Rural Systematization as an Instrument of Political Control of the Communist Regime in Romania

Roxana Carjan[1], Dan Idiceanu-Mathe[1], Oana Andreea Banescu[1]

[1] Politehnica University Timisoara, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, 2 Traian Lalescu Str., Timisoara, Romania

roxi.carjan@gmail.com

Abstract. This paper deals with one of the means of communist control over society in Romania: rural systematization. After the Second World War, the Romanian villages underwent radical changes. The main objective of the communist regime was to reduce the number of villages from 13,129 to 10,000 by the year 2000. To this end, feasibility studies were conducted and the villages were classified as viable and non-viable. About a quarter of Romanian's village were threatened. They were classified according to the following criteria: functionality, infrastructure and social and cultural facilities. The community itself, with its traditional and historical values and the role of the private investors were completely ignored. Some of the villages were to be turned into agro-industrial towns, while others were to be abandoned. The priority of the rural strategy was the shaping of the "New Man" who had to be provided with decent living and safety conditions. The result of the territorial systematization process would be the "New Towns", which had to meet the 'New Man's" needs. This required, among other things, new buildings erected after typical design. The purpose of the communist authorities was to homogenize all the members of the society, so that they were easier to control. Another communist priority was to control the migration from the rural to the urban area by optimizing the commuting system.
Encouraging population growth and improving the living conditions were the means by which the communist authorities planned to incorporate the rural environment into the urban one.

1. Introduction

One of the means of changing the Romanian society was territorial systematization. This was materialized through the rural modernization programme that was based on several significant ideological factors. Such factors included the industrialization of socialist agriculture, collectivization and mechanization which determined the marginalization of the private sector, the uniformization of the human settlements networks, the standardization of buildings and the „improvement of the living and cultural standards". All this aimed at minimizing individualism and its potential to resist the communist regime.

The concept of „urbanizing the rural environment" through systematization was intensely debated at the beginning of the 1960's, when the effects of the industrialization and agricultural modernization were becoming visible. The systematization process was regulated only in 1974 by Law 58/1974 on the measures of territorial systematization.

Several authors had already expressed their interest in the historical formation and evolution of the Romanian villages as early as the beginning of the 20th century. The purpose of their documentation was to classify rural settlements by their morphology, occupational degree, form, size, structure, texture, typology, all in relation to the communities, lifestyle and main activities.
In the inter-war period, the Romanian towns and cities developed due to private interventions and investments. This increased the differences between villages and towns.

After the Second World War, some of the villages developed, while others were neglected. The villages that were industrialized rapidly and became rural centers or agricultural production cooperatives or farms underwent major changes. These villages had better services (education, medicine, craftsmen workshops) and more developed industries (light manufactures, mining, quarrying etc.). The distribution of the industrial objectives played "a major role in the economic development of the region, because they established permanent and mutual relationships between the villages and the industrial centers." Consequently, the urban lifestyle penetrated the rural environment. In contrast, the villages that were located farther from the urban centers and did not have their own natural resources were not included in the social-economic development programme. However, they had a great advantage: they preserved traditions, customs, typologies of houses and households and traditional building methods.

The territorial systematization plan that aimed to reduce the number of villages and to homogenize the human settlements network was part of the "the modernization of the Romanian society". "According to the Romanian Communist Party's territorial systematization policy, one of the fundamental principles is to provide equal living and working conditions for all the citizens of the country, irrespective of their nationality, in the context of socialist equality, of gradually erasing the differences between villages and towns by raising the village to the level of urban development",[1].

The modernization, development and reconstruction of the rural area were supposed to standardize the society, which meant more effective control of the community members. Urbanization was defined as "modernization" by turning human settlements into mixed rural-urban forms; this would have been possible through spreading urban characteristics in the rural environment. "In order to make best use of human and natural resources, one must provide the uniform development and distribution of the production forces based on effectiveness, economy and social-related criteria, with a view to improving the rural living standard as well as creating a building context that meets the new requirements: better facilities, improved level of comfort in dwellings and public utilities", [2].

