

***Rural Systematization in Romania vs. Settlement Systems in Bulgaria:
Comparative Perspective on Spatial Planning and Regional Policies
during the Late Communist Period****

Alexander VEZENKOV**

The choice of topic for this contribution corresponds to the ambition to discuss the interrelations between regime and society in post-1956 communist countries in comparative perspective. In the first place, a study of regional processes and spatial planning provides a good opportunity to examine the interactions between official policies and the response by ordinary people. Communist regimes managed to control the various aspect of social life with different success and the case of mobility and migrations is revealing in this regard. External mobility and migration were effectively controlled and as a rule communist regimes managed to reduce dramatically the number of emigrants. In contrast, internal mobility and migration proved difficult to control (or such control would have been at the expense of economic rationality) and as a result rural-urban migrations exceeded the expectations of the planning institutions. Authorities responded by imposing administrative restrictions on settling in big cities, by decentralizing industrial investment, by providing subsidies for rural areas and higher payment for specialists and some categories of skilled workers in villages, and later on they also attempted to improve living conditions and provide easier access to social services in rural areas. At the same time, the authorities successfully profited from the desire of many young people to live in bigger cities and especially in the capital: just in order to obtain a permit to resettle a considerable number of young people spent years doing jobs that were not desired by local people.

Secondly, spatial and regional policies are a topic that allows to see the complex picture of the relations between regime and society and to avoid

* Paper presented at the international conference *The Comparative Study of Communism: Regime and Society in the Countries of Eastern Europe (1956-1989)*, 24-25 of November 2015, Sofia. Published in Bulgarian as: *Sistematizatsiyata na selata v Rumănia i selishtnite sistemi v Bălgariya; sravnitelen pogled kăm teritorialnoto planirane i regionalnite politiki prez kăsnia komunisticheski period*, in Ivaylo Znepolski (ed.), *Istoricheskoto sravnenie – metodi i obekti. Kăm edna sravnitelna istoriya na komunizma v Iztochna Evropa*, Sofia, Dom na naukite za tchoveka i obshtestvoto, 2016, p. 243-272.

** PhD, freelance scholar, e-mail: alexander.vezenkov@gmail.com.

addressing the problem in two macro-categories. "Society" is not a monolithic unitary actor, but nor is the "regime." In this case we can easily see the different lobbies within the communist regime, the tensions between economic and social ministries as well as between central and local levels of the party and state apparatus, the competition for resources between individual settlements, administrative units, etc. Let us take again the example of rural-urban migration: local authorities in cities were in favor of reducing the inflow of migrants, but the management of factories and the economic ministries, on the contrary, needed new workers and often openly helped such people to settle in cities. The situation was paradoxical – the main reason to try to prevent further immigration in cities was the housing deficit, but in order to overcome the housing deficit more workers were needed and these were most often newcomers from rural areas.

Thirdly, a study of regional policies and processes allows us to think about the relations between regime and society both in terms of opposition and cooperation. On the one hand there was a clear tension: people were not migrating in the direction desired by the planning institutions (actually the authorities most often expected people to remain in their native places); they often preferred jobs in the administration or in the tertiary sector instead of heavy industry, constructions and other sectors with deficit of working force; many young people concluded marriages just in order to obtain permanent permit to live in the capital city. At the same time, the authorities' policies might in some cases coincide with the desires and phobias of ordinary people. This phenomenon is most clearly visible at local level where local authorities (i.e. "the regime") and ordinary people (i.e. "society") shared similar ambitions: for instance they were all enthusiastic about their locality becoming administrative center and receiving larger share of industrial and social investment.

At the same time, this text is interested in the comparative perspective. Regional policies in communist countries were not only based on similar principles, but in practice they were elaborated after consulting the plans for spatial development in other countries of the Soviet block, but also in the West. In Romania and Bulgaria for instance plans for spatial development on the national scale were elaborated during the 1970s and relied to a large extent on the experience of countries like Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the USSR, which already had such plans during the 1960s. Not only the elaboration of the plans for spatial and regional development, but also the academic studies in this field are often written in comparative perspective. The major contributions in the field often present all communist countries, although Romania and Bulgaria are usually underrepresented in such studies.

More importantly, the comparative study of the regional processes is very much needed in order to understand the policies in the individual communist countries. This paper will address only one specific problem of regional policy in only two countries, in order to demonstrate how the comparative perspective

provides us with a different, and hopefully better, understanding of the policies in the individual countries. I will address the plans for development of backward rural areas and the policies towards small villages in Romania and Bulgaria during the last two decades of the communist regime. These are two very different cases, which could be considered also “exceptional” when compared to other East European communist countries, especially the notorious Romanian “systematization.”

Two very different types of plans

The program for rural systematization (*sistematizarea rurală*) in Romania was elaborated in the late 1960s and early 1970s and took final form with a law passed in November 1974¹. Two elements of the plans for rural systematization attracted the most attention. On the one hand, authorities envisaged to transform around 300-350 big villages into towns (120 till 1980 – 2 to 4 in every county, another 100 till 1990, etc.), and thus to create a denser and equally distributed network of urban settlements all over Romania, 14-15 in each county. At the same time, 6,000-7,000 villages (out of a little more than 13,000) were to be phased out and their population transferred to the future towns; during the late 1980 the number of villages to be demolished was reduced to 3,000-4,000². It is also important to note that around 90-95% of the existing housing had to be replaced by apartment blocks. Ultimately, by the end of the 20th century Romania was expected to have 70-75 percentage of its population living in approximately 600 cities³.

