

CRITERIA FOR INDIVIDUALIZATION AND DELIMITATION OF CITIES IN THE NORTH DEVELOPMENT REGION

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Abstract *The North Region possesses the largest number of small and medium-sized towns among the development regions of the Republic of Moldova, including 3 municipalities and 17 towns. Currently, the urban network of the North Development Region (RD Nord) is characterized by a polycentric structure, in which the municipality of Bălţi represents the main polarizing growth center, followed by urban centers with secondary regional functions. The emergence and evolution of these urban centers have been influenced by a series of political, economic, and social factors. Small and medium-sized towns perform economic, social, and administrative functions within the human settlement network. However, in the absence of coherent development strategies and due to the manifestation of unfavorable socio-economic factors, most human settlements in the region face demographic and economic challenges, which have contributed to an accentuated urban decline. The purpose of this study consists of analyzing the criteria for individualizing and delimiting the towns of the North Development Region by evaluating their territorial, social, and economic dynamics, as well as the evolution of urban functions in the context of regional transformations. The research is based on quantitative analysis methods used to identify the causes of urban stagnation, improper management, and the insufficiency of strategic planning. The study's results can contribute to the substantiation of regional and urban development policies, serving as a useful tool for local and regional decision-makers.*

Keywords: *city/town, urban settlement, administrative boundary, urban centers*

JEL: R11, R12, R58

Introduction

A city is an administrative-territorial unit that is more economically, socially, and culturally developed than a village. It encompasses an urban population and features corresponding municipal, industrial, and commercial structures. The majority of its population is employed in industry, public services, various fields of intellectual activity, and in cultural and political life. [1]

Small and medium-sized towns play an important role in the network of human settlements through the economic, social, and administrative functions they fulfill. The dynamics of these territorial entities constitute a complex process, marked by their positioning at the intersection of important trade routes, by industrialization policies, and by socio-economic restructuring. Currently, the urban network of the Northern Development Region (RD Nord) is distinguished by a polycentric structure, with the municipality of Bălţi serving as a polarizing growth center, followed by regional centers with a secondary degree of polarization. The purpose of this study is to analyze the dynamics of these settlements from a territorial, social, and economic perspective, highlighting the way in which their functions have evolved over time in accordance with the transformations that have taken place in this space.

Urban physiognomy is a product of the evolution of human settlements, governed by factors of varying spatial, political, and socio-economic intensity. Within the general framework, the city is a component of the habitat system, yet it plays a well-defined structuring role at the spatial level. On a global scale, cities have exhibited territorial and demographic functionalities and redistributions that

have contributed to the current geographical configuration of the world and its peoples, while enhancing the overall quality of life.

Concerns regarding the study of cities date back to antiquity; essential contributions were made by ancient philosophers such as Strabo, Hippocrates, Plato, Ptolemy, and others. The first systemic appraisals of urban areas are found in the works of Alexander von Humboldt, specifically in his work *Views of Nature* (1808) [12], and Karl Ritter, in his work *Die Erdkunde* (The Science of the Earth) [13]. Friedrich Ratzel is considered the father of social geography; in his work *Antropogeographie* [14], he proposed for the first time at a scientific level the theory of "living space" (*Lebensraum*), defining the notion of the *ecumene* as the habitable part of a people that provides terrestrial and expansion rights based on their type of activity or military decisions. This theory confirmed the hypothesis of the influence of natural factors and geographical position on the morphostructure of cities. In the mid-20th century, Walter Christaller (1893–1969) observed the position of urban habitats in relation to rural ones as being hierarchically superior, occupying a central position that governs the surrounding space. This theory was named the **Central Place Theory**.

The human factor was not excluded from this context. Practically, an indissoluble relationship manifests between man and his place of residence; through their lifestyle and types of activities, humans shape natural landscapes and directly influence ecological systems. The highly complex dynamism of urbanization has been observed as a phenomenon starting from the middle and toward the end of the last century, marked by intense population movements toward cities. This generated a complex urban system and, simultaneously, highlighted the functionality of cities as a primary factor in industrial and socio-economic development.

The evolution of cities is approached from both an intra-urban and inter-urban perspective. At the **intra-urban** level, the city is studied from a functional perspective—specifically, the interaction between population flows and the site where the city developed. In other words, this refers to the **urban morphostructure**. From an **inter-urban** point of view, the focus is on the alignment of a city's fundamental concepts in relation to the broader urban system.

