

URBAN-RURAL DIVIDES IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

Sorin PAVEL

Department of Geography, West University of Timișoara, Romania

Email: sorin.pavel@e-uvt.ro

Abstract: *In Romania, the predominance of rural areas throughout much of the 20th century shaped large-scale socio-political projects, as well as the diverse interpretations of the national past, Romanian spirituality, and destiny. Until 1989, policies governing urban–rural relations largely disregarded rural spaces, prioritizing urban development. After 1989, the agrarian reform of 1990 further accentuated the separation between urban and rural areas. Using a methodology grounded in the interpretivist–constructivist paradigm, this article examines the historical context of rural predominance in Romania, the unfinished project of forced urbanization and rural modernization during the communist period, and the disparities between urban and rural areas following Romania’s accession to the European Union. Statistical data from the National Institute of Statistics reveal significant demographic and social discrepancies between rural and urban Romania more than 15 years after EU integration. These disparities, however, have deep historical roots and are not new phenomena. Although reducing the rural–urban gap was a major objective after 1945, even four decades of communism failed to modernize rural Romania or place it on a clear developmental trajectory. Romania’s EU accession in 2007 brought substantial investment in rural development, yet disparities with urban areas persist.*

Key words: *urban, rural, disparities, Romania*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 19th century, one of the major social challenges in Romania’s modernization process has been the structure of Romanian society. Modern society is typically shaped by cities and the middle class; however, in Romania, the dialectic of social relations primarily juxtaposed landowners and peasants (Boia, 1997). The Industrial Revolution, which elsewhere fueled modern society, had only a marginal impact in Romania, affecting just two regions—Banat and the Prahova Valley—where resources essential for industrial development (coal and oil) were available. Most of Romania, apart from a few major cities such as Bucharest, Brașov, Timișoara, Cluj, and

Arad, remained dependent on rural resources until the mid-20th century. From the mid-19th century onward, Romanian intellectuals and prominent writers (including Mihai Eminescu, George Coșbuc, Liviu Rebreanu, and Mihail Sadoveanu) consistently idealized rural life and the traditional virtues of the Romanian peasant in their works. It was only after the First World War that the Romanian countryside became the subject of systematic scientific research (Fabes, 1983). Dimitrie Gusti, regarded as the first Romanian sociologist, approached the reality of the Romanian village scientifically through the monographic method, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of rural life (Gusti, 1939)

The massive rural predominance strongly marked a wide range of socio-political projects, as well as various interpretations of the national past, Romanian spirituality, and Romanian destiny. Until the mid-20th century, urban Romania accounted for no more than a fifth of the country's population and was not considered a major social element of Romanian society. Moreover, numerous positions expressed by the Romanian elites, especially in the years leading up to World War II, considered the Romanian urban phenomenon to be exclusively the creation of foreigners and, as a result, outside the local spirit (Boia, 1997).

After 1945, communism undoubtedly made an obvious attempt to urbanize Romanian society. The brutality of its solutions did indeed force a break with the rural past, but at the cost of destabilizing all social structures and resulting in the creation of a false modern society, completely divorced from what modernity meant at the end of the 20th century. The solutions adopted during this period failed to solve the problem of modernizing the Romanian countryside, which continued to spread underdevelopment throughout Romanian society (Pasti, 1997).

After 1989, although politicians wanted to restructure and modernize rural areas, the fragmentation of land ownership brought Romanian villages back to their traditional configuration from the interwar period. The traditional peasant household, recreated by the 1991 agrarian reform, led to the emergence of patriarchal social relations and, consequently, isolation from urban areas (Mihalache, 2018). Fifteen years after joining the European Union, Romania remains one of the most rural countries in the EU. With 55% of its population living in urban areas, Romania stands out sharply from the European Union average of 76% and even from other countries in southeastern Europe that have evolved under similar historical conditions, such as Bulgaria (77% urban population), Croatia (59%), and Greece (81%), and lags far behind other countries in Central and Western Europe: Belgium (98% urban population), the Czech Republic (75%), France (82%), Germany (78%), etc. (Eurostat, 2024).

In this context, this paper attempts to explain the socio-historical factors that have shaped the rural nature of Romanian society and the failures of projects to modernize rural Romania during the communist and post-communist periods, which have led to the current situation, in which the urban-rural divide has become problematic. The objective of this paper is to highlight the key urban-rural disparities in post-communist Romania and to answer some essential questions related to this issue: *What are the main urban-rural disparities in post-communist Romania? Is there currently a coherent project for the modernisation of rural Romania in Romanian society? How can the urban-rural disparities that currently characterise Romania be mitigated?*

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The gap between urban and rural areas is a consequence of the Industrial Revolution that marked Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. The massive rural predominance that existed before the Industrial Revolution has gradually faded globally, with World Bank estimates showing that currently about 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas (World Bank, 2025). The distinction between rural and urban areas is not uniform even at the European Union level (Woods, 2005). It is generally considered that the agricultural and non-agricultural parts of rural areas form a distinct entity from urban areas, which are characterized by a high concentration of inhabitants and vertical and horizontal structures (Midgley, 2003). The traditional distinction between urban and rural areas in a country is based on the assumption that urban areas, however defined in that country, offer a different standard of living and, usually, a higher economic standard of living (Bengs, Schmidt Thome, 2005).

