

## POST COMMUNIST FUNCTIONAL CHANGES IN ROMANIA'S SMALL TOWNS. CASE STUDY: BEIUȘ LAND (BIHOR COUNTY)

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**ABSTRACT.- Post Communist Functional Changes in Romania's Small Towns. Case Study: Beiuș Land (Bihor County).** Until the establishment of the communist regime, the predominantly rural Romania had showed a slow evolutionary trend from rural settlements towards an urban status. This trend was disrupted by the communist state policies aimed to industrialize and urbanize Romania. In this context, at the national level, a number of small towns emerged, many of them being mono-industrial. Their support lasted until the fall of communism. The transition to the rigors of the market economy has affected these small towns, triggering forms of urban restructuring and finally an urban decline process with the diminishing of the urban functions. Within Beiuș Land, the most important changes triggered by the communist policies were the birth of the three new towns (two of them being the exponents of the urbanization policy and the accelerated industrialization) besides the traditional urban centre – the town of Beiuș.

The present paper looks at the post communist functional changes that occurred into the four small towns in Beiuș Land from economic, socio-cultural and residential point of view. The working method relies on a series of indicators showing the number of enterprises, the professional structure of the population, the share of population occupied in different work sectors, the presence of socio-cultural buildings and the ratio of house building, between 1990 and 2011. The analysis of the mentioned indicators for the given period will highlight the major changes that occurred in the four towns and how they adapted to the market economy and to the changes that the Romanian economical system faced after 1990.

**Keywords:** *small towns, Beiuș Land, post-communism, functional changes.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The most frequently used criterion to delimit groups of cities is based on the population size. Population is usually the most used criteria to separate small towns from other categories of the urban network and identifying them as a distinct category of urban system (Brennan *et al.*, 2005). Besides the criterion of the number of people which identify small towns, there is a qualitative method for identifying and defining small towns, which emphasizes on the significance and the role they can play within the adjacent territory through the functions they perform. From this perspective, centrality

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is the most used criterion to define cities, identifying in this way centers with more or less functional importance for the adjacent territory (ESPON, 2006). The principle of centrality based on the theory of central places developed by Walter Christaller in 1933 formalized the relationship between a city's population, the specialization degree and the number and range of functions fulfilled by cities. By this method of identification, a small town is considered a place where a number of economic, cultural, political, administrative and financial functions are concentrated and fulfilled with effects on the surrounding territory. A combination of these functions results in a higher importance of the city in the territory. This way of defining the city emphasizes the important role of cities in the functional pattern of the national territory, and especially in their area of influence. Smaller towns act as centers for providing services (public or private) for the surrounding rural areas (Courtney and Errington, 2003).

The urban development affects and influences the unequal spatial development (Kim, 2008), on the one hand by urban specialization in different industries. On the other hand, the size distribution of cities in a region is essential for its development. If the towns of the region are small and evenly distributed, urbanization will have a minor effect on the regional disparities, whereas when towns differ in size, it usually happens that there are spatial disparities in regional development. Two types of theories explain the role of small towns in the rural development. Firstly, the modernization theory, which suggests that small towns are centers that disseminate innovation and encourage modernization (Săgeată, 2001) in rural areas. Secondly, the dependency theory suggests that small towns contribute to the impoverishment of the rural population especially by exploiting its natural and human resources (Tacoli, 2003). The middle or intermediate hypothesis implies the need to take into account, on the one hand the uniqueness of small towns and on the other hand the distinctiveness of the region where they are located (Tacoli, 1998). It was considered that the development of small towns can influence the change of the rural population (Zamfir and Brăghină, 2000) from the surrounding countryside by providing employment in non-agricultural activities (Zamfir, 2005), thus having an important role in the decrease of the migration pressure on larger towns.

The factors and forces responsible for the growth of small towns are: the location, the types and resources of their area of influence, the infrastructure and the quality of labor resources, the historical evolution and the administrative status. Besides these factors related to small towns, they are also affected by exogenous factors like national or regional economic development, macro-territorial development trends, regional decline or regional attractiveness (UNCRD, 1983). Hinterland richness in terms of natural resources (agriculture, minerals etc.) influences the economic performance of small towns. It is well-known that the development of small urban centers takes into account the development potential of their rural area of influence (Vârdol, 2009). Key elements in the development of small towns are represented by the historical, cultural, political and religious legacy.

