

THE SETTLEMENTS AND THE IMPACT OF SUBURBANIZATION ON THE DEMOGRAPHIC AGE STRUCTURE IN SIBIU COUNTY, ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. – **The Settlements and the Impact of Suburbanization on the Demographic Age Structure in Sibiu County, Romania.** The process of suburbanization has had an impact on the settlement system in Sibiu County. Demographic data collected from the last two censuses (2011 and 2021) as well as from the National Institute of Statistics show that the cities of Sibiu and Mediaș experienced a demographic decline in the last decades, while their suburban areas increased demographically. The highest growth has been recorded in the commune of Șelimbăr and in the town of Cisnădie, as well as in other communes around the city of Sibiu (Șura Mare, Șura Mică, Cristian, Roșia). While there is no data regarding the age of the migrants from the core cities to their respective suburban areas, the analysis shows that most of them are young adults and their (future) children. This has led to a sharp change in the age structure of the population both in the core cities and in the suburban settlements. On the one hand, the cities of Sibiu and Mediaș experienced a decline in young and adult population, and an increase of the weight of the elderly population. On the other hand, suburban settlements have registered not just an increase in terms of population, but also in the weight of the young and adult population. Therefore, we witness a process of sharp rejuvenation in the suburban settlements (mostly in Șelimbăr and Cisnădie), at the same time with the intensification of demographic ageing in many parts of Sibiu County, including the two cities, Sibiu and Mediaș. At the same time, suburbanization brought along a number of issues, such as the insufficient number of educational institutions in the suburban areas and increased traffic due to the large number of commuters.

Keywords: suburbanization, settlements, cities, age structure, Sibiu County, Romania.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Suburbanization has been an important process in post-socialist Romania, especially after 2000 (Voiculescu *et al.*, 2010; Grigorescu *et al.*, 2012; Suditu, 2012; Cochei, 2014; Grigorescu, Mitrică, and Mocanu, 2015; Bodocan, Benedek, and Rusu, 2018; Rusu, Bodocan, and Man, 2020; Rusu, 2022), the same as in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe (Hamilton, Dimitrovska Andrews and Pichler-Milanović, 2005; Enyedi and Kovács, 2006; Young and Kaczmarek, 2008; Sýkora and Bouzarovski, 2012; Sýkora and Stanilov, 2014). Many urban residents, who grew tired of the compact cities filled with communist-style blocks of flats, have preferred to move to the neighbouring villages, adopting a more rural lifestyle, without giving up the urban commodities and amenities or their jobs in the city, commuting daily between their new homes and the core city.

This process has had a strong impact on the development of settlements around larger cities, as well as on the cities themselves. While Romania has been characterized by a general demographic decline (Benedek and Török, 2014; Vasile and Dobre, 2015; Dumitrașcu, Trică, and Caragea, 2018; Hărăguș and Földes, 2020; Patiță, 2024), suburban settlements were among the very few ones which experienced a constant and sometimes explosive growth in terms of population, while the core cities declined due to emigration (Rusu, Bodocan, and Man, 2020). This process is also seen as a sort of re-migration, because some of migrants returned to their original villages, which they left for the cities during the socialist period. However, in most cases the migrants are young adults who were not even born in the socialist period. From a historical perspective, this process is nevertheless the reverse of what happened during the socialist period (and before), when people from rural areas flocked to the cities.

Given the young age of the migrants, suburbanization has left a mark on the demographic age structure. Therefore, suburban settlements have a much younger population on the whole, with a significant proportion of young adults and children, leading to high birth rates, while the core cities are affected by demographic ageing and high mortality rates. The positive natural balance in the suburban settlements doubles the effect of immigration, generating explosive population growth, while the negative natural balance in the core cities creates a downward spiral in demographic terms, leading to an even more striking decline.

2. DATA AND MATERIALS

Historical data regarding settlements have been retrieved from a number of studies. For instance, the first documentary attestation of each settlements has been taken from the works of Suciu (1968), but other sources have been checked as well, especially for newer settlements.

Population data has been retrieved from the 2011 and 2021 censuses, available online, as well as from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), which publishes annual statistical data on the online platform TEMPO. Data has been assessed and then used to create maps using Arc-GIS 10. Unfortunately, only the censuses provide the total population at settlement (village) level, and there are no other sets of data at this level, except for the demographic structure according to gender, also provided by the censuses every 10 years. Annual relevant data provided by the INS are available at the level of municipalities (cities, towns, and communes), and therefore most of the maps have been created using the administrative map of the county, and demographic processes are mainly assessed at this level.