This paper presents the strategy of "rural reconstruction" related to the priority of shaping the "New Socialist Man" and the environment in which he lived: the "New Socialist Town" as an ideal of the communist doctrine. All this may have reflected the communist ideology, the authorities' concern for security and the complete control of the economy by the state. "Rural reconstruction is one of the major means of materializing the policy of the Romanian Communist Party and State and improving the living conditions of the village under the wide-ranging programme of building the multilaterally developed socialist society and Romania's advance towards communism."[3] Under the pretext of increasing security and comfort, the state was able to exercise a stricter control of the individuals through settlement standardization, collectivization, industrialization, proletarianization, collective living in blocks of flats and minimizing the private sector in agriculture.

2. The Systematization Stages
The systematization process was divided into three stages:
   a. 1950-1965– the "non-systematic rural renovation" stage, when the building process was not too rigorous yet and free spontaneous developments were still possible in the private investment sector.
   b. 1965-1975 – the "systematic rural renovation" stage, during which more restrictive norms were applied and the pace of erecting private buildings decreased. The building of dwellings was supported financially by the State.

c. 1975-1990 – the "systematic modernization" stage, when the building of private buildings stagnated. The investments focused on the villages that were considered viable. The "key villages" were supposed to provide modern facilities and develop the non-agricultural sector.

3. The Communist Method of Rural Systematization

Initially, the rural systematization strategy may have arisen from the collectivization process (1950-1960), but its methodology was elaborated only in 1970's.

Some aspects of Ceausescu's programme for rural development "reflected the principles of modernization along the Western lines: the channelling of investment into "key villages" with the highest potential for growth."[4] However, the programme was applied to the realities of the socialist system through a centralised economy related to the structure of agricultural production cooperatives and state-owned farms. The potential of private enterprises, such as local tourism and handicrafts, was neglected.

After 1974 the village systematization complied with "Law no. 58/1974 on territorial systematization measures" which regulated rural urbanization according to the close interdependence relationships between the territorial planning and the development of settlements. The process of establishing the viability of villages was based on the methodology of determining and selecting rural settlements. The documents were submitted to the party leadership for approval.

A common systematization methodology was needed and the documentation was to be conducted by an interdisciplinary research team. A sociological approach was required to accomplish the systematization steps.

3.1. Classifying the villages as viable/non-viable villages

The criteria used for classifying the villages into settlements with development opportunities (key villages) and settlements without development opportunities were established. Several parameters related to the demographic factor, the natural resources, the infrastructure, the socio-economic factors, and the geographical and commuting possibilities were taken into consideration, but the traditional values and the tourism potential indicators were totally ignored.

The socio-demographic indicators referred to population, density, birth rate, population growth, migration, employed population, commuting, population's age and the ethnographic value of the village.

The geographical and geological indicators were related to soil and subsoil resources, soil fertility, water supply possibility, the balneological capacity of the locality and the possibility of optimal communication means.

The economic indicators included the local industry and agriculture level of development, the capacity to absorb the local labour force, the necessary investments in the systematization process and the financial situation of the inhabitants.

Important studies and analyses were conducted and proposals of development were brought forward for village classification. The studies revealed the following types of villages:

Viable/key villages were villages that had so-called developmental opportunities analysed from the demographic, economic and social point of view and with economic activities in the primary, secondary and tertiary sector. These villages would provide a properly constructed framework for the "new requirements" of "the New Man". They would be endowed with high level comfort facilities and infrastructure. The approach of the systematization programme was the re-thinking of the rural settlement network, as the dispersion of the villages hindered urban evolution, the improvement of the living conditions and the efficiency. The role of the locality in the settlement network was essential for classifying villages as viable or non-viable.

