

The Urban Triangle: Social Force, Public Administration and the Legislative System as Pillars of Romanian Urbanism

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Abstract: This paper starts from a structural observation: the contemporary Romanian urban system can be understood only as the outcome of three permanently interacting forces—the pressure of social needs, the capacity of public administration to manage them, and the coherence of the legislative framework that regulates both. The paper proposes an analytical model, the “urban triangle,” to explain why numerous Romanian urban sites have fallen into decline even where public authorities made visible efforts to preserve the urban order they had created. Building on a systematic review of legal, geographical and sociological literature, and using a combined method—doctrinal-legal analysis of spatial planning legislation and a decade of constitutional and case-law-unifying jurisprudence, together with a case-study approach applied to paradigmatic situations (the former mining towns of Valea Jiului, uncontrolled metropolitan sprawl, the Ferentari-Rahova neighborhood in Bucharest, and the prolonged stalemate over Bucharest's General Urban Plan)—the paper identifies the mechanisms through which “ordinary” and “extreme” social conditions undermined otherwise well-intentioned planning efforts. The conclusion proposes a minimal set of normative pillars for a more resilient urbanism-legislation system: normative codification, regulatory and jurisprudential predictability, genuine public participation, territorial coherence of administrative competences, and socio-spatial equity.

Keywords: Urban Planning, Urbanism Legislation, Public Administration, Urban Decline, Jurisprudence, Romania

1. Introduction

Urbanism is not, in its essence, a purely technical discipline. It is the meeting point of three orders of phenomena that, taken separately, belong to different disciplines—the sociology of communities, the science of administration, and public law—but that, on the ground, manifest simultaneously and inseparably. A street, a neighborhood, an entire city can be read at once as a space inhabited by a community with specific needs, as the product of successive administrative decisions, and as the application—or, frequently, the non-application—of a normative framework.

Contemporary Romania offers a privileged field of observation for this type of triangular analysis. More than three decades after 1989, the country has undergone a triple transition: from a planned economy to a market economy, from centralism to administrative decentralization, and from a state-run, fully controlled urbanism to a formally regulated urbanism that is nonetheless frequently circumvented. The result is a contrasting urban landscape: cities that adapted successfully to post-communist transformations coexist with areas that have entered irreversible decline, even though, at least on paper, the legislative and institutional framework meant to prevent such decline has existed all along.

The central thesis of this article is that Romanian urban decline cannot be explained solely by the absence of regulation—the opposite argument, that of “over-regulation insufficiently enforced”, is in fact closer to reality—but rather by the persistent imbalance among the three pillars of what we propose to call the “urban triangle”: the social driving force (the needs, expectations and, at times, the desperation of communities), public administration (the authority called upon to translate the norm into practice), and the legislative system itself (the framework that should provide predictability for administrative decisions). When one of these pillars gives way—either because social needs outpace institutional response capacity, or because the administration lacks the resources or the political will necessary to enforce the law, or because the law itself is

incoherent, contradictory or easily circumvented—the established urban order erodes, even when the competent authority has not been, formally, passive.

The paper is structured around this working hypothesis. After a review of the relevant literature and a section devoted to the theoretical and methodological framework, the article examines, in turn, the three pillars of the urban triangle as applied to the Romanian case: the social force, through examples of “ordinary” and “extreme” conditions that led to the decline of urban sites; public administration, through an analysis of its competences and its effective institutional capacity; and, finally, the legislative system, for which we propose a set of normative pillars necessary to secure Romanian urbanism in the long term. The paper closes with a discussion of the interdependence of the three pillars and a series of reform directions.

2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to the problem of Romania's urban planning legislative system organizes itself, for the purposes of this paper, into four thematic strands, corresponding, as will become clear in the next section, to the three pillars of the proposed urban triangle.

2.1. Legislative Fragmentation and Jurisprudential Instability

A first strand of research, predominantly legal in nature, documents the fragmentation and instability of the Romanian urbanism regulatory framework. The works of Duțu (2000) and, more recently, of Podaru (2015) establish the doctrinal architecture of “urbanism law” as a distinct branch of Romanian public law, situated at the intersection of administrative law, environmental law and property law. The administrative-law treatises of Vedinaș (2018, 2025) place urbanism competences, in turn, within the broader architecture of constitutionally enshrined local autonomy. In recent years, this doctrinal literature has been matched by an unusually active body of constitutional and case-law-unifying jurisprudence—itsself an indicator of the degree of normative conflict in the field—which we examine in detail in section 6.2.