The urban-rural gap is a current reality in the European Union. This reality, with differences from country to country, is covered and analysed in numerous documents drafted by European institutions (Bertolini, 2008). These documents affirm the need to reduce urban-rural disparities and establish complex partnerships for the development of both types of areas (European Commission, 1999). Rural areas in the EU are characterized by diversity and endogenous development potential. They are economic, natural, and cultural areas, in other words "complex areas", which cannot be characterized by one-dimensional criteria such as population density, agriculture, or human resources (Dijkstra, Poelman, 2008). Some rural areas have already consolidated their structural change. This is not only the result of location factors, such as an attractive site or lower wages, but rather the result of increasingly important factors, such as the quality of natural and cultural heritage, the presence of networks and partnerships, and the democratic nature of decision-making (Ray, Ward, 2006). Some rural regions have even become highly competitive in the agricultural or tourism sectors. On the other hand, many rural areas have not yet managed to achieve structural conversion; they face considerable economic problems, often linked to their peripheral location (Feher, 2017). The structural weakness of these areas can have various causes: a high proportion of people employed in agriculture, low population density, poor accessibility, climatic handicaps, lack of infrastructure, unsuitable agricultural production conditions, etc. (Scott, 2007) Rural areas subject to new constraints related to economic growth and pressure from the urbanization of neighboring cities, as well as areas threatened by agricultural decline, face considerable challenges (Eurofound, 2006). In the past, rural areas were often considered homogeneous spaces facing the same obstacles and having the same development potential. This view does not correspond to the reality of the EU (European Commission, 1999). The only characteristics that are still common to all rural areas are low population density and land use that is essentially agricultural. On the contrary, they are very different in terms of their development patterns and prospects. The diversity of rural development in the EU clearly shows that spatial development strategies must be based on local and regional conditions, specificities, and needs (Shucksmith, 2009). The urban-rural divide in the European Union can be reduced by giving new impetus to the partnership between cities and rural areas (Davidova, 2009). This primarily involves an integrated vision that views cities and rural areas as a functional spatial unit, characterized by

multiple interrelationships and dependencies (Courtney, 2007). Reducing the urban-rural divide can only be achieved within a region because only regions are capable of creating markets for new jobs, information, and communication (Olah, Flora, 2015). The region is therefore, in most cases, the appropriate level for intervention and implementation and the appropriate level for analysing a large number of urban-rural gap issues (OECD, 2006).

In Romania, the disparities between urban and rural areas are well known and analysed in important documents drafted by the relevant institutions. In these documents (MDPLA, 2020, Kerekes, 2010), in addition to accepting the idea that rural areas in Romania are in decline, it is also recognized that the gap between rural and urban areas has widened in recent years. The decline of rural areas is analysed from a demographic perspective, and the decline in the rural population, which began as a consequence of the modernization of society, has become permanent due to a combination of demographic, economic, and social factors. Demographic decline is also associated with the continuous deterioration of the age structure, caused by the aging of the population, which is much more pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas. The National Institute of Statistics (INS) estimates, in its medium scenario—the most plausible one for population growth—that Romania's rural resident population will be 6,141,500 by 2060, representing a decrease of 2,930, 700 people or 32.3% between 2017 and 2060 (MDLPA, 2020). In terms of solutions to this problem, from a conceptual point of view, little distinction is made between the different types of rural areas in Romania (Sandu, 1999). For example, peri-urban rural areas are not facing demographic decline, but in many cases, solutions are based on financial instruments provided by the European Union.

3. METHODOLOGY

This scientific approach to urban-rural disparities in Romania is based on the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes a deep understanding of the phenomena studied. Thus, in a first stage, the social and historical context of Romania that is likely to generate urban-rural disparities was inventoried. In a second stage, the meanings of this issue were explored, as well as how it has been conceptualized and reflected upon in the specialized literature. Subsequently, based on the available statistical data, the main areas in which the urban-rural divide in Romania is still significant were analysed. Finally, the research results were interpreted, and their significance was sought in the broader context of Romania's development prospects.

Documentary research was used in a context where numerous documents drafted at national or European level are particularly important for examining the issues concerned in a broader context, as they cover a wide range of topics in depth and have samples large enough to provide highly accurate estimates. The importance of this approach lies in incorporating a representative dimension at national level in order to capture the general aspects of the subject and the vision of decision-makers on the phenomena studied. The documents and materials that were consulted and analysed had different purposes: to understand the European perspective on the topic (European Commission, 1999), to identify the conceptual scope of the issue addressed in government documents (MDLPA, 2020), to provide comparative data over time (Pasti, 1997), to obtain indirect information on an issue for which there are no relevant statistical data (e.g., the "Save the Children" Association).