This paper follows a previous study (R. Rusu *et al*, 2024) which analysed the natural and the migration balance rate of the population in Sibiu County at various levels. The findings of that study are used in this paper to explain certain features of the settlements in Sibiu County as a whole, and especially of those located in the suburban areas.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sibiu County is located in the central part of Romania, in southern Transylvania. It has been always been an important hub for trade and transport, because it provides one of the few ways of crossing the Southern Carpathians, along Olt River. Most of the current settlements date from the Middle Ages, when Germans (mainly Saxons) were settled in southern Transylvania, and the city of Sibiu has become the main seat of the Saxon community, which had certain facilities granted by the Hungarian kings. Nowadays the number of Saxons is very low, because most of them emigrated to Germany (and other German-speaking countries) in several waves during the 20th century: one at the end of World War II, one during the socialist period, and the last one at the beginning of the 1990s.

While German settlements date mainly from the 12th to 14th century, some of the Romanian settlements may be even older than that, although they appeared in the documents roughly during the same period. It is worth mentioning that almost 75% of the current settlements (140 out of 188) have been attested for the first time during the 13th and 14th centuries (fig. 1).

Administratively, the 188 settlements of Sibiu County are grouped into 2 cities (Sibiu and Mediaş), 9 towns, and 53 communes. There are 11 urban settlements (the core settlements of the 2 cities and 9 towns) and 177 rural settlements (villages), out of which 25 rural settlements belong to either cities or towns, and the other 152 rural settlements make up the 53 communes,

meaning that there is an average of almost 3 rural settlements in each commune. 53 rural settlements are commune seats, while the other 99 rural settlements are smaller villages belonging to the communes.

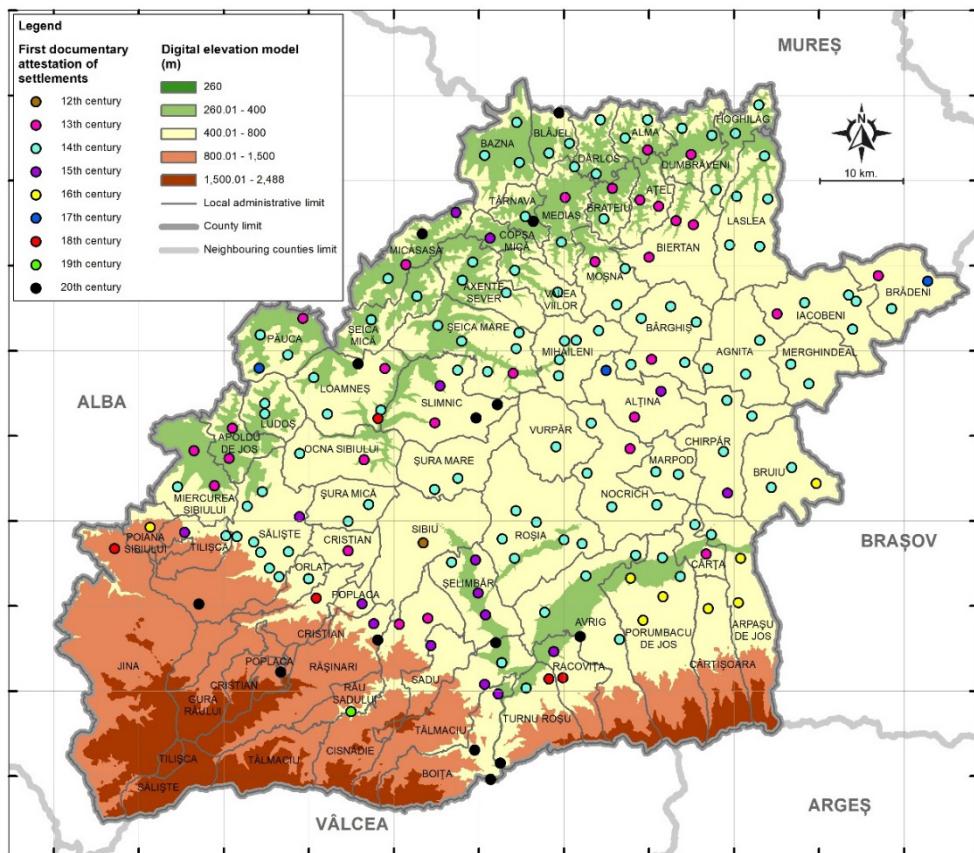


Fig. 1. The first documentary attestation of settlements in Sibiu County, Romania.
Source: the authors, according to data from Suciu (1968)

In terms of size, according to data from the last census (in 2021), the only available data at the level of each settlement, there is one large city, above 100,000 inhabitants (Sibiu), two middle-sized urban settlements, between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants (Mediaș and Cisnădie) and 8 small towns (Avrig, Agnita, Dumbrăveni, Copșa Mică, Ocna Sibiului, Săliște, Miercurea Sibiului, and Tălmaciu), which all have less than 20,000 inhabitants, and most of them even less than 10,000 inhabitants.

