

A brief review of the perception of planning in Romania

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Abstract. This article aims to provide a brief historical overview of the political timeline of planning in Romania, including how it generally shifted public perception of planning in the country. The aim is to uncover the societal understanding of the role of planning by the Romanian public and see how historical events impacted planning through legislative or political events. The review is based mainly on key readings and work by Pascariu and Munteanu and Servillo, along with fieldwork that was undertaken by the author during his doctoral studies. The fieldwork consisted in interviews with planning professionals, planning officers, architects, urbanists and academics active in the city of Bucharest in the period between 2018-2023.

Key words: planning, politics, history, Romania

1. A Brief History of the Romanian Planning System Until '89¹

Romania's history of the Planning System can only be examined by analysing the foundation of the state, which is an amalgamation of four diverse regions: the Romanian kingdom, Transylvania, Basarabia, and Bucovina, as Pascariu² states. Each region brought administrative rules and organisational models to the newly established nation. In the pre-1918 era, Romania's regions had been subjected to the dominion of major powers. The Austrians controlled the west, the Ottomans the plains in the south, and the Russians the east and north³. It is challenging to analyse the different planning systems in the provinces before they were united. Still, different empires ruling other regions of present-day Romania left lasting marks on the evolution of settlements, with towns and villages taking on unique shapes and structures that are still recognisable despite efforts towards a homogenous development over the past century⁴.

The pre-20th century planning system can be split between the Austrian dominated, which was based on the feudal system regarding efficient land use⁵. Further, the Germanic influence can be noticed in the characteristic design of the Western-type cities that started industrialising in the 19th Century⁶. At the same time, the southern and eastern part of the country was dominated by the Ottomans and the Russians, who imposed a French influence when reconstructing important harbours around the Danube (Braila, Giurgiu) and planning the Northern part of Bucharest under Kiseleff's rule⁷.

During the 19th century, the development of the cadastre, regulations for the development of rural areas and the first topographic maps for towns and cities were among the first attempts to regulate urban planning and development, followed by public investment in

¹ The article is an excerpt of the authors PhD thesis presented in February.

² Pascariu 2012

³ Pascariu 2012

⁴ Pascariu 2012

⁵ Pascariu 2012

⁶ Puşcaşu 2009

⁷ Pascariu 2012

streets, boulevards, parks, water and sewage networks. After the unification of Moldova and Wallachia, several infrastructure projects were undertaken, mainly upgrading the port of Constanta and connecting it to Bucharest⁸.

The interwar period spanning 1919 to 1947, according to Pascariu, marked a time of immense socio-economic progress and spatial development. Urbanisation, industrialisation, and infrastructure projects became paramount, necessitating the establishment of a coherent spatial planning system. Most cities had an urban plan, including Bucharest's Directory Plan, which emerged between 1934 and 1939. The architects of the time were introducing Western-oriented plans and procedures that provided fresh perspectives on Romania's social and economic landscape. However, the era was characterised by incomplete legislation and poor administration quality⁹.

According to Pascariu, the communist era is characterised by three different stages¹⁰. In the first stage until the 1960s, the regime was focused on preparing the socialist transition through the reconstruction of the country after the Second World War and social, economic, and cultural changes. In the first two decades, regional and large-scale studies were developed. New urban plans were proposed "aiming to support the fast process of industrialisation and urbanisation which was a priority of the new political regime" while the land was nationalised simultaneously¹¹. The obligatory Five-Year Plans common in all Soviet spheres of influence dictated specific economic and demographic targets that had to be achieved through correct planning¹².

In the second stage, from the 60's until the early 70's, there were some complex studies regarding settlements and developing a legislative and institutional framework. Spatial planning started being performed by institutions organised at a country level, including architectural design and urban planning, based on the input of multi-disciplinary professionals from various fields, such as geographers, economists, and sociologists¹³. In addition, several infrastructure projects were initiated and completed during this time, such as residential neighbourhoods, tourism facilities along the Black Sea with resorts, power network infrastructure including hydro-electric dams, and industrial zones, especially in the south and east of the country¹⁴.