Settlements differed by function, size, level of technological equipment and cultural and social infrastructure:

1. Main villages with complex functions played a coordinating role in the territory and included important agricultural and industrial units and spas. They attracted the people in the

surrounding villages with their recreation and tourism facilities. These localities were to be provided with urban equipment and facilities.

2. Villages that functioned as agricultural production centres, agricultural processing units or local industrial units. They were to have superior urban technical infrastructure.

3. Villages as local agricultural production centres in which the infrastructure would be improved in compliance with the standards.

4. Villages that would be promoted as **agro-industrial towns** – "The New Town".

The above-mentioned studies underlined the necessity to correlate the systematization of the village with its size and prospects of economic progress and to zone the village functions by positioning the industrial and agricultural production units and the other economic sectors as required by the village precincts.

Non-viable villages were those that would dissolve in time because of depopulation. They were considered as having no development perspectives. Their economic function would be taken over by a nearby village where a part of the active population, attracted by the employment opportunities, would move. The destruction of the villages had to occur "naturally"; most of the remaining villagers were old and did not want to leave their village because they could not afford to build new houses. The village development would be constrained and the villagers would not be allowed to repair their houses.

The modernization of the settlements could be achieved by organizing the urban network in two systems:

a. **Grade 1 System**- the communes grouped several villages with similar traditions, customs, socio-cultural and economic interests and direct communication links. They revolved around the main village of the commune as grade 2 system elements. The main village of the commune was the political administrative centre with social, cultural and commercial amenities.

b. **Grade 2 System** -consisted of rural settlements that were economic and social centres with urban characteristics. They revolved around urban centres and would become agro-industrial or industrial towns. The authorities' intention was to boost rural industrialization and to reduce the disparities between the rural and urban population. The rural centres would provide the villages under their influence area with social-cultural facilities, goods and services. This model was part of the gradual urbanization process that was supposed to prevent overcrowding in towns. Another goal of rural systematization was to reconsider the buildable perimeter and maintain the "development in perspective". The industrialization and the agricultural mechanization led to the release of labour force that could be moved to another economic sector.

3.2. Standardisation

Putting the transformation plan of the Romanian society into practice was a major piece of social engineering in which people were forced to change their "way of thinking, behaviour, occupations, customs and practices."[5]

In the 1950's, at the beginning of the rural systematization process, type projects were designed for every region, depending on the natural and built environment. (figure 1) The challenge was to meet the representation criteria and the economical use of material resources when building cultural, administrative, commercial and educational institutions.
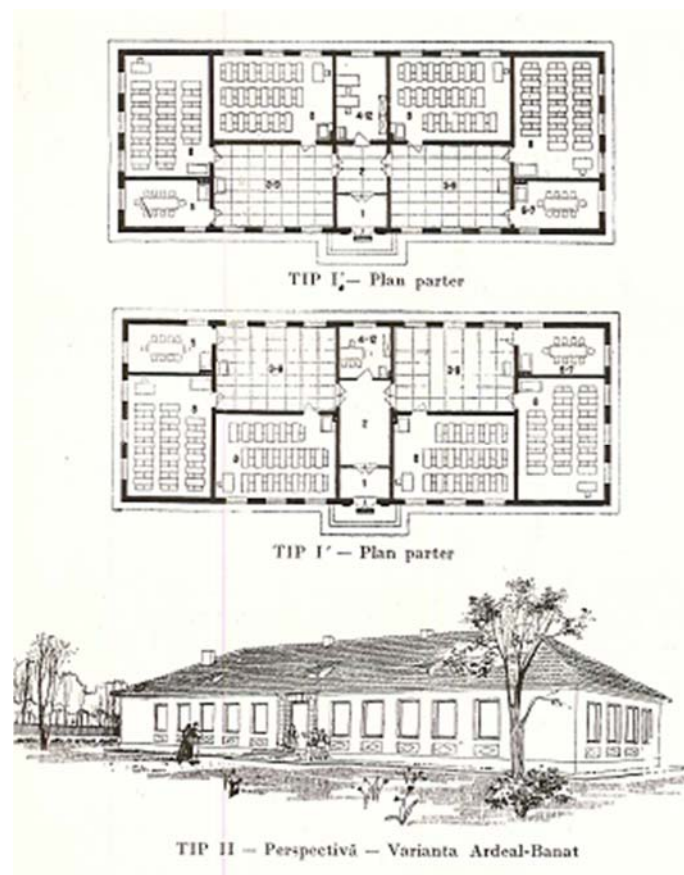
Figure 1. Rural school type project – 1960s