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Rural settlements have been classified into very large villages (more than 4,000 inhabitants), large villages (1501 – 4000 inhabitants), middle-large villages (1001 – 1500 inhabitants), middle-small villages (501 – 1000 inhabitants), small villages (101 – 500 inhabitants), very small villages (6 – 100 inhabitants), and depopulated villages (less than 6 inhabitants).

There are only two very large villages (Selimbăr and Răşinari), both located near the city of Sibiu. 15.3% of the villages are large, 13% are middle-large, 26% are middle-small, while the largest category is the one including small villages (36.2% of all the villages in Sibiu County). Very small villages are few (5.1%), while 6 villages (3.4%) may be considered as depopulated, since their number of inhabitants dropped to zero or almost zero (fig. 2).

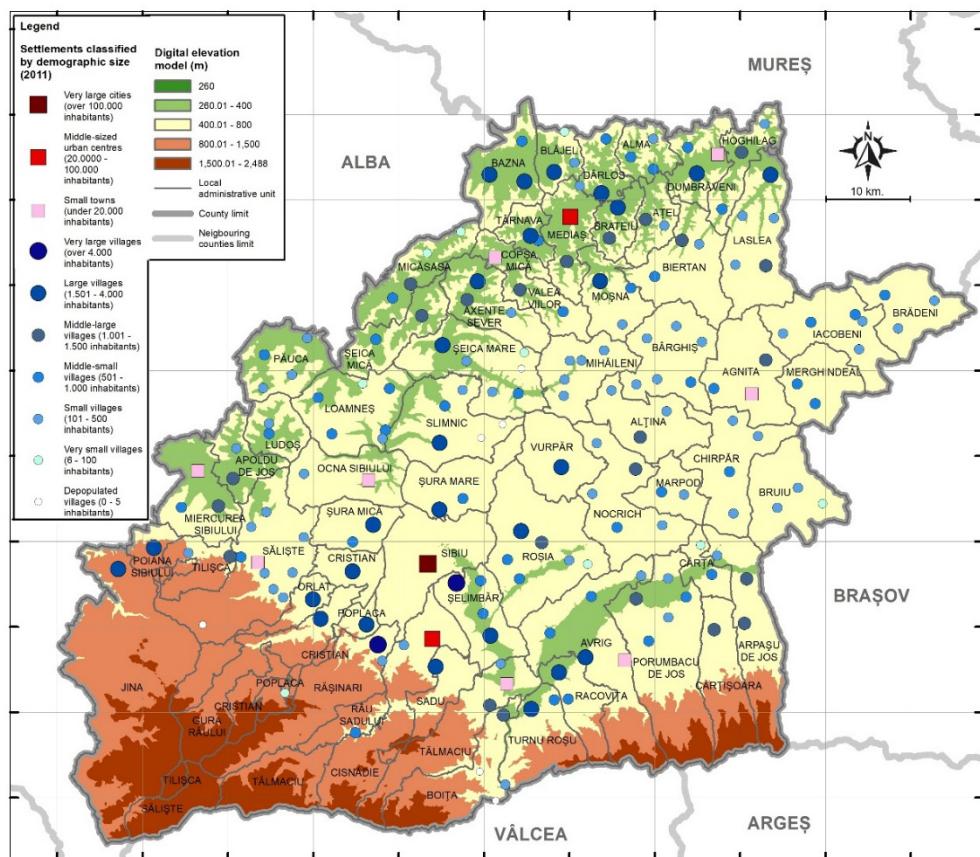


Fig. 2. Classification of settlements in Sibiu County according to their demographic size.

Source: the authors, according to data of the 2011 and 2021 censuses

Moving up to the administrative level of cities, towns, and communes, a classification based on demographic size (based on the 2021 census data) would include similarly a large city (Sibiu), two middle-sized urban centres (one city, Mediaș, and one town, Cisnădie), and eight small towns (Avrig, Agnita, Dumbrăveni, Copșa Mică, Ocna Sibiului, Săliște, Miercurea Sibiului, and Tălmaciu). It should be noted that among the small towns only Avrig is larger than 10,000 inhabitants, while all the others have less than 10,000 inhabitants, and three towns (Miercurea Sibiului, Ocna Sibiului, and Copșa Mică) have even less than 5,000 inhabitants, which makes them smaller than very large communes.