2.2. Contraction and Uncontrolled Expansion of Romanian Cities

A second strand, predominantly geographical and urbanistic, documents two seemingly opposite faces of the same structural instability: the demographic contraction of small and medium-sized towns, on the one hand, and the uncontrolled expansion (urban sprawl) of large metropolitan areas, on the other. Constantinescu's (2012) foundational study of the mining towns of Valea Jiului opened, in the international literature, the discussion of Romania's “shrinking cities”; it was followed by typology and resilience analyses (Bănică et al., 2017; Eva et al., 2021). Symmetrically, recent research by Coheci and Petrișor (2023a, 2023b) and by Ianoș, Coheci and Petrișor (2024) documents, for the country's five most dynamic metropolitan areas, an opposite but equally unsustainable process: the uncontrolled extension of built-up areas onto agricultural land, with negative effects on the environment, social cohesion and economic efficiency. Florescu and Coheci (2023) and Ianoș and Jones (2019) situate the specific case of Bucharest—examined at length in section 5 of this paper—within this broader framework of metropolitan spatial planning, while Grădinaru et al. (2023) document the conflict between local authorities and the European target of no longer converting natural land (“no net land take”).

2.3. Socio-Spatial Marginalization and the Legacy of Socialist Systematization

A third thematic strand, sociological and anthropological in origin, explores the mechanisms of residential segregation and socio-spatial marginalization in Romania's post-socialist cities. Teodorescu's (2019) long-term ethnographic research on the Ferentari neighborhood remains, in this respect, the central reference point; it is complemented by Vincze's (2024) broader analysis of the residualisation of Romania's public housing stock and by Lancione's (2022) historical reconstruction of the successive urban plans through which Bucharest's Roma population was dispossessed. For understanding the historical roots of these phenomena, Vais's (2022) research on the concept of “systematization” in twentieth-century Romanian urbanism offers an

indispensable framework: it shows how a technical instrument, claiming scientific rationality, was gradually instrumentalized politically, first by the interwar regime, then, with far graver consequences, by the communist regime.

2.4. Theories of Governance and Institutional Coordination

A fourth strand, theoretical in nature, supplies the conceptual tools for the “urban triangle” model proposed in this paper. The institutional-economics literature on the state–market–civil-society “governance triangle” (Bowles & Carlin, 2026) and the planning-theory literature on multi-level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003) and polycentric governance (Ostrom, 1990) provide the foundation for understanding urbanism as a coordination process among actors with different interests and information levels, rather than as a mere technical application of norms. North's (1990) theory of institutions explains, in turn, why formal institutions (laws) are never sufficient in the absence of real enforcement and sanctioning mechanisms.

A useful metaphor for this type of coordination failure is the “Byzantine Generals Problem” from distributed computing (Lamport, Shostak & Pease, 1982): much like generals who must coordinate an attack without a secure communication channel, the actors of the Romanian urbanism system—central authorities, local authorities, designers, investors, communities—often act on the basis of partial or contradictory information, and the result, as in the original theoretical problem, is coordination failure rather than necessarily the bad faith of any single actor. Finally, the classics of urban theory—Jacobs (1961), Lynch (1981), Logan and Molotch (1987)—together with more recent collaborative-planning-theory literature (Healey, 1997; Janin Rivolin, 2012), complete this framework with a perspective on how urban space is, simultaneously, the product of economic, social and institutional forces.