Due to the different political and socio-economic context, Romanian small towns present certain specific peculiarities which are reflected in their role played in the territory. During post-communism, the Romanian society went through profound demographic, economic, social and cultural changes. These mutations occurred in both rural and urban

areas, left their mark on the functionality of the environment. Contrary to the large and medium size cities tributary to the communist past, the small towns in Romania are facing serious and generalized issues, represented firstly by the economic restructuring, followed by demographic decline, labor migration and, ultimately by reduced urban functions.

All these specific post-communist problems of Romanian small towns, caught the attention of specialists from various fields, being tackled in a number of studies conducted mainly by geographers and sociologists. It is worth mentioning the studies elaborated by Iașu and Muntele (2001), Zamfir (2007), Erdeli and Dumitrescu (2007), Zamfir, Talângă and Stoica (2009), Pascariu (2010), Camară (2011), Filimon et al. (2011), Humă and Chiriac (2012) etc. The present study is enrolled in the same vein, aiming at the analysis of the functional changes occurred during the post-communist period in the four small towns of Beiuș area.

As it is well known, small towns are considered the link between rural and urban areas (Ianoș, 1987), which is true both for the communist era and the present. Specifically, the role of small towns in the adjacent territory, besides their demographic size and their position in territory, is derived from the functions they perform, which gives them the status of "relays in the transmission of urban characteristics in rural areas" (Ianoș, 1987, 46), but without claiming exclusiveness of this action.

In order to render the functional changes occurred within Beiuș Land small towns, we analyzed the economic, socio-cultural and residential function changes. The analysis carried out for Beiuș, Nucet, Ștei and Vașcău towns focused on the following indicators: the number of economic units, the structure of the active population by activity branches, the level of endowment with socio-cultural units (to render the economic and socio-cultural function changes) and the degree of housing renewal (to render the changes in the residential function). The period of analysis covers 20 years between 1990 and 2010. Statistical information used in this paper was taken from the databases of the four small towns (BDL) and the censuses of 1992 and 2002 provided by Bihor County Statistics.

## **2. COMMUNIST LEGACY IN THE FUNCTIONAL PROFILE OF SMALL TOWNS**

Until the end of World War II, the evolution of Romanian towns analyzed through spatial planning had not suffered major influences, their development following a natural course. Thus, the settlements were developed mostly based on the actual capitalization of local potential (Ghiorghiță, 2002), not taking into account that the contribution of local development can induce regional and national development. This fact had triggered, especially in rural areas, the emergence of undefined structures, textures and shapes, which later led to complex problems in systematization, in accordance with the newly adopted legislation. The following period was characterized by the decisive intervention of the communist state, where the administrative organization was correlated with active economic policies imposed from the top down, with a strong impact on regional development. Planning in communist Romania was imposed by a suitable form of the New Economic Policy (NEP) from the Soviet Union, economic development being based on five-year plans (Vela, 1986). It was the moment when "the stage of building the multilaterally developed socialist society" started. The five-

year plan foresaw huge investments in industry, in large economic projects, but of a doubtful economic value. The emphasis was on the siderurgy, petrochemical, chemical industry and machine construction industry (Dobrescu *et al.*, 2012). The existing rural-urban gap in the early stage of communism led to the establishment of immediate urbanization policies at large scale. In 1967, the Central Commission for Village Systematization presented the prototype of the future Romanian rural settlements: each village was going to have one or more schools, a public library and a house of culture, cinema, medical and maternity clinic, a public bath and a network of shops that was to ensure the supply of consumer goods for the residents. In parallel, intellectuals were supposed to be brought in these communes to decide on a medium term the transformation of these communes into semi-urban settlements. Rural systematization foresaw the replacement of households from small and scattered villages (considered as lacking development perspectives) being concentrated in the more compact communes. Hundreds of communes selected across the country were to be converted into agro-industrial centers with urban status. Their inhabitants (in number of at least 5000 in each town) were to be removed from their individual homes in collective dwellings (blocks) with several floors creating a high density of the population. Inside these localities, the administrative and political offices were supposed to be grouped in the center of the settlement. Industrial sites, stores, schools, hospitals and other facilities were supposed to be constructed in these areas serving the surrounding villages within a radius of up to 20 km (Dumitrescu, 2008). Since the early 1980s the systematization became part of annual and five-year plans.

