

INTEGRATING STRATEGIC APPROACHES INTO LOCAL URBAN POLICIES. AN INSIGHT INTO THE URBAN PLANNING PROCESS IN BEIUȘ LAND, ROMANIA

Paul OLĂU

University of Oradea, Department of Geography, Tourism and Territorial Planning,
1 University st., 410087 Oradea, Romania, e-mail: emilolau@yahoo.com

Luminița FILIMON

University of Oradea, Department of Geography, Tourism and Territorial Planning,
1 University st., 410087 Oradea, Romania, e-mail: palelumi@yahoo.com

Valentin NEMEȘ

University of Oradea, Department of Geography, Tourism and Territorial Planning,
1 University st., 410087 Oradea, Romania, e-mail: nemes_vali@yahoo.com

Abstract: The paper addresses the cutting issue of adapting the traditional Romanian land use practices to the newest urban planning policies. The study area comprises a region-like mental space in the south-eastern part of Bihor County in western Romania. Due to its high archaism degree, the region encounters a great resilience to structural changes, including spatial development. Examining the experience of Nucet, the smallest town in Beiuș Land, the paper focuses on presenting firstly the general state of art of the Romanian spatial development policy making and secondly, the local strategic planning process. The *further considerations* section at the end of the paper tries to briefly conclude our findings and to anticipate the changes that the new land use plans will bring. As planning policies are held responsible for the very future of a local (as well as regional) community, a change of the present practices is a must. And the change is about integrating local and regional strategic options into local land use planning.

Key words: Beiuș Land, urban policies, strategic planning, land use planning

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INTRODUCTION

Beiuș Land, one of the 18 land type spaces in Romania (Cocean, 1997), is located in the north-western part of the country, in the south-eastern part of Bihor county. The analysed territory has some particular features that recommend it as adequate regarding the issues addressed by the present paper. The most important is the existence of four urban centres which have – during

the history – unevenly polarized the Land’s territory. Secondly, the natural environment “dictates” the natural spatial organization because of its sink-like relief, surrounded by mountains and hills and last but not least, the local human communities, which have a strong local identity due to their tradition, habits and mentality. Regarding spatial development, all of these features have both plusses and minuses.

How the disadvantages regarding the changing urban dynamics, the environment’s constraints and the regional mentality of the Beiuş Land’s inhabitants can be turned into advantages? is the question that the present paper is trying to respond. The lead that we try to explore is whether integrating strategic objectives into the land use plans and regulations will eventually increase the founding opportunities, help the recovery and the protection of landscapes and increase the competitiveness of local economy. The exercise refers to the smallest town’s planning process in the area, the town of Nucet. The analysis of the local development strategy making is trying to highlight the incoming changes within the land use planning process. As they are currently being reviewed, the land use plans and regulations will be analysed in a future paper which will try to fill in the local planning activity scenery, as main step in formulating Nucet’s local development policy.

THEORETICAL VIEWPOINTS

One of the major challenges of the post-Socialist European democracies is the reviewing of the public policies deeply altered by the radical changes of the national ideologies. Probably having the major territorial impact, the spatial development policies seem to best illustrate – by their evolution- the difficulties that the local collectivities have to face in the management of their territories. During the transitional periods, the territorial development is highly influenced by the new national, regional and local policies (Stanilov, 2007).

The spatial development policies are influenced by the degree of approach by the supranational policies (community), national, regional, urban and rural and represent the position of the deciding factors towards the issues regarding the complex development of the territories they relate to.

Romanian spatial development policies are nationally transposed by means of planning tools such as the *National Spatial Development Plan*, the *National Development Plan*, the *National Concept of Territorial Development* – at national level, by *regional zonal territorial development plans* and the *regional development plans* – at regional level, by the *county territory development plans* and the *county development plans* – at county level, and locally by the *land use plans and regulations* and by the *local development strategies*. Beside the planning tools, to the statement of the urban policies we might add a range of financial tools such as *POR*, *POS*, *INTERREG*, *ESPON*, *URBACT* etc., and last, but not least, the legislative framework that brings under regulation the spatial development of the urban and rural localities. With all the laws, plans and programmes intended to ensure the balanced administrative territorial development, the urban policies do not seem to be clear, and the obvious issues such as the urban display and the degradation of the urban tissues are not clearly approached. Of all these, the programmatic plans limit themselves to the transposition in a lower hierarchic level of some prescriptions without a local distinctiveness, leaving the elaboration of local policies to the local communities. The development programmes approach only selectively the urban issues whilst the legislative

framework is relatively poor (three man laws) and vague (the strategic planning is not clearly brought under regulation).