Quantitative data analysis was used extensively and was based exclusively on data available from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics. In selecting the relevant data, the criteria for analysing urban-rural gaps existing in European Union documents (European Commission, 1999, Eurofound, 2006) were considered: demographic situation, access to education, access to services and ICT, and the structure of total household expenditure. The reference years used were 2007, the year Romania joined the European Union, and 2024, in some cases 2023, the last years for which statistical data were available at the time of writing. At the European Union level, there is a complex system of criteria for the comparative analysis of the two environments (Kerekes, 2010), but Romania's official statistical data system is not consistent: for some analysis criteria, there were differentiated rural-urban data, but for other criteria, only data broken down by administrative-territorial units were available. For the sake of consistency, only those areas for which differentiated rural-urban data were available were selected.

In some cases, qualitative analysis involved re-examining some of the existing data sets in order to answer certain research questions that arose as a result of contradictory findings. Most of the time, however, the two types of analysis, quantitative and qualitative, were used together, complementing each other. Qualitative analysis was used in the initial stages to explore the topic of urban-rural gaps and generate hypotheses, and quantitative analysis was used later to test these hypotheses on a larger scale.

4. THE FUNCTIONING OF URBAN-RURAL RELATIONS DURING THE COMMUNIST PERIOD

During the communist period, the dynamics of rural–urban relations were shaped primarily by disparities in their respective capacities to exploit local resources. These interactions reflected a dual process: on the one hand, addressing the urban deficit in agri-food products, raw materials, and labor; on the other, compensating for the rural deficit in industrial goods, services, and information (Pasti, 1997). The legislative framework governing rural–urban relations until 1989 largely neglected rural areas, prioritizing urban development. Extensive investments—particularly in urban industrial sectors—reconfigured rural and peri-urban spaces by altering land use patterns and intensifying commuting flows, which generated significant economic, social, and cultural consequences (Ianoș & Tălângă, 1994). Demographic, economic, administrative, and service-based linkages played a pivotal role in sustaining these interdependencies.

From a *demographic perspective*, the most prevalent phenomenon prior to 1989 was commuting, which in major urban centers involved as many as 30,000–40,000 individuals daily. The intensification of commuting around large cities highlighted the inefficiency of the cooperative agricultural system in Romania (Bezemer & Davis, 2002). The relatively affluent villages located near urban areas were not traditional peasant communities but rather settlements of commuters who supplemented their wages with agricultural income. Following the decline of urban industrial activity after 1989 and the consequent contraction of the industrial workforce, these groups were among the most affected. They were rapidly transformed into a rural labor force, now living under conditions of land ownership that were, paradoxically, worse than those

experienced before 1989 (Mărginean, 2005). In terms of *technological development*, aside from the widespread electrification and the gradual introduction of household appliances into rural homes, the communist period brought few significant changes to Romanian villages. The mechanization of cooperative agriculture remained severely underdeveloped, as evidenced by the persistent demand for manual labor during harvest seasons, when the state resorted to mobilizing schoolchildren, students, and even industrial workers (Pasti, 1997). *Market relations* during the communist period were strictly controlled by the state, with the sale of agricultural products functioning as a state monopoly. The only form of quasi-independent trade was permitted for products obtained from the small plots allocated by the Agricultural Production Cooperatives (C.A.P.), which could be sold in local markets. However, the absence of organizational measures in these markets led to the ruralization of urban consumption—characterized by unprocessed agricultural products, unsupervised trade practices, and a lack of standardized norms. The collection, storage, and marketing of agricultural production were entirely monopolized by the state, which set prices according to its own criteria and purchased goods based on prevailing policies or political interests (Bosworth, 2010). *Agricultural specialists* during the communist era were often perceived as part of the bureaucratic apparatus managing the sector. Detached from the land, they lacked incentives to remain in state service, while farmers generally distrusted them and had little practical opportunity to implement their advice.

The functioning of urban–rural relations before 1989 demonstrates that these interactions were largely short-circuited by state and administrative decisions (Brown & Bandlerová, 2000). The limited exchanges that did occur were dictated by centralized commands. After 1989, during the transition to a market economy, deindustrialization and financial constraints caused by the recession hindered the development of natural linkages between urban and rural areas. The market, which should have assumed a regulatory role, was unable to function effectively under conditions of minimal interaction between the two systems (Bański, 2017). Consequently, rural areas became increasingly inward-looking, developing their own social structures, values, behaviors, regulatory mechanisms, ideologies, and political orientations. Meanwhile, urban areas, unable to drive rural modernization, were forced to reduce their functions, thereby limiting their capacity for influence (Pasti, 1997).