2.5. Synthesis and the Contribution of This Paper

Taken together, the four strands of literature confirm the central diagnosis of this paper but have not, to date, articulated it within a unified framework: the legal literature documents normative incoherence, the geographical literature documents its spatial consequences (both contraction and uncontrolled expansion), the sociological literature documents its social consequences (segregation, marginalisation), and the theoretical literature supplies the conceptual tools to relate them, but rarely does so explicitly, for the Romanian case, within an integrated model. The specific contribution of this paper is precisely the proposal of such a model—the urban triangle—capable of articulating the three levels within a single analytical structure, which we develop in the following section.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Framework: The Urban Triangle as an Analytical Model

The idea that the governance of any domain of public interest results from the interaction of three distinct spheres—the state, the market, and civil society—has a consistent tradition in institutional theory and political economy. Recent work in institutional economics has explicitly proposed a “governance triangle”, in which the state contributes regulation and coercive force, the market contributes prices and contracts, and civil society contributes social norms, group identity and reputation, each sphere holding comparative advantages where the other two fail (Bowles & Carlin, 2026). In planning theory, the same triad—state, market, civil society—has been used to explain the shift from a “rational-comprehensive” urbanism, centred exclusively on public authority, to a “governance” type of urbanism, in which decision-making power is distributed among multiple administrative levels and private and community actors.

For the purposes of this article, we adapt this tripartite model to the specificity of urbanism, replacing the “market” component—insufficiently relevant to the institutional context analyzed here, where the real-estate market acts more as an exogenous variable than as a pillar of institutional governance—with a component explicitly centred on the normative framework, namely the urbanism legislative system. The result is the “urban triangle” presented in Figure 1:

the social driving force, public administration, and the legislative system, with urban order as the outcome of their interaction.