The urban development has had an impressive evolution in Romania over the last 20 years. Unfortunately, one cannot say the same thing about the planning process that should supervise this development. Presently, the two forms of urban planning, land-use and strategic planning seem to evolve separately, although they have the same objective, which is the shaping of the actual urban forms into more balanced, sustainable cities.

The specialized literature in Romania gives great importance to *land use planning* within the planning process. Internationally however, more and more importance is given to the strategic planning of the classic urbanism. (Albrechts, 2004). There are more and more papers tackling the integrated planning, the poor infrastructure, the increase of the urban traffic and the social segregation (Bentivegna, 2002). In spite of all this, some authors (especially in the American literature) support the sectoral planning, by highlighting the conflicts between opposing objectives such as the promotion of the economical growth of the cities, the protection of the urban nature and the advocating of social justice (Campbell, 2007).

Nationally, *the urban planning activity* generally corresponds to the urbanism technique whose aim is “the stimulation of the complex evolution of the localities by means of short, medium and long term strategies of development” (L 350/2001) and is focusing on “the establishment of the spatial development of the urban and rural localities in keeping with their potential and their inhabitants' dreams” (idem). In reality, according to GPO 38/99 the foundation studies are responsible for this evolution which can have an analytic, consulting and prospective character. Decision making should follow an analysis of the results of the foundation studies, the prospective ones being extremely important in this respect. Most of the times ignored, the result of this process is a land-use planning with reactive character that is trying to solve the malfunctions resulting from the analysis of the present situation. Only an integrated approach that should analyse both the present characteristics and the economic, social and environment development perspectives of a territory, constitute the premises of a planning exercise which should lead to a sustainable territorial development. Thus becomes important the integration in the land-use planning practice of a proactive approach, based on the evolution trends of a territory. This practice is more specific to the *strategic planning*, a technique adopted in economy, mainly in the enterprise management.

The *strategic planning* implies the future design of the development trends of a territory. Starting from the present situation, the strategic plans target an ideal situation in a limited time, defining some possible evolutionary scenarios to achieve the desired situation. Mainly, the strategic planning target the direction of the political-administrative decisions towards the efficient allocation of the resources of a territory, based on a long term view in a inter-institutional framework (Sartorio, 2005).

Unlike land use planning that only stipulates the built environment the strategic planning operates directly on the economic, social and environment components, by projects that do not necessarily target construction works. They too have to spatially transpose the stipulations of the county, regional, national and community strategies of territorial development. May they be strategic

plans, development strategies or development plans, they imply the work out of a series of actions together with activities materialized through projects financed by internal and external funds which should solve the present drawbacks and capitalize the available resources, thus leading to the development of the respective territory. The actors that take part in the strategic planning process are external and internal experts (professionals or representatives of the development agencies or the consulting houses), decisional factors (advisors – representatives of the political class) and the civil society (organized or not in activity groups).

PRACTICAL VIEWPOINTS

Practically, both land use planning and strategic planning have several strenghtnesses and weaknesses in generating healthy urban development policies.

Romanian land use planning covers two major objectives. Firstly, it ensures the physical development of human settlements, by providing appropriate spaces for growing cities and tailored solutions for shrinking cities. Secondly, it regulates and controls the building activity. The first phase is about deciding what suitable uses to give to existing or new zones of a city. Within the urban policy making this phase comply with de drawing of the land use plans and the writing of the land use regulations. This work is strictly controlled by a legal methodology and it is fulfilled for different spatial levels, starting with a general land use plan through more detailed plans and the associated regulations. Largely, this means that the public administrations have the power to decide both the limits of the built-up area and the building limitations for certain zones, regardless if we're talking about public or private land. The method used to establish different functions in a city is called zoning and it implies the spatial assignment for different urban functions. Each different function has different taxing regimes and different recommendations regarding the plot sizes and the buildings height.