To streamline the construction process, all buildings had to be standardized and raised from prefabricated elements, but in the early phase of the process local resources were accepted as well. Subsequently, as the communist authorities' intention was to simplify and save time, differentiated type projects were abandoned and the same type project was implemented in all regions. The use of local materials was gradually abandoned. Thus, the buildings that marked the town centres conflicted with the surrounding area and the community character and did not fit into the specific local features. Both the urban and the architectural discrepancies had a major impact on the social life of the villages.

For the housing programme, specialists were suggested to create "housing models for rural urbanization with solutions dictated by people's social needs."[6] Several type projects were carried out for rural collective housing. They were differentiated by central or marginal areas. The central area project types were higher and had several levels, better equipped and occupying larger plots, while the rest were smaller, had fewer levels and required the development of simpler and more systematic communication networks.

The blocks of flats were to be divided into homes for intellectuals or workers and homes for rural people. However, the blocks in the countryside did not fit into the existing built framework; they were unsuitable, austere and poorly equipped and constructed and had common sanitary facilities. This was a decline in the living standards. The dwellers, who were peasants, no longer had stables and cages, so they had to improvise and built unsound and unhealthy shelters for their animals and poultry in spaces that were both unspecific and unacceptable for territorial systematization.
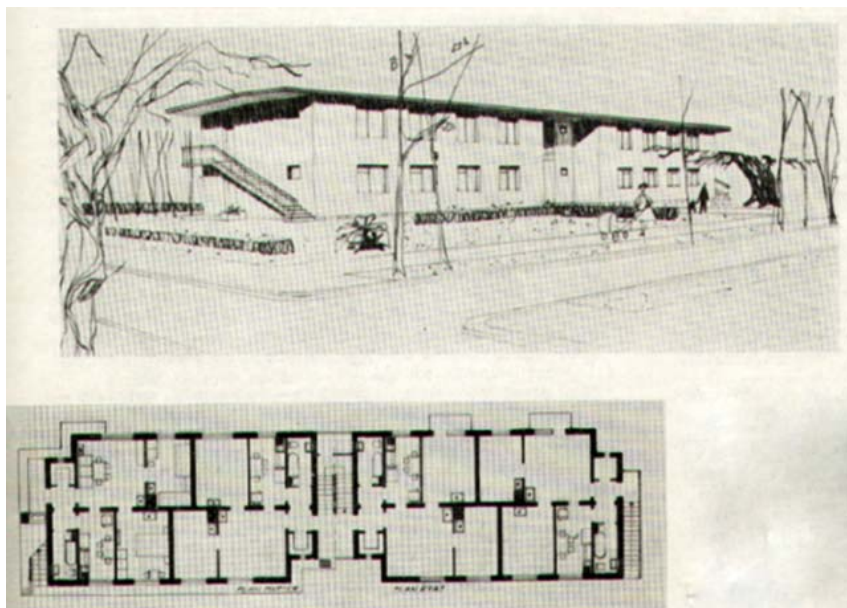
Figure 2. Rural collective housing type project - perspective and plan

Villagers living in individual houses were allowed to have only 250 m^2 for their courtyard and the garden areas were drastically diminished. They had to pay rent for them. Owners became tenants of their own buildings. They also had to pay a quota of the crop. In the 1980's, the share of collective dwellings was increased to the detriment of individual houses. Individual households were to be restricted and eventually to disappear. The residents were allotted very small plots around the blocks to preserve the traditional functions of the village (vegetable cultivation, animal husbandry).