5. RESULTS. URBAN-RURAL DIVIDES IN THE POST-COMMUNIST PERIOD

5.1. Demographic aging and rural exodus

The changes recorded in the rural population over the last two decades, highlighted by the negative evolution of the main demographic indicators, have generated a pronounced demographic imbalance that manifests itself in the aging of the population, declining birth and fertility rates, increasing mortality, and an explosion in external migration, with the main negative effect being the depopulation of rural areas (MDLPA, 2020). Romanian villages are characterized by a marked trend toward demographic aging. While in urban areas the proportion of the population over 60 was 24.4% in 2024, in rural areas it was close to 27% in the same year. Although, compared to 2007, the gap with urban areas seems to have narrowed, it must be said that this is due to the influence of the peri-urban areas surrounding large cities, which are

characterized by a much younger population (Table 1). The deep rural environment probably far exceeds the official statistics in terms of demographic aging. The same explanations can also be given for the average age, which in 2024 was at the same level in both environments: 42.9 years in urban areas compared to 42 years in rural areas (cf. INS). The village also generated a very special labor force structure. Its occupational structure is clearly different from that of urban areas (Pasti, 1997). It eliminates specializations: according to the 2021 Population and Housing Census (PHC), Romanian villages had three times fewer specialists than cities and four times fewer civil servants. In 2021, there were three times fewer technicians in rural areas than in urban areas and two and a half times fewer service workers than in urban areas (cf. 2021 PHC). In rural areas, the population remains employed well beyond retirement age and, although these situations are not recorded, they start working well before the age of 16, as established by labor legislation.

Table 1. Structure of Romania's population (%) by broad age groups and places of residence in 2007 and 2024

Age groups	2007		2024	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
0-14 years	15.9	16.3	19.5	15.4
20-59 years	69.1	58.8	56.1	58.0
over 60 years	15.0	24.9	24.4	26.6

Source: INS (2025)

The rural exodus is also one of the phenomena that has affected Romanian villages since the early decades of the communist period. It reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, coinciding with the intensification of industrialization in socialist Romania, when peasants left for the cities, for jobs in industry, in search of a better life that collectivized agriculture could not offer them. The second wave of rural exodus began in the 1990s (and continues today) and took the form of mass emigration to Western European countries (Kerekes, 2010). The massive deindustrialization of post-communist Romania and the disorganization of agriculture have placed rural Romania in a difficult situation characterized by a lack of prospects and a decline in living standards. There are no clear statistics showing what proportion of the 4-5 million Romanian emigrants in Western European countries (a figure estimated by various non-governmental organizations) come from rural areas, but certain indirect data can provide an insight into this phenomenon. For example, the "Save the Children" Association estimated in 2024 that 25% of children in rural areas have parents who have gone abroad to work¹.

5.2. Access to education

Access to education in rural areas of Romania is a complex issue, characterized by significant disparities compared to urban areas. Although progress has been made, major challenges remain in terms of infrastructure, quality of education, school dropout rates, and access to resources.

¹ <https://www.salvaticopiii.ro/sites/ro/files/2025-01/> (accessed on 09.09.2025)

The trend towards a reduction in the overall level of schooling among the population is becoming more pronounced. In 2022, the participation rate of people aged 18-69 in formal/non-formal education was 33% in urban areas and only 21% in rural areas (cf. INS). There also remains a significant gap in the ratio of school population to number of teachers in rural areas, which was 12.2 in rural areas compared to 15.0 in urban areas in 2023, reflecting the fact that rural areas are not yet sufficiently attractive to teachers (Table 2). In terms of school infrastructure, the gap with rural areas is particularly worrying, with rural areas having four times fewer school laboratories than urban areas (Figure 1). In this regard, the qualitative part of the World Vision Romania (2024) research is significant, which consisted of telephone interviews with 62 school principals in rural areas, in the communities where the foundation operates. According to the principals, the 2024-2025 school year began under the following circumstances: 1 in 4 schools has no Internet connection; 9 in 10 schools have no laptops/PCs/tablets for digital education.

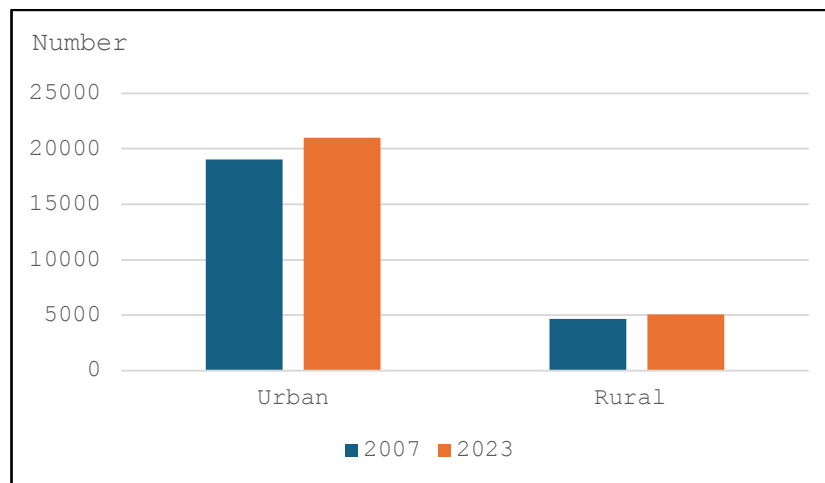


Figure 1. Number of school laboratories by residence (2007 and 2023)

