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Newsletter

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DISRUR

Demographic disparities in rural areas

Participation in the RSA Central & Eastern Europe Conference 2017, Cluj-Napoca, ROMANIA

On 11th-13th September 2017, the city of Cluj-Napoca will host the Regional Studies Association Central and Eastern Europe Conference 2017 on *Regional Polarisation and Unequal Development in CEE: Challenges for Innovative Place-based Policies*, organised by Babes-Bolyai University in collaboration with the Regional Studies Association (RSA). Given the serious internal spatial imbalances between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, between core regions and peripheries in the CEE countries, the aim of the conference is to identify appropriate directions for the development of balanced territorial policies.

Several members of the DISRUR/14-AUF project coordinator team will participate in this scientific event with the paper *From Industrial Activities and Community Pride to No Man's Village - Shrinking Villages in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains*, submitted under the "Rural Areas Under Pressure (Marginalization & Rural Peripheries/Areas)" conference theme.

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The results of the paper highlight the extent of depopulation in the Romanian mountain areas, in this case, the Poiana Ruscă Mountains, and the way in which local communities have tried to adapt. Most of the inhabitants chose to migrate to other workplaces in the vicinity or abroad, while the remaining ones are elderly or live only seasonally in the rural area. The stages of transition undergone by the Romanian rural area are analysed at microscale by observing the way in which the territory has been managed by the responsible decision-makers.

Field research in the shrinking villages of the Poiana Ruscă Mountains

26 June- 4 July 2017

Researchers of the Centre for Regional Geography made an extensive documentation during the eight-day research field trip, associated with a complex sociological survey, as well as a detailed photographic documentation, which aimed at identifying the territorial specificities of the rural settlements in the mountain area under analysis.

The working methodology was based on conducting a complex sociological survey, in the form of semi-structured interviews, aimed at collecting information on the quality of life of the local communities before 1989 and afterwards, and their perception of the viability of the Romanian village. The semi-structured interview was conducted with 103 persons from 34 settlements, selected from various categories of stakeholders (inhabitants, local authorities, entrepreneurs). The settlements characterized by a sharp downward demographic trend were predominantly selected.

Habitat observation sheets were filled in for each of the 34 settlements in order to collect information on the features and the conservation status of households, road network, and local economy, both in terms of their physiognomy and their functionality.

The collection of data was supplemented with photos taken of the most representative elements of the rural settlements in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains, from physical aspects to elements of socio-economic impact.



There was industry once ...



The socialist period is under the sign of industrialisation; industrialisation planned especially for the urban area. In this context, the cities of Hunedoara, Deva, Oțelu Roșu polarised human resources from all over the country.

Industry was the one which created... another universe: jobs, housing for the newcomers, families. The change of the political regime in 1989 brought about new socio-economic changes. The closure of mines and quarries, and the privatisation of factories generated a high unemployment rate in the first stage, followed by a search for another job, predominantly in the proximity or abroad.

The mines and quarries of Ghelari, Teliuc, Muncelu Mic, Ruschița, and Alun involved the population of the mountain villages. Once they were closed, villages began to lose a significant number of people, especially young people. But it is not only industry that determined the massive migration of the rural population, but also the need for education. Many of the young people moved to the city to study and they ended up by settling there to live and work.

Today, there are only a few industrial units that are functional and all of them are privatised. The most conclusive example is the Ruschița Valley, where the processing of marble for building materials and funerary monuments has led to a specialisation of the inhabitants of Ruschița and Rusca Montană.

Other industrial units, such as early 19th century iron blast furnace of Govăjdia, are listed as historical monuments, but their use for tourism purposes is almost non-existent.



With the depopulation of villages and the pronounced population ageing, increasingly more settlements are defined by a wooded, wild landscape. Moreover, interviewees confirmed the high degree in which the area has been taken over by wilderness and there were many times when it turned out that wild boars, bears, or other wild animals seem to be the omnipresent inhabitants of these locations.

The cessation of industrial activities led to the abandonment of mines and quarries, which were gradually overgrown by vegetation. In terms of the physiognomy of the built-up area, from the household precincts or the structure of roofs to the road network covered more and more by grass, this isolated, peaceful and “natural” character of the area is even more evident.

There has been also a reverse trend over the last decades. If, initially, population preferred heights for their habitats, today, the need for connectivity has led to a concentration of population in the valleys to the detriment of highland settlements.

Nature reclaims its territory

Villages such as Curpenii Silvaşului, Mosoru, Țața, Gotești, Mesteacăn, or Alun are among the settlements where the process of being taken over by wilderness is most visible. If some of them are still alive and are attractive for a restricted segment of population, such as the descendants of the former owners or tourists looking for a tranquil living, others have gradually disappeared and only some remnants of households are still preserving the evidence of some inhabited places.

The prospects for the development of these villages are directly conditioned by the degree of accessibility and connectivity of settlements. In most cases, the state of road viability is precarious, rather suitable for off-road routes.

In the perception of inhabitants, tourism is not an alternative for the development of the area. At present, the Poiana Ruscă Mountains are little valorised in this respect.

Mountain village - between traditional and modern

The physiognomy of the Romanian villages in general - and of the mountain village in particular - is gradually changing. The simple and efficient aesthetics of the old households are replaced by high-rise houses, by building materials that have nothing to do with the local natural resources, and a desire for urban comfort that gives rise to the emergence of kitsch elements.

The proximity of settlements to an important road leads to a higher frequency of postmodern elements in their physiognomy.

The main economic activities are limited to agriculture, animal husbandry in particular.

Surprisingly, the exploitation of wood has not represented in this mountain area, not even in Ținutul Pădurenilor (i.e. the District of the Forest People), an occupation to which the inhabitants can relate. Besides land, mineral resources and building materials were the main resources exploited in the area.



Planned phases and activities

In order to ensure the interdisciplinarity of the created partnership and the transfer of best practice models from the partner states, three distinct work phases were established, each of them focused on a specific type of activity, as follows:

Phase I. Diagnostic analysis of the rural areas in terms of demographic disparities

- I.1. Theoretical and methodological benchmarks on rural demographic disparities
- I.2. Diagnostic analysis of some rural areas by addressing demographic disparities
- I.3. Field research

Phase II. Best practices on alleviating regional disparities in rural areas

- II.1. Identification of best practices in the European area on alleviating demographic disparities in rural areas
- II.2. Elaboration of recommendations on alleviating demographic disparities in rural areas

Phase III. Dissemination of DISRUR project results

- III.1. Elaboration and dissemination of studies
- III.2. Elaboration of progress and final reports



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