Concerning the urban framework there are three major phases of the regional policies that brought a metamorphosis on the Romanian urban space:

- The first stage corresponds to the 1950 administrative-territorial division (28 regions including rayons, cities and towns) after an "imported" model (Forman *et al.*, 2011). This division had assumed the appearance of regional small centers which had difficulties in exercising their administrative and socio-economic functions.

- The second stage includes the reduction of the number of regions to 16. During this period, there had been important changes, towards the economic and social enhancement of regional seats and rayon centers which developed technical infrastructure and their own institutions resulting in a lesser importance of the other urban centers.

- The third stage is represented by the administrative division of the territory in smaller units, the traditional counties, by Law no. 2/1968 (initially 39 counties, and then, after the changes in 1981, 41 counties). This meant the descent of the industrialization process from large urban areas to middle and lower urban entities. A number of new county seats (which previously had not had a significant industry) faced a major development. The economic development led to an increased urbanization process. In 1975 the urban population increased by 335% from 1930, compared with the increase of 51% of the total population (Forman *et al.*, 2011). As a result of industrialization, urbanization was amplified through an increase of the existing cities due to the migration from rural to urban (Lăzărescu, 1977). Also, industrialization triggered the emergence of new cities, other cities resulting from the transformation of villages that had been developed economically. The setting up of suburban communes, the way in

which they were administratively subordinated to towns, triggered the strengthening of the relations between these units and the polarizing unit until the merging of the periurban areas with cities.

### **3. THE POST COMMUNIST PERIOD IN THE CONTEXT OF FUNCTIONAL CHANGES OF SMALL TOWNS**

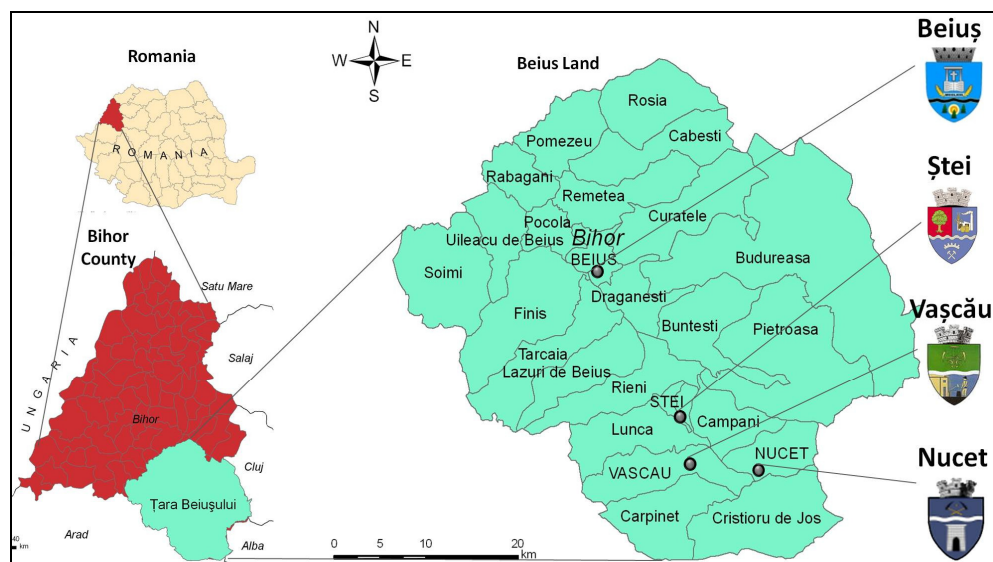
The end of the planned urbanization and regional redistribution policies has increased the polarization process. These polarization processes are stimulated by new industrial cycles of de-industrialization and stagnation (Musil, 1993). The end of regional and urban redistribution policies determined the increase of decentralization process and the dependence of the cities on their economic and social potential. Economic basis, the position within the region and the access to the main communication routes of small towns resulted in their differential evolution based on the ability to adapt to the new opportunities offered by the transition to a market economy. The polarization processes that occurred were more intense within these towns. The evolution of towns followed a specific post-industrial period trend of urban systems formation corresponding to the last phase of the industrial development characterized by high energy consumption towards a rectification process. The urban structures created by the forced urbanization process characterized by large industrial units based on limited local resources and imported labor force underwent a shock in the economic transition, being unable to adapt to the market economy. Lack of identity emphasizes the drift status, solutions being found in state policies.