Source: INS (2025)

Table 2. Report school population / number of teachers (2007 and 2023)

Place of residence	2007			2023		
	School population	Number of teachers	Report school population / number of teachers	School population	Number of teachers	Report school population / number of teachers
Urban	3,113,491	182,850	17.07	2,530,628	168,673	15.00
Rural	1,291,690	93,999	13.73	935,920	76,366	12.25

Source: INS (2025)

5.3. Access to services and ICTs

Access to healthcare. Healthcare in rural Romania faces several challenges. These include a shortage of medical staff, particularly family doctors, and poor

healthcare infrastructure. Many villages have no access to basic healthcare services, and those that do exist are often poorly equipped and inadequately staffed. Only 10% of medical school graduates choose to practice in rural areas, leading to inadequate coverage of medical needs (Ministry of Health, 2024). Rural medical offices are often poorly equipped, and some villages have no access to medical services at all. Official reports revealed that in Romania, in 2023, more than half (53%) of localities did not have enough family doctors, and 328 communes had no such specialists at all (Ministry of Health, 2024). Difficult living conditions in rural areas, such as poverty and isolation, contribute to worsening health problems. The high percentage of elderly people in rural areas exacerbates the need for medical services, especially in the case of chronic conditions such as high blood pressure. The National Institute of Statistics does not have data on the number of doctors by place of residence to illustrate the gap between rural and urban areas, but only by administrative units (counties). To compensate for this lack of data, we compared two counties, one predominantly rural (Botoșani – only 38% urban population) and the other predominantly urban (Prahova – 70% urban population). In both counties, the number of doctors decreased in 2023 compared to 2007, but in Botoșani County there is 1 doctor per 962 inhabitants, while in Prahova County there is 1 per 806.

Access to banking services. The INS do not provide data on access to banking services either. However, there are studies (ARB, 2023) showing that there are currently large gaps in access to banking services between rural and urban areas. Thus, in 2023, 82% of the urban population had banking products and services, while in rural areas, only 60% did (ARB, 2023). Also, in terms of the number of ATMs, rural areas had only 1,077, while urban areas had eight times as many (8,750), (Figure 2). Foreign-owned banks in Romania and the two domestic banks are focusing their strategies on the large-scale expansion of online payment instruments, but given the conditions in rural Romania, with its aging population, these are rarely used. Currently, in rural Romania, most transactions and purchases are made in cash.

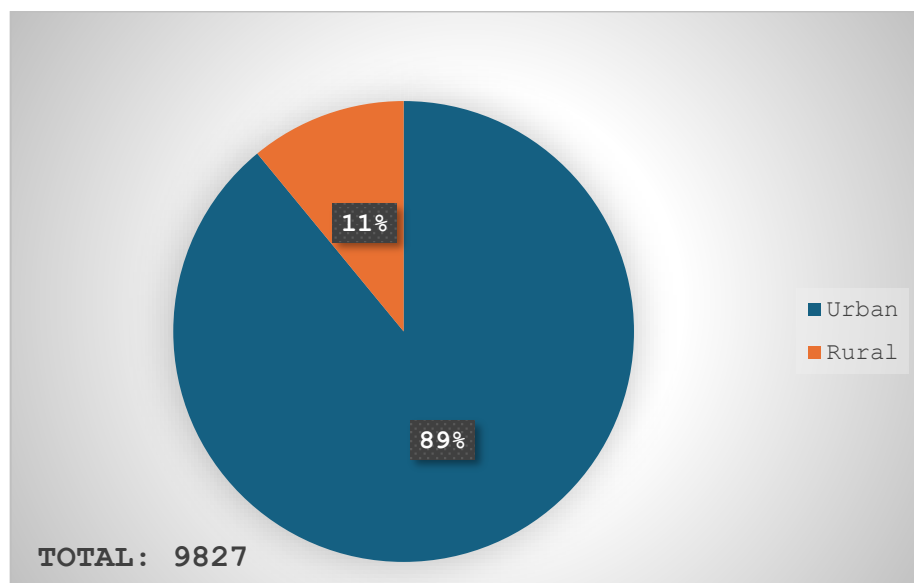


Figure 2. Share of ATMs in urban and rural areas (2023)

Source: ARB (2023)

Access to ICTs. In terms of access to information and communication technology, the progress made in recent years is evident. Mobile phone networks cover the entire territory of Romania and offer 3G or 4G mobile data services in rural areas, while large cities are covered by 5G networks with speeds of 500 Mb (cf. INS). INS statistics show that in 2007, only 3% of the rural population had access to the internet, compared to 33.6% in urban areas. In 2023, 83.2% of the rural population had access to the internet, compared to 92.5% in urban areas. Similarly, the proportion of the population owning a computer (Figure 3) increased in rural areas from 11.9% in 2007 (46% in urban areas) to 51.9% in 2023 (83.2% in urban areas). However, most of the rural population (76%) used computers and the internet in 2023 mainly for recreational purposes (social media, games, movies, etc.).