Criteria for Urban Individualization

The city represents the most expressive image of society, concentrating the most precious assets created by man. [6] Over time, a multitude of definitions regarding the significance or meanings of the term "city" have been proposed. In his work *Antropogeographie*, Friedrich Ratzel attributes to the city a substantial surface area with a minimum number of inhabitants, situated at the intersection of communication routes. Jean Brunhes, in his work *La Géographie Humaine* (Human Geography, 1910), and Pierre Defontaines in *L'Homme et l'habitat* (Man and Habitat, 1953), consider that a city exists whenever the majority of its inhabitants spend their time within the agglomeration. Ferdinand von Richthofen views the city as a grouping of people whose primary activities are non-agricultural. On the other hand, H. Wagner considers cities to be concentrated points of human trade. According to author Vasile Cucu in his work *The Geography of Cities* (1970) [11], several basic criteria are essential in defining urban areas, namely: geographical position, demographic size, professional structure, and economic potential.

From all these conceptions put forward over time, we can conclude that the city represents a form of organization comprising the following components:

- a) **Natural framework** (soil and subsoil components)
- b) **Population**
- c) **Built environment** (residential areas, production and storage units, commercial units, monuments, health and cultural institutions, educational institutions, etc.)
- d) **Infrastructure** (roads and access ways, utility networks, technical equipment)
- e) **Leisure zones** (parks, plantations, recreation areas) [6]

Based on the analysis above, one can observe the so-called "urban anonymity," manifested through a high degree of cultural diversity. Mutual acquaintance among community members is quite reserved,

kinship ties are of little importance, and the population's activities can extend beyond the administrative perimeter of the city.

Criteria for the Delimitation of Cities

The granting of urban status is based on multiple criteria. However, in most countries around the world, the fundamental criterion is the population size. At an international level, it is a common practice to grant urban status to settlements with a population ranging between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants.

In the European Union, administrative-territorial organization is a competence assigned to the member states. This means that each country has its own criteria for granting urban status. Nevertheless, through Eurostat and the OECD, a standardized system has been created to obtain comparable statistical data from each country.

European practice is based on population grids per km². Thus, settlements are classified into cities (large urban centers) and towns and suburbs as follows:

Table 1. Criteria for the Delimitation of Cities in the EU

Settlement Type	Characteristics
Cities (Large Urban Centers)	75% population concentration 1,500 inhabitants km ² ≥50,000 inhabitants
towns and Suburbs	50% population concentration 300 inhabitants km ² ≥ 5,000 inhabitants

Source: elaborated by the author based on source [4]

A very practical phenomenon in the EU is the **FUA (Functional Urban Area)** [4], a concept used by the OECD and Eurostat to delimit a city's actual sphere of influence, rather than just its administrative boundaries. This means that urban status can also be granted to settlements that do not strictly meet the criteria listed above but represent an urban core through their capacity as a **commuting zone**. In other words, populations from adjacent settlements commute for their daily activities. This practice is frequent and attracts significant European funding. Examples of such urban areas include Île-de-France (France), Lille (Belgium), Ruhr and Duisburg (Germany), Katowice and Sosnowiec (Polonia), Szeged and Pécs (Hungary), and Chiajna, Otopeni, Popești-Leordeni, or Apahida-Clujului (Romania).

In countries with low population density due to climatic conditions, the threshold for granting urban status is even lower, both at the international and European levels. Sweden, Iceland, and Peru serve as examples of such models. In Denmark and Sweden, the population threshold can drop as low as 200 inhabitants, while in Peru and Iceland, the minimum population threshold disappears entirely, focusing instead on the degree of spatial occupancy itself—specifically, a minimum of 100 dwellings. There are also regions where even the smallest human settlements take on an urban character based on their specific commercial functionalities. Such a practice is frequently encountered in the USA and Canada.

When discussing population distribution within human settlements, it is indispensable to take into account the degree of compactness. From this perspective, the distances between buildings should be between 50 and 200 meters, while population density varies from country to country: in France, it

must be 5 inhabitants/ha, for Germany 10 inhabitants/ha, and 25 inhabitants/ha for the United Kingdom.

Table 2. Minimum population thresholds for granting urban status.

Minimum Number of Inhabitants	States / Countries
200	Sweden, Denmark
500	South Africa
1000-2000	Australia, Ireland, France, Greece, Netherlands, Argentina, Cuba, DR Congo
2500	Mexico
4000	South Korea
5000	India, Pakistan, Turkey, Austria
10 000	Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Italy, Spain, Japan, Serbia, Montenegro, Switzerland

Source:elaborated by the author based on source [4,6]

At the international level, there is also the practice of granting urban status through political decisions, either in the form of local referendums or through individual laws. Such phenomena are found in Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Scotland, Bulgaria, and the United Kingdom. This practice is also present in Romania.