3.3. The civic centre – a detail of rural systematization
Civic centres are **structural areas** important to any systematized town. Their social function depends on how effectively they can organise the economic and social life of the village. (figure 3)

Figure 3. Proposal of Civic Centre 1980s – Salcia, Teleorman District

Locating is the first step in the process of systematization. Locations were chosen based on several competing factors such as the geographical, historical and ethnographic characteristics, typology, the economic profile and the socio-functional connections. The purpose was to create attractive public spaces for all residents.

The geographical and typological characteristics influenced the composition and position of the assembly, and the proposed functions depended on the role the town played within the network of settlements. The economic profile, especially the industrial and the agricultural profile, as well as the level of industrial development are elements identifying the following sorts of village centres:

- usual civic centres, including cultural, administrative, commercial amenities and services;
- basic civic centres, including cultural and recreational activities, services and trade, administrative, educational and research institutes, canteens, clubs etc.;
- cultural centres with recreational, administrative, trade, small trade and services facilities situated in the residential districts around enterprises.

The architectural approaches relied on the historical and ethnographic values and they either capitalized these features or preserved them, or ignored them as having little or no value. The socio-functional connections influenced the position of the civic centre depending on the residents' interests. Their purpose was to create dominant cultural and educational nuclei within the locality structure. The civic center was located in symbolic areas that had a polarizing character in the community and enhanced social cohesion. It was to be the "organic part of the village, so that the streets flew towards this space, being integrated into people's life not only physically but also morally."[7] Architectural objects stood out as symbols of the village and were proportional to the importance of the object. The sociological and psychological meaning of the assemblies was that of outdoor venues accessible to everybody. Space zoning depends on the functional and spatial requirements, land configuration, the neighbourhoods, the phasing, the designer's skills, the traditions and the local-and space-related customs, the framework of the building (the front), the streets and the natural environment. The buildings that created public spaces were socio-cultural and administrative institutions and block of flats. They were based on the principle of establishing balanced relationships between indoor and outdoor public spaces and the natural environment. The designers sought to create an architectural space specific of the village at human scale. The involvement of specialists from related sectors (psychology, sociology, topology) was compulsory.

The civic centre of the "New Town" was modest and dominated by blocks of flats and new public buildings erected on land obtained through seizure or the demolition of private properties.

3.4. Developing infrastructure and optimizing the commuting system
Besides removing the disparities between urban and rural areas and ending the isolation of villages from towns, the goal of the systematization process was to reduce the migration to larger towns. Removing migration from village to town was not included the original programme. It required controlling the migration phenomenon. The city was preferred due to its more attractive living and working conditions. The migration phenomenon threatened villages with depopulation. Viable solutions needed to be found in order to maintain the village population without deprived it of the comfort of the city. Urban policies aimed at developing housing programs and improving the commuting system. The policies were part of the measures taken to raise the living standard, which also included easier access to health, education and cultural services. Key villages, the only ones that were supposed to survive, had to be compacted for the more effective use of land areas and utilities. Key villages could be provided with social, cultural, commercial and administrative amenities. By reducing the number of villages and regrouping the households, large areas of land were turned into arable land. Another advantage of the regrouping measures was that they simplified and optimized the communications and commuting system.

4. Discussion about the failure of the systematization plan
The climax of the systematization process was reached in the late 1970's. In those years, most new agro-industrial towns developed and blocks of flats and civic centres were built on land seized from private owners. Many construction regulations were imposed in the housing programme. The buildings had to

be at least two stories high and accommodate several families. Grouping the constructions was supposed to restore arable land that would help improve agricultural performances. In this context of forced collective dwelling, the communities dominated and controlled the individual.

