

RECONVERSION OF MONO-INDUSTRIAL URBAN AREAS (CASE STUDY – BECLEAN CITY)

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ABSTRACT. – **Reconversion of Mono-Industrial Urban Areas (Case Study – Beclean City).** Following the collapse of the communist regime in Romania, the country's economy went through deep transformations, which negatively impacted the standard of living of the population. The closure of a large number of industrial enterprises overwhelmed the Romanian cities, and its impact was felt more intensely in the small, mono-industrial urban areas: since many of these had been established around these companies, their very existence was threatened by the closures. The city of Beclean is a typical example of such a mono-industrial settlement, which started facing difficulties with the decline of its metallurgical industry. In its search for life saving ideas, the local government decided to focus on the tourism potential of the area, as evidenced by the fact that all the projects under implementation in the city aim at developing this sector.

Keywords: *reconversion, revitalization, sustainable development, sustainable tourism, urban resilience.*

1. Introduction

The city of Beclean is the largest settlement along Someșul Mare Corridor and the second largest in Bistrița-Năsăud County. It is a typical example of an urban settlement trying to find new solutions in order to return to its pre-1990s economic and social status. The well-documented economic decline of urban areas in Romania was felt more strongly in small towns, which are characterized by a narrow range of functional economic branches; such is Beclean, among

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others, and this feature directly affected its inhabitants' standard of living. After the 1990s, when the average number of active workers in the city was 7,517, there was a steep and continuous decline until the 2005-2010s (3,888 workers); since then, the number stabilized around 4,100 (4,253 in 2012, 4,037 in 2016, 4,010 in 2018), then it dropped again suddenly to 3,610 in 2019. This latest decrease was due to special circumstances, namely the challenges faced by the largest employer in the city, SC Dan Steel Beclean, a company that continued the metallurgical activity from the communist period. Through all this, the city's population remained close to 12,000. In conclusion, we have seen a 52% decrease in the average number of active workers in the city over a 30-year period, while the total population has roughly remained at the same values.

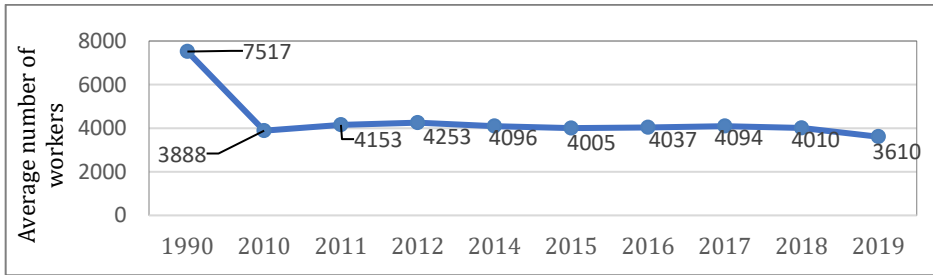


Fig. 1. Evolution of the average number of workers in the city of Beclean.

Source: Direcția Regională de Statistică Bistrița-Năsăud

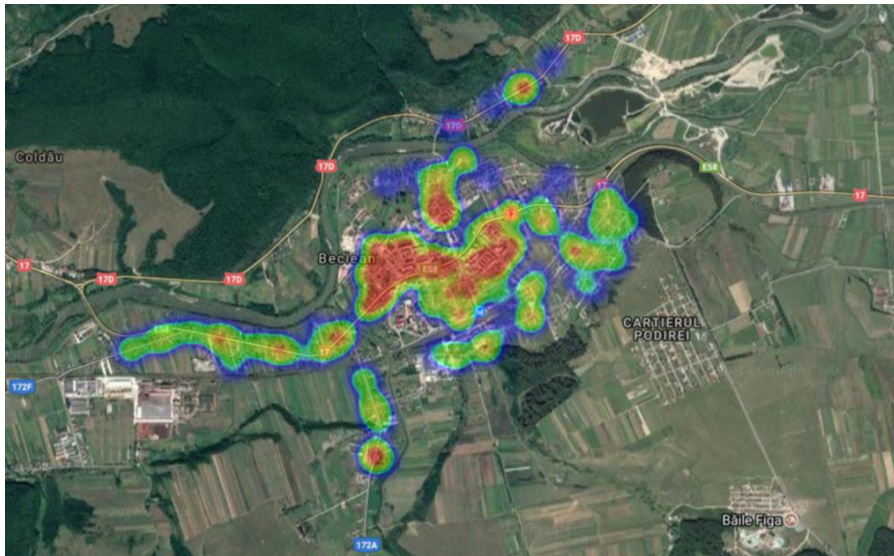


Fig. 2. Location of the main economic operators.