The plans provoked fear among many Romanian citizens – most of them directly affected (or at risk to be affected) by the systematization plans, but also scholars and experts concerned about the cultural heritage of the country. In 1988-1989 some dissidents more openly criticized systematization as one of the most oppressive policies of the regime, but for obvious reasons most vociferous were the Romanian emigrants abroad. Critiques of rural systematization came also from Hungary and Western Germany, because of the fear that these measures would affect the rich Hungarian (and German) villages in Transylvania. Some

¹ Legea nr. 58, privind sistematizarea teritoriului și a localităților urbane și rurale. See “Buletin Oficial”, No. 135, 1 Nov. 1974, p. 369-395; Steven Sampson, *National Integration through Socialist Planning. An Anthropological Study of a Romanian New Town*, New York, Boulder, 1984, p. 77-83.

² Stelian Dumitrăcel, *Sate dispărute – sate amenințate*, Iași, Institutul European, 1995, p. 22; Dennis Deletant, *România sub regimul comunist*, București, Fundația Academia Civică, 1997, p. 179; Mihnea Berindei, *Distrugerea satelor românești în arhivele Comitetului Central*, in “Revista 22”, 30 iunie 2009 (<http://www.revista22.ro/distrugerea-satelor-romanesti-in-arhivele-comitetului-central-6312.html>, accessed February 13, 2016).

³ Vasile Cucu, *Sistematizarea teritoriului și localităților din România*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1977, p. 129; Ioan Measnicov, Ilie Hristache, Vladimir Trebici, *Demografia orașelor României*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1977, p. 5; Cezar Lăzărescu (ed.), *Urbanismul în România*, București, Editura Tehnică, 1977, p. 32.

regarded rural “systematization” as a cover for the assimilationist policies of the Romanian dictator⁴. Public opinion in Western Europe, including environmentalists, also reacted. The campaign “Operation Villages Roumains,” which started in 1988 included the “adoption” of Romanian villages by villages in Western Europe (Belgium, Switzerland, United Kingdom, France) in order to protect them from demolition⁵.

The program for rural systematization was implemented to a very limited extent. The number of cities in Romania increased from 148 in 1950 to 236 in 1968, but this process stopped during the 1970s and 1980s, exactly when it was supposed to accelerate. In April 1989 alone, 28 villages were granted urban status (among them the native village of Ceaușescu – Scornicești). However, according to official information, only 10 of these newly declared towns had been already transformed into agro-industrial centers⁶. Demolitions in villages were also limited, at least not at the initially envisaged scale: during the 1980s some 7,676 buildings were destroyed in Romanian villages, actually not all because of systematization plans⁷. The 1992 census demonstrates that the program for a complete reconstruction of the built environment gave equally limited results on national scale: 98.5% of the houses in villages were still family houses, only 1.4% of the buildings had more than one dwelling unit and just 0.1% were apartment blocks⁸. Rural systematization was a terrifying plan, but it became reality for relatively few peasants especially when compared to devastating results of “urban systematization” at the same time.

In Bulgaria, the planning authorities’ attitude towards small villages was quite different: the dominant discourse was “to save the village.” Official reports and academic publications were depicting the negative effects of the mass rural-urban migration – the excessive growth of big cities and the depopulation of rural areas, and especially the fact that many villages were put at risk to disappear. The ambition was to stop this process, and even to attract young people back to the villages in order to revitalize them. Some public figures and scholars insisted that the envisaged migration from cities should be directed to *all* villages⁹. Even in abandoned small villages the buildings should not be destroyed, but used as second homes for vacation, for housing people tempo-

⁴ E.g.: Rocco Turi, *Villaggi europei. Studi per la riqualificazione degli insediamenti marginali / Europai falvak. Tanulmányok a márginalis települések újraménésítéséről*, Cosenza, Bios, 1995, p. 129-134.

⁵ Stelian Dumitrăcel, *op. cit.*, p. 44-47; Dennis Deletant, *op. cit.*, p. 185-189.

⁶ Gábor Hunya *et al.*, *România 1944-1990. Gazdaság- és politikatörténet*, Budapest, Atlantisz, Medvetánc, 1990, p. 170; Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu și Securitatea*, București, Humanitas, 1998, p. 296.

⁷ Dorel Abraham, *Puterea și mediul construit*, București, Centrul de Sociologie Urbană și Regională, 1992, p. 64-65.

⁸ C. Cârțână, M. Gânju, *Populație și habitat în mediul rural*, in “Sociologie românească”, s.n., VI, No. 3-4, 1995, p. 283-284.

⁹ Lyulyana Ruskova, *Vzaimootnosheniya selo-grad. Sotzialni i prostranstveni problemi*, Sofia, BAN, 1987, p. 60.

rarily working in the area and even for tourism¹⁰. Policies for developing small industry and services in depopulated, mountainous and border regions existed in all communist countries, but the planning authorities in Bulgaria went much further in this regard: ultimately 60% of the territory of the country benefited in one way or another from such programs¹¹.