The third stage of the communist years was the one that shifted the character of the regime and fully unveiled the totalitarian aspect of governance. The new planning law, the so-called "systematisation law", introduced several restrictive elements, mainly minimising the possibility of expanding existing settlements and shifting the attention to the densification of existing settlements, making them more effective and better equipped¹⁵. The Urban centres

⁸ Pascariu 2012

⁹ Pascariu 2012

¹⁰ Pascariu 2011; Pascariu 2012

¹¹ Pascariu 2012

¹² Pușcașu 2009

¹³ Pascariu 2012

¹⁴ Pascariu 2011

¹⁵ Pascariu 2012

of towns and villages were forcibly restructured with administrative and cultural buildings, squares, and residential collective housing blocks.

At the same time, the devastating earthquake of 1977 changed the priorities of the regime that saw in the wake of Ceausescu's aspirations an opportunity to restructure Bucharest. Under the terror and the fear of a similar catastrophe, the government used the earthquake as a pretext for the extensive restructuring of the central part of Bucharest, the demolition of a large part of the city centre and the forced eviction and relocation of the population. The project comprised large residential quarters and a monumental axis –today Unirii Boulevard – leading to the "Palace of the People".

This large-scale project that was initiated from the leadership of the party – which is not unusual for the planning procedures in Eastern Europe, where spatial planning was intertwined with the political goals set by the Communist Party Committees – did consume the majority of the resources in the human and economic capital of the country. In combination with Ceausescu's aspiration of an economically autonomous country that is reliant on its production means and powers so that it is not subject to foreign pressures – either from the West or Soviet bloc – would lead the population to exhaustion, long queues in stores for basic needs and even starvation. The austerity aimed to repay all the country's foreign debts.

The scars that this restructuring project left on the population were deep and profound, considering the "systematisation" as *"one of the most powerful symbols of the communist regime, responsible for the destruction of a large part of the built-up heritage of towns and villages and for the brutal reshaping of the urban environment"*¹⁶. Historians as Dinu Giurescu¹⁷ cited by Pascariu¹⁸ described the "systematisation" as the *"the destruction of the traditional urban constructed area almost in its entirety and its replacement by tenement apartment buildings and the resettlement of the entire rural population"*.

Not long after the disintegration of the Regimes of the Warsaw Pact in 1989, Romania's turn came in mid-December when several protests against the regime spread from Timisoara to Bucharest. Being the most violent revolution of all transitions from communism to a democratic market-based economy, the National Salvation Front came to power after the drumhead trial and execution of N. Ceausescu and his wife. The first Law Decree¹⁹ issued by the provisional government led by the National Salvation Front on the 26 of December 1989 cancelled several laws, including the Systematisation Law 58 of 1974. From the symbolic cancellation of the systematisation law in the first act of the provisional government, we can conclude how hurtful that process was and its bad connotations in the conscience of the Romanian people in general, forming a culture against top-down planning approaches and a negative notion towards planning and urbanism as a state function.

¹⁶ Pascariu 2012

¹⁷ Giurescu 1989

¹⁸ Pascariu 2012

¹⁹ National Salvation Front Council 1989

2. The post-socialist political landscape in spatial planning

Following the 1989 violent revolution and the repeal of Law 58/1974, the planning legislation evolved very slowly. Despite the premature enthusiasm the society enjoyed from the country's transition towards a democratic market-based society, the government of Romania did not follow the speed of reforms like other countries of the Eastern Block did. Romania showed an initial willingness to join the European Community early on, which impacted the spatial planning reforms. If examined closely, the reform of the planning system was not based on a coherent incremental procedure but was built on political willingness, EU terms to allocate EU funds and societal and market pressures²⁰. This approach led to partial legislation covering sectors that needed to be regulated at different times without having an extended coherent framework to cover the whole development sector, spatial and urban planning and construction. As Munteanu and Servillo²¹ note, there have been five periods up to 2012 that can be identified with different political approaches that had an effect on the evolution of spatial planning legislation in Romania:

The first one ranges from 1989 to 1996, which made the first attempts to reform the legislation though with a very slow rhythm; the second one from 1997 to 2000, when the government pushed ahead with privatisations and implemented a regional policy; the third one from 2001-2004 focused on reforms to facilitate the pending EU accession and adopted the first planning law. The fourth period, from 2004 to 2008, was marked by the EU accession and the adoption of the first National Plans, but it was also the moment when several NGOs started appearing in the field of urban planning, covering the state's inability to control urban growth. The fifth period was characterised by high public investment through EU funds that Romania received as a member state and by the first attempts to *"align spatial planning to the regional development policy while trying to limit the discretionary private initiative"*²². The last period can be extended up to 2016, which follows the same trends of limiting private initiative. After this, a period from 2016 to today focused on producing new legislation and debating a coherent framework for Regional and Urban Planning, including Permitting and Construction, which has not been approved up to today.

