

IDENTITY AND SOCIO-CULTURAL RECONFIGURATION OF THE PERI-URBAN SPACE OF CHIȘINĂU MUNICIPALITY

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Abstract: *The peri-urban space of Chișinău municipality is undergoing a continuous process of transformation under the influence of urbanization, suburbanization and the functional expansion of the capital city. The intensification of population mobility, residential development and the diversification of economic activities determine significant changes in the socio-cultural and identity structure of peri-urban localities. In this context, the peri-urban becomes a space of interference between traditional rural values and contemporary urban models, generating new forms of territorial organization, social interaction and identity expression. The aim of the study is to analyze the processes of identity and socio-cultural reconfiguration of the peri-urban space of Chișinău municipality in the context of sustainable development. The research seeks to identify the main factors influencing the identity, social and cultural transformations of peri-urban localities. The role of commuting, population mobility, human contacts and socio-cultural infrastructure used jointly in transforming the peri-urban environment and consolidating a new territorial identity is highlighted. The influence of urban-rural interactions on lifestyle, social behavior and the perception of inhabited space is also analyzed. The research findings reveal that the peri-urban space of Chișinău municipality acquires the characteristics of a transitional territory located at the intersection between tradition and modernity, rurality and urbanity. The identity and socio-cultural reconfiguration of this space represents both a consequence of current socio-economic transformations and an important premise for sustainable development and peri-urban territorial competitiveness.*

Keywords: *peri-urban space, territorial identity, sustainable development, suburbanization, Chișinău municipality, socio-cultural transformations, socio-spatial reconfiguration.*

JEL: R11, R23, R58, Z13

Introduction

The peri-urban space of Chișinău municipality represents one of the most dynamic areas of territorial transformation in the Republic of Moldova. It cannot be understood merely as an urban periphery or as a physical extension of the capital city. It must be analyzed as a space of interference between urban and rural, between tradition and modernity, between local belonging and functional integration into the peri-urban area of Chișinău municipality. In this territory, not only land use or the structure of housing changes, but also lifestyle, social relations, cultural practices and the collective representations of residents.

The relevance of the topic is determined by the dominant role of Chișinău municipality in the national settlement system. The capital city concentrates administrative, economic, educational, cultural and symbolic functions. It attracts population, investment, services and infrastructure. At the same time, this concentration generates pressure on nearby localities. Peri-urban localities become spaces of residence, daily mobility, consumption, recreation and real estate investment. They preserve rural elements, but are increasingly connected to urban rhythms. In this sense, the peri-urban space of Chișinău becomes a transitional territory in which local identity is continuously reconstructed.

The motivation for choosing this topic stems from the need to understand the social and cultural dimension of peri-urban transformations. A significant part of research on the peri-urban focuses on urban expansion, mobility, land, infrastructure or planning. These aspects are necessary, but not sufficient. Peri-urban reconfiguration is also an identity process. Long-term residents and newcomers do not use space in the same way. They may have different practices, different expectations and different representations of community. Therefore, the analysis of peri-urban space must include ways of life, local memory, socialization, territorial symbols and forms of community participation.

International studies show that peri-urbanization is a complex process generated by the expansion of urban activities beyond the administrative boundaries of the city. Woltjer (2014) defines peri-urbanization as the transformation of rural areas at the edge of cities into spaces with an increasingly urban character from a physical, economic and social point of view. The same author proposes three important dimensions: peri-urban space, peri-urban life and peri-urban change. This approach is also applicable to Chişinău, because it allows the peri-urban to be analyzed not only as a spatial form, but also as a way of life and as a social process.

In sociological literature, the peri-urban is considered a relatively recent but highly important object of research. Damon, Marchal and Stébé (2016) show that these spaces were long analyzed through the simple city-village opposition, although their reality is more complex. In the Eastern European and post-socialist context, Gnatiuk, Mezentsev and Provotar (2021) demonstrate that suburban and peri-urban spaces combine urban, rural and suburban practices. They are not simple territorial containers, but living environments that influence residents' behaviors and perceptions.

