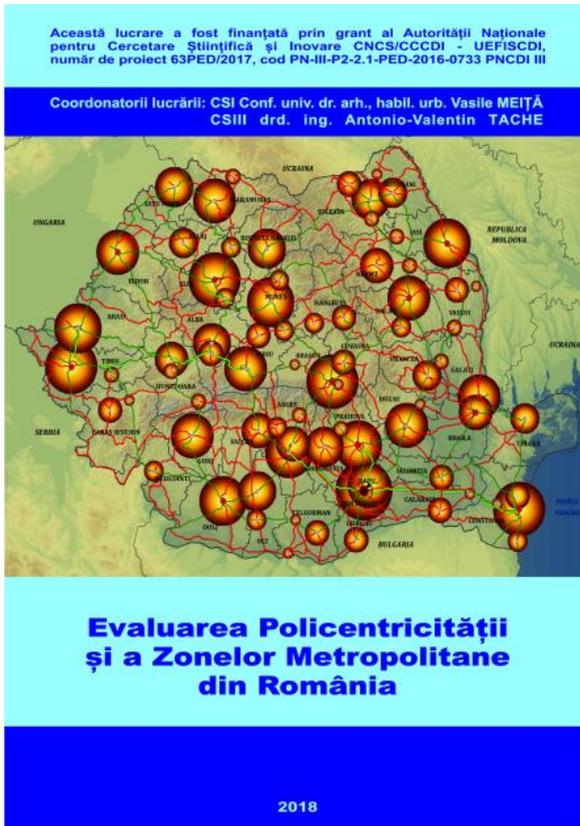


**BOOK REVIEW: MEIȚĂ V. M., TACHE A.-V. (EDS.) (2018),
EVALUAREA POLICENTRICITĂȚII ȘI A ZONELOR
METROPOLITANE DIN ROMÂNIA (ASSESSING ROMANIAN
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Worthwhile studies on regional science and planning occur in splendid isolation, especially within the Romanian literature. It therefore makes for a refreshing change to see an interesting analytical book appear across an increasingly dreary landscape of pseudo-scientific output.

This is a book about Romanian polycentrism and metropolitan areas, topics dear to both planners and the central administration. It is analytical in nature, mostly written in the style of a report. This feature will be particularly helpful for readers with a propensity towards methodology.

The book consists of five chapters, with its architecture being as follows: The first chapter traces the convoluted history of polycentrism. It is essentially a literature review, coupled with an exercise in assessing the current degree of Romanian polycentrism, based on the methodology produced by the first generation of ESPON studies. Albeit methodologically sound, I would have preferred a graphical representation of the theoretical and, ideally, the political filiation of polycentrism. Such a graphical filiation would have highlighted different, and sometimes overlapping, research traditions, thereby providing some orientation in an otherwise rather obscure field.

The second chapter focuses upon the concept of Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) and its illustration within a Romanian context. Methodologically, it builds again on the pioneering ESPON (2006) studies, thereby contributing to a valuable European research tradition. Taken together, the first two chapters form the analytical backbone of the entire

book, providing ample material for the student in regional science.

The following two chapters take a more policy-oriented stance. Hence, the third chapter delves into matters of 'smart' specialisation. Its ambitions are less supported by empirical evidence and by methodological profiling, most likely due to the theoretical ambiguity and the empty rhetoric of the concept. As a consequence, the text becomes somewhat less stimulating, as it often lingers on the descriptive side.

The pace quickens again during the following chapter, which examines the related concept of territorial 'attractiveness'. However, by this time, the reader becomes fully aware that the theoretical and methodological underpinning of the book has gradually shifted towards the second, and every so often, less inspired, generation of ESPON (2013) studies. Nonetheless, the authors offer an incipient mathematical model for assessing the level of territorial attractiveness exhibited by the Romanian settlement network. Be advised, however, that the model is essentially an exercise in weighting various indicators, based on George Jenks' optimisation method. More work on this matter will most likely follow.

The book concludes with a chapter dedicated to the metropolitan areas in Romania. Here again, an introductory theoretical appraisal guides the reader towards an exercise in profiling Romanian metropolitan areas. The final, and most promising, section of the entire chapter is the last one. Albeit surprisingly short, it is here that the performance level of all Romanian metropolitan areas is finally revealed. The message is

powerful: Romania evolves at markedly different speeds.

To complement the perspectives offered by this book, I would highly recommend to any interested reader the perusal of the World Bank's report on Romanian magnet cities. Taken together, these two works shed precious light on just how different these development speeds really are. One is therefore bound to ask whether current policies at the national level, aimed at supporting polycentric development, are effective or not. I am very inclined to say no. Against this background, I strongly believe that it is high time for a spatial policy evaluation exercise in Romania.

Now, to the crux of the matter: the book's impact. Will it garner a large enough audience, for it to exert a noticeable influence across the planning community? Hopefully, but I cannot be completely sure. I do hope that it will become at least a household name for planning students, irrespective of their backgrounds. Anything beyond that will certainly be impressive, albeit increasingly uncertain. Let me explain why.

The planning profession in Romania is currently in a state of flux. Future prospects are fuzzy and, more often than not, rather bleak. The reasons for this unfortunate state of affairs are manifold, but I would suggest critically examining the following three aspects: First, the lack of theoretical production; second, the largely absent methodological progress in Romanian planning, and third, the increasing weakness of the planning profession.

Theoretical insufficiency has marred the field of planning for almost three decades

now, with scholars producing surprisingly little valuable theory. And by theory, I mean any set of propositions with explanatory and predictive power. Theory, be it substantive or procedural, is important, because it delineates the commonly agreed body of knowledge. And without a commonly agreed body of knowledge, the planning discipline becomes empty rhetoric. Which, unfortunately, it has. This is the first point I wish to stress.

Secondly, methodological progress has been largely absent from recent planning discussions in Romania. The same applies to academic output, for that matter. This is rather irksome, as the Romanian planning tradition has been remarkable in methodological output, both during the interwar period and the socialist times. Very little remains of that.

And finally, the institutional conundrum. Astonishingly enough, it has a lot to do with the issues mentioned earlier. However, there is more to it than meets the eye. Simply put, it is a twofold problem. On the one hand, it is procedural. Planning instruments have become increasingly impotent in managing urban and regional change. With the repeal of the Systematisation Law in December 1989, the planning profession was left with virtually no workable normative context. Almost thirty years later, planning bodies have proved unable to design and to erect an efficient planning system.

This brings us to the second aspect of the problem: The lack of skin in the game for planners. Provocative as it might seem at first sight, suffice it to say that, generally, the responsibility of any planner ends when planning documents are endorsed by the public authority.

Hence, there is little incentive for reform within the profession. And, sadly enough, when the proper functioning of an entire planning system rests solely upon the ethical responsibilities of planners, policy makers and policy takers, the system will eventually fail. Because few are able, and willing, to take a moral high ground on this matter.

It is against this sobering background that I welcome the publication of this book, because I believe it might just achieve the following:

- To become a widely consulted work across Romanian planning studies, as well as by young professionals interested in regional science, thereby

contributing to a more rational turn in planning practices;

- To provide the methodological groundwork necessary to design a proper monitoring mechanism for metropolitan development in Romania, aimed at substantiating planning evaluation exercises;
- And, at least partially, to bridge the gap between spatial analysis and, especially urban, development policy, thereby contributing to correct the professional and political myopia that permeates the Romanian planning field at the moment.

Three rather ambitious aims, to be honest. Nonetheless, I do hope that I shall see them fulfilled sometime soon.