The immediate need to provide a framework for permitting of new buildings and organising the construction sector urged the first government to adopt Law 50/1991. This legislation, with many amendments that followed and changed it substantially, is, until today, the main reference for building and permitting. The Spatial Planning framework had not yet become a law, though. Initially, with a Ministerial Order (that it adopted with a simple Government Decision, and not through Parliament) renamed – aiming to rebrand it from the bad memories – the field from "Sistematisation" into "Urbanism and Territorial Planning"²³. In addition, the constitution that was adopted with the turn to democracy guaranteed the self-governance of local administration²⁴.

²⁰ Munteanu and Servillo 2014

²¹ Munteanu and Servillo 2014

²² Munteanu and Servillo 2014

²³ Petrisor 2010; Pascariu 2012

²⁴ Munteanu and Servillo 2014

As Munteanu and Servillo note, this period mainly focused on privatisation and economic restructuring. The change in economic conditions and the liberalisation of the market in light of the EU accession negotiations brought different actors in the planning field, raising the private interest and dismantling the institutional bodies carrying out planning procedures²⁵. This brought, they argue, newly introduced actors into the field, such as banks, private investors and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and had a profound impact on the planning culture that is visible even today in the country²⁶. The result of privatisation was the strengthening of the private initiatives in the country that fostered Foreign Direct Investments and facilitated in the following years the absorption of EU funds and private investments but shattered the planning procedures and the “knowledge-sharing platforms” that the planning institutes provided²⁷. During that time, the main Urban Planning legislation was drafted, approving as law 350/2001²⁸ the first attempt to provide a planning framework. Even though this framework detailed all levels of spatial planning, from national spatial planning to general urban plans for every administrative unit (city, town, municipality, village), it sets out the powers of the administrative units but also gives the possibility to private individuals to amend and change the general urban plans through private planning²⁹.

Following the approval of Law 350/2001, the pre-EU accession period showed minimal improvement in municipalities drafting their own General Urban Plans, according to them. The poor planning framework favoured private investments that started transforming mainly greenfield areas into residential quarters and retail malls³⁰. These investments could have been materialised according to the old urban plans of the settlements that, in many cases, had become obsolete had the law not allowed the private zoning plans.

Munteanu and Servillo³¹ argue that this shifted the attention from centralised planning, which was usual up until the transition from a centrally planned economy towards a market-based economy, towards case-by-case private planning in each administrative unit. In the context of growing social disparities, high unemployment and poverty, the thirst for private investments led many administrations to allow amendments to the higher-level plans through Zonal or Detailed urban plans that were drafted and approved locally. These plans, in combination with the unclear legal field and the understaffed local authorities, sometimes led to zoning changes and planning permits that were based on poor or no relevant studies at all, missing approvals “*or not fully compliant with the procedures*”³². The lack of control in local planning procedures, and the extended violations of procedures, legal requirements and lack of quality of projects led to the creation of many Non-Governmental Organisations that demanded scrutiny over the planning procedures, cancellation of permits lacking legal permits or approved standards, and campaigned for public participation in the planning field. Some of these NGOs used the ongoing planning violations as a threshold to extend

²⁵ Gabrea 2010

²⁶ Munteanu and Servillo 2014

²⁷ Munteanu and Servillo 2014

²⁸ Romanian Government 2001

²⁹ Munteanu and Servillo 2014

³⁰ Munteanu and Servillo 2014

³¹ Munteanu and Servillo 2014

³² Munteanu and Servillo 2014

their activity in all aspects of civil and political life, even becoming political parties running for office in later years³³.

