

Coming to a stand still: Romanian environmental practices after accession in the EU

The general theme of my essay is “Coming to a stand still: Romanian environmental practices after accession in the EU”. Needless to mention that my country had to comply with various requirements as to become a member of the European Union. Moreover, once the moment of first of January 2007 (which is the moment of Romania’s accession in EU) passed, the pressure is rising, as we are expected to come in line with the high standards of quality of the union.

Being an EU member has been in recent years a major goal for the Romanian politicians, and a source of hope for citizens. Everyone was excited about the advantages, but few were also considering the shortcomings.

The main point of my essay is that, after the accession, Romania was confronted with an expected economic growth, but with great destructive consequences over the environment.

Environmental problems in Bucharest. Motivation

About the enormous threats for the environment represented by the modern man’s actions you have heard a lot, that’s for sure. Problems such as global warming, pollution, decreasing natural resources, are issues that all states have to deal with; that’s why I wanted my essay to investigate an aspect of environmental problems that might not be so familiar to you.

Even though when speaking about the environment everybody looks at the green problem, I consider the issues are deeper than we think, because the city has problems as well. More than 55% of Romania’s population lives in urban areas, therefore we should pay more interest to the environmental issues of the city life. Although the problems of the natural areas as such are very important, the cities have to deal with many other difficulties that can decrease the comfort of the citizens and, what’s even more important, harm their health.

I chose to focus on Bucharest, which is the capital of Romania and also the biggest city in the country. The reason I wanted to write on this subject it's because I have to face these problems in everyday life.

The great majority of Bucharest's surface is occupied by constructions and the transport network (autovehicles and railways). Bucharest is situated in a rather small area and the mineral resources are very low. The density of the population is very high and the issues Bucharest is facing are specific to the urban development of big cities around the world:

- small surface
- vertical development
- lack of green spaces
- bad salubrity
- intense auto traffic
- pollution generated by traffic and thermic power stations.

Town-planning and the arhitectural problem

The evolution of Bucharest from city to metropolis is explosive if we take into consideration the already developed real estate projects of the announced ones. The extension of Romania's capital overwhelmed the existing infrastructure – at the level of sewerage system and drinkable water.

Bucharest's development can not be done by the companies, the administration or the population. The answer to citizen's everyday problems should be answered by all of these three factors and only the collaboration between them can obtain a good answer.

Since the early '90, when the legislation was not sufficiently explicit regarding the right of investors to build what they want, where they want, increasingly important projects started to appear, which instead of making the city more beautiful, gave a sad air and they have crowded the capital.

At 18 years away from the new beginning for urban development, the problems seem to be the same, although at the official level there is a general urban plan (PUG) since seven years now. This document, however, that should normally represent the basic

structure of urban development for the future of Bucharest, is considered already passed, so not applicable in concrete situations today.

"General urban plan in 2000 is accused by developers as too restrictive, while the media, for example, consider it outrageous permissive. From our point of view (the Bucharest City Hall) is one of the many acts that are not respected or are viciated by dilettante interpretations, with or without a good reason", said Adrian Bold, chief architect in the Bucharest City Hall (PMB).

Meanwhile, chief architect admits that the municipality in the current form of organization, there is not even prepared to respond institutional crisis in traffic.

In other European capitals, in cities such as Paris, Vienna, Prague or Budapest the tone comes from the administration, most often chief architects of those towns being the best known opponents of private projects that do not meet the "line" of urban development.

These town-planning problems show up not only in our country, but at our neighbours as well. I will briefly present the case of Hungary as an example.

→**The Hungarian Example**

One of the most important media scandals of the Hungarian government one year ago was the resignation of the chief architect of the capital, Istvan Schneller, may sound, which defends the interests of the city in front of investors eager for more profitable projects, which do not comply with urban development plan. In September 2006, Istvan Schneller, resigned from office, and organised a press conference in which he explained why he took such a decision.

As he said, one of the main factors which made him resign was that developers have gained enough power in the hall to "dethrone" the interests of the city. Schneller, the chief architect of Budapest since 1994, was one of the initiators of the draft law which provided a maximum height of 45 meters for the buildings in the area of central Budapest, law promoted by the local council, with a comfortable majority in 2002. Besides the central area, buildings may not exceed the height of 65 meters. The highest building in the center of Budapest is the palace, 21 floors, which measures 96 meters.

Schneller first announced his resignation in a magazine interview given to HVG magazine. He said then that he will not allow the esthetic decline of the traditional city. "I am not against sky-scrapes. Some time ago such buildings were symbols of big companies, which were competing in building the highest sky-scrapes. How it can still be a symbol if a building is surrounded by other similar buildings? The cities win in atmosphere by churches, bars and parks", he said at the time of his resignation.

