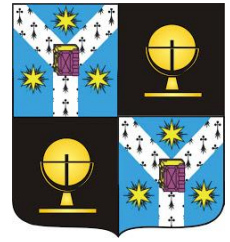




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**The Geography of New Residential Developments in the Iași
Metropolitan Area
- Summary of the PhD Thesis-**

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As a result of the reconfiguration of contemporary urban space, its boundaries have become increasingly difficult to define, particularly in emerging states or in countries undergoing various stages of transition. Functional urban areas, whether formally recognized or unofficially structured, are gradually turning into highly contested spaces, where the interplay of social, economic, and institutional factors shapes increasingly tense and fragmented peri-urban zones. Central and Eastern Europe offer numerous examples of such dynamics, especially in large urban centers where demographic pressures and speculative practices give rise to urban landscapes with limited functionality and unpredictable trajectories.

In recent decades, driven by post-socialist transformations, peri-urbanization has become the most active force shaping the development of human settlements in Romania. Under the influence of political, social, and economic changes, private initiatives were given free rein, and the consequences for land use have been significant. Elements such as economic growth, real estate market pressures, and weaknesses in planning policies have fueled rapid urban expansion nationwide.

The Iași Metropolitan Area (IMA), through its economic structure, rapid urban development, administrative fragmentation, and complex demographic dynamics, serves as a relevant reference point for understanding post-communist peri-urbanization trends in Romania. Urban expansion has surpassed the city's limits, exerting pressure on it. The real housing demand, driven by the city's attractiveness, is exploited through speculative practices, and the area's geography is being reshaped by these dynamics.

In this context, the present study aims to unravel the main mechanisms driving urban expansion within the IMA. By employing a methodological triangulation, the research seeks an efficient approach to the topic and aims to produce valid results within the boundaries of this academic discipline.

The thesis is structured into three main sections. The first part includes a relevant literature review in light of the issues outlined above. This section is intended to clarify terminology and build a theoretical framework robust enough to support accurate interpretation of the results obtained in the analyses. The second part provides information about the databases used, the study area, the chosen methodology, and concludes with a

description of the data limitations. The third and final part presents and interprets the results of the research. This section includes a systematic analysis of relevant policies, from the European level to the local one. It then turns to an examination of the urban environment in the IMA, followed by an assessment of land use at the metropolitan scale, and an analysis of new residential developments. The third section concludes with an overview of potential conflicts within the study area.

At an initial stage, a series of reference points were proposed to broadly guide the research and provide a formal framework. These guiding points are presented further in the text. While the usefulness of such a plan is undeniable, its rigidity may become a disadvantage in the context of the topic at hand. As such, these points should be seen as general directions outlined during the early stages of the research. The chaotic nature of the subject requires a high degree of flexibility, and any restriction of this flexibility could compromise the entire endeavor and narrow the scope of the investigation.

Metropolitan areas display varying degrees of dependence on higher-level administrative structures, and the extent of this dependence, especially regarding financial resources, can serve as a reliable indicator of a metropolitan area's vulnerability. To what extent is the viability of metropolitan zones influenced by the stability of the external structures they are part of?

In terms of housing, following the collapse of centralized planning systems, the exurbanization of settlements and services has become the most active and dynamic force shaping the development of human settlements in Romania, bringing about major social, economic, and cultural transformations. What are the main spatial processes and phenomena that drive peri-urbanization, and who are the key actors involved?

Sudden transformations, especially those triggered by political, economic, and social transitions, have generated territorial chaos. Ongoing changes carry significant conflict potential, which could severely impact territorial cohesion. As a result, socio-economic development is often pursued at the expense of sustainable territorial planning, leading to conflicts within territorial structures. Consequently, the following question arises: Can geographic analysis contribute to understanding these conflicts? If so, can it serve as a solid foundation for such analyses?

Rapid urban expansion leads to social fragmentation in peri-urban communities. In the absence of a sense of belonging, these communities risk turning into dormitory suburbs where anonymity replaces neighborly solidarity. How are metropolitan areas affected by the loss of local identity brought on by peri-urbanization?

The hypothesis guiding this research can be formulated as follows: real estate developers are the most active agents driving the dynamics of peri-urban territorial structures, often in conflict either with public authorities' strategic development plans or with the interests of local communities. Beyond this central hypothesis, the study also proposes several secondary hypotheses:

1. Accelerated urban expansion runs counter to current European policies and is often driven more by speculative real estate operations than by coherent planning.
2. New residential developments are the product of socio-economic transition at the city level combined with the incoherence of local territorial planning policies.
3. Urban expansion is one of the main causes of land use transformation.
4. These developments represent the most aggressive form of peri-urbanization and the primary source of tension and conflict within communities.
5. Peri-urbanization leads to the degradation of natural resources surrounding cities, the disappearance of agricultural land, increased air pollution, and the erosion of social cohesion and local identity.

The general objectives of this research are structured as follows:

1. Clarifying the concept of residential development, including at the legislative level, and analyzing the main metropolitan policies from the European to the local scale by identifying the institutions involved in urbanization control and examining their visions, strategies, and actions in relation to the study area.
2. Creating comprehensive sets of cartographic materials to illustrate land use changes and the locations of new housing developments in the study area.
3. Assessing the extent to which peri-urban areas are treated as integral parts of urban systems in spatial, social, or planning terms, and examining residents' perceptions and satisfaction with the quality of life in these areas.

4. Determining the intensity of the impact that residential developments have on territorial structures within the metropolitan area and evaluating their conflict potential in neighborhood relations.

Beyond identifying the mechanisms that shape the specific pattern of urban expansion in the IMA, the analyses conducted throughout this thesis also aimed to explore the conflict potential generated by these mechanisms. In this regard, several types of tensions were identified. The primary type of conflict examined was the one arising from the opposing interests of the key actors involved in the process of urban growth.

Broadly simplified, this conflict involves three main parties:

1. Local authorities, who are expected to defend the interests of residents by ensuring balanced and sustainable urban development, mediating conflicts, and maintaining a fair balance between economic growth and social stability;
2. Real estate developers, whose primary goal is financial profit;
3. Residents, who must defend their right to a functional urban environment that guarantees accessibility, well-being, and safety.

This type of conflict, driven by the divergent interests of these three actors, is not unusual in areas affected by urban expansion. However, in this case, the dynamics between these actors and the influence they exert on the expansion model represent the main shaping force behind the geography of new residential developments in the IMA.