Source: Beclean City Bypass – Road Traffic Study

2. Theoretical background

During the communist period, many small towns in Central and Eastern Europe underwent intensive industrialization (Hirt, 2005; Stanilov, 2007; Šykora, 2009). Communist governments invested heavily in the development of the industrial sector, which led to rapid growth in production and the creation of jobs in small towns. This industrialization had a significant impact on the urban landscape and attracted many migrants from rural areas (Hamilton, Dimitrowska & Pichler-Milanović, 2005). After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Romania faced a series of significant changes in the field of urban development, especially in small towns in the country (Ianoş, 2001, 2004; Dumitrescu, 2008; Roşu, 2015). This was marked by the transition from a centralized and planned system to a market economy, and the impact of these changes on small towns in Romania was considerable. Likewise, the impact of the change in development strategies after 1990 for small cities in Romania was mixed. On the one hand, some of the cities managed to successfully adapt to the new conditions and attract investments, which led to economic growth and an increase in the standard of living for the inhabitants. On the other hand, others have lagged behind with weak economies and poor infrastructure. Factors such as geographic location, availability of resources and the quality of local governance had a significant impact on the results (Heller & Ianoş, 2004). One of the concepts widely addressed in specialized literature and often used by decision-makers is associated with the capacity of urban systems to resist various changes and evolutionary transformations and to be able to reorganize from a structural and functional point of view (Parkinson et al., 2012). In the context of the urban resilience paradigm, a large part of small towns in Romania, after 1990, faced sudden economic changes and a loss of traditional industry (Simmie & Martin, 2010; Dumitrescu, 2008; Bănică & Muntele, 2015; Red, 2015). However, many residents and local authorities have been able to adapt and find new ways to support their communities. For example, small towns began to invest in developing local resources, such as agriculture and tourism, to diversify their economy and become more resilient to sudden economic changes. As small towns faced economic restructuring, they had to reinvent themselves and adapt to new demands of the market economy. Cities that have succeeded in diversifying the economy and attracting investment have had a significant impact on the wider territorial system, contributing to the development of surrounding rural areas (Radu, 2015). This development process has had a positive impact on the sustainable development of the regions, creating a more balanced economy and promoting the efficient use of

natural resources. Many small towns in Romania have suffered from outdated infrastructure and abandoned urban areas. With the support of European funds and other funding sources, many of these cities have started urban regeneration projects to revitalize these areas and make them more attractive to investors and tourists. This process of urban regeneration had a positive impact on the functionality aspect of small towns, contributing to increasing their attractiveness. By promoting the unique natural, cultural and historical resources of these cities, new opportunities for economic development have been created (Sýkora, 2009, Bănică & Muntele, 2015). Tourism has helped to create jobs and raise living standards, but at the same time it has required significant investment in tourism infrastructure and services. In conclusion, the change in development strategy after 1990 had a profound impact on small towns in Romania. These cities had to become resilient and adapt to new economic realities, invest in urban regeneration to revitalize their abandoned areas, contribute to territorial development and promote sustainable development. At the same time, they had to focus on the social and cultural development aspects and capitalize on the tourism potential. Despite all the challenges and difficulties, these small towns have demonstrated that they can be engines of regional development and examples of adaptation and innovation in a context of economic and social transition.

3. Methodology

This research analyses the results of the Beclean local government's strategy for development, which had European Union funding and was implemented over a period of about fifteen years with the aim of capitalizing the region's tourism capabilities. By contrasting these results with those achieved by other administrations in the same region, we hope to identify a successful model that can be followed by other communities living in the former mono-industrial cities of the communist era.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Revitalization of the urban area by investing in tourism

In 2009, in order to counter the negative effects of this trend, the local government, who had not been able to attract investors from the industrial sector – due to the lack of a medium- and long-term action plan, inadequate infrastructure, inexperience or even political or personal conflicts of interests, as well as a lack of support from the county level of governance, which directed all investments to the county seat – found a successful solution in accessing EU funds (non-repayable PHARE grants). This first step marked an important turning point in the evolution of the city. The implemented project was aimed



Fig. 3. “Legacy” Centre

Source: the authors

at capitalizing on the spa resources of the salt lakes in the north-west region of Romania, in collaboration with the administrations of Cojocna and Dej (for Ocna Dejului). Consequently, on June 25, 2010, within the administrative territory of the city of Beclean, Băile Figa spa resort was opened up; it consisted of a building with an indoor pool, sauna, jacuzzi, changing rooms, gym, and outdoor saltwater pool.

Although the projects implemented in the three locations had the same beginnings, Beclean city administration anticipated the development potential of the project and constantly pursued the expansion of the leisure area, which finally managed to distinguish itself from the similar resorts in Cojocna and Ocna Dejului. Namely, with the help of EU financing or its own funds, the local government directed several expansion projects over the next years: 4 additional outdoor pools (one of them heated), a lazy river, slides for children and adults (one of them 140 m long), aerosol therapy areas, playgrounds for children, walkways, mud-packing



Fig. 4. Social Centre
Source: the authors

therapy areas, lifeguard station, sports fields and several concession stands. Moreover, the city hall opened to private investors a concession lots area close to the resort, and approximately 200 cottages and 150 small houses were built there, providing around 2,500 tourist accommodation units. These developments allowed the resort to attract increasing numbers of tourists: over 200,000 entrance tickets to the resort were sold in 2021, as compared to 20,000 in 2010.