The reactions of ordinary people to the policies for revitalizing rural areas were contradictory: public opinion shared in good faith the concern that the countryside was depopulating and small villages faced the prospect of disappearing in the near future. At the same time, people themselves were reluctant to migrate back to the villages: even the majority of people who graduated in agriculture actually lived in cities¹²; some accepted to work in rural areas in order to receive higher payment, but in practice they only commuted from cities to their workplaces in villages; even those who were eager to maintain a second house in a certain village were not necessarily choosing a depopulating one.

The programs for development of backward rural areas did not manage to reverse the trend and the depopulation of villages continued. During the 1970s and 1980s the migration flow from villages to cities declined simply because the rural population was already drained; otherwise a relatively high percentage of rural inhabitants continued to leave villages annually¹³. Actually during the late communist period it was the urban-urban migration that dominated: a flow from smaller to bigger cities¹⁴.

National contexts

These two different approaches towards small villages fit quite well into the established image of the regimes of Ceaușescu in Romania and Zhivkov in Bulgaria. Obviously communist regimes in Romania and Bulgaria shared a lot in common – both countries were among the less developed East European communist countries; both regimes were vehemently nationalist, more autho-

¹⁰ Radka Naidenova *et al.* (eds.), *Prirodniyat i ikonomicheskiyat potentzial na planinite v Bălgariya*, Vol. 2, *Naselenie i ikonomika*, Sofia, BAN, 1990, p. 81. The author of this part is Svetlin Kiradzhiev.

¹¹ Geshe Geshev *et al.*, *Vliyanie na migratziyata vărhu formiraneto na regionalnata demografska situatziya*, in “Naselenie”, X, No. 5, 1992, p. 29-39.

¹² Aron Mashiah, *Gradovete i gradskoto naselenie v NR Bălgariya / Izsledvaniya i analizi, 16/1971/*, Sofia, Dărzhavno upravlenie za informatziya, 1971, p. 51; *Demografska i sotzialno-ikonomiticheska harakteristika na ikonomiticheski aktivnoto naselenie*, Vol. 2, Sofia, Tzentrarno statisticheskoto upravlenie, 1988, p. 34, 85.

¹³ Valentina Zlatanova, *Vătreshnata migratziya v Bălgariya i neynoto vliyanie vărhu demografskoto razvitie na selskoto naselenie v Bălgariya (1956-1985)*, in “Naselenie”, VIII, No. 1, 1990, p. 35-48; Robert N. Taaffe, *Population Structure*, in “Südosteuropa Handbuch”, Vol. VI, Klaus-Detlev Grothusen (ed.), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990, p. 446.

¹⁴ *Rezultati ot prebrovavaneto na naselenieto*, Vol. VI, Part 1, *Vătreshna migratziya na naselenieto*, Sofia, Natzionalen statisticheski institut, 1994, p. VII-VIII sqq.; *Teritorialno razpredelenie, kontzentratzia i urbanizatziya na naselenieto v Republika Bălgariya. 1994*, Sofia, Natzionalen statisticheski institut, 1995, p. 12.

ritarian and repressive, as well as rather suspicious towards liberalization in the economic sphere. But there were differences and these differences were not limited to the relative independence of the regime in Bucharest vis-à-vis Moscow and respectively the docile pro-Soviet orientation of the leadership in Sofia. The style of the two regimes was different also with regard to the handling of various domestic affairs.

In what concerns the Romanian case, Ceaușescu's regime was inclined towards radical interventionist measures, ambitious projects and social experiments with full disregard for social cost and possible discontent. Rural systematization was related in the first place with urban systematization – the ambition to reconstruct existing cities. Starting from the mid-1970s construction works were moved from city peripheries to the city center¹⁵. As a result, entire neighborhoods (including a number of historical monuments, churches, monasteries, etc.) were demolished in order to clean space for new constructions; the phenomenon is most clearly visible in the capital Bucharest¹⁶. The Vrancea earthquake of March 4, 1977 gave additional impetus to the plans to demolish old city parts. As a whole the systematization was implemented in cities to a much greater extent than in rural areas: in total 120,247 dwellings were demolished during the 1980s, i.e. above 15 times more than the number of dwellings demolished in villages at that time. A quarter of these demolitions took place in Bucharest¹⁷. Actually, the plans for rural systematization provoked fears mostly after the implementation of urban systematization started during late 1970s.

Foreign analysts at that time saw systematization as a part of a wider project for radical transformation and modernization of the country¹⁸. Ceaușescu planned to accelerate the industrialization of Romania at a time, when other communist regimes were already opting for lower growth rates of their heavy industry in order to avoid the high social cost of such experiments. Later on, Ceaușescu decided to pay off the external debt of Romania at any cost and actually succeeded in this shortly before falling from power. His regime was also much more perseverant in pursuing a pro-natalist policy compared to other communist regimes. In his ambition to appear as the founder of a new Romania, Ceaușescu did not hesitate to erase all traces from the past regardless of the fact that the official ideology was to praise the glorious history of the nation¹⁹.

In contrast, Zhivkov's regime in Bulgaria was more cautious, more traditionalist and even conservative. Planning authorities in Bulgaria had a similar

¹⁵ Cezar Lăzărescu, *Probleme actuale ale sistematizării teritoriului național și așezărilor umane în România*, in "Viitorul social", V, No. 1, 1976, p. 36.

