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The role of urban growth poles in regional policy: the Romanian case

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Abstract

As part of a broader Europeanization process, the general guidelines and principles of the European spatial planning documents have been uncritically overtaken in the last two decades in the Romanian spatial planning system. One of them is represented by the growth pole concept, which was widely used not only in the selection process of the cities as growth poles but in the delimitation of the metropolitan zones as well. The Regional Operational Program (ROP) 2007-2013 has incorporated the above logic, the priority axe 1 sustaining the urban growth poles with 30% of the budget allocated to the whole ROP. The future prospects for 2014-2020 are going in the same direction.

The main aim of this paper is to evaluate the process and outcome of establishing the urban growth poles as key elements of the new regional policy in Romania. In particular, we will address the process of establishing the urban growth poles as high priority development goal. The paper highlights the failure of regional policy in attaining its essential objective, the reduction of regional disparities. Driven by the growth of the capital region Bucharest-Ilfov, regional polarisation is at a historical high, as the regional policies applied in Romania being unable to influence this process. Although we have at this time no exact evaluation on their regional impact, we can assume that the urban growth poles program has rather contributed to the intensification of regional imbalances.

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1. Introduction

Professional interest in regional and metropolitan development is steadily increasing in Romania. This interest arises especially from Romania's experiences as an EU member state and from the opportunities offered by the next programming period. The present study will evaluate the role played by the metropolitan areas in the Romanian regional policy by thoroughly assessing the regional policy applied in the programming period 2007-2013. The reference documents are represented by the Romanian Act 315/2004 on regional development, which sets the goals and institutions of regional policy, and the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) for the period 2007-2013. The last document identifies five EU-financed development priorities (Romanian Government, 2007). One of these five priorities is explicitly territorial (sustaining balanced territorial development), while another has a significant territorial impact (the development of infrastructure). It is beyond the scope of the paper to offer a comprehensive evaluation of the ROP 2007-2013 or to determine the effects of the urban growth pole program. The main aim is to critically evaluate the process of establishing the urban growth poles as key elements of the new regional policy in Romania. In particular, we will address the process of establishing the urban growth poles as high priority development goal.

2. The major outcomes of the Europeanisation of the Romanian regional policy

The convergence of the national spatial systems in form of an ongoing Europeanisation has generated an intense debate (Reimer, Getimis & Blotvogel, 2014). During the last two decades, the Romanian spatial planning in particular has experienced an intense Europeanisation process (Benedek, 2013) strongly connected to Romania's accession negotiations to the EU. As part of this process, the institutional framework of the regional policy has been established in 1998 through the adoption of the Regional Development Act (RDA), which stipulates the three fundamental principles (subsidiarity, decentralisation and partnership), as well as the three fundamental goals (reduction of regional disparities, regional harmonisation of sectoral government policy, supporting regional collaboration) of regional policy.

The goals listed reflect the mere discourse-level and rhetoric Europeanisation of Romanian territorial planning, since in practice only a fraction of these goals was actually attained (Tănăsioiu, 2012; Benedek, 2014). The goals set in the RDA were theoretically consolidated by the change in European territorial planning, as a result of which territorial cohesion -an essential pillar of reducing regional disparities- became a headline target. The abovementioned change refers to the third article of the Lisbon Agreement adopted in 2007, entered into force in 2009, which defines territorial cohesion as a new horizontal EU objective, thus completing the objective of promoting economic and social cohesion. Subsequently, territorial cohesion became a headline target both in EU and Romanian development plans, even though the general agreement upon the meaning of this concept is still pending. Both major spatial development strategies of Romania – “Strategic Concept of Territorial Development Romania 2030” and “National Plan for Spatial Development” - have largely overtaken the European spatial planning discourse (Benedek, 2013).

3. Regional policy in the 2007-2013 programming period

In the period 2007-2013 the receipts of cohesion policy from the EU budget increased to 35.67% (Leonardi, 2006), placing Romania in a very advantageous situation. NSRF 2007-2014 includes Romania's development priorities and formulates a headline target: reduction of the economic and social disparities between Romania and other EU member states by a GDP increase of 15-20% (by 2015). Within the scope of convergence, NSRF defines 7 Operational Programmes (OP): 6 of them were sectorial programmes, the remaining one was defined as Regional Operational Programme (ROP). The later can be viewed as a particular way of increasing territorial cohesion by setting up so called urban growth poles in the framework of the priority axe 1 (sustainment of urban development), with 30% of the total budget of the ROP (Benedek & Cristea, 2014).

The main strategic goal of ROP 2007-2013 was the balanced and sustainable regional development. This is further sustained by 5 specific aims: increasing the social and economic importance of cities, applying the principle of polycentric development; providing better access to regions, especially by enabling access to city centres and

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