The interdependence relations between employment, places, services and infrastructure, respectively, the direct link between the closing of the major industrial units (especially mining) and local living standards (Sheldon *et al.*, 2002) have prompted the authorities to promote socio-economic development policies in order to improve the situation of the areas affected by industrial and mining restructuring, including them in a sensitive category of "disadvantaged areas". The beginning of negotiations with the European Union towards the integration into the community space has contributed greatly to the reorientation of national territorial development policies by adopting measures of decentralization and regional development (Development Regions facilitated by Law no. 151/1998). Accession to the European Community space imposed adherence to rules and principles of sustainable development set by the European Union. In this context, cities, particularly smaller ones, have access to funding sources (Structural Funds) and the possibility of shaping development strategies and policies based on human and natural resources that they have. Nevertheless, the articulation of the legal and institutional framework, or operational tools such as policies, strategies and programs in a unified approach that respects both national distinctiveness and European policy framing seems to be difficult.

### **4. FUNCTIONAL CHANGES IN THE SMALL TOWNS OF BEIUȘ LAND**

Beiuș Land, located in the South-East of Bihor County, is part of the "land" type area category, this being a geographic region of deep authenticity specific to Romania (Cocean, 1997, Filimon, 2012). The urban system of this region is represented by the

towns of Beiuș, Ștei, Vașcău and Nucet. If the first city has a long and continuous urban tradition, not the same can be said about the other three, which are the effects of central policies of forced urbanization and industrialization. If until the setting up of the communist regime the regional convergence axes were directed towards Beiuș, after several external interventions in the natural course of regional development, the urban hierarchy was disturbed. The gravity center moved temporary from Beiuș to Ștei - Vașcău - Nucet (fig. 1). In this context, a series of functional changes took place in the small towns of Beiuș Land.



**Fig. 1.** Beiuș Land. Location of urban settlements

### *Economic changes*

The largest changes occurred in the post communist period affected the economy. The difficulty to adapt to the rigors of market economy of the old economic units was felt acutely. Large economic units closed their doors, the vacuum created and the need of a fast recalibration resulted in the emergence of new economic units. Even if the number of industrial units increased in the post-communism years, the lack of entrepreneurial experience correlated with the lack of resources and avoidance of major investments, made that many of these units did not contribute significantly to the economic development of towns and did not compensate for the disappearance of old economic structures.

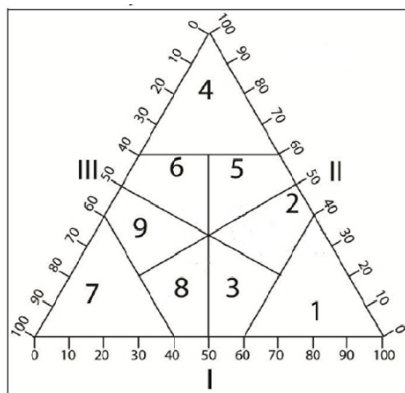
The dynamics of the *number of economic units* in the post-communist period reveals a continuous increase in all four studied towns. Beiuș has the highest economic growth in number of economic units, rising from 135 in 1990 to 404 economic units in 2005 and 591 in 2011. Ștei, from 68 economic units in 1990, reached 248 in 2005 and 332 in 2011. Nucet town has increased from 18 economic units in 1990 to 37 in 2005 and 63 in 2011. It can be noted that Ștei-Nucet-Drăgănești as a disadvantaged area had no

major impact on promoting the installation of new economic units in the case of Nucet. On the contrary, in Ștei the disadvantaged area status triggered the installation of powerful companies with a major impact in transforming the profile of this area. Vașcău presents a unique situation with a stationary character. The number of economic units in 2005 was the same as in 1990, in recent years their number increasing to 57.