Communes have been classified according to their demographic size in very large communes (more than 5,000 inhabitants), large communes (3001 – 5000 inhabitants), middle-sized communes (1500 – 3000 inhabitants), small communes (1000 – 1499 inhabitants), and very small communes (less than 1000 inhabitants).

Currently, there are three very large communes – Șelimbăr, Rășinari, and Roșia, all located near the city of Sibiu. This suburban location allowed to them to grow demographically even in recent years, with Șelimbăr reaching to more than 17,000 inhabitants, which is more than most towns in Sibiu County. The large communes are located also in the suburban areas of the cities of Sibiu (Cristian, Șura Mare, Șura Mică, Gura Râului) or Mediaș (Târnava, Brateiu, Bazna), or along the main transport corridors (Slimnic, Șeica Mare, Axente Sever, Laslea). Almost half (43.5%) of the communes in Sibiu County are middle-sized, and almost a quarter (24.5%) of them are small and very small communes. There are five very small communes: Râu Sadului, Ludoș, Bruiu, Mihăileni, and Marpod, which are located far from the towns and the main transport axes (fig. 3).

Comparing the census population data of 2011 and 2021 respectively, it comes out that the population of Sibiu County has registered a small decline, from 397,322 inhabitants in 2011 to 388,325 inhabitants in 2021. This decline is mainly due to the negative natural balance, partly compensated by a positive migration balance (R. Rusu *et al.*, 2024).

However, looking at the level of administrative units within Sibiu County, there are important differences (fig. 4). While most of the administrative units within the county, including the two cities (Sibiu and Mediaș) experienced demographic decline, there are several administrative units which grew, some of them even at explosive pace, such as the commune of Șelimbăr, which experienced a demographic increase by 148.9%, meaning it more than doubled its size in ten years, from 7,028 inhabitants in 2011 to 17,492 inhabitants in 2021. The annual data from the INS, while slightly different than the numbers provided by the censuses, shows the same growth, and one should point out that this has continued, as the population of Șelimbăr on 1 July 2025 (the latest available figure) was 20,096 inhabitants (INS, 2025).

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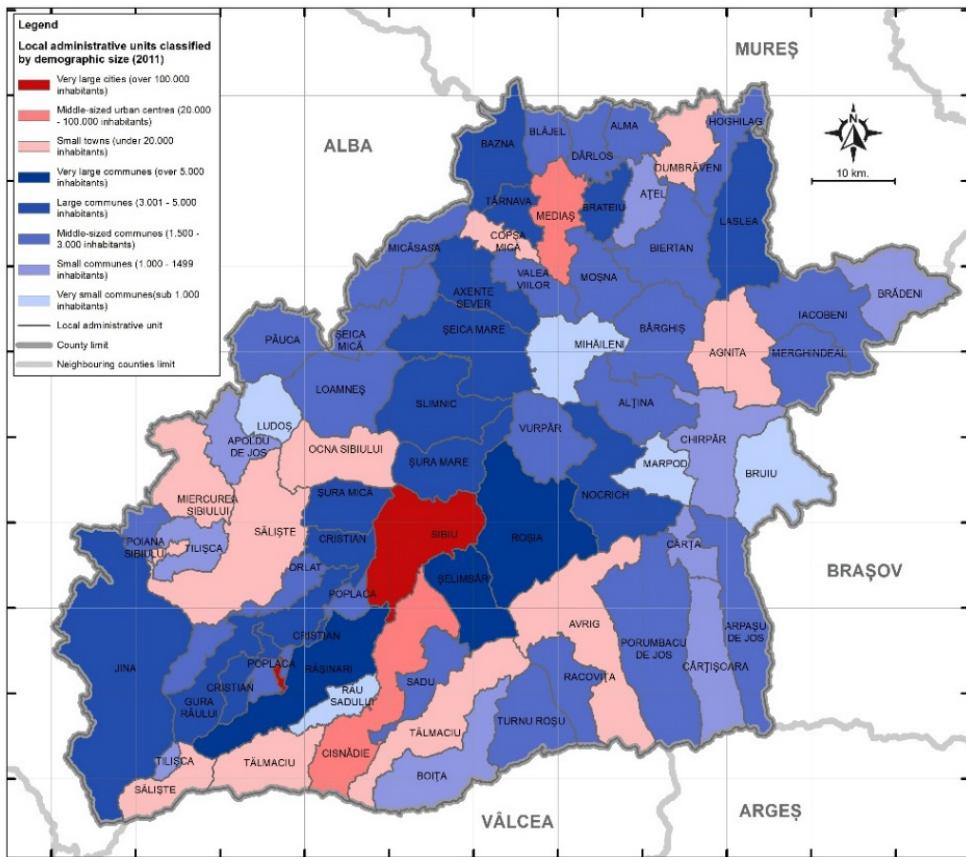


Fig. 3. The classification of administrative units according to their status and demographic size.