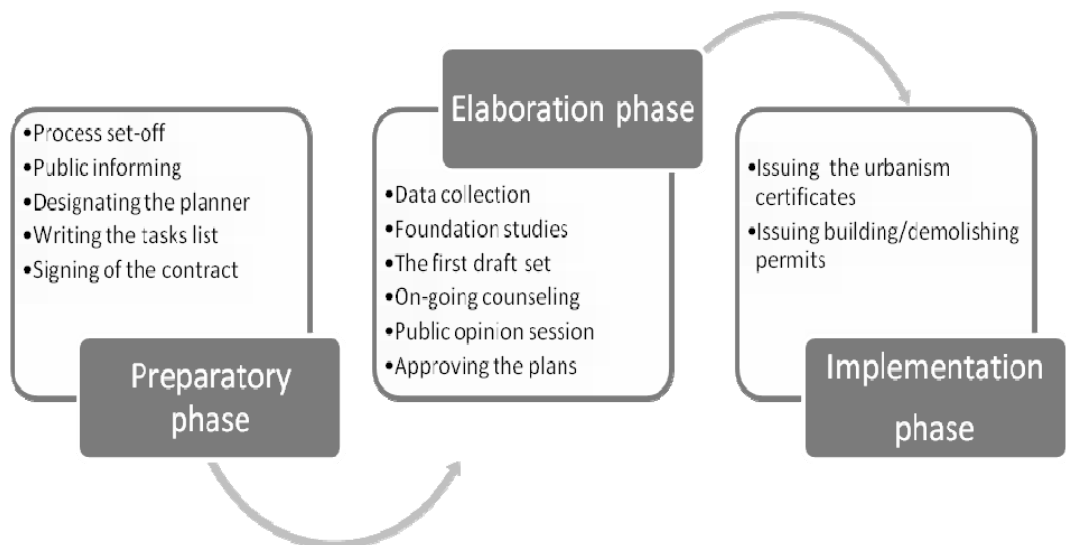


Figure 1. Land use planning process
(Source: GPO 38/99)

The actors involved in the process are public bodies like the local government as the deliberative forum, and the central government as the advisory forum, together with the planning bureau, which is usually a private company. The general public is to be noticed by a communication in the local press about the kickoff of the planning procedure, and subsequently, about a mid-way *vox populi* meeting.

The second phase is about implementing the plan and the accompanying land use regulation. The main use of these documents is to control the building activity, regarding the layout of the new buildings, the buildings' height, density indicators, material and colours etc. This activity consists in issuing the *urbanism certificate*, a document which provides information about the technical, economical and legal regimes of a plot and in issuing the *building permit*, which is the legal act that allows any construction or rehabilitation works on a building. Another use of these documents is validation of public investments like technical infrastructure or social equipments. The planning of a new neighborhood claims a series of public investments like water and sewage systems, electricity and gases, educational services like kindergartens and schools, cultural and medical services. Usually, all these investments are paid by public money. A sound justification of the way this money was spent is a good land use planning documentation.

Beside the aforementioned actions, which are mainly responding to the urban growth issues, the land use plans can have three other important objectives: the mitigation of natural and anthropic hazards, the preservation of the natural and built heritage and the renewal of urban tissues.

The first objective implies either building or even access restrictions in the affected areas or with active hazards potential, or intervention works to prevent or stop the future hazards.

The second case implies the work out of more detailed additional land use plans to identify and protect the natural or built heritage either by a total prohibition of any building or intervention (usually in the natural protected areas), or by a strict regulation of any building activity (whether it is a new building or an old one). This action generally applies to the historical downtowns of the cities. The zones protected by zonal plans have different building regulations regarding the architectural style of a building. These recommendations are strictly stating the permitted facade and roof materials and colour, the woodwork of the gates, doors and windows, the laying of the urban infrastructure (so that it is not visible), the street furniture and street billboards. All these have a main target which is preserving of the original aspect of building, whenever possible, or the integration of new buildings into the architectural pattern of the existing urban environment.