For the case of Chişinău, Nina Ivanova's research is particularly relevant. The author shows that the image of Chişinău in residents' representations includes a significant rural component. The urban-rural opposition does not appear as a rigid separation, but as a continuum of forms, practices and perceptions. This situation is explained by the particularities of urbanization in the Republic of Moldova, by the social stratification that followed the dissolution of the USSR and by intense internal migration (Ivanova, 2020).

The aim of the study is to analyze the processes of identity and socio-cultural reconfiguration of the peri-urban space of Chişinău municipality in the context of the interaction between urbanization, mobility, way of life and community transformations. The research objectives are: 1. to analyze the conceptual framework concerning the relationship between peri-urbanization, territorial identity and way of life; 2. to highlight the factors influencing the socio-cultural reconfiguration of Chişinău's peri-urban space; 3. to examine the relationship between rural belonging, urban functionality and the formation of a transitional peri-urban identity; 4. to formulate conclusions regarding the relevance of peri-urban research for sustainable development and the development of territorial public policies.

Methodologically, the article has a theoretical-analytical and synthetic character. The research is based on the analysis of specialized scientific sources, with emphasis on the literature concerning peri-urbanization, post-socialist urbanization, ways of life, urban identity and the demographic profile of Chişinău municipality. The methods used include documentary analysis, conceptual synthesis, comparison and socio-geographical interpretation. The methodological approach makes it possible to highlight the functional and identity transformations of the peri-urban space in the context of the expanding urban influence on adjacent localities. At the same time, the research contributes to understanding the socio-territorial dynamics specific to contemporary processes of peri-urban development.

The peri-urban space as a territory of socio-cultural transition

The peri-urban space is formed where the city extends its influence over nearby localities, while the rural gradually modifies its functional structure. This transformation does not mean the disappearance of the rural. Rather, it produces a combination of ways of life. In the peri-urban space, traditional households, modern individual housing, new residential functions, diversified economic activities

and daily mobility towards the city intersect. Therefore, the peri-urban cannot be described solely through administrative criteria. It must be understood as a relational space.

Woltjer (2014) explains peri-urbanization through three dimensions: spatial manifestations, activities and uses, and flows and factors of change. The first dimension refers to the expansion of the city and the mixture between urbanized land and land with rural functions. The second refers to the emergence of mixed economic, residential and social activities. The third concerns population mobility, investment, pressure on land and institutional changes. This scheme is useful for the analysis of Chişinău, because peri-urban localities are simultaneously influenced by housing, migration, infrastructure, consumption and social relations.

In the case of Chişinău municipality, this hybridization is amplified by its role as capital city and as the main concentration of resources, services and opportunities. Peri-urban localities become increasingly attractive through the possibility of individual housing, access to land, proximity to nature and the preservation of local community ties. Thus, an intermediate form of habitation emerges, situated between rural and urban. Residents may have their domicile in a locality with a rural appearance and traditions, while carrying out their professional activity, studies, consumption and social relations in the city. This situation contributes to the formation of a transitional identity specific to peri-urban space.

Sochircă (2010) shows that Chişinău municipality has experienced a territorial and demographic evolution strongly influenced by historical, social and economic factors. The capital city has expanded its functions and extended its area of influence over the adjacent space. This perspective is important for the analysis of the peri-urban. It shows that the relationship between the city and nearby localities is not recent, but in the contemporary period it becomes more intense and more diversified. Chişinău influences not only the economy of nearby localities. It also influences aspirations, behaviors, representations and lifestyles.

This reconfiguration is also specific to other post-socialist spaces. Gnatiuk, Mezentsev and Provotar (2021) show that suburbanization in post-socialist spaces does not fully reproduce the Western model and includes different scenarios determined by residents' social profile, their origin, the motivations for relocation and their relationship with the city. In the peri-urban space, long-term residents, young families, middle-income people, commuters, internal migrants and people who use the locality as a transitional space may coexist. This diversity generates different everyday practices.