¹⁶ Dennis Deletant, *op. cit.*, p. 183-184; Gheorghe Leahu, *Bucureștiul dispărut*, București, Editura Arta Grafică, 1995, p. 66; Dinu C. Giurescu, *Distrușerea trecutului României*, București, Museion, 1994, p. 44-50.

¹⁷ Dorel Abraham, *op. cit.*, p. 65-66.

¹⁸ Mark Almond, *Decline without Fall: Romania under Ceausescu*, London, Institute for European Defence & Strategic Studies, 1988, p. 9.

¹⁹ Stephen Fischer-Galați, *20th Century Romania*, 2 ed., New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 198.

taste for megalomaniac projects, but usually did not dare to implement them. For instance, one of Ceaușescu's most notorious infrastructural projects was the Danube-Black Sea canal between Cernavodă and Constanța completed in 1984; another canal, from Bucharest to the Danube, did not materialize. It is less known that in the 1970s the Bulgarian authorities also considered a project for a Danube-Black Sea Canal. For purely geographical reasons it was much more absurd – the projected canal between Rousse and Varna had to be more than three times longer, and the waterway was supposed to cross a territory reaching up to 212 meters above the sea level. At the same time, there was also a plan for another canal between the river of Maritza and the Black Sea. In the Bulgarian case all these plans remained on paper²⁰.

The regime in Sofia preferred to avoid economic measures at a high social price that might provoke social tensions; at the time when Ceaușescu was eager to repay the external debt, the regime in Sofia relied on foreign capital to keep the living standard and thus prevent possible unrest. The ambitious project to preserve small villages was in itself a reaction to the stronger rural-urban migrations in Bulgaria, which led to more pronounced decline of rural population. The idea to revive depopulating areas was not a utopian project of social engineering, but an attempt to stop social transformations that seemed too rapid for the taste of a conservative elite.

The most radical “project” of the communist regime in Bulgaria was the forced renaming of the Turkish minority in 1984-1985. This was a social experiment without equivalent in other East European communist countries. The rationale behind it was the increasing share of Muslim and Turkish population and its alleged encapsulation. I would argue that the desire to save the small villages was to a large extent a desire to save “the Bulgarian village” and was interrelated with the wave of Turkophobia in late communist Bulgaria.

Muslims, and especially Turks, were marginalized in the urbanization process: some of them migrated to smaller and middle-sized cities and very few to the biggest urban centers in the country. According to the 1992 census, only 31.6% of the Turks were living in cities, compared to 71.6% of the “ethnic” Bulgarians. The flip side of this phenomenon was an increasing percentage of Turks in rural population: in 1975 Turks were 8.4% of the total population but comprised 15.6% of the rural population; in 1992 (despite the considerable wave of emigration that started in 1989) Turks already comprised 19.7% of the rural population in Bulgaria (9.4% of total population)²¹. Not only the communist regime, but also many “experts” and “intellectuals” shared the fear of “Turkification” of specific settlements, areas and the country as a whole.

Symptomatic about the preoccupations of the communist regime is the decree No 22 of 10 May 1982, which envisaged various measures for under-

²⁰ Central State Archive, Republic of Bulgaria (CSA): 1-B/35/2746.

²¹ *Rezultati ot prebroivaneto na naselenieto*, Vol. I, *Demografski karakteristiki*, Sofia, Natsionalen statisticheski institut, 1994, p. XXV-XXVI.

developed and border regions and especially for the Strandzha-Sakar region²². Strandzha-Sakar was and still is a rural, depopulated and mountainous area, but most importantly it is located on the border with Turkey. The highest point of the communist regime's regional policy during the 1980s was the project to revitalize a strip of land, between 30 and 50 kilometers wide, alongside the Bulgarian-Turkish border. The program envisaged not only investment in industry and infrastructure but also generous subsidies for young couples willing to settle in the region.

I also need to clarify to what extent the spatial planning in the two countries could be considered "nationalist." As it was already mentioned, the plans for rural systematization in Romania were regarded as a cover for demolishing Hungarian and German villages in Transylvania. In fact the project concerned the whole territory of Romania and was experimentally applied in the county of Ilfov (i.e. near Bucharest), where 4 villages with 728 houses in total were destroyed²³. Recent archival studies show that relatively fewer villages in Transylvania were listed for phasing out than in other parts of the country.²⁴ Also in what concerns urban systematization, the most of the heavily affected cities were in Wallachia, Moldavia and Dobrugea, and less in Transylvania²⁵. Systematization policy corresponded to the ambition for "homogenization" of the society (the term *omogenizare* appears very often in publications of that time), which was inevitably a threat for the various minorities but also for the traditional culture of the Romanians.

On the contrary, the plans to save small villages and to repopulate rural areas in Bulgaria are rarely regarded as "nationalist" policy. Actually this is also due to the fact that the very topic of minorities gradually became a taboo. During the 1970s and 1980s official publications in Bulgaria were simply avoiding references to national minorities and instead talked euphemistically only about the administrative units (and sometimes about geographical areas) inhabited by these minorities. Symptomatic is a government decree from 1 July 1970, regarding the socio-economic and cultural development of the Kardzhali, Silistra, Razgrad, Shumen and Targovishte counties, i.e. the counties with considerable Turkish population. The last special program concerning the areas inhabited predominantly by the Turkish minority dates from 1985 and refers to the county of Kardzhali²⁶. In a similar way policies concerning the Pomaks (or the 'Bulgarian Muslims' as they are also called) usually referred to the county of Smolyan, while those targeted at preventing the formation of Macedonian national identity referred to the county of Blagoevgrad. While experts on regional policies rarely discern the nationalist bias of the Bulgarian planning authorities, virtually

²² "Därzhaven vestnik", No. 42, May 28, 1982, p. 545-551.