*The professional structure of the population* for the four towns reveals a continuous decrease of the share of active population from the total population. Beiuș is the town that has the most stable evolution from this perspective. Thus, if in 1990, 57.65% of the population was active, in 2005 its share was 46.15 and decreased to 44.89 in 2010. In Nucet in the first year of the establishment of democracy and market liberalization (1990), the share of the active population from the total population, was only 19.43. Furthermore, this indicator underwent a slow increase at 21.16 % in 2005 and 21.71 % in 2010.

Ștei registered a significant decrease of the active population during this period of transition, moving from a share of 81.21% of active population to 65% in 2005 and almost at half by 2010, when the share of active population was 39.47%. Another city that has experienced a continuous decrease in the active population is Vașcău, from 35.49% in 1990 to 15.10% in 2005 and only 11.87% in 2010.

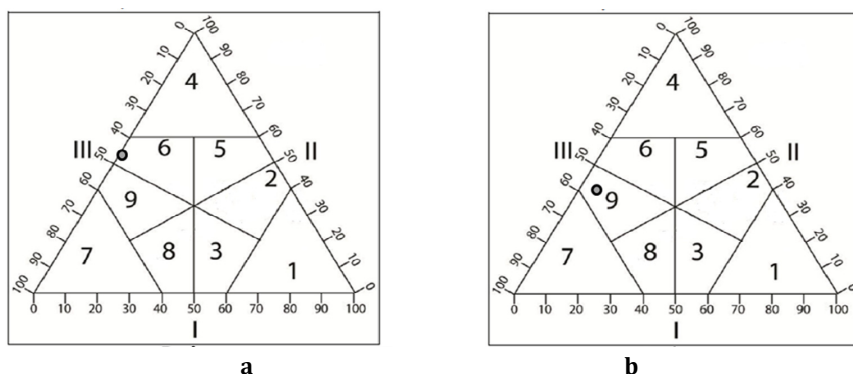
There are a number of factors that led to these changes in the occupational structure. On the one hand, the reorganization of economic units with large number of employees and, on the other side, the lack of urban attractiveness. Regarding the economic profile of the towns of Beiuș Land, the economic changes which had occurred in recent years can be seen by analyzing *the structure of the employed population by sector*. Depending on the economic distinctiveness of urban areas can be highlighted a number of urban types based on the economic profile (fig. 2).



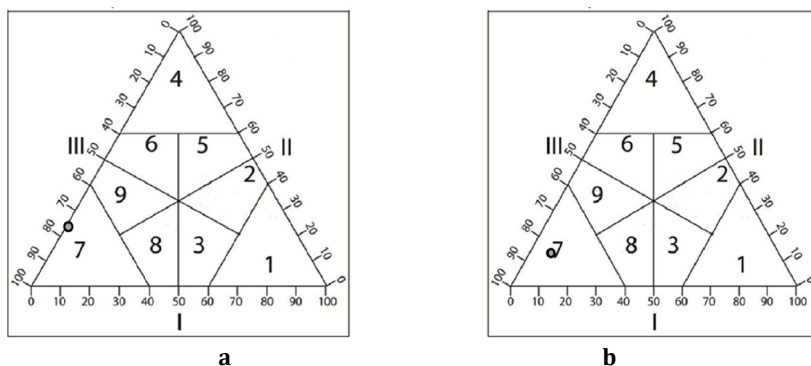
**Fig. 2.** I, II, III – functional types; (1. agrarian, 2. agrarian-industrial, 3. agrarian-service, 4. industrial, 5. industrially-agrarian, 6. industrially-service, 7. service, 8. service-agrarian, 9. service-industrial) (Lukić et al., 2012)

For the studied towns, the situation varies from case to case being otherwise under the influence of different exogenous factors which have acted on them with a different intensity. Resilience and adaptation processes are those which set their print at present.