For Chişinău, this is essential. The peri-urban space is not homogeneous. Some localities are more strongly integrated into urban flows. Others preserve rural structures more visibly. Some become attractive for individual housing. Others face insufficient infrastructure and pressure on services. In all cases, however, local identity is reconstructed. It is no longer exclusively rural, but neither is it entirely urban. Identity becomes peri-urban.

This identity can be observed in the changing relationship between private space and public space. In peri-urban localities, the household remains important. The house, the courtyard and the land have social and symbolic value. At the same time, the importance of access to roads, transport, schools, medical services, internet, commercial and cultural spaces increases. Residents no longer evaluate the locality only through tradition and neighborhood relations. They also evaluate it through connectivity, comfort, accessibility and environmental quality.

Therefore, the identity reconfiguration of the peri-urban is a process of negotiation. Residents negotiate between rural memory and urban aspiration. They negotiate between belonging to the community and daily mobility towards the city. They negotiate between traditions and modern practices. This negotiation should not be interpreted as an identity crisis. It may be understood as a form of adaptation to contemporary territorial changes.

Way of life, mobility and the transformation of everyday practices

Way of life is an important conceptual key for understanding socio-cultural reconfiguration. Hachi (2005) defines way of life as a generalizing characteristic of the life of the population of a territory.

It includes activities, material and spiritual choices, behaviors, values and stereotypes. The author emphasizes that way of life expresses the socio-economic and socio-cultural identity of a social group with a concrete spatiality. This approach allows the peri-urban to be analyzed not only through infrastructure, but through the actual life of the population.

In the peri-urban space of Chişinău, way of life and consumption are closely connected to the city. The locality of residence becomes a space of living, but the city remains the main source of opportunities. This functional dependence changes the rhythm of life. The social time of residents is organized around travel, working schedules and access to urban services.

The demographic profile of Chişinău municipality shows that the municipality attracts population from other localities of the country. A considerable share of respondents report having changed their domicile in recent years, and young people are the most mobile category (Rusu, 2022). This confirms the role of Chişinău as a pole of attraction. At the same time, it shows that urban and peri-urban identity is influenced by internal migration. Residents arriving from other localities bring different practices, norms and experiences. They participate in the formation of a mixed urban and peri-urban culture.

This mobility produces effects on peri-urban communities. Long-term residents may preserve traditional forms of solidarity. New residents may have expectations oriented towards comfort, services and rapid access to the city. Differences between these groups may lead to tensions, but also to social innovation. The peri-urban community becomes more diverse. Neighborhood relations change. Participation in local life may become weaker if the locality is perceived only as a dormitory space. However, it may become stronger if residents develop joint projects and attachment to place. Ivanova (2020) observes that the image of Chişinău is marked by the coexistence of the urban and the rural. The author proposes the interpretation of the existence of two symbolic entities: one urban and one rural, which structure the perception of space and reflect the functional and identity duality of the city. This idea can also be extended to the peri-urban. Peri-urban localities have their own symbolic centers: the church, the school, the household, the main street and the memory of local families. At the same time, they are oriented towards the urban center of Chişinău. Thus, residents live between two systems of reference.

The transformation of everyday practices can also be observed in the relationship between generations. Young people are more connected to the city, education, mobility and digital communication. Older people preserve more strongly the memory of place and traditional forms of socialization. Young families may choose peri-urban localities for residence, but they depend on the city for work, kindergartens, schools, medical services and cultural activities. Thus, the peri-urban becomes a space of generational differences.

Hachi (2005) shows that way of life is influenced by mentality, traditions, socio-cultural stereotypes, population mobility and the settlement system. In the peri-urban space of Chişinău, these factors act simultaneously. Local tradition does not disappear, but is reinterpreted. The rural household may coexist with an urban style of consumption. Family networks may coexist with more individualized social relations. Neighborhood practices may coexist with the anonymity specific to urban life.

This combination has effects on identity. Peri-urban identity is not a simple sum of rural and urban elements. It is the result of the interaction between them. Residents may preserve attachment to the village or suburb, while adopting urban norms of consumption, education and mobility. They may value quietness, green space and their own household, while demanding infrastructure and services of urban quality. This dual orientation defines the socio-cultural specificity of the peri-urban.