²³ Dorel Abraham, *op. cit.*, p. 67; Stelian Dumistrăcel, *op. cit.*, p. 22-23.

²⁴ Mihnea Berindei, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Dinu C. Giurescu, *op. cit.*, p. 50, 72.

²⁶ Government decree No. 20 / 22 April 1985, in CSA, 136/78/23.

all studies about minorities and assimilationist policies during the communist regime discuss also the respective regional projects.

Rural areas in socialist planning

One could hardly imagine two plans more different from each other – to demolish all small villages or, to try to preserve them at any price, and even to wish to revitalize villages that were already abandoned by their inhabitants. Nevertheless the plan to abolish all small villages in Romania, and the ambition to preserve the small villages in Bulgaria were only elements in a spatial policy based on identical logic. Spatial planning in both countries was based on identical principles, which were not necessarily “communist.”

Communist regimes were favorable to urbanization in principle, but suspicious towards big cities. Big cities were considered economically inefficient, mostly because of the higher cost of infrastructure; in addition, the rapid growth created shortages of housing and social facilities at least in the short run. At the same time very small settlements were also considered inefficient from economic and social point of view. The solution was something called “decentralized concentration”²⁷ – i.e. to invest in a number of regional centers, in practice these were the administrative centers at county level. During the 1950s and 1960s county centers received most of the investment in industry and infrastructure, and also attracted the largest share of migrants.

The inevitable result was that this deconcentration at the national level gradually led to overconcentration at the regional level. Starting from the 1960s, the communist governments applied more systematic measures for further decentralization. They tried to create a balanced network of medium-sized cities and small towns, in order to counterbalance the bigger cities and reduce their further growth while also helping modernize the respective areas and provide “urban way of life” for the surrounding rural settlements. That was done both through administrative reforms, by turning villages into towns and by trying to develop a more efficient network of social services for the whole territory of the country, including the less developed rural areas.

Still the small villages remained a problem. It was not possible to industrialize them because there was not enough work force for any type of factory; actually it was difficult to modernize even the agriculture, which according to the communist frame of thinking was necessarily large scale agriculture; in small villages there were not enough customers to provide social services at a reasonable price; even the construction of the most basic infrastructure would have been very expensive *per capita*.

The radical solution was to transfer the population of the small villages into bigger ones and especially in those designed to become towns. This idea

²⁷ Károly Perczel, György Gerle, *Regionális tervezés és a magyar településhálózat*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1966, p. 208-209; Jiří Musil, *Urbanizace v socialistických zemích*, Praha, Svoboda, 1977, p. 342.

was very popular until the 1960s in the Soviet Union, where the creation of new agro-towns was combined with a policy of phasing out the very small villages²⁸. The same approach was adopted in Romania already in the late 1940s and the first Romanian attempts in this direction were discussed as an example to follow also in Hungary²⁹. The idea to gather the population of small and dispersed settlements in bigger ones was adopted in Hungarian spatial policy during the 1950s³⁰. In Bulgaria, there were only occasional opinions that small villages should not be preserved at any price³¹. Some studies were discussing the need to gather the population of small villages in the “perspective villages,” but they were simply avoiding the question what should ultimately happen with the small villages³².

What is specific with the rural systematization in Romania is that the plan to phase out small villages was still on the agenda at a time when it was already abandoned elsewhere. Even that was not so shocking. Actually on paper everything looked rather acceptable: the law for systematization of 1974 follows the basic principles of spatial planning not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the West, for instance in France³³. It is symptomatic that although systematization is regarded as one of the most absurd policies of the communist rule in Romania, the program was elaborated during the “liberal” phase of Ceaușescu’s regime. Until the late 1970s (when large scale demolitions in Romanian cities started) western publications simply mentioned the program for rural systematization without criticizing it³⁴.

There was also a softer solution to the problem, which ultimately prevailed almost everywhere: small villages were to be considered as part of a group of settlements. Instead of building new housing in the future towns, authorities planned to preserve the small villages and simply to provide better public transport for their inhabitants. For instance in the then German Democratic Republic very small villages were considered inefficient, but there were no

²⁸ A. Morgenstern (ed.), *Siedlungsstruktur und Urbanisierung. Probleme ihrer planmässigen, proportionalen Gestaltung in der entwickelten sozialistischen Gesellschaft*, Gotha/Leipzig, Haack, 1981), p. 26-29; Lyulyana Ruskova, *Ustroystvo na bălgaskoto selo pri socialisticheskiya natchin na zhivot*, Sofia, BAN, 1982, p. 86.

²⁹ Gyula Belényi, *Az Alföldi városok és a településpolitika (1945-1963)*, Szeged, Csongrád Megyei Levéltár, 1996, p. 95-97.