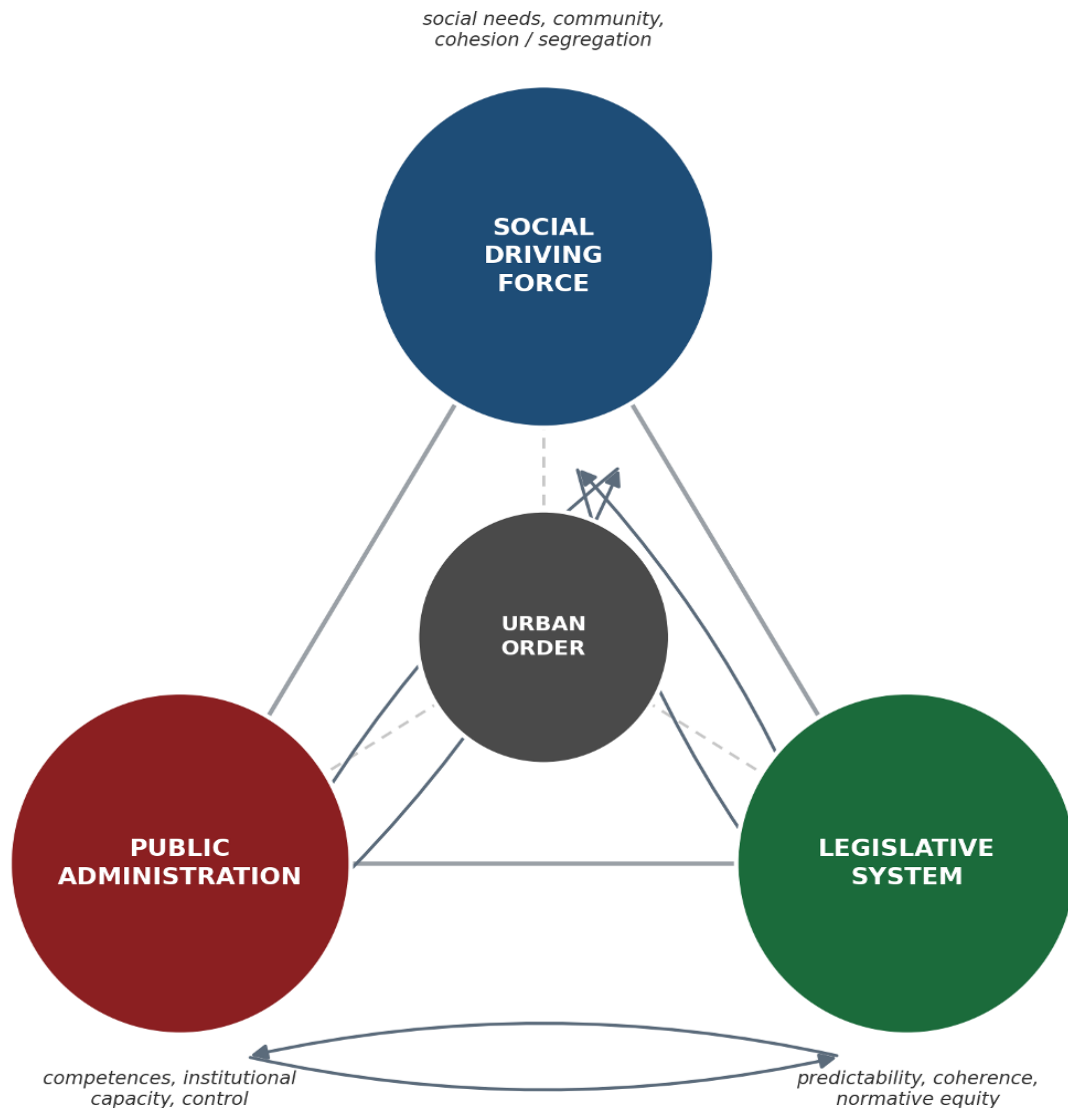


Figure 1. The urban triangle—the three interdependent pillars of the urbanism system

Source: Original figure by the author, based on the theoretical framework of “tripartite governance” (state – administration – society) adapted to the field of urbanism.

Each of the three pillars corresponds to a distinct structural question. The social driving force answers the question, “What does the community demand of urban space, and what happens when these demands are not met?” Public administration answers the question, “Who holds the competence and capacity to act, and within what limits?” The legislative system answers the question “what rules govern both administrative action and society's legitimate claims, and how coherent, predictable and enforceable are these rules—including in their judicial interpretation?” As will be shown, none of these questions can be treated separately from the other two; together they constitute the structure of the problem announced in this paper's title.

Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative approach, combining doctrinal-legal analysis of the main normative acts that make up Romanian urbanism law—Law No. 350/2001 on spatial planning and urbanism, Law No. 50/1991 on the authorization of construction works, Law No. 10/1995 on construction quality, and Government Emergency Ordinance No. 57/2019 on the Administrative Code—with an analysis of the relevant constitutional and case-law-unifying jurisprudence, and with a case-study method applied to situations considered paradigmatic for each

of the three pillars analyzed. The selection of cases—the mining towns of Valea Jiului, uncontrolled metropolitan sprawl, the Ferentari-Rahova neighborhood in Bucharest, and the institutional stalemate surrounding Bucharest's General Urban Plan—does not aim at statistical representativeness but at heuristic value: each case illustrates a specific way in which the imbalance among pillars leads to urban decline despite authorities' intervention.

4. Pillar I. Social Driving Force: Social Needs and the Decline of Urban Sites

4.1. “Ordinary” Conditions: Demographic and Structural Pressure

The category we term here “ordinary conditions” covers those slow, structural background social processes that do not have the character of a shock but that, accumulated over the long term, erode the balance of an urban site even in the absence of any visible crisis. The most relevant such process, at the national level, is demographic decline. According to the final results of the 2021 Population and Housing Census, Romania's resident population fell to 19,053,815 persons, 1,067,800 fewer than at the 2011 census—a contraction of approximately 5.3% in just ten years (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2023). More recent data further show a partial reversal of the urban–rural ratio: as of 1 July 2024, the urban population fell by 0.4% relative to the previous year, while the rural population grew by the same margin (Figure 2). Far from signalling a revival of the Romanian countryside, the phenomenon more likely reflects a combination of demographic ageing, external migration and “re-ruralisation” out of necessity—with direct effects on the pressure exerted on the existing urban built stock: entire buildings and neighborhoods remain under-occupied, oversized utility infrastructure becomes costly to maintain, and local authorities face a shrinking fiscal base precisely when they would need additional resources for urban regeneration.