In the early 1990s, Beiuș had a dominant industrial profile with a low participation of the service component. *The industrial armour* dressed in the communist period by a town with a long urban and commercial tradition (in 1451 it was declared *oppidum*) was easily replaced by a *mantle* represented by economic units with activities in services. Nowadays, Beiuș is a town with an economic profile characterized by numerous activities in providing services.



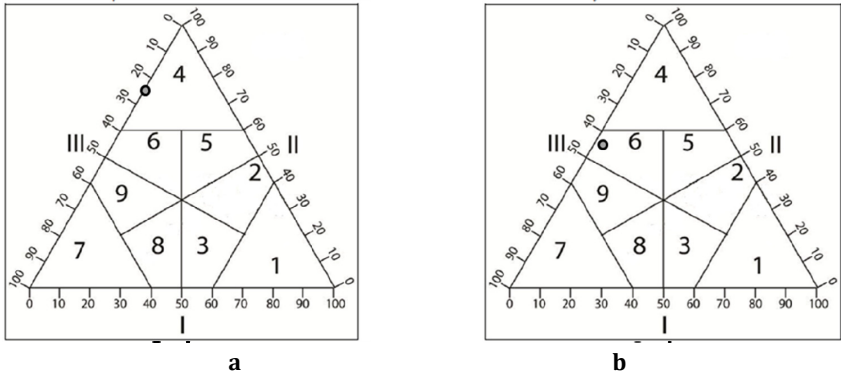
**Fig. 3a.** Beiuș - economic functional type in 1990 and  
**3b.** Beiuș - economic functional type in 2010.



**Fig. 4a.** Nucet - economic functional type in 1990 and  
**4b.** Nucet - economic functional type in 2010

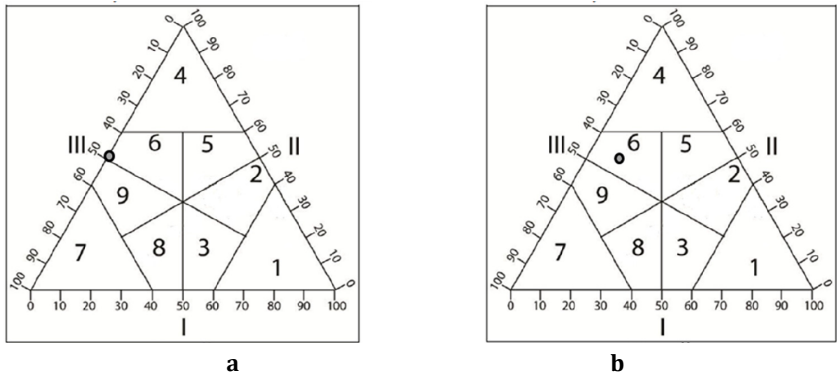
The new town created during the Soviet occupation was developed around the mining activity and related industrial branches. After the fall of communism and the shift to market economy, the communist overdeveloped industrial structure, dependent on one another and with low production, faced difficulties to adjust. Most of the economic units diminished their activity, the social consequences being severe. The local economy diversified due to the new private economic initiatives. 82% of these have a commercial profile, only 15% provide services and 3% has industrial activity. It is obvious that twenty years after the fall of communism, the local economy did not manage to diversify its profile and outrun the difficulties of monospecialization, Nucet and the two other villages remaining mining communities which lost their identity without constructing a new one (Filimon *et al.*, 2011).