³⁰ Gerle Perczel, *op. cit.*, p. 142-143, 158-159; György Enyedi, *New Basis for Regional and Urban Policies in East-Central Europe*, Pécs, Centre for Regional Studies, 1990, p. 23; idem, *Településpolitika a fejlett szocializmusban*, in “Historia”, No. 9-10, 1997, p. 33.

³¹ Lyulyana Ruskova, *op. cit.*, p. 86-87.

³² Mincho Semov, *Potentzialnite migranti*, Sofia, Narodna mladezh, 1973, p. 90 sqq.; see also: Lyubomir Dinev, *Prásnatite selishta v Bălgariya*, in *Problemi na geografiyata v NR Bălgariya*, Vol. 1, Sofia, Nauka i izkustvo, 1964, p. 206-207.

³³ Dorel Abraham, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³⁴ E.g.: K.-D. Grothusen (ed.), *Südosteuropa Handbuch*, Vol. II, *Rumänien*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977, p. 456; Wilfried Heller, *Regionale Disparitäten und Urbanisierung in Griechenland und Rumänien*, Göttingen, Erich Goltze, 1979, p. 29.

plans for their liquidation in order to make maximal use of the already existing housing in these villages³⁵.

This is exactly the model adopted in Bulgaria with the so-called “settlement systems”³⁶, which aimed namely to solve the problem of small villages by integrating them into larger units. The country was subdivided into 291 “settlement systems” – first in spatial planning (1977), then by an administrative reform (1978)³⁷. Usually there were 20 to 30 villages per “settlement system”, respectively per *obshtina* (the smallest administrative unit). In approximately one third of these settlement systems (which were obviously among the smallest and least developed), the center was a village, expected to develop into a genuine urban center for the neighboring villages. In every *settlement system*, there were usually several secondary centers, which had to provide services also to the surrounding small villages. It was explicitly stated that the whole settlement system should be treated as one single settlement. In what concerns the villages in general, 2,976 or 57.71% of them were listed as “prospective villages” (*perspektivni sela*). The remaining 2,181 villages (or 41.29% of the total) were euphemistically called “villages with changing functions” (*sela s izmenyashiti se funktsii*)³⁸. The villages of latter category were initially more openly labeled as “prospect-less villages” (*bezperespektivni sela*) and their share is similar to that of the villages designated for demolition in Romania.

Even the idea that several villages could be transformed into one town was not unfamiliar to Bulgarian authorities. At least twenty five newly declared towns in communist Bulgaria were in fact composed of two or more villages. There was no population transfer, simply two or more neighboring villages were declared one single settlement and granted urban status – at least in theory the new “settlement” was big enough to assume urban functions. In only few cases the new town grew enough and the former villages were almost absorbed into one single settlement. This is for example the case of Velingrad (consisting of three former settlements), as well of Dunavtzi, to a lesser extent of Devnya and Novi Iskar. In all other cases the former villages remained clearly separated, but were labeled as “neighborhoods” of the new “town”: this is the case of the town of Rakovski, composed of three former neighboring villages, of Apriltsi, which included 4 villages, of the town of Plachkovtzi, which consists of 3 villages and 6 hamlets, etc. In most other cases, the smaller villages that were incorporated in such towns later on regained their status of independent settlements. The best know example is the town of Srednogorie – it appeared in 1978 through the unification of the two neighboring towns of Zlatitza and Pirdop, which regained their previous status in 1991.

³⁵ A. Morgenstern, *op. cit.*, p. 105-112.

³⁶ Marin Devedzhiev, *Selishtnite sistemi*, Sofia, Nauka i Izkustvo, 1978; Jean-Paul Volle, *Bulgarie: les systèmes de peuplement*, Montpellier, GIP RECLUS, 1986.

³⁷ “Därzhaven vestnik”, No. 10, February 3, 1978, p. 95-104. The number of *obshtina* and respectively of settlement systems increased to 300 in 1983 (*ibidem*, No. 76, September 30, 1983, p. 969-970) and later was reduced to 246 in 1987 (*ibidem*, No. 78, October 9, 1987, p. 1-3).

³⁸ Lyulyana Ruskova, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

In sum, regional policies in Bulgaria and Romania followed a similar logic. Firstly, they were preoccupied with preventing the further growth of big cities. Secondly, they planned to urbanize the whole territory of the country through establishing a dense and evenly distributed network of small towns. The regimes in Sofia and Bucharest shared also the illusion that people from rural areas would be satisfied with the “urban way of life” provided by these small towns, instead of migrating to big cities.

There were two substantial differences between the Romanian and Bulgarian plans for rural areas. Firstly, the widely discussed plans to demolish small villages in the Romanian case. Secondly, and this is also important, the plans in Romania envisaged large-scale reconstructions in all other villages and especially in those designated to become towns. For this second reason both ordinary people and local authorities in big Romanian villages were reluctant to accept the promotion of their own village into town, while in the Bulgarian case the status of town was usually desired as a symbol of prestige and a means to obtain increased investment.

In practice, the fate of small villages in Romania and Bulgaria was not very different: they were not demolished in the first case, nor revitalized in the second. In both cases the main problem was that in a centralized state economy these “prospect-less” settlements were deprived of long-term investment; even some of the existing social services were closed down. By the end of the communist period experts in regional planning concluded that the process of deterioration of the conditions in small villages due to limited investment was common for all Eastern European communist countries, but in Romania it was more pronounced than elsewhere³⁹.