Source: the authors, according to data of the 2021 census

An important demographic increase, by 56%, is also remarkable in the case of the town of Cisnădie, also located in the suburban area of Sibiu. This has led to Cisnădie rising from the status of small town to that of a middle-sized town, as it surpassed 20,000 inhabitants in 2021, reaching 27,221 inhabitants on 1 July 2025 according to INS (2025). Demographic growth is noticeable in other communes around Sibiu, such as Șura Mare, Șura Mică, Roșia, Cristian, and Sadu. It is obvious that the decline of the city of Sibiu is at least partly due to migration towards its suburban area, and that the process of suburbanization has intensified after 2010, as demographic data shows. The same is true, though in lesser numbers, for the city of Mediaș and its surroundings, where only two communes experienced a demographic increase – Târnava and Valea Viilor.

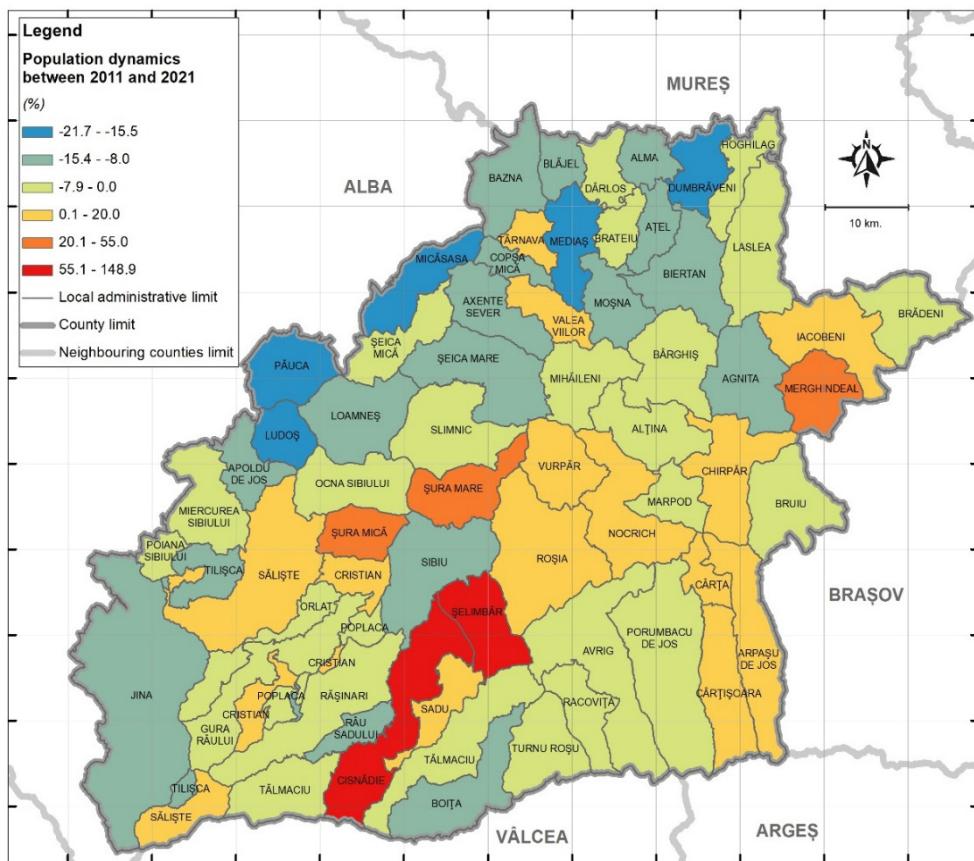


Fig. 4. The population dynamics between 2011 and 2021 at the level of administrative units within Sibiu County.

Source: R. Rusu et al. (2024)

The process of suburbanization brought important changes in the age structure of the population. Those who moved from the core cities to the suburban settlements are usually young adults, which generated a boost in terms of birth rates (R. Rusu *et al.*, 2024). Looking closely to the weight and distribution of the young population (0-14 years old) in the administrative units within Sibiu County (fig. 5), it comes out that most of the administrative units with the youngest population are located close to the cities of Sibiu (Roşia, Șelimbăr, Șura Mare, Nocrich) or Mediaş (Brateiu, Tânava), or in between them, in the central part of Hârtibaciu Plateau (Mihăileni, Vurpăr, Marpod), as well as in the easternmost part of the county (Iacobeni, Brădeni).