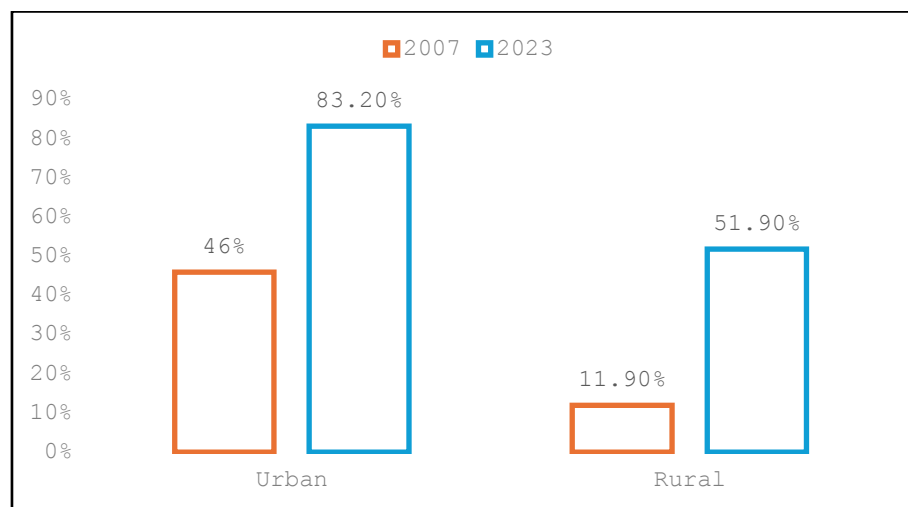


Figure 3. Share of population that owns a computer (2007 and 2023)

Source: INS (2024)

5.4. Household expenditure

The structure of total household expenditure in rural areas (see Table 3) shows a fairly high share of consumption of agricultural products from own resources (13.8% in 2023, compared to 12% in 2007 according to the NIS), which clearly indicates that peasant production is not decisively oriented towards meeting market demands. This is also evidenced by the share of investment and production expenditures, which fell in rural areas from 11.1% in 2007 to 2.7% in 2023. The share of expenditure on non-food goods is unusually high in rural areas, rising to 29.6% in 2023, exceeding that in urban areas (22.2%) and, in absolute terms, almost reaching the same level as in urban areas. The explanation for this can be found in the specific nature of rural households, which require more industrial products to maintain them in proper condition. Added to this is the fact that, despite the large proportion of the population living in rural areas, the village is still an extremely limited market for services. According to INS data from 2023, a rural household spends on average less than €130 per month on services, half the amount spent in urban areas. The share of spending on education has also decreased

in both urban and rural areas, but in rural areas the decrease occurred from an already very low value in 2007, reaching 0.2% in 2023.

Table 3. Structure of total household expenditure by media category (%)

Expenses for:	2007		2023	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Food and drinks consumed	25.7	28.8	19.6	21.2
Non-food goods	24.6	19.4	22.2	29.6
Services	22.1	16.7	16.7	13.4
Education	1.0	0.3	0.7	0.2
Investment and production	-	11.1	-	2.7
Taxes and fees	20.7	11.7	36.3	19.1
Value of consumption of agricultural products from own resources	5.9	12.0	4.5	13.8

Source: INS (2024)

Statistical data from the National Institute of Statistics show significant demographic and social discrepancies between rural and urban Romania more than 15 years after Romania's integration into the European Union. However, these disparities have a long history in Romanian society and are not new in Romania's recent history. Although reducing the gap between rural and urban areas was an important objective after 1945, even communism failed, in over forty years, to modernize rural Romania and set it on a clear path to development. Although Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 brought significant investment in rural development, the gap with urban areas continues to exist. The natural question arises as to whether the causes of this underdevelopment of rural Romania should be sought solely in the economic dysfunctions of recent decades. Is Romanian society still influenced by representations that are at odds with what development means in the current period? Intellectuals in cities continue to praise patriarchal life and the Romanian village as the guardian of traditional Romanian traditions and virtues (Fabes, 1983). However, these ideologies are less pragmatic and are, for the most part, purely urban. They do not form the basis for action programs in rural areas but rather legitimize the inefficiency of solutions for modernizing rural Romania.

6. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Following the analysis, this paper can provide some answers to the questions posed at the beginning. *What are the main urban-rural disparities in post-communist Romania?* The gaps analysed concerned five areas essential to the functioning of urban-rural relations: demographic trends, access to education, access to services and ICT, and household expenditure. It is noticeable that these gaps narrowed in 2024 compared to 2007, the year Romania joined the European Union. However, the data analysed reflects an aging population in rural areas, which is more pronounced than in urban areas. In terms of access to education, the gaps are much more pronounced in terms of both teaching staff and school facilities. There are also large gaps in access to banking services (eight times fewer ATMs in rural areas) and ICT (76% of the rural population uses the internet only for recreational purposes). In terms of household expenditure, the very low share of investment and production expenditure in rural areas is striking,

indicating a retreat of rural areas into subsistence. Statistical data and official documents on the disparities between urban and rural areas in Romania make it difficult to answer the question of *whether there is currently a coherent plan for the modernization of rural Romania*. More than 15 years after Romania's accession to the European Union, not all the problems of the rural environment and the mechanisms through which it causes underdevelopment in Romanian society have been realistically investigated. Many documents drafted by decision-makers point to the decline of rural Romania, but the solutions are often not grounded in the reality of Romanian society. The partnership with urban areas, although affirmed, is not accompanied by concrete measures to put it into practice. For the time being, there is no politically endorsed project in Romania to reduce the urban-rural divide. It is true that European funds attracted to rural areas in Romania have increased over the last decade (MDLPA, 2020). They have been used for utility networks (water, sewage, gas, etc.), road modernization, sports halls, etc., but, on the other hand, media reports abound with data on useless investments in Romanian villages: sports halls in villages with a heavily aged population, modernized schools in villages without children, parks between cornfields, etc. This proves that Romania does not yet have a coherent project for the modernization of the Romanian countryside.

How can the urban-rural disparities that currently characterize Romania be mitigated? First, it is necessary to restructure the definition of rural and urban areas in Romania. Statistical data remain ambiguous in terms of delimiting urban areas in Romania, which distorts analyses of rural areas. One of the phenomena that has had a strong impact on urban areas in the post-communist period has been the emergence of peri-urban "halos." Including these in the rural environment distorts the indicators used in the analysis of urban-rural disparities and cannot provide a sufficiently realistic basis for analysing urban-rural disparities. Secondly, administrative reform could select rural areas that are viable in terms of population and efficiently direct government and European development funds. Thirdly, urban areas in Romania must take on greater responsibility for contributing to rural development. Romania's major regional cities (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara, Iasi, Constanța) are developing rapidly, but predominantly endogenously and in an underdeveloped rural context.

Market economy mechanisms have favoured only part of rural Romania. These are rural areas surrounding large cities, which have undergone profound transformations in recent years, multiplying their population several times over and benefiting from urban living conditions, even though administratively they are included in the rural environment. Common examples are often given of peri-urban areas such as Giroc or Dumbrăvița near the city of Timisoara, Florești near the city of Cluj-Napoca, etc., which have experienced explosive population growth and offer even better living conditions than the nearby cities (MDPLA, 2020). In the deep countryside, market economy mechanisms have had little impact, given that the Romanian village has proven to be one of the most conservative structures of Romanian society, and ancestral survival mechanisms, consolidated over hundreds of years, cannot be easily replaced. This may be beneficial for preserving rural specificity in some areas with tourism potential, but on a rural scale, it reflects backwardness (Rusu, 2008).

This article is only a partial analysis of urban-rural disparities in Romania and a starting point for investigating this vast issue, which is particularly important for Romanian society. Even so, these partial results allow for two important conclusions. The first is that, since 1990, the contemporary Romanian village has regressed to its traditional configuration, recreated by the 1991 agrarian reform. This regression

translates into poverty, patriarchal social relations, reduced schooling of the population, and isolation from urban areas. The second shows that the decline of socialist industry in urban areas, in the absence of modern industries and services to replace it, generates underdevelopment against a backdrop of impoverishment of the population and consumers. Unable to create wealth and jobs, urban areas reduce living standards and, ultimately, diminish their functions and capacity to interact with rural areas. The modernization of Romanian villages is a necessity, and the concrete methods by which real processes of rural modernization can be initiated do not need to be invented but only adapted to the specific situation in Romania. In all modern societies, this has been achieved by orienting peasant households towards the market, modernising agriculture, professionalising workers and creating opportunities for work and advancement in non-agricultural occupations because of increased labour productivity. At the same time, living conditions in villages have been made very similar to or even more comfortable than in urban areas, and the rural population has been attracted to public life in both local communities and the country as a whole.