The liberalisation of the planning processes, taking them out of state control, or to put it better, the transformation of the planning departments into mere "approvers" of documentation who were lacking the infrastructure, human resources, and legal weapons to resist the requests for land-use change, or density increase, resulted in some reforms in 2008 and 2012 that redrew the planning procedure, limited the density increase possibility, and allowed public participation, through the means of public consultation. However, this actual participation does not mean that it obligates the actors – planners, investors and city halls – to consider the public's opinion and adapt or modify the projects. It allows the projects to get under public scrutiny, applying pressure on all actors to follow the procedures thoroughly since the approval of a planning process is a political act, and it goes through the city council while putting pressure on the elected official to approve or reject a project.

A pivotal moment over the ways planning approvals and building permits are issued proved to be a tragic event that resulted in many casualties in Bucharest in October 2015. An accidental fire in an underground events venue during a concert of a popular band, poor firefighting and evacuation measures resulted in many people losing their lives and many injuries, plunging the country into crisis. The lack of response from several state institutions, healthcare and the fire brigade brought down the government at the time. The trials that followed, the poor oversight from public authorities over the inadequate fire-fighting measures and nightclub permission and licence, in combination with the public outrage, led to a gradual change from the public authorities over the planning practices. It raised the scrutiny that urban plans and architecture projects should go through the relevant committee. In combination with the transparency and public consultation that projects need to go through according to the modification of the Law and the prosecution of members of committees and elected officials regarding negligence, transformed the procedure from a generally "symbolic" approval into lengthy procedures that can last months. This change showed a general trend of shifting the "culture" of the state authorities from mere checkers of the legal acts to questioning the necessity of investments. At the same time, specialised studies (traffic, sociological, historical) became necessary even though before they were just an exception.

The limitations that the amended legislation for Urban Planning provided, especially with the highly politicised context of urban planning, led the NGO's work to become quite popular. Several critical actors then stepped up into the political sphere and ran for office in the country's big cities, including national elections. At the same time, many of them managed to get elected, including the leader of the most popular NGO battling unregulated urban development, who managed to become mayor of Bucharest. While many conclusions can be drawn from the fluid political environment in Romania past 2012, which transcends the scope of this study, we can mainly note a shift of the country towards the right wing and the birth of anti-establishment parties that follow the general trend of generational battles for public office.

³³ Munteanu and Servillo 2014

3. Conclusions

By reviewing the planning history of Romania, we can note that the country has been influenced by three different empires that left their mark in the region. Each region carried different characteristics, and until the Second World War, there were attempts to modernise the country with infrastructure projects and planning initiatives that were western-oriented. These attempts were cut off abruptly by the Second World War. Following the imposed Soviet rule in the country, planning followed an opposite direction with a strict State rule that became autocratic and even oppressive during the late years of “sistematizare”—these years marked the Romanian perception of planning profoundly, leading to the complete abrogation of all planning legislation in the first legislative acts of the new Provisional Government installed after the Revolution.

The country tried to re-establish its relationship with regional and urban planning in the following years. The abrupt switch in a market economy where private investments and profit within a liberal setting did not match the traditional understandings of planning by the politicians, academics or planners accustomed to long-term state programming of state investments. Within this given context, the country slowly initiated the planning legislation to regulate regional and urban planning. Often, this was requested as a pre-requisite for European funding, leading to the quick adoption of laws that were an amalgam of existing planning notions and European guidelines without paying attention to the shifting needs of planning and the reality on the field.

The societal perception of planning has affected the way politicians and practitioners regulate and practice planning on the field. The possibility of controlling planning in a very local level through the decentralised system of planning approvals, which is based on Law 350/2001, as a reversal of the strong hierarchical system of “sistematizare”, in the post-socialist years has led in a fragmented planning approach around the country. This tends to favour local politics in planning and led planning in recent years to become a strong aspect of contestation in political discourse.

This is further amplified by the societal understandings of planning around the country and does not allow a coherent approach in battling the development pressures. Further research is required to uncover the societal and local understandings of planning by comparing the different societal environment, planning environment and planning artefacts³⁴ in the country that will lead to a coherent approach to planning, and will make easier to compile a planning legislative framework. Additionally, it is important not only to focus on improving the legislation that regulates planning but to aim to align the understandings of planning by the local administration and planners in promoting a more coherent and sustainable urban development agenda.

³⁴ Knieling and Othengrafen 2009

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Primit: 17 mai 2024; Acceptat: 23 mai 2024

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