The third case is what we call urban renewal and it's about changes or rehab works of some outdated urban functions. Urban regeneration projects can cover a building, a block of buildings or a whole neighbourhood. Generally, the project perimeter is an area with high urban dynamics where the initial function is outran by a newer one, the old one becoming disturbing for the new one. The most conclusive examples are the old industrial activities embedded in a residential urban tissue. Whether the production units are still functioning or not they act as territorially, aesthetically and environmentally disturbing factors.

The time span covered by the Romanian land use plans and regulations somewhere between 5 and 10 years, depending whether important structural

changes show up or not within a given territory. Although according to the law, the urban planning activity has as its major aim the establishment of the short, medium and long term development strategies, according to GPO 38/99¹ the validity of land use plans strictly refers to a very short time span. Thus it is obvious that land use plans do not target the medium and long term urban development. This means that the urban planning activity is presently incomplete. In order to provide a sustainable development policy, some long term perspectives have to be drawn.

Strategic planning, on the other hand, is not covered by any legal text. Neither a law, nor a methodology was issued to state that a local strategy is compulsory for the planning process, or how a strategic plan should look like. There are, however several models implemented by components of the EU funds, especially for rural settlements.

Nevertheless, one can notice that a strategic planning process has been initiated by almost every Romanian municipality. Whether they did it for gaining a better regional (sometimes cross-border) image, for attracting private investors, or they had to do it in order to meet the eligibility criterion for attracting public investments from funding programmes, the existing strategies seem to be running on a parallel way to the land use plans. Normally, the last ones should have been entirely revisited after the enactment of the strategies, in order to implement their objectives into the land use plans and regulations.

The strategic planning process usually have six phases: the set-off and the building of the work groups, which is the preparation phase, the analysis of the present situation or the territorial diagnosis, the vision and the strategic objectives setting, the elaboration of the action plan, the implementing and monitoring of the plan and finally, the reviewing of the strategy, which confers a running character to the whole process.

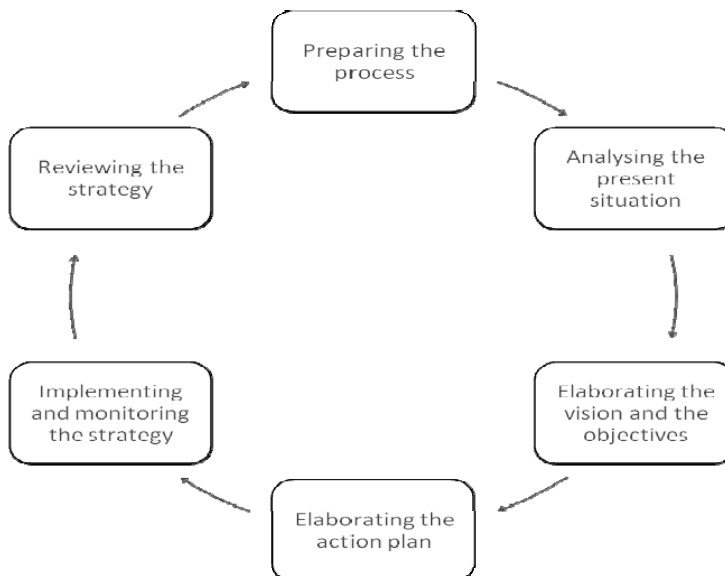


Figure 2. Strategic planning process

¹ Ghid privind metodologia de elaborare si continutul cadru al Planului Urbanistic General (Methodological guide on elaborating the General Land use plan)

One of the most important phases of the process is the elaboration of the action plan. This phase is about finding the best solutions for each of the objectives. These solutions come under the form of what we call development projects. Sometimes the projects act on the physical environment in case of infrastructure or housing projects, sometimes they act as organizing activities, like organizing different events, providing services or initiating partnerships. No matter what kind of activity it implies, the action plan has a double role: establishing a priority within the objectives and finding the available funds for implementing the projects.