Territorial identity between rural belonging and urban functionality

Territorial identity is formed through the relationship between place, memory, social practices and collective representations. In the peri-urban space of Chişinău municipality, this identity is influenced by proximity to the capital city. Peri-urban localities cannot be analyzed only as administrative units.

They must be understood as spaces in which residents permanently negotiate belonging to the local community and integration into the urban system.

Rural belonging is expressed through the memory of place, family networks, traditions, local holidays, household practices and neighborhood relations. Urban functionality is manifested through dependence on jobs, education, medical services, trade, culture and administration in the city. The peri-urban resident may be, simultaneously, a member of a local community and a daily user of the city of Chişinău. His or her identity is not contradictory, but layered, resulting from the overlap and integration of different social and spatial practices.

This complex identity is important for territorial policies. If peri-urban localities are treated only as spaces of residential expansion, their social dimension is lost. If they are treated only as traditional villages, their real integration into the urban system is ignored. An effective policy must recognize the dual character of these territories. They need urban infrastructure, but also the protection of local community and cultural resources.

Petre (2008) demonstrates that residential peri-urbanization in Romania has generated a new peri-urban model in which the urban population settles in rural localities close to the city. The author emphasizes the emergence of new social relations between the local population and newcomers. This model is also relevant for Chişinău, even though it has local particularities. In both cases, peri-urban localities become spaces of encounter between old and new, between rural and urban, between traditional property and new forms of housing.

At the same time, the peri-urban should not be idealized. Identity reconfiguration may also produce social fragility. Residential growth may exceed the capacity of infrastructure. Daily mobility may reduce the time available for community participation. New residents may have a weaker relationship with local memory. Long-term residents may perceive changes as a loss of local specificity. These tensions are natural in a space undergoing transformation, but they must be managed through dialogue and planning.

Landry and Bianchini (1995) emphasize the role of creativity in the development of cities. Cities are spaces of interaction, diversity and innovation. This idea can also be applied to the peri-urban. Peri-urban localities can become spaces of local creativity, not merely residential zones. They can develop cultural activities, community initiatives, recreational spaces, local services and heritage projects. Thus, peri-urban identity can become a resource for development.

For Chişinău municipality, this direction is important. The capital city has high cultural and educational potential. Peri-urban localities can benefit from this proximity, but they must also preserve their own specificity. Identity reconfiguration should not lead to uniformity. On the contrary, it can create a network of localities with distinct profiles, connected to the city, but capable of offering quality of life and local belonging.

Peri-urban identity can be consolidated through public spaces, local events, community education, heritage protection, civic participation and intercommunity cooperation. It can be expressed through local names, traditions, landscapes and cultural practices, but also through new forms of urban expression. What is important is that residents should not be mere consumers of space, but participants in its social production.

Implications for sustainable development and territorial public policies

The identity and socio-cultural reconfiguration of the peri-urban has direct implications for sustainable development. Public policies cannot approach the peri-urban only through construction regulations or infrastructure expansion. They must take into account way of life, social cohesion, mobility, access to services, environmental quality and local identity.

Woltjer (2014) shows that institutional responses to peri-urbanization are often insufficient because they fail to capture the dynamic and fragmented character of these territories. This observation is also relevant for Chişinău. Peri-urban localities are influenced by flows that exceed local administrative

competences. Migration, real estate investment, daily mobility and pressure on land require metropolitan coordination.

The sustainable development of the peri-urban must start from the recognition of the interdependence between the city and nearby localities. Chişinău offers jobs, education, services and culture. Peri-urban localities offer residential spaces, land resources, natural environment and community potential. This interdependence must be managed through integrated planning.

The demographic profile of Chişinău municipality shows the need for people-centered policies adapted to demographic changes (Rusu, 2022). This recommendation may be extended to the peri-urban. Policies must take into account young people, families, older persons, commuters, internal migrants and vulnerable groups. Each category has different needs. Young people need education, mobility and opportunities. Families need care services, housing and infrastructure. Older persons need access to services and the preservation of social networks.

