in 1992 to 27% in 2002, the adult population remained around 61%, respectively, 66% in 2002, and the share of elderly population doubled from the 3% in 1992 to 8% in 2002.

The transition to a market economy of the communist enterprises established in Ştei was particularly difficult (Filimon et al., 2011b), mainly because of their profile, then because of the loss of their market and the tight dependence on other associated units, whose imbalance caused chain reactions in the Romanian economy.

In conclusion, the adaptation of the heavy industry in Ştei to the rigors of the market economy was very slow, and the achievements, moderate. The monospecialization of this area in the south of Beiuş Land is a long-term challenge for a balanced territorial development process. As a result of the situation that had caused social problems primarily on the unemployment of population, in 1998 was created the Ştei-Nucet under-privileged area (by Government Emergency Regulation no. 24/1998, modified by Law no. 20/1999), including Ştei and Nucet town and Drăgăneşti commune, benefiting from a number of facilities in order to attract potential investors. During the transition to a market economy and with the support from the national level, the town of Ştei managed to recalibrate the problematic situation caused by the restructuring of the industry. In the research paper *Beiuş Land. Regional geography study* conducted by Luminița Filimon, Ştei is described as a part of an effervescent economic area.

Conclusions

The communist urban structures (Săgeată, 2002) are nothing else than the ambition of the communist regime resulting from the central planned economy policies built on representative pillars of those times, namely, urbanization and industrialization. When the two pillars had been created in an artificial way where Ştei was concerned, the transiency of these structures was strictly related to the higher level support. Of course, forced urbanization and industrialization policies had a major impact not only on the newly created communist structures, but also on the entire region, causing disruptions in the natural evolution of the region. The rural areas were profoundly affected, the changes occurred at the settlements level being, in many cases, irreversible. The end of the communist regime meant the abandonment of these new urban structures and, implicitly, of the emblematic industry. Therefore, the elements around which the urban structures had been built disappeared and, due to the mono-industrial character of those towns, favored the installation of severe crises in the area. A new process of socio-economic mutations took place, namely, the return to rural origins was a specific process in the early years of the post-communist period. In fact, those who came in Ştei from the surrounding villages, were, during the communist period, close and in touch with the native space, and once that it was possible they returned at their forefathers homes. The inclusion of the studied town in the so-called under-privileged areas triggered the appearance of some investors, and finally, the set-up of new large industrial platforms which generated new processes of gravitation from the surrounding countryside. Thus, the socio-economic risks were limited, improving the attractiveness of the town. The general national context triggered by

the orientation towards European Union integration and the accession in this structure in 2007 has led to new opportunities. On the one hand, the access to information and funds designed to improve the life quality, and on the other hand, the access to employment in western European countries profoundly changed the pre-integration situation, young and adult people leaving Ștei towards Oradea, and from there, to-

wards the more attractive western European countries. The difficult situation facing the community of Ștei from a socio-economic point of view, the adaptation to the rigors imposed by a competitive market economy impose sustained efforts by the local authorities and the necessity to adopt local strategies, corroborated with the policies elaborated at a superior hierarchical level.

Notes

- ¹ This contribution presents some results from the UEFISCDI research project TE_287, nr.75/2010.
- ² In this study, the urban structure is viewed as an abstract or generalized description of the distribution of socio-economic phenomena in urban geographic space (Capone and Nichols, 1976).
- ³ Dr. Petru Groza was the Prime Minister of the first Communist Party-dominated governments under Soviet occupation, during the early stages of the Communist regime in Romania.
- ⁴ Fișa localității, is a general data base at local level.

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