The systematization process was intended to slacken towns' growth, to reduce the number of villages, to convert communes to towns, to increase efficiency in industry and agriculture through mechanization in order to create more labour force for the industrial sector.

In the 1980's, the urbanization process stagnated. Only a few villages were reported as towns. The proposed target was not reached. This may have happened due to the break the government had to take following the earthquake in 1977, the completion of the Danube-Black Sea Canal and the economic crisis caused by the president's desire to pay off the country's debts to international agencies. Although agriculture was not operating at a loss, the estimated production was not obtained. This is why industry became a priority to the detriment of agricultural development and modernization. The newly declared agro-industrial towns were the new type of socialist town that was supposed to meet the needs of the New Man and lifestyle. The concept of "ecological plan" for each locality led to further studies that were conducted to classify the settlements and establish agro-industrial councils with the party's approval. This ensured a larger degree of autonomy of the local authorities that could take economic initiatives.

It was a period of population migration from one part of the country to another and from the town periphery to the centre. This meant taking the villagers away from their traditional household. The forced dislocation of the population to inferior living conditions made it difficult to adapt to the new living standards imposed by the communist regime. At the same time, the total elimination of small investments met the resistance of the population. Ceausescu's settlement programme was the most draconian in Eastern Europe. It was an absurdity, first because he was obsessed with the communist ideology and wanted to create "the New Socialist Man", and secondly because he promoted the "Bulldozer Policy" and supported urban development without an adequate infrastructure. Consequently, he created key villages instead of towns. "Ceausescu's territorial systematization programme was in fact a counter-urbanizing strategy based on town development in favour of a new hybrid layer in the central-place hierarchy shaped after the Soviet *agrorod* and possibly the Asian communist practice as well."[8]

Architects contested the programme because it affected traditional buildings and households. Geographers and sociologists underlined the damage the programme caused to smaller communities. Voices were heard protesting against the plan to destroy the villages and invoking huge social and economic costs besides the loss of historical values. In 1988, Doina Cornea, a lecturer of the University of Cluj, sent an open letter to Ceausescu. It was signed by several intellectuals and underlined the importance of the "spirit of the village" seen as "a spiritual community existing for centuries and representing people's love for their land and the houses they were born in." The village is the soul of the nation that nourished the passive resistance to communism. There was also opposition from many parts of the world, from public personalities like King Mihai I and Prince Charles. The most vehement protest came from Hungary, a country that thought the Hungarian minority in Romania was discriminated. The Westerners saw such things as threats to the minorities. In 1989, the authorities in Brussels initiated a humanitarian campaign of protection of the Romanian villages, *Opération Villages Roumains*, through which Romanian villages were adopted.

5. Conclusions

In theory, the Romanian authorities wanted to create a new type of locality with urban comfort that should preserve the values of the village through tradition, customs and vernacular architecture and at the same time consolidated the community through common activities and collective dwelling. This was hard to put into practice because the dislocation of the population and collectivization could not be part of the local system of values. Ceausescu wanted to turn as many villages as possible into towns, but he was able to fulfil his plan only partially because it required the modernization of the transport infrastructure and advanced technical and urban development. As a result, the villages did not become towns but "key villages". Systematization was the climax of several decades of fighting against individualism. It reached its highest point in the 1980's, when Ceausescu ignored the Romanians' history

and accelerated the process to implement the socialist doctrine. The communities formed by the forced grouping of people in the government-imposed structures could lead to the complete control of the individual by the state. The people could not adapt to the imposed living conditions, so the attempts to "modernize" the society failed. Nevertheless, the Romanian people suffered. They were deprived of their rights and freedom, taken away from their traditional homes and forced to adapt an inferior lifestyle. The effects of the social failure are still felt in the Romanian society, particularly due to the absence of the community spirit, non-involvement and the lack of interest in tradition and history, as well as the absence of a system of values.

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