In Latin America, all administrative units that perform socio-economic and regional coordination functions are considered cities.

Criteria for the Classification of Cities

As a highly complex social and economic phenomenon, the city can possess very special structures and functionalities of particular significance to economic development, maintaining its position as a primary driver of collective population satisfaction.

Consequently, the classification of cities is based on several criteria, depending on the intended objective.

Table 3. Classification of cities according to specific criteria [6]

Criterion	Type / Category
By geographical location	Mountain cities Hill, plateau cities Plain cities Cities near hydrographic networks (Riverside/Coastal)
By genesis (origin)	Ancient Medieval Contemporary
By structure (layout)	Linear, bilinear Rectangular (Grid) Polynuclear
By appearance / morphology	European style North American style
By function	Commercial / Trading Agro-industrial University / Student cities Military Complex (Diversified)

By evolutionary form	Micro-region City / Town Metropolis Megalopolis
By demographic capacity	Small cities ($\leq 10\,000$ loc.) Medium cities ($10\,000 - 100\,000$ loc.) Large cities ($100\,000 - 1\,000\,000$ loc.) Very large cities / Megacities ($\geq 1\,000\,000$ loc.)

Source: elaborated by the author based on source [6]

The city is considered a pole of territorial coordination, meaning that it performs multiple functions. Consequently, cities can also be classified based on other criteria, such as the polarization area (sphere of influence), infrastructure, administration, public security, and others.

Table 4. Analysis criteria for granting urban status. Elaborated by the author.

Analysis Criterion	Indicators / Description
Populations	Global average of 5,000 inhabitants.
Polarization Area	Within a radius of 20–30 km (sphere of influence).
Infrastructure	Access road networks and connectivity.
Labor Market	75% of the population employed in non-agricultural sectors.
Administration	City Hall (Local Government), prosecutor's office, notary services, courthouse, justice departments.
Health	Hospital, ambulance services, pharmacies, outpatient clinics.
Trade / Commerce	Specialized stores, marketplaces.
Sports	Gyms, sports fields, stadium.
Public Utilities (Utility Infrastructure)	Water supply (aqueduct), sewerage, pumping stations, wastewater treatment plants, public restrooms, sanitation/waste management stations.
Environmental Protection	Ecological inspectorates, animal shelters.
Communications & Transport	Post office, bus station and/or railway station.
Finance	Banks, commercial banks, insurance companies.
Religion	Places of worship, cemeteries.
Education	Nurseries, kindergartens, schools, specialized schools (fine arts, music, dance).
Tourism	Travel agencies, hotels (minimum 2 stars).
Culture	Libraries, community centers (<i>culture houses</i>), art and creative centers.

Security	Police stations, gendarmerie/carabinieri, Inspectorate for Emergency Situations (IGSU/Fire Dept).
Leisure / Recreation	Parks, playgrounds.
Social Assistance	Placement centers, elderly care centers, inclusion centers.

Source: elaborated by the author based on source [6]

In the Republic of Moldova, administrative organization is coordinated in accordance with **Law No. 764 of 27.12.2001 on the Administrative-Territorial Organization of the Republic of Moldova**, which establishes the categories of administrative-territorial units. According to this provision:

"The city (town) is an administrative-territorial unit that is more economically and socio-culturally developed than the village; it encompasses the urban population, possesses appropriate public utility, industrial, and commercial structures, and its population is largely employed in industry, public services, and various fields of intellectual activity, as well as in cultural and political life." [1]

In this regard, we can distinguish that cities occupy a higher hierarchical position compared to villages through the structures and functions they perform. At the same time, cities occupy an area of economic polarization for the surrounding settlements.

Within the same legal provision, the status of **municipality** is established under the category of cities, defined as "an urban-type locality with a distinctive role in the economic, socio-cultural, scientific, political, and administrative life of the country, featuring important industrial and commercial structures, as well as institutions in the fields of education, healthcare, and culture." [1] The status of municipality is granted to the cities of Chişinău, Bălţi, Bender, Cahul, Ceadr-Lunga, Comrat, Edineţ, Hînceşti, Orhei, Sorooca, Străşeni, Tiraspol, and Ungheni. According to **Law No. 435 of 28.12.2006 on Administrative Decentralization**, it is established that cities possess autonomy in managing their own resources to satisfy community needs, aiming to enhance administrative quality and improve demographic and infrastructural indicators. [3] The competences and duties of community leaders are in strict accordance with the legal-normative framework governing city administration, in democratic consensus with local councils, which are politically formed following electoral ballots based on political affiliation or independent candidacy. [2]

The Evolution of Urban Settlements

The genesis of the first urban formations coincides with the region spanning from Northeast Africa to the Far East [6], situated along hydrographic networks. This territorial organization was due to both the requirements of waterborne transport for goods and products—serving as a communication route—and the necessity of supporting agriculture.