Despite this success, a slowdown in the rate of annual growth in the number of tourists has been noted over the last 3 years. Also in 2021, the leisure area of Băile Figa – the city of Beclean was officially declared a tourist resort of local interest. The Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism (MEAT) press release announcing the official resort status for Băile Figa leisure area states that this “is a European Destination of Excellence, as it was awarded the 3rd place in the 2019 national competition for the health and relaxation tourism category”.

The main challenge for the local tourism is the shortness of the period when the resort is visited by a large number of tourists (July and August). In order to make the destination more attractive to tourists, and to extend the tourist season as well, several EU-funded projects were launched, some of which are planned to be opened very soon. In fact, one of these projects was opened to the public in 2023 inside the resort: it is called the Legacy Recreational Centre and it has recreational-educational, recreational-sports and recreational-creative functions. The project involved the construction of a building with several facilities, including 4 swimming pools, a bowling hall, a gym, and a conference hall. The various activities of the centre can host 425 people at the same time. Very close nearby, and also in 2023, a social centre was opened; its role is to provide the services of a properly equipped physical recovery unit. In addition to this, a children’s playground was also set up on an area of approximately 1 ha. Several projects aimed at improving urban mobility, and benefiting the tourism sector as well, were also carried out. One such project

is the Sustainable urban mobility plan, which allowed for the rehabilitation of all the streets in the city and the setting up of a local transport company. This company manages 8 electric buses, a depot, and new stations, and its services include the connection between the city of Beclean and Băile Figa resort. The bypass of the city of Beclean is also under construction at this time; its aim is to prevent frequent times of traffic congestion, which negatively impacts tourism as well.

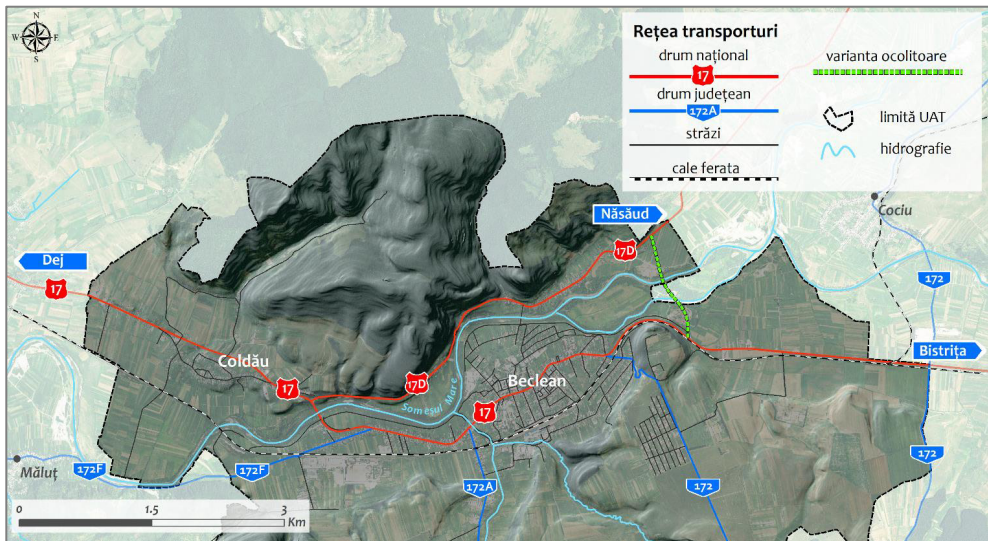


Fig. 5. The bypass route

Source: Beclean City Bypass – Road Traffic Study

According to the road traffic study carried out for this purpose, approximately 2.7 million vehicles (out of which 20% are heavy-duty) transit through the city annually, at an average speed not exceeding 30 km/h. In addition to cutting down transit times – with clear economic and environmental benefits, and also helping to increase the quality of life for the residents – the bypass will improve access to Băile Figa, as its junction with the DN17 road is located near the access road to the resort. Another large-scale project aimed at significantly raising the tourism profile of the area is the “Urban Garden of Transylvania”, currently in its research phase. The plan is to use the 10 ha area for setting up facilities which allow the development of sustainable forms of tourism, such as glamping, for which 55 tents are planned. Furthermore, floating bungalows on an artificial lake, greenhouses with exotic plants, and hotels and shopping centres will also be built. In order to capitalize on the area’s

tourist potential, the Local Action Group “Ținutul Haiducilor” (Outlaws Land) was set up; it is made up by 18 administrative and territorial units around the city of Beclean (17 in the west of Bistrița-Năsăud County and one in Cluj County). This approach is an attempt to capitalize on the resources of the 17 administrative and territorial units neighbouring the city of Beclean in a unified manner, with coordination from the core municipality.

5. Conclusions

As we have seen, the municipal government has opted for tourism to be the main engine of progress for the city, disregarding all other options. However, for the time being, the economic impact of the small private tourism businesses around the resort has not been able to replicate the positive effects of the large industrial companies that were there prior to 1989. Other neighbouring cities have implemented different strategies, focusing mainly on industrial development (Dej city, for instance). Only the future can tell, after all the projects now in various stages of development are completed, whether the local government has found the winning option in tourism, so as to ensure a complete conversion of the economic profile and a sustainable development for the city of Beclean.

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