The lack of coherent legislation, which supports the development policy of administration in fact is recognized by chief architect of Bucharest.

"As a country recently alligned to the European standards, the next stage should start with the harmonization of legislation to new needs, because urban history in recent years noted the failure in oposing the urbanism institution in front of the real estate „gold rush”, says Bold.

Very strict regimes of height are met in Wien, Paris and many other capitals or major cities. Negative example most often used by architects and European urbanists is Frankfurt, a modern city, bright, whose center is smothered down by sky-scrapes.

→**How are "diseased tissues"**

The administration of a city, through all the departments and the representatives in government or in parliament, should ensure a development plan. Bold pulls the alarm that there are at least two major threats to the Bucharest's expansion. The first is dire poverty, by creation of areas where the population with low income and who will develop only with the help of Municipality, investors avoiding it on the map, and the second is the over-development, which will take as to the congestion of buildings, leading to additional pressure on traffic and the demographic density.

If real estate developments are now sufficiently profitable for investors to neglect the lack of infrastructure, one of the most clear examples being Pipera, in the long term situation will change. In a past issue of the journal Business Construct example was presented the Erasmus bridge, the local press called "The Swan", which is the connection between the northern and the southern part of Rotterdam, Netherlands. Motivul construirii lui, pe banii primariei, nu a fost unul estetic ci de omogenizare a celor doua parti ale orasului. The reason for building it, the mayor's money, was not one aesthetic

but homogenization of the two parts of the city. Since announcing the project, a high number of investors have expressed their desire to develop projects in that area, until then considered a poor one. In the early years local government has also led a more relaxed fiscal policy in that area.

If the current "diseased tissues", those with a low level of development and in need of a very large investment, are in great part the former industrial areas, located mostly in the southern part of the capital, the future could bring famous "victims". The infrastructure for water and sewage has not yet extended until Pipera area. The administration says that this comes into tasks of the company Apa Nova, which received in concession this public service, through auction.

At the same time, however, Andreas Baude, general manager of Apa Nova, said in an interview in the Financial Magazine that he respects the contract. With deadlines for each point in hand, Apa Nova followed step by step contractual requirements, extending the network of water and sewage being passed among the priorities.

→ **How to build exactly what you want**

„If the owner of a land wants to build something of an elevation that exceeds the UGP (Urbanistic General Plan) he addresses a town-planner that creates an Urban Zonal Plan (UZP), changing the percentage of filling of the land and the maximum elevation. There's a network of influence between the succesful town-planners and the members of the Tehnical Commssion of the General Council of Bucharest. This network allows illegal authorizations to receive their approval". This is the way the report explains how it's possible to build a tower in a one-story hoses area.

The main problem are the UZP (Urban Zonal Plans) which come into conflict with UGP (Urbanistic General Plan). In the European Union, only the authorities are allowed to create UZP and only after public debate they are accepted.

→ **Demolishing by night**

The same report offers information about the intentions of the historical monuments buildings owners to demolish them by night. These houses are situated in the historical center of Bucharest, on streets like: Lahovari, Eminescu, Dorobanti or Traian.

Instead of these old constructions, their owners would like to build office buildings and take advantage of the central area. The examples are illustrated by a small house on Visarion street which was burnt one night until it fell, even though the owner did not have a demolition authorization.

The traffic. Crowd, noise, pollution

Grab a hundred random inhabitants of Bucharest and ask them about their discontents concerning the city they live in. I bet the great majority of them will mention public transportation, the bad traffic and the lack of parking lots that should meet the citizens' needs. Therefore, a second major problem in Bucharest is the traffic.

In Bucharest, increasing fleet of vehicles, together with the requirements of mobility, have made the network of streets in Bucharest, in general and in central areas, in particular, to be crowded by flows of vehicles. In the main intersections appear large gatherings of traffic, especially along the ring and the main central streets. The circulation of cars hardly takes place because of insufficient parking spaces arranged.

Transportation systems are very harmful to the environment, both locally and globally. Issues such as noise, vibration, air pollution are harmful to health and welfare of communities across the industrialized and developed countries. Shipments also have an important contribution to sustaining global climate change. The basic relationship between transport and climate system is complex.

Shipments are almost entirely dependent on oil for fuel. Oil, along with other fossil fuels (coal and gas) are the main sources of carbon dioxide, which together with other greenhouse gases cause unprecedented changes in global climate system.

→To the office, by car

Building extremely tall buildings right in the center of the city has repercussion over the traffic, because all the business centers gather thousands of cars each day. As an example, we can take a look at the business center that is being built next to „Saint Joseph Cathedral”. Approximately 500 vehicles will exit the Cathedral Plaza Parking at the same time on the boulevard General Barthelot. All of these cars occupy no less than 3,5 kilometers on one direction of driving!