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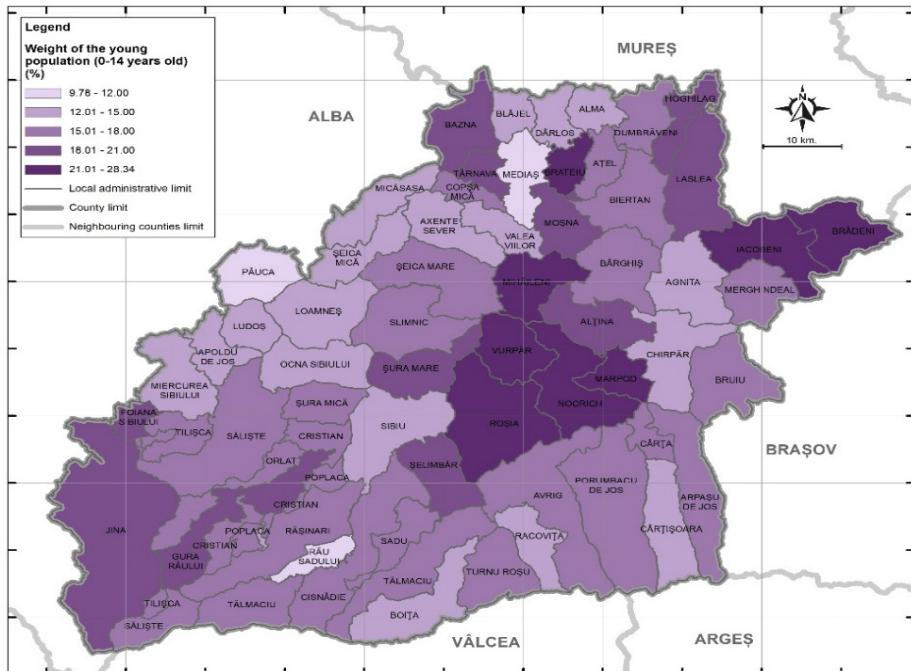


Fig. 5. The weight of the young population (0-14 years old) in the administrative units within Sibiu County in 2022.

Source: the authors according to data from INS (2025)

The administrative units with the youngest population correspond to those which experienced a high birth rate in the last 15 years, and there are certain different reasons for these numbers (R. Rusu *et al.*, 2024). One of the reasons is suburbanization, because some of the families that migrated to the suburban areas had already had children, while others planned to have children, and obviously many did, therefore the suburban settlements are now confronted with insufficient kindergartens and schools for all these children. The lack of educational institutions in the suburban areas led to yet another issue – daily commuting became compulsory for families whose children attend kindergartens and schools in the core city. Public transport has not entirely adapted to the needs of these families, who are therefore using the personal cars to commute, generating traffic jams at rush hours.

At the opposite end, the lowest weight of young people is found in communes located far from the cities and towns, especially in Secașe Plateau, in the West of the county (Păuca, Ludoș, Loamneș), in the mountains (Râu Sadului), but also in the main cities (Sibiu, Mediaș) and some of the towns (Agnita, Miercurea Sibiului, and Ocna Sibiului).

The adult population (15-64 years old) represented more than two thirds (67.83%) of the total population of Sibiu County in 2022 (INS, 2025). At the level of administrative units within Sibiu County (fig. 6), the largest weight of adult population was recorded in the town of Copșa Mică (73%), followed by many administrative units in the suburban areas of the cities of Sibiu (Cisnădie, Tălmăciu, Poplaca, Șelimbăr, Șura Mică, Orlat, Cristian, Avrig) and Mediaș (Moșna, Dârlos, Biertan). Once again, the process of suburbanization had a certain impact on the growing number of adults in these areas, especially in the cases of Cisnădie (71.19%, the second highest weight in the county) and Șelimbăr. While there is no data regarding the age of the migrants to the suburban areas, it comes out that most of the migrants have been and are young adults, who are more willing to change their residence for a number of perceived facilities, including the lower living costs, more space for them and their children, a healthier and more secure environment.