PRESENT SITUATION

The town of Nucet is one the second smallest town of Romania after the touristic resort Baile Tusnad. The town's history is quite recent and it is strongly connected to mining activity in Baita village, in the south eastern part of Beiuș Land. Although the village was located in a mountain old mining region which was traditionally exploiting metals like iron (ever since 1270), gold, silver, copper, bismuth, the real economic take off occurred only after the detection of a high concentration uranium ore by the "Third Expedition" of the *Geology Ministry of URSS* in 1951. This is the major event that signed the birth certificate of the town. Nucet was erected from scratch between 1952-1956, on the few arable lands that the locals had. The impressive activity that merged almost 10000² people in the new town didn't last long. The reduction of the high concentration uranium ore after 1958 led to a drop in the Russians' interest for the area. Their departure has led to a drop of the total population to 2768 according to the 1966 census. Ever since, the town's population went on a descendent slope, reaching 2399 in 2002 (Filimon et al, 2011a).

The municipality of Nucet runs four localities, Nucet, Baita, Baita Plai and the Vartop holiday village. Excepting the last one, the other three have rather a slow, steady urban dynamics. This fact is mostly due to the restructuring mining activities, which was the general economical activity until recently, and to the tourism emergency, as a secondary economical activity. The first three localities have rather a residential function, with very shy entrepreneurial initiatives. Beside the few blocks of flats in Nucet, the three settlements have really strong rural features. The shortage of arable lands and the vicinity of the woods have imposed however lodging and berry picking as secondary activities.

The holiday village was born at the base of the Arieseni-Vartop ski slope, located on the border line between Bihor and Alba counties. Regarded as a possible opportunity for the economical revival of the town, the municipality tried to draw its development strategy by included the holiday village on the town's priorities list.

THE MAKING OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

The local development policy of the town of Nucet is based on the town's development strategy, written in 2007, and on the land use plans and regulations drawn up in 2000 for all of the localities and reviewed in 2005 for Vartop holiday village.

Nucet's town sustainable development strategic plan was issued in 2007, following a participatory process started in 2006. According to the documents

² 1956 figures

(PSDDON³, 2007), beside the town hall's staff, the local inhabitants and businessmen as well as specialists from the *Bihor County Prefecture's Development Compartment*, together with experts from the *National Mining Zones Development Agency (ANDZM)* were involved in the planning process.

The process included three major phases, the pre-planning phase, the elaboration phase and the implementation phase, which is actually still running.

During the pre-planning phase the Organizational Committee counting 25 members was established and trained by the support organizations (Bihor County's Prefecture and ANDZM). The training sessions implied transmitting the trainees some methodological knowledge regarding how to organize focus-groups, how to initiate a public debate, an interview, a survey and an analysis meeting, methods the committee's members have used later on during the writing of the plan.

The elaboration phase took-off by organizing several theme seminars (the visions, the contradictions and the strategic guidelines seminars). Within these seminars, which went on for 30 days, eight strategic perspectives were identified. The background of the eight strategic perspectives was the territorial diagnosis, the local community's needs as shown in the surveys that were conducted, the stakeholders' analysis and the SWOT.

The eight strategic perspectives – *Improving the infrastructure, Creating investors friendly environment, Elaborating and implementing Nucet's town marketing strategy, Involving the citizens into community's life, Strengthening the funds accessing mechanism, Improving public services and Initiating town twinning projects* – don't seem to answer the analysed territory's real problems, at least at the first glance. At a second glance however, one can understand that poor infrastructure is almost every small Romanian municipality's problem, so providing for better water and sewage systems and a good internal road network should be on the front list of a local development strategy. On the other hand, building a ski slope and a European sports base are economical objectives, intended to develop touristic activities in the area, so they should be proposed within the second strategic perspective, which is *creating investors friendly environment*. In our opinion, this is the sector where they should concentrate on offering real investment ideas and facilities, rather than inventorying available lands and spaces for business developers. The third strategic perspective, *Elaborating and implementing Nucet town's marketing strategy* seems to be a bunch of activities like editing promotional flyers and CDs, up-dating the town's web page and organizing a national agro-tourism seminar, rather than a real strategy, with clear objectives and actions. The fourth strategic perspective, *Involving the citizens into community's life* implies organising seminars for raising public awareness on environmental issues, promoting volunteering activities and informing and consulting citizens. The fifth strategic perspective, *Strengthening the funds accessing mechanism* intends to facilitate a the allowance of a 5% rate from the local budget to pay various feasibility studies, a precondition to accede to structural funds, to encourage and monitor the foundation of an NGO for undertaking some of the administrative tasks, and to strengthen the local personnel's governing abilities by qualification courses. The sixth and the seventh strategic perspectives, *improving public services and initiating town*