The specialists propose the bicycles or public transport, but these are not viable options at this moment. Five years ago, the City Council started to mark bicycles routes in Bucharest, but only on the most important boulevards. What happened after is a disaster! These routes were not protected and everybody started to park their cars on the special routes for bicycles. Because of that, riding a bicycle in Bucharest is almost impossible. Local authorities should encourage the use of environmental friendly transport alternatives, like public transport, bicycles or non-polluting small scooters. But they do not offer people the chance to use them, because there is no infrastructure for that.

After announcing that there won't be built any other parking spaces in Bucharest, mayor Adriean Videanu reversed its declaration. The Transport Department of the City Council announced that in the spring of 2008 there will be single lanes for buses and the police said that the number of available agents will be used in order to maintain the bus lane free.

On the other hand, the citizens still do not have space to walk on the sidewalks, standing still blocked in traffic hours in a row, and the green traffic light still does not guarantee priority to pass.

In most seminars on urban issues, foreign officials who have visited us, Dutch, Belgian, British or French, drew attention that there is a single measure to combat problems caused by a very intense traffic. The solution, as they show them, is a set of measures to be implemented simultaneously.

Nowadays, the only street with special lane buses is the boulevard Queen Elizabeth, from the University until Opera, but the regulations are not respected as well. The administration is aware of the capital needs of the inhabitants. Nevertheless, the effects of actions so far are still not so visible. Moreover, there is an institutional problem.

The architects are those who usually accuse the mayors of Bucharest, the members of the town hall council and the town-planners that they illegally approve building projects that mutilate the city.

Tower blocks of flats with dozens of stories in areas surrounded by one-story houses, patrimony buildings have been demolished without any authorizations, just because the value of the land under the construction is bigger than the historic value. The

urbanism plans nowadays violate the general urbanistic law in Bucharest. The officialities approve the retrocession of many parks or green spaces that become, just over night, construction sites for new office buildings or blocks of flats. All of this data is based on a report edited by an NGO (Save Bucharest Association) that is meant to explain why Bucharest looks like a concrete city, where the dust and the pollution took the place of green spaces.

This expert's report contains photographs and written cases that illustrate the urbanistic disaster from the capital of Romania. All of this data has been collected from the press, which drew the attention of the citizens over this problem. The authors of this report show that the legislation is showing a visible deficit, but also that the authorities break this legislation without any remorse. Even though this NGO tries to mobilize the citizens, the City Council reacts in a rather hilarious way by telling that the green spaces afferent to every inhabitant are not as low as the report says. But it seems that the City Council takes into account the green spaces from the grave-yards and the town zoo park.

Statistics and comparisons.

The average driving speed in the center of Bucharest was 15 km/hours in 2000. In 2006, it decreased to 10 km/h, and at the rush hours, at 2 km/h.

The economical losses generated by traffic jams are estimated at 180.000.000 euros per year.

Ambulances: the driving time to an incident grew from 12 minutes in 2002 to 35 minutes in 2006.

Bucharest has a density of 9.009 inhabitants / square km, compared to Berlin - 3.905, Wien – 3.850 and Budapest – 3.674. The social confort decreases at higher densities than 3.500 inhabitants / square km.

AIIESEC, one of the NGOs in Bucharest started a project called „Bucharest Whistles a Foul!”. This project wants to pull the alarm signal about the durable development in Bucharest: promoting the bicycles as a non-polluting way of transport, protecting the green spaces in the city (which is asphyxiated by concrete) and informing the citizens about cleaning their own city.

Green areas in danger

Bucharest's inhabitants are mad about the architectural and urbanistic disaster and about the problem with parking lots particularly because these affect their comfort and the need for a proper environment. But there are problems in Bucharest that harm even more, as they have a really powerful impact on people's health. In Bucharest, in 2004, the green spaces area was 17,082,024 m², while area parks and gardens in the administration of PMB was 2,490,630 m².

In the city of Bucharest, on the basis of observations made between 1990 and 2005 finds an accentuated trend in declining green areas (about 50% between 1990 and 2005) and degradation of green spaces. Thus, the area green space with unlimited access to the locals who returned the capital fell from 1989 until 2002 from 16.79 m² to 9.38 m² (9 m²/locuitor minimum set by the World Health Organization). The situation is worrying if they take into account the fact that only 18% of green spaces are public parks and gardens, which is 1.68 m² per inhabitant (the recommended norm is 8 m² park per inhabitant, 6 m² per inhabitant public garden).

Among the causes of severe destruction of vegetation in the city we can include:

- Development of small and medium economic activities in parks and public gardens,
- Increasing road traffic,
- The accumulation of carbon monoxide and lead and the apparition of acid rain,
- Industrial pollution,
- Extending the areas already constructed
- Lack of funds to restore green spaces

The Air quality problem

The poor quality of the air the citizens of Bucharest breath every day is a direct consequence of the problem of the green areas.