The first urban settlements developed along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Mesopotamia, considered the cradle of civilization), as well as in the Nile and Indus valleys. In mountain basins, the Persian civilization established itself, favoring the development of a pastoral economy.

The most ancient city is Petra (known in antiquity as Raqmu), which is also mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls and was founded in the 6th century BC. Damascus remains the oldest continuously operating capital, founded over 4,000 years ago, while Jerusalem was established in 1000 BC by the Hebrew King David on the site of a Canaanite fortress, remaining the only holy city for three major religions. [6]

In political-administrative organization, a significant role was played by cities developed in coastal areas, particularly in the Mediterranean basin, which fostered the expansion of navigation and trade. Relevant examples include the Cretan and Greek civilizations, which served as the foundation for subsequent civilizations (Roman, Phoenician). The most famous cities were Troy, Ephesus, Mycenae, Knossos, Heraklion, etc. The peak was reached during the expansion of the Roman Empire through wars of conquest, stretching from the Iberian Peninsula to Dacia Felix and Nor The oldest cities in

Romania date back to the 7th century BC and were concentrated on the Black Sea coast: Tyras, at the mouth of the Dniester; Istros (Histria); Tomis (Constanța); and Callatis (Mangalia). These cities functioned as city-states. There were also cities of civil-military cohesion known as *davae*: Ziridava (Pecica), Petrodava (Piatra Neamț), Cumidava (Râșnov), Buridava (Ocnița), and Pelendava (Craiova).

The Historical Evolution of Cities in the North Development Region

In ancient times, Moldavia was divided into three parts: the Lower Country (*Țara de Jos*), the Upper Country (*Țara de Sus*), and Bessarabia, which together comprised 23 smaller districts [7, p.20] The Lower Country included 12 districts, covering part of the current territory of northern Moldova; the Upper Country included 7 districts, and Bessarabia was considered the "forefront" (*partea de frunte*) of Moldavia.

Urban settlements on the archaic territory of the Republic of Moldova are documented during the Middle Ages under the phrase *târguri* (market towns), a term derived from the Slavic word *trugu*. The term *oraș* (city/town) has its roots in the Hungarian word *város* and became popular in this region during the 14th century. [5, 10, GIURESCU C.C]

Urban fortifications were built depending on the geographical position of the locality or the nature of human activity. However, the primary role in the genesis of urban settlements belonged to the citadels, which asserted their importance through the presence of fortresses or fortifications. [5]

During the medieval period, the most significant urban centers with economic impact were Old Orhei (*Orheiul Vechi*), Hansca (Costești, Ialoveni District) [5, 9], and the small market town of Scerbanca, which later ceased to exist. [5, 9]

At the end of the 15th century, the urban complex comprised 17 cities, four of which were located in the territory between the Prut and Dniester rivers: Cetatea Albă, Chilia, and Sărata. In the 16th century, three more urban centers appeared: Cernăuți, Hotin, and Orhei. [5, 9]

The 18th century was marked by the work of the greatest chronicler, politician, and philosopher—Dimitrie Cantemir. His fundamental work, which includes a detailed description of this territory, is *Descriptio Moldaviae*. [7] According to Cantemir's records, cities were divided into three categories:

- **Fortified Cities (Fortress-Cities):** Hotin, Soroca
- **Market Towns (*Târguri*):** Lăpușna, Orhei
- **Small Market Towns (*Târgușoare*):** Chișinău

It was specifically in the **18th century** that the development of cities in Bessarabia reached its peak with the emergence of market towns (*târguri*), especially in the Northern region.

Thus, the market town of **Bălți** was founded in 1769, followed by **Atachi (Otaci)** in 1781. The market town of **Lipcani** emerged due to the commercial route within the Iași–Hotin–Botoșani economic triangle. **Briceni** appeared as a market town in 1788, and **Telenești** in 1795. The first historical records of **Soroca** were documented in a charter signed by Prince Stephen the Great on June 29, 1499, as a land grant to the burgrave (*pârcălab*) Coste; the settlement was then named *Alchionia*. During the reign of Alexander the Good, on June 15, 1431, the Veadinți district—today's city of **Edineț**—was granted to the boyar Cupcici. Due to the clayey soil and climatic conditions that created heavy mud (*glod*), the settlement on this land was named **Glodeni** in 1673. The youngest city in the North Development Region is **Ocnița**, which was once a small village on the banks of the Dniester. It received city status in 1897, following the construction of the railway hub at the junction of commercial routes on the country's northern border.