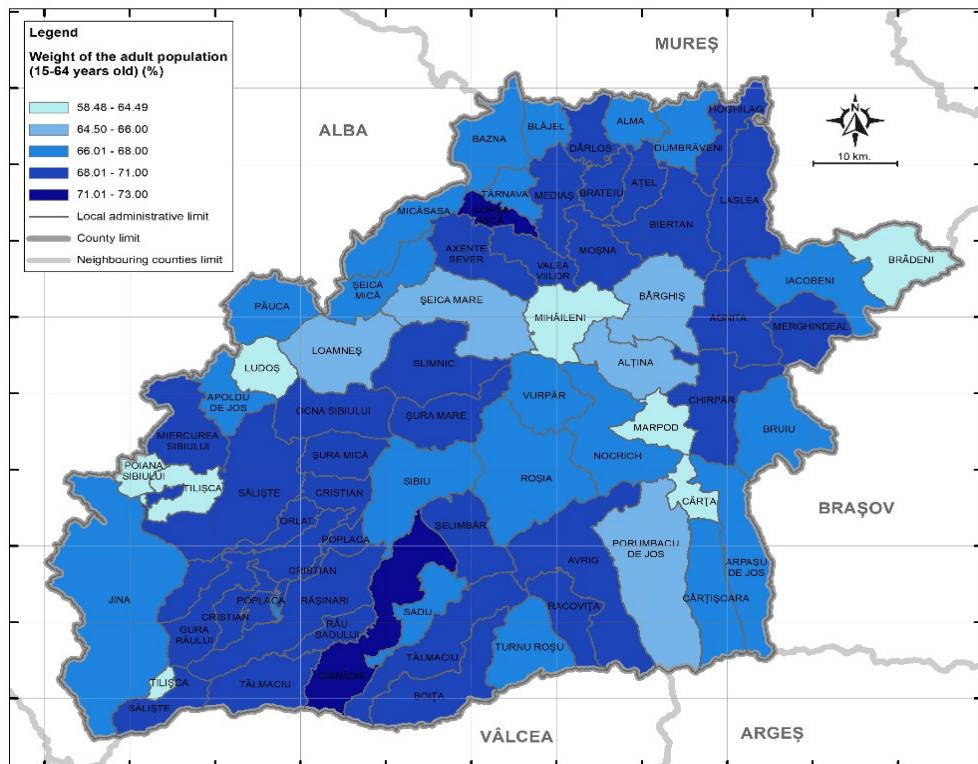


Fig. 6. The weight of the adult population (15-64 years old) in the administrative units within Sibiu County in 2022.

Source: the authors according to data from INS (2025)

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The lowest weight of the adult population was recorded in some communes located in the central part of the county, in Hârtibaciu Plateau (Mihăileni, Marpod, Brădeni), in the western part of the county, in Secașe Plateau (Ludoș, Loamneș) or at the feet of the Carpathians (Poiana Sibiului, Tilișca).

The weight of the elderly population (65 years and older) has grown steadily in the last decades, as the birth rate declined, and the average life expectancy increased. In 2022, the weight of the elderly population was 16.89% in Sibiu County as a whole, exceeding the weight of the young population, which was only 15.27%. These numbers indicate that demographic ageing is an important issue in Sibiu County, just like almost everywhere else in Romania (Nancu, Gurani-Nica, and Persu, 2020).

The analysis of the weight of the elderly people at the level of administrative units within Sibiu County shows however that there are important differences (fig. 7).

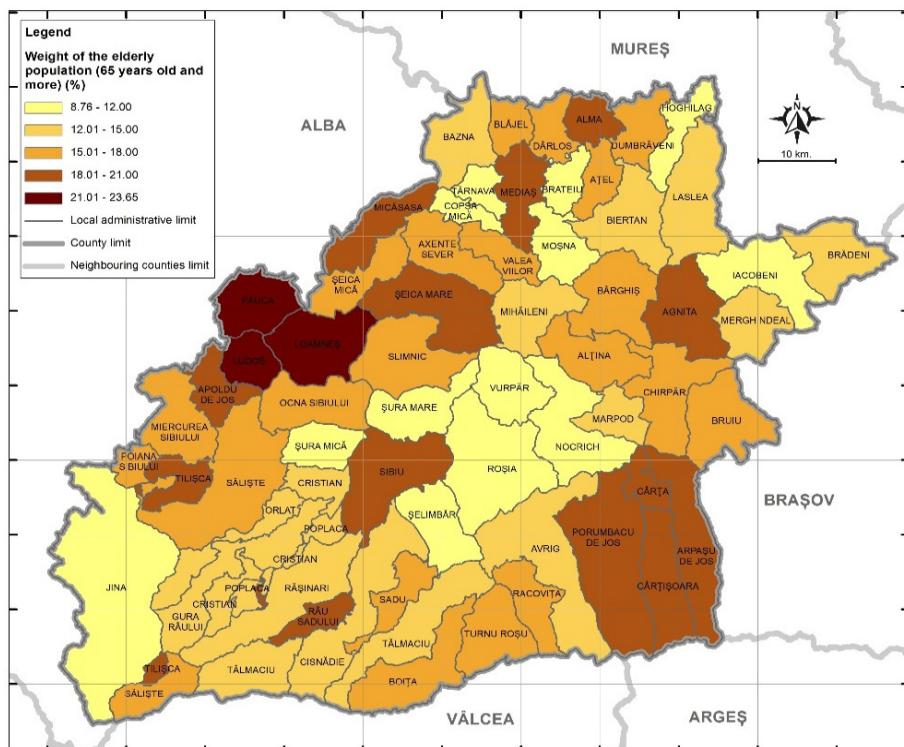


Fig. 7. The weight of the elderly population (65 years old and more) in the administrative units within Sibiu County in 2022.