Following the recommendation of the Master Plan for development the National Integrated Monitoring System for Environment (Phare project RO91.05), the monitoring of the ambient air quality and the opportunities for improving the management of the monitoring system at the level of municipality is considered to be a priority.

Presently, Bucharest city has 3 non-automatic air control networks, with 20 sampling points in total (all of them are not operational). None of the sampling points has meteo station. The data processing gathering from this network consists in monthly reports with average concentrations, maximum concentrations and over-passing frequency on each pollutant. Because this network is not working in “real time” the exceed values of each pollutant are known a day after the sample was taken. Some representative pollutants for large urban areas – CO and O3 – are not measured. The air emission monitoring is not present in Bucharest city because the lack of equipment at potential sources.

Romania and EU- Legislative harmonization. Funds

After presenting the environmental problems in my country, I find it useful to say a few words about the way Romania is trying to reduce the disparities between it and the other EU members.

The 22nd Chapter of the pre-aderation programme of Romania to the European Union took care exclusively of the field of environmental protection. He was among the last to be finished, given that Romania was missing a good environmental policy built nationwide. Once admitted into the European community, the requirements of the EU have increased for the Romanian state.

What should we do to be in line with other Community Members? Here are a few dilemmas that we do not leave us too much thinking time to resolve them. The first stage of the accession assumed legislative harmonization. Approximation of national legislation with the Community legal regulations constituted a mandatory step in the pre-accession period. In this way the existing legal framework become more homogeneous and closer to European standards.

Harmonization should be followed by an upper stage, the transposition of the regulations in the national plan, which must be carried in the post-accession period. Thus, Romania's strategy after accession prescribes the implementation and compliance with the principles and fundamental values of the Union consisting in solidarity, consensus and spirit of compromise.

In the environmental field gap against the EU Member States will be reduced, regarding sustainable development and protection of natural resources.

In this regard local investment capital will be promoted for the measures and works to protect the environment, biodiversity and natural heritage will improved by supporting the management of protected areas, the quality of soil will be ensured, water pollution will be reduced and the waste management will be improved also. These are the priorities of Romania in the following period.

A new framework law regarding environmental protection has been adopted, with no substantial changes, but all in addition to the legislative framework with national strategies and principles enshrined at Community level.

Through these strategies, Romania will be able to fulfill the environmental requirements. Romania will reach standards that will improve the environment as a whole, and the quality of life also.

In essence, through the realisation of the 'internal market', Europe's new prosperity and economic development has put pressure on cities. The role and contribution of cities to Europe's economic growth, jobs and competitiveness, while also delivering social and environmental goals, has been addressed extensively by the EU institutions together with the regional and local authorities (European Commission, 2005). Sustainable urban development appears prominently in many European policy commitments, not least EU regional policy.

To this end substantial EU Cohesion and Structural Funds budget transfers to Member States provide powerful drivers of macro-economic change to support EU integration. However, analysis shows that they can also create inadvertent socio-economic effects that have promoted the development of sprawl. The coordination of land use policies and Structural and Cohesion

Funds investments remains key to support the containment of urban sprawl, which is complicated by the fact that EU intervention in many other, if not all, policy domains, impact on or are impacted by urban development.

One illustration of the extent of these interrelationships is the EU commitment to sustainable development and policies to tackle climate change: how can we ensure that the growth of urban greenhouse gas emissions due to the dominance of car transport

in the EU's sprawling cities does not threaten to undermine EU Kyoto commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2020?

Overall, the EU has an obligation in relation to the wide range of environmental, social and economic impacts of urban sprawl to define a clear and substantial responsibility, and a mandate to take an active lead in the development of new initiatives to counter the impacts of sprawl.

Conclusions

Environmental problems are not the same in the city and in the nature as such. The people in the city have specific needs, like those concerning a proper architectural plan, enough space for parking the cars, the level of noise, the quality of the air or the way waste is collected. Bucharest, the capital of Romania, deals with all these problems, and, as i assume, the difficulty has risen once with the accession in the EU, which launched the economic growth and the expansion of the real estate market.

In spite of these negative aspects, i consider that the integration of Romania in the EU might have in itself the solution at these problems. The structural funds that are at our disposal will surely help us to keep up with the latest technologies for the protection of the environment and to assimilate the practices of other countries that succeeded in the the field of green problem.

Resources:

1. <http://www.euractiv.ro/>
2. <http://www.zf.ro/>
3. <http://www.apmb.ro>
4. <http://europa.eu/>
5. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/>
6. <http://reports.ro.eea.europa.eu/catalog/>
7. <http://www.evz.ro>