**Fig. 5a.** Ștei - economic functional type in 1990 and  
**5b.** Ștei - economic functional type in 2010

The town planned in Moscow and built by the Russians owes its existence to the forced industrialization policies. In the early 1990s the town had a mono-industrial profile, where about 75.5% of the total workforce operated in the industry. The reduction and finally closure of these industrial entities created new economic opportunities. In 1998 Ștei-Nucet disadvantaged area was established (Emergency Decree no. 24/1998, modified by Law no.20/1999), by including the towns of Ștei, Nucet and Drăgănești commune, which were to benefit from a series of facilities to attract potential investors (Filimon *et al.*, 2012). The newly-established industrial platform changed the economic profile of the town, much more because the new economic units were accompanied by connected activities. The tertiarization process is obvious, respectively the transition from a mono-industrial town to an industrial-services type town.



**Fig. 6a.** Vașcău - economic functional type in 1990 and  
**6b.** Vașcău - economic functional type in 2010

Vașcău maintained the same industrially-service profile throughout the entire post-communist period, having an alternation of population employed in the tertiary sector. The share of the population employed ranged from 49.5% in 1990 to 57.6% in 1991 and back to 35.5 % in 1992. This highlights the existence of instability in Vașcău

on a reduced temporal scale. The oscillatory evolution continues throughout this period. In 1998 the share of population employed in the tertiary sector reached the maximum (77%), coinciding with the year of the declaration of the disadvantaged area Ștei - Nucet - Drăgănești.

### *Socio-cultural changes*

The changes in the socio-cultural composition of the towns are analyzed according to their level of endowment with social equipments: schools, universities, libraries, museums, cinema, culture, theaters, philharmonic, hospitals, religious buildings and spaces designed for recreation.

The town, regardless of its size, is a generator of culture, and tradition plays an important role in this sense. Taking into account this tradition and how these towns earned their urban status, with the exception of Beiuș, the cultural function did not receive a special attention from the state authorities, therefore no major differences in the current period compared to the communist period were noticed.

During the communist period, this function was achieved through organized action in the House of Culture, cultural associations, cinemas. Immediately, after the change of the political regime in Romania, due to the wider range access to television services, the first to suffer were the cinemas. They have disappeared from the sphere of recreational activities offered by these towns. The activities of the House of Culture and cultural associations were reduced significantly in the post-communist period due to the lack of the state external intervention.

In the educational field, unlike the communist period, changes were not particularly spectacular. The number of schools remained the same: five high schools, three in Beiuș and two in Ștei. The only changes that occurred consist in the reorientation of these high schools from the industrial profile towards a human, pedagogical profile. A significant change is represented by the presence of higher education institutions, present in Beiuș, by a branch of the University of Oradea, specialized in teaching and engineering.

### **Socio-cultural institutions in Beiuș Land small towns**

**Table 1**

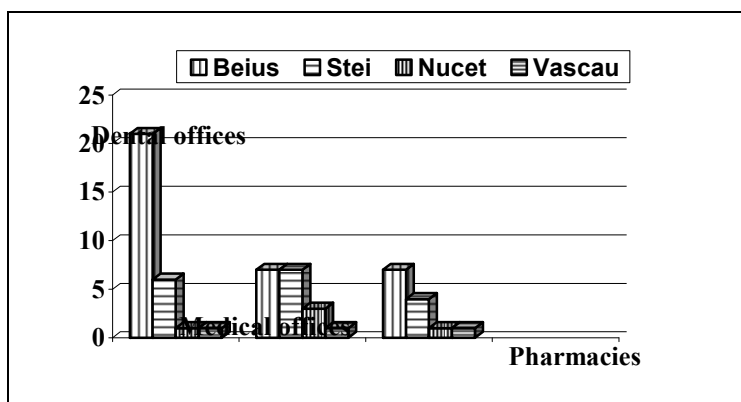
City	High schools		Museums		Hospitals		Libraries		House of Culture	
	1990	2011	1990	2011	1990	2011	1990	2011	1990	2011
Beiuș	3	3	1	1	1	1	3	1	2	-
Nucet	-	-	-	-	1	1	2	1	1	-
Ștei	2	2	-	-	2	1	2	1	1	-
Vășcău	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	-

Source: BDL, 1990-2010

From socio-cultural and recreational point of view, the biggest changes occur at the individual level. This can be noticed in the way in which the towns have adapted to the new demands of the people. Freedom of religious expression, limited in the communist period, generated the emergence of new religious communities to which the towns had to answer. The answer comes through the emergence of new urban religious buildings belonging to different denominations (Baptist, Pentecostal etc.).