Source: the authors according to data from INS (2025)

The highest weight of the elderly population was recorded in the western part of the county, especially in Secașe Plateau, in communes such as Păuca (23.65%, the highest value), Ludoș, Loamneș, and Apoldu de Jos, and in the South-East of the county, in Făgăraș Basin, in communes like Cârța, Cârțișoara, Arpașu de Jos, and Porumbacu de Jos. High values of the elderly population were also recorded in the cities of Sibiu (19.95%) and Mediaș (19.93%), as well as in some of the towns (Agnita, for example). At least in the case of the two cities, one of the explanations for the high weight of the elderly population is suburbanization, materialized by the migration of young adults and their (future) children, while the elderly population is not equally mobile. Elderly people are more likely to remain in the core cities, as they are already accommodated with the neighbourhoods and they feel safer in a well-known environment, where everything they need (including medical services) is close and easier to reach.

As opposed to this, the lowest weight of elderly people was registered (not surprisingly) in Șelimbăr (8.76%), the suburban commune with the highest growth in the latest decades. Other communes with low weights of the elderly population are also located near the city of Sibiu: Roșia, Șura Mare, Șura Mică, Vurpăr, Nocrich – all with values less than 10% elderly population, or near the city of Mediaș: Brateiu, Tânava, Moșna, the town of Copșa Mică. These figures show clearly that the process of suburbanization had a strong impact on the age structure of the population, reducing the weight of the elderly population in the suburban settlements, and increasing the weight of the young population and / or the adult population in the same settlements.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The process of suburbanization has had an impact on the settlement system in Sibiu County. Demographic data collected from the last two censuses (2011 and 2021) as well as from the National Institute of Statistics (INS) show that the core cities of Sibiu and Mediaș experienced a demographic decline in the last decades, while their suburban areas increased demographically. The highest growth has been recorded in the commune of Șelimbăr and in the town of Cisnădie, as well as in other communes around the city of Sibiu (Șura Mare, Șura Mică, Cristian, Roșia).

While there is no data regarding the age of the migrants from the core cities to their respective suburban areas, the analysis shows that most of them are young adults and their (future) children. This has led to a sharp change in the age structure of the population both in the core cities and in the suburban settlements. On the one hand, the cities of Sibiu and Mediaș experienced a

decline in young and adult population, and an increase of the weight of the elderly population to such an extent, that they almost have the same values of the weight of the elderly population as some of the most isolated and peripheral rural communes in Sibiu County. On the other hand, suburban settlements, especially those around the city of Sibiu, have registered not just an increase in terms of population, but also in the weight of the young and adult population. Therefore, we witness a process of sharp rejuvenation in the suburban settlements (mostly in Șelimbăr and Cisnădie), at the same time with the intensification of demographic ageing in many parts of Sibiu County, including the two cities, Sibiu and Mediaș, and some of the other towns in the county.

The new demographic realities of the suburban settlements brought along a number of issues which the authorities have to deal with. There are not enough kindergartens and schools in the suburban settlements to accomodate the ever increasing number of students, and the existing schools are not large enough. The authorities need to find solutions, and the building of new kindergartens and schools is an absolute priority. Because of the insufficient number of educational facilities, many families have decided to commute together with their children to the core cities of Sibiu or Mediaș, where there are enough schools, and the parents have jobs. Public transport is not yet adapted to the increasing demand, and not always service the newly-built areas, where newcomers have to rely mainly on their personal car to move around and to commute. Therefore, traffic has increased manyfold, leading to jams at rush hours, given the poorly designed road infrastructure, not prepared to take in so much traffic. Authorities have to adapt quickly the public transport to the new territorial realities, and to find ways to develop new roads and bypasses to allow for a better connectivity and accessibility to the newly-built areas in the suburban areas. Many of these areas also need other facilities as well, such as shops, schools (as pointed above), health-related services, and many others, because their new inhabitants are former urban dwellers who expect to have at least the same living standards as in their former neighbourhoods in the city.

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