The events following **1812** were marked by the cession of the Principality of Moldavia and the occupation of this territory by the Tsarist regime. During this period, the so-called "*posads*" (suburbs/trading settlements) emerged. Thus, under the rule of the Russian Empire, seven cities, three *posads*, and two market towns stood out, organized according to the following structure:

- **Capital City** (referring to Moscow)
- **Gubernatorial City** (Chișinău)

- **County Seat / Residence City** (Bălți, Soroca, Hotin)
- **Non-residence City** (Cahul, Chilia) [5]

At the beginning of the 20th century, Bessarabia reunited with Romania. Historical records mention that on the territory of Bessarabia, there were 9 county seats and 49 market towns (*târguri*). [1, 8] The registration of such a high number of market towns highlights the significant growth of commercial activities and the fact that cities were increasingly becoming both economic and administrative centers. [8]

In 1925, the **Law on the Administrative Unification of Romania** was passed. The effects of this law extended to the territory between the Dniester and Prut rivers. Thus, from an administrative perspective, the territory was organized into counties (*județe*). Consequently, by 1930, there were 20 cities and 3 municipalities on this territory: Chișinău, Bălți, and Cetatea Albă. The distribution was carried out by including several cities within a county, according to the following structure:

- **Bălți County** – the cities of Bălți and Făleşti
- **Cahul County** – Cahul and Leova
- **Cetatea Albă County** – Cetatea Albă and Tuzla
- **Hotin County** – Hotin and Noua Sulița
- **Ismail County** – Ismail, Bolgrad, Chilia, Reni, and Vâlcov
- **Orhei County** – Orhei and Rezina
- **Soroca County** – Soroca
- **Tighina County** – Tighina and Comrat

With the formation of the Moldavian SSR, urban settlements developed in accordance with the legislative and economic changes that took place. This period is characterized by increased economic progress generated by industrial development. In practice, there was an explosion of industrial complexes specialized in specific production fields, such as agriculture—including livestock farming, viticulture, and fruit growing—or production and consumer industries, such as the food or sugar industries. Heavy industry played a special role, as it covered energy market distribution and the construction sector.

Consequently, alongside this surge in economic progress, new towns emerged. In 1976, the town of **Costești** was established, built near the Costești-Stâncă Hydroelectric Power Station. The town of **Ghidighici** was founded in 1963 near construction material production plants. In 1964, the town of **Dnestrovsc** was established on the Left Bank of the Dniester, adjacent to the Moldavian Thermoelectric Power Station. Near sugar production plants, several towns were founded: **Cupcini** (Edineț) in 1964, **Biruința** (Sîngerei) in 1965, **Frunze** (Ocnița) in 1946, and **Ghindești** (Florești) in 1956. [5]

During the Soviet period, the typology of urban settlements included the concept of **urban-type settlements**, also known as small towns or worker's settlements, which occupied an intermediate position between a city and a village. To obtain this status, these localities were required to have a population exceeding 500 inhabitants, primarily consisting of workers from *sovkhozes* (state farms). Between 1950 and 1980, the share of urban-type settlements exceeded 50% of the total number of urban localities.

Following the 2021 reform, the administrative-territorial organization is divided into 33 districts and 65 cities (20 of which are located in the North Development Region). Among these, 7 hold the status of **municipality**: Chișinău, Bălți, Tiraspol, Bender, Comrat, Edineț, and Ungheni.

Conclusions

The city represents a heterogeneous administrative unit, with diverse populations—both native and migrant—who relate to distinct social values. Ensuring high-quality urban living is a fundamental and highly complex necessity, requiring the active commitment of both political and administrative actors.

Structurally, urban areas are characterized by an immense concentration of habitats, which often limits free access to ecological resources. Therefore, quality standards require constant monitoring to remain sustainable.

On the archaic territory of the Republic of Moldova, urban settlements were first documented during the Middle Ages under the term *târguri* (market towns). With the formation of the Moldavian SSR, urban settlements developed through economic progress driven by industrial expansion. Notable examples include the towns of **Cupcini** and **Glodeni** (sugar industry), and **Ocnîța** (railway hub and canning industry), among others.

The increasingly accelerated process of urbanization emphasizes the creation of an urban image that passes through both the subjective filters of individual trust and the objective perspectives of the entire community.

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