The changes in the cultural recreational range of the urban environment are the result of changes in recreational behavior of the individual. Thus, it is a shift towards activities considered degrading or even banned during the communist era, like gambling, discos, night clubs etc.

In terms of changes occurred in the health-service system, it should be noted that during communism there were a total of four hospital units, one in Beiuș, one in Nucet and two in Ștei. Following the restructuring that took place in the Romanian health system, hospitals even closed. The number of hospitals decreased to three, one hospital in each of the mentioned towns. Vașcău has never had a hospital. The most important changes in health care system of the post-communist period are represented by the emergence of private medical establishments such as dental offices, medical offices and specialized pharmacies.



**Fig. 7.** Medical and connected services in the small towns of Beiuș Land  
source: BDL, 1990-2010

In the four studied towns, there is a total of 29 dental offices, 11 pharmacies and 18 private family medicine offices. Their distribution in the four towns shows their higher concentration in Beiuș. In Beiuș and Ștei there are also ambulance services, providing service to the entire Beiuș Land.

#### *Changes in the residential function*

The residential function or the ability to provide a decent standard of living to its inhabitants is related to the attractiveness of towns. To highlight the changes occurred in the post-communist period, we analyzed the evolution of the number of dwellings from 1990 to 2011. This trend overlaps a general trend of population decline.

The number of new dwellings in the four analyzed towns for the entire period is 747, or an average of 34 dwellings/year. At the town level, Beiuș stands out with 375 dwellings, ie 17 dwellings/year followed by Nucet with 258 dwellings (12 dwellings/year) and Ștei with 9 dwellings/year (197 new dwellings). Vașcău registered a decrease of housing for the entire period (-73 dwellings), respectively - 4 dwellings/year.

The spatial effects of these functional changes in the small towns of Beiuș Land are consequential in the rural area that they polarize and influence. The emergence and intensification of metropolisation processes caused a weakening and even limitation of some urban functions of the small towns in the favor of Oradea, the county seat. The high quality services offered by the city of Oradea induces an increase in the urban attractiveness, influencing regional orientations.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The small towns of Beiuș Land represent the skeleton on which the regional development of this territory must be built. Although these towns were influenced by the same effects of the transition from centrally planned economy to the economic development generated by local mechanisms, the adaptive course was different. This difference is given by the existence or not of an urban tradition. If Beiuș has a long urban tradition, Ștei with the newly created elitist urban character managed to draw a certain urban identity. In Vașcău and Nucet, the urban character is entirely missing, having a predominantly rural character. In these towns the link between past, present and future is extremely weak, their urban image being the most affected. The identity of an urban space is the result of the historical past. In this context, one should take into account Beiuș with a modest urban dynamics but which has a high capitalization potential nourished by the legacy of the past, especially in the cultural field. The other three towns owe their existence as urban areas to the central forced policies. Their short period of existence and the diversity of origin of the inhabitants created an unstable community cohesion linked to the industry and implicitly to the created jobs there. With the disappearance of the communist industrial units, the articulation between individuals, territory and identity has also disappeared. Slow economic recalibration processes and resilience in the case of Beiuș and adaptation in the case of the other three towns are obvious.

In order to adapt to the new market economy rigors after the end of the communist regime, the small towns of Beiuș Land suffered major changes. The most visible changes are in the economical profile of the four small towns, which directly or indirectly affected their socio-cultural and residential functions. Functional changes are more obvious in the three towns emerged during the communist era which highlight severe urban decline signs. Contrarily, due to its urban potential enhanced during the history through its commercial status gained already in the Middle Ages, the town of Beiuș presents nowadays a stable situation. The functional changes registered in this town offer more competitive opportunities and a wider polarizing area in the region.

## Acknowledgements

*This contribution represents the results of the following research project PN II, TE\_287, no. 75/2010.*

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