³ Planul strategic de dezvoltare durabila al orasului Nucet (Nucet's town sustainable development strategic plan)

twinning projects have only one target each, finding a garbage operator and establishing contacts and sending proposal letters to other towns by internet. The last strategic perspective, *cultivating the civic spirit* intends to launch a debate between citizens and municipality on social issues and to set-up a local traditions museum.

The implementation phase begun with the adoption of the plan in the local council meeting and it goes on until 2013.

DISCUSSIONS AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The fact that the planning process is of great importance for local development policy making is a certain thing. Although some basic criterion like the existence of financing programmes adequate to the community's needs and profile or the affinity of the local political discourse with the actual ideologies are quite important, working out the best strategic options and the technical standards to carry them out are of paramount importance.

Concerning the town of Nucet, the eight strategic perspectives of the PSDDON are proposing general town management objectives regarding the endowment with infrastructural and social equipments, without making any cross reference with the land use plans. This fact designates either a misunderstanding of the connections between the two types of planning, or a lack of vision on how to implement the designated objectives. Whatever the reason, both of the facts can have severe impacts on the local community's development.

Regarding the real proposals of the strategy, we think that it doesn't provide for the citizens. Neither the job shortage, nor the environmental issues are addressed by the current policies. More than a half of the 523 employees in the town (of the 2477 total inhabitants⁴) are occupied in the medical care sector, due to the presence of the mental illness hospital. The closing mining activities have left behind both on the ground and underground polluted brownfields. Moreover, the conversion of some of the abandoned mine galleries into national radioactive waste dump arises another set of questions regarding both the long term impact on local community's health and the effects of a possible natural hazard like an earthquake. Neither of these problems is addressed by the present strategy.

The loss of the urban functions highlighted in a recent work on the impact of intercomunality on small towns (Filimon et al, 2011b) should be another major concern of the municipality. The strategic guidelines set by the plan require a review of the land use plans. According to the guidelines, the new land use plans will have to imprint the analysed territory a sustainable pattern by establishing appropriate uses for lands and tailored construction solutions and rules. Thus, the proposed activities within the built-up area and the manner in which lands can be occupied with buildings and infrastructure will have to ensure healthy economic growth, social cohesion and more than everything environment protection. As we mentioned before, the last of the challenges is an extremely delicate local issue, so solving this has to be a major concern for the coming local policies.

Twinning projects should not be initiated randomly by surfing on the internet, but by trying to get in touch with small towns that have faced similar

⁴ 2007 figures

problems and reported a positive, consistent development. A good example in that matter is Bad Schlema, an ex-mining German town, located in Eastern Saxony, close to the Czech border. The town had pretty much the same history like Nucet, a four decade of uranium mining under a Soviet – German company which turned the local community into such a disastrous state that the town was nicknamed “The Valley of Death” (Lintz, Wirth, 2008). The rebirth of the town followed after a brief written *Leitbild* (strategy in German) which proposed a radon spa health resort instead of the decaying uranium mining activity. One has to notice how the German actors turned the old obsolete local landmark into a new and positive identity – yet based on the same “dangerous” radioactive natural resources. The town of Nucet actually has not one, but two local landmarks, the mines and the mental illness hospital. Both could generate high level applied sciences research institutes, maybe within a partnership with several universities which have nuclear physics and medical study programmes.

As a last drawback of the strategic planning process, the monitoring phase was completely forgotten. No planning process can achieve its goals without a sound monitoring activity.

Last but not least, drawing a strategy around a new touristic activity like a winter holiday village should involve more than a single strategic objective like creating a new ski slope.

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