At the same time, policies must protect the cultural dimension of peri-urban localities. Residential development should not destroy the memory of place. New neighborhoods must be integrated into the community. Public spaces should encourage interaction. Infrastructure should connect rather than fragment. Planning must include consultation with residents, because territorial identity cannot be created exclusively through administrative decisions.

Thus, the peri-urban space of Chişinău must be treated as a strategic space. It is important for the balanced development of the capital city, for quality of life, for reducing pressure on the urban center and for consolidating a modern territorial identity that remains anchored in local specificity.

Conclusions

The identity and socio-cultural reconfiguration of the peri-urban space of Chişinău municipality is a complex process determined by urbanization, mobility, internal migration, changes in way of life and the extension of the capital city's functions over nearby localities. The peri-urban cannot be reduced to the status of a city margin. It represents a space of transition, interaction and hybridization, in which rural and urban forms coexist and transform each other.

The analysis of the sources demonstrates that peri-urbanization produces not only spatial changes, but also profound social transformations. Woltjer (2014) proposes understanding the peri-urban through the relationship between space, life and change. This approach is relevant for Chişinău, because peri-urban localities are simultaneously influenced by urban expansion, population mobility, the transformation of activities and pressure on infrastructure. Damon, Marchal and Stébé (2016) draw attention to the fact that the peri-urban was for a long time difficult to place within the traditional categories of urban sociology. This difficulty is also found in the case of Chişinău, where the simple urban-rural opposition is no longer sufficient.

In the case of Chişinău municipality, identity reconfiguration is closely linked to the role of the capital city as a pole of attraction. Chişinău concentrates opportunities and generates internal population flows. These flows modify the structure of communities and everyday practices. The demographic profile of the municipality confirms the importance of internal mobility and of the attraction exerted on young people and the working-age population (Rusu, 2022). This dynamic directly influences peri-urban localities. They become residential spaces for people with different social experiences and different expectations towards community.

An important conclusion is that peri-urban identity has a layered character. It combines rural belonging with urban functionality. Peri-urban residents may preserve links with tradition, family, household and local memory. At the same time, they depend on the city for work, education, services and consumption. This dual belonging should not be interpreted as a contradiction. It represents the specific form of adaptation of communities to contemporary territorial transformations.

Way of life is a central element of this reconfiguration. Hachi (2005) shows that way of life expresses the activities, choices, values and behaviors of the population of a territory. Applied to the peri-urban

space of Chişinău, this perspective allows transformations to be understood beyond physical indicators. It shows that peri-urban development must be analyzed through residents' everyday life, through their social relations, mobility, consumption, participation and representations of place.

Socio-cultural reconfiguration may have positive effects. It may stimulate the modernization of localities, the diversification of activities, the emergence of new services and the consolidation of a more open territorial identity. However, it may also generate risks. These include social fragmentation, the weakening of community cohesion, pressure on infrastructure, the loss of local specificity and the transformation of peri-urban localities into residential spaces without community life. Therefore, peri-urban development must be managed through integrated policies.

For public policies, the main implication is the need for a metropolitan and socio-cultural approach to the peri-urban. Infrastructure expansion is not sufficient. It is necessary to strengthen public spaces, protect local heritage, stimulate civic participation, develop social and cultural services and integrate new residents into community life. The peri-urban must be viewed as a resource for sustainable development, not merely as a land reserve for the expansion of the city. Public policy formulations can be more precisely grounded following in-depth sociological research proposed within the doctoral study.

Finally, the peri-urban space of Chişinău municipality may be defined as a laboratory of social and territorial change. Here, the transformation of the relationship between urban and rural can be observed most clearly. Here, new practices of habitation, new lifestyles and new forms of belonging are formed. Researching this space is important for understanding the future of Chişinău municipality and for grounding public policies that are more balanced, more sensitive to local identity and more oriented towards quality of life.

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