REFERENCES

- ARB** (2023), The evolution of the banking system in Romania, a study conducted by the Romanian Banking Association.
- Bański, J.** (2017), The consequences of changes of ownership for agricultural land use in Central European countries following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. *Land Use Policy*, 66, 120 – 130.
- Bengs, C. & Schmidt-Thomé, K.** eds (2005), *Urban–Rural Relations in Europe* ESPON 1.1.2 Part 2: Results of the Project.
- Bertolini, P. & al.** (2008), *Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas*, European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Brussels.
- Bezemer, D., Davis, J.** (2002), *The rural non-farm economy in Romania: overview of findings*, Natural Resource Institute Report No. 2730, Chatham.
- Boia, L.** (1997), *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, Editura Humanitas, București.
- Bosworth, G.** (2010), Commercial counterurbanisation: an emerging force in rural economic development, *Environment and Planning, A* 42 (4) 966-981.
- Brown, D. & Bandlerova, A.** eds (2000), *Rural Development in Central and Eastern Europe*, Nitra, Slovak Agricultural University.
- Courtney, P. & al.** (2007) Small towns as ‘sub-poles’ in English rural development: Investigating rural–urban linkages using subregional social accounting matrices, *Geoforum*, 38(6), 1219-1232.
- Davidova, S. & al.** (2009), Subsistence and semi-subsistence farming in selected EU new member states, *Agricultural Economics*, 40, Supplement, 733–744.
- Dijkstra, L., Poelman, H.** (2008), Remote Rural Regions. How proximity to a city influences the performance of rural regions? *Regional Focus* No. 01/2008, European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional Policy, Brussels.
- European Commission** (1999), Community spatial development framework. Towards balanced and sustainable development of the European Union's territory.
- Eurofound** (2025), *First European Quality of Life Survey: Urban–rural differences*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/index.htm>, accessed on 08.06.2025
- Fabes, R & al.** (1983), *The Myth of the Rural Idyll*, Child Poverty Action Group, Leicester.
- Feher, A. & al.** (2017), Convergence of Romanian and European Union agriculture – evolution and prospective assessment, *Land Use Policy*, 67, 670–678.

- Gusti, D.** (1939), *Enciclopedia României. Vol.3. Economia națională. Cadre și producție*, Asociația Științifică pentru Enciclopedia României, București.
- Ianoș, I., Tălângă, C.** (1994), *Orașul și sistemul urban românesc în condițiile economiei de piață*, Editura Academiei, București, (128 p.).
- INS** (2025), <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, accessed on June 2025.
- Kerekes, Kinga & al.** (2010), *Dezvoltare rurală. Ocuparea forței de muncă*, Editura Accent, Cluj-Napoca.
- Mărginean, I.** (2005), Condițiile de viață din mediul rural, *Probleme economice* vol. 183, Centrul de informare și documentare Economică, București.
- Midgley & al.** (2003), Patterns and Concentrations of Disadvantage in England: A Rural-Urban Perspective, *Urban Studies*, 40(8), 1427-1454.
- MDLPA** (2020), *Zonele rurale în declin. Provocări acțiuni și perspective pentru guvernața teritorială*, Ministerul Dezvoltării, Lucrărilor Publice și Administrației (MDLPA), București.
- Mihalache, F.** (2018), Reforma funciară în perioada postcomunistă, *Sociologie Românească*, vol. 16 No. 1-2, 71-82.
- Ministry of Health** (2024), *Activity Report for the Year 2024* <https://ms.ro/ro/informatii-de-interes-public/rapoarte/rapoarte-de-activitate/> accessed on 09.09.2025.
- OECD** (2006), *The New Rural Paradigm: Policies and Governance*, Paris, OECD.
- Olah, S. & Flora, G.** (2015), Rural youth, agriculture and entrepreneurship: A case study of Hungarian and Romanian Young Villages, *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Economics and Business*, 3, 1, 41–66.
- Pasti, Vi. & al.** (1997), *România – starea de fapt* (vol. I), Editura Nemira, București.
- Ray, C., Ward, N.** (2006), *The Futures of Rural Policy: The Significance of Rural Futures Studies* Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle upon Tyne Discussion Paper 7.
- Rusu, M.** (2008), Potențialul de diversificare a activităților economice în spațiul rural, *Economie agrară și dezvoltare rurală*, 5(3), 279-289.
- Sandu, D.** (1999), Dezvoltare și sărăcie în satele României, *Sociologie Românească*, 4, 117-138.
- Scott, A. & al.** (2025), *The Urban-Rural Divide: Myth or Reality?* SERG Policy Brief No. 2, Macaulay Institute, Aberdeen, www.macaulay.ac.uk/economics/research/SERPpb2.pdf, accessed on 15.07.2025.
- Shucksmith, Mark & al.** (2009), Urban-rural differences in quality of life across the European Union, *Regional Studies*, 43(10), 1275-1289.
- Walsh, J.** (2025), *Rural Deprivation*, *Encyclopedia of World Poverty*. SAGE Publication, http://sage-ereference.com/worldpoverty/Article_n597.html, accessed on 09.07.2025.
- Woods, M.** (2005), *Rural Geography: Processes, Responses and Experiences in Rural Restructuring*, SAGE, London.
- World Bank Group** (2025), *Health Nutrition and Population Statistics*, <https://databank.worldbank.org/>, accessed on 09.09.2025.
- World Vision Romania** (2024), <https://worldvision.ro/2025/09/08/studiu-world-vision-romania>, accessed on 09.09.2025.
-