The process of promoting big villages into towns also had little impact. The problem was not so much the small number of newly declared towns, but rather the fact that they remained small and with limited impact over the neighboring area. Actually with few exceptions such as the native villages of the two communist dictators, Ceaușescu’s Scornicești and Zhivkov’s Pravetz, the population of the newly declared towns was declining. Most importantly, the process of concentration of urban population in big cities continued.

Debates among experts as a litmus test

Comparison with the other socialist countries demonstrates that in fact the situation in Bulgaria and Romania had even more in common. The debates among experts in the field of spatial planning and regional studies could be revealing in this regard. First of all in countries like Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia there were more adequate critiques from egalitarian point of view; for instance social segregation in cities was openly discussed and criticized⁴⁰. At

³⁹ György Enyedi, *op. cit.*, p. 18; Gábor Hunya, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁴⁰ E.g.: Ivan Szelenyi, *Urban Inequalities under State Socialism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1983.

the same time in these countries (and even in the USSR) there were also advocates of pro-market policies, which were favorable to urban growth. Especially in Poland the authorities were favorable to the further expansion of big cities, which were expected to lead the economic and social development of their surrounding region⁴¹. In Romania and Bulgaria the planning authorities and scholars in the field discussed more about villages and the small towns at a time when the majority of people were already living in urban settlements and preferred to move in bigger cities. They were preoccupied to counter-balance this trend as opposed to stimulating further the urbanization process like what their Polish colleagues were doing for instance.

Obviously, experts and scholars in communist countries published what they were allowed to publish; in many cases they were supposed to popularize the adopted policies, not so much to discuss or criticize them. Actually, a comparison between publications before and immediately after 1989 shows to what extent experts and scholars were silenced by the authorities – we could understand what was imposed by the regime and what they actually genuinely believed in. It turns out that the communist authorities, the experts in regional planning and a vast number of ordinary people often shared similar views, desires and phobias. The Strandzha-Sakar program in Bulgaria and the plans for rural and urban systematization in Romania did not come out of the madness of the political leaders alone.

In Bulgaria, experts and pundits, both before and after the fall of communism, have been raising ongoing concerns about the “rural depopulation” as well as about the “Turkification” of certain areas (and more and more about the increasing share of Roma people). Scholars were disappointed that the measures to resettle the population back in the villages had only very limited results⁴². Despite the fact that official policies were directed towards preserving the existing villages, at present many historians tend to blame the communist regime for “the withering away of the Bulgarian village”⁴³. Even in 2015 some experts from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences continue to advise the government to plan for renovation of buildings in depopulating settlements⁴⁴.

In Romania intellectuals and architects were concerned not only about the irremediable losses resulting from the demolitions, but also about the megalomaniac buildings that were to last for decades and even longer. In the mid-1990s

⁴¹ Yuriy Pivovarov, *Sovremennaya urbanizatsiya*, Moskva: Mysl', 1976, p. 168 sqq.; Jiří Musil, *Urbanizace v socialistických zemích*, p. 340; Geshe Geshev, *Urbanizatsiyata v Polsha*, in “Geografiya”, 29, No. 9, 1979, p. 11.

⁴² Boyka Vasileva, *Migratsionnitate protsesi v Bălgaria sled Vtorata svetovna voina*, Sofia, Sv. Kliment Ohridski, 1991, p. 249.

⁴³ Ekaterina Nikova, *The Withering Away of the Bulgarian Village*, in “Etudes Balkaniques”, XLVI, No. 1-2, 2010, p. 3-29.

⁴⁴ Tzeli, *prioriteti i politiki za izpălnenie na strategiyata za demografsko razvitie na Republika Bălgariya* (Sofia: BAN, 2015), 26, see on-line http://www.mlsp.government.bg/ckfinder/userfiles/files/politiki/demografska%20politika/nacionalni%20strategicheski%20dokumenti/Report_BAS_MLSP.pdf, accessed September 11, 2019.

there was an architectural design competition called “Bucharest 2000” aiming to solve the latter problem and the paradox is that the winning project envisaged the construction of even higher buildings in the city center, which could overshadow Ceaușescu’s legacy. Ultimately one such building is already under construction – the so-called Cathedral for the Salvation of the Romanian People (*Catedrala Mântuirii Neamului Românesc* or simply *Catedrala Neamului*), which would be approximately 125 m tall, or more than 40 meters taller than the largest building of Ceaușescu’s era – The Palace of the People. So much for “Ceaușescu’s megalomania”.

A larger overview of the specialized literature on spatial planning in communist countries gives us a better understanding of the above-discussed policies in Romania and Bulgaria. In what concerns the Romanian case publications usually insist on the elaboration of the program at the time of Ceaușescu and point at the decisions approved by a Central Committee Plenum in October 1967, by the Party Congress in August 1969 and the National Party Conference in July 1972, as well as to the law of November 1974⁴⁵. Studies also insist on Ceaușescu’s visit to North Korea in June 1971 and the capital Pyongyang as an inspiring example for the remodeling of Bucharest. It suffices to look back to Romanian and Hungarian publications from the late 1940s and 1950s in order to discover that the idea to phase out small villages preceded Ceaușescu. In fact it was common for socialist planning at that time and was even seen as positive abroad. In the Bulgarian case, one needs to consult the studies on spatial planning in more developed communist countries in order to understand the logic of the “settlement systems”.

At the same time, the basic principles of socialist urbanization were understood and applied in a different way. The idea to reduce regional differences and to achieve even spatial development was widely accepted, however it was applied in a different manner. For example, in the federal states (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia), reducing spatial inequalities meant in the first place to foster the development of the less developed republics in the respective federation. In Hungary, the authorities were preoccupied with the dominant position of Budapest and in order to counterbalance it they decided to stimulate the five largest provincial cities as poles of regional development. Such a policy of fostering the development of regional capitals was hardly thinkable in Romania or Bulgaria, where all big cities were subjected to restriction and the emphasis was on small towns and even on large villages in order to create a dense and evenly developed network of urban settlements.

Planning authorities in the individual communist countries sometimes used one and the same argument for very different purposes. The only argument for demolishing the small villages in Romania was the need to re-cultivate the land occupied by the former village and use it as arable land for agriculture. For the same reason the planning authorities envisaged even to abolish some “superfluous” roads

⁴⁵ Steven Sampson, *op. cit.*, p. 77 sqq.; Mihnea Berindei, *op. cit.*

in the countryside. The preservation of arable land was a priority for planning institutions in Bulgaria, but that was used as an argument for avoiding city expansion over new territories; keeping new constructions within the existing limits of the cities inevitably meant to destroy some old neighborhoods. In what concerns rural areas, contrary to what was claimed at that time in Romania, it was believed that only by keeping the population in small villages one could make full use of the arable land in the country.

It is equally symptomatic how planning authorities in Romania and Bulgaria responded to the Vrancea earthquake (1977). As already mentioned, for Ceaușescu's regime that was an additional excuse to go ahead with demolitions in the old parts of the cities. In Bulgaria, that was an occasion to revise seismic regulations⁴⁶ but also an argument (among others) for scaling down the construction of very tall buildings (with ten stores or more).

Even identical data could be interpreted differently and this is the case with the percentage of small villages in Romania and Bulgaria. According to the specialized literature on Romania, the high proportion of small villages is "characteristic" for the settlement network of the country – in 1966 71.4% of the Romanian villages had less than 1,000 inhabitants⁴⁷. This "specificity" was presented as shortcoming from economic and social point of view, and used as justification of the plans to reduce dramatically the number of villages⁴⁸. Actually small villages constitute the majority in every settlement network and by coincidence the share of small villages in Bulgaria is very similar: according to the 1965 population census, 71.9% (i.e. 0.5% more than in Romania at that time) of the villages in Bulgaria had less than 1,000 inhabitants and their share continued to grow reaching 75.7% in 1975 and 80.2% in 1985⁴⁹. In the Bulgarian case, the interpretation was quite different – the high number of small villages is quoted in order to alert the public about the negative effects of rural-urban migration ("our villages are getting smaller and smaller, they might disappear") and to advocate measures for reversing this trend in order to revitalize the villages.

As it becomes clear, the comparative perspective in re-examining spatial policies during the communist regime is useful not only for the art of producing "comparative studies." Even the policy of the individual countries could not be properly understood if we do not take into account the models they were following. At the same time, one needs to look carefully at the specific context at the national level. One must be careful when talking about "socialist planning" in general, because its principles were freely adapted not only to the realities of

⁴⁶ Georgi Brankov (ed.), *Zemetresenieto Vrancea – 1977. Posledstviya v NR Bălgariya*, Sofia, BAN, 1983, p. 344, 353.

⁴⁷ Steven Sampson, *op. cit.*, p. 72-73.

⁴⁸ Ion Bold, Mioara Matei, Petre Săbădeanu, *Sistematizarea rurală*, București, Editura Tehnică, 1974; Mioara Matei, Ioan Matei, *Sociologie și sistematizare în procesele de dezvoltare*, București, Editura Tehnică, 1977, p. 79-80.

⁴⁹ *Demografska i sozialno-ikonomiticheska harakteristika na naselenieto*, Vol. 1, Sofia, Tzentralno statisticheskio upravlenie, 1988, p. 387.

the individual countries, but also to the priorities and preferences of the respective regimes and the experts that served them.

***Rural Systematization in Romania vs. Settlement Systems in Bulgaria:
Comparative Perspective on Spatial Planning and Regional Policies
during the Late Communist Period***
(Abstract)

Keywords: spatial planning, rural settlements, comparative studies, Romania, Bulgaria.

The article compares policies towards rural settlements in Romania and Bulgaria during the 1970s and 1980s. These are two very different cases, which could be considered also “exceptional” when compared to other East European communist countries: in Romania planning authorities envisaged to transform some 300-350 big villages into towns, while 6,000-7,000 villages (out of a little more than 13,000) were to be phased out and their population transferred to the future towns; in contrast, the ambition in Bulgaria was to preserve all villages (even the smallest ones) and to attract young people back to the villages in order to revitalize them. It is demonstrated that in fact both regimes were following identical principles of spatial planning, which were not necessarily “communist.” Still these principles were adapted not only to the realities of the individual countries, but also to the priorities and preferences of the respective regimes.