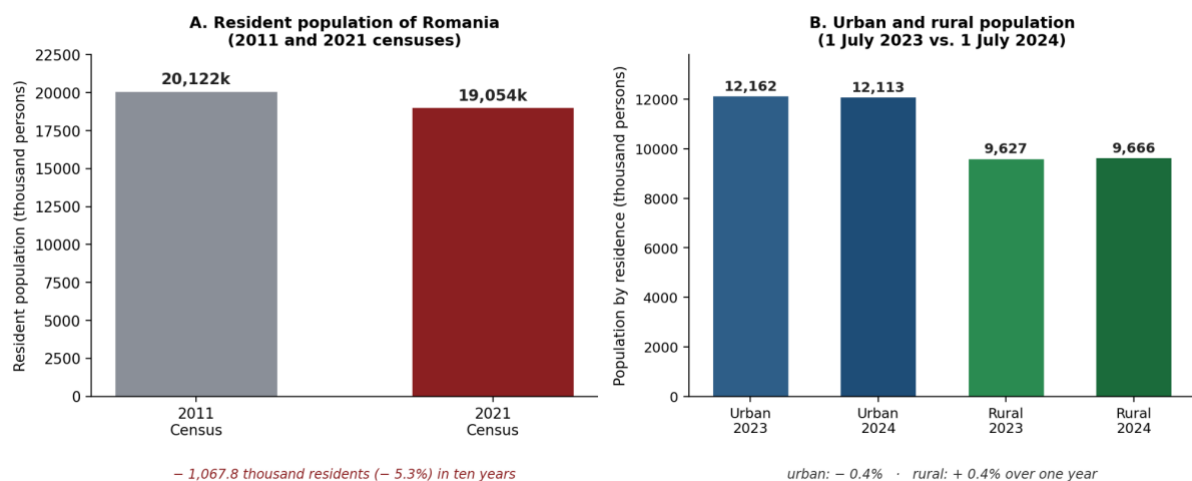


Figure 2. Romania’s Demographic Dynamics as an Indicator of Social Pressure on the Urban Planning System: Overall Population Decline and Reversal of the Urban–Rural Ratio

Source: Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2021 Population and Housing Census (final data); Population-by-residence data for 1 July 2023 / 2024 (INS, cited in Ziarul Financiar, 2024).

A second structural process, distinct from demographic decline but closely related to it, is that of “shrinking cities”, a phenomenon for which Romania ranks among the most affected countries in Europe (Constantinescu, 2012). The most studied case is that of the mining towns of Valea Jiului (Petroșani, Petrila, Lupeni, Vulcan, Uricani, Aninoasa), whose economy was built entirely, during the communist period, around coal extraction. The gradual closure of the mines after 1990 triggered a cascade of effects: job losses, the migration of young and skilled labour, progressive depopulation and, ultimately, the physical deterioration of a housing stock built for a population

several times larger than the current one (Constantinescu, 2012). More recent analyses confirm the persistence and even the intensification of this pattern across the Romanian urban network over the past three decades (Eva et al., 2021), while research dedicated to the resilience capacity of Romanian shrinking cities shows that the adaptation mechanisms available at the local level remain, in many cases, insufficient (Bănică et al., 2017).

It is essential to note that this type of decline cannot be attributed to any absence of authority: local administration has, in general, remained functional, and the urbanism legislative framework has continued to apply formally. What was missing was not authority but its capacity to counteract a socio-economic force of such magnitude—an exact illustration of how the “social force” pillar can overwhelm, through its sheer structural weight, the other two sides of the urban triangle.

A third example of decline under “ordinary” conditions, regulatory rather than demographic in nature, is the qualitative degradation of the urban landscape through the uncoordinated overlap of sectoral legislative frameworks. A study dedicated to outdoor advertising in Bucharest shows that, although legislation on the placement of outdoor advertising exists formally, the absence of any correlation with urbanism legislation led, over two decades, to an uncontrolled invasion of street advertising, with visible effects on the quality of public space and on protected built heritage, even in central historic areas (Suditu et al., 2016). The case is relevant precisely because it involves no acute social crisis: it is an “ordinary” decline, produced slowly, through the accumulation of individual administrative decisions, each legal in itself but uncoordinated at the system level.

4.2. “Extreme” Conditions: Shocks, Institutional Rupture and Social Conflict

Unlike the slow processes described above, the category of “extreme” conditions covers shock events—natural disasters, political ruptures, acute economic crises—that abruptly interrupt an otherwise planned urban development process, leaving a void that authorities can no longer fill in time. The most instructive case for the Romanian context is that of the Ferentari neighborhood in Sector 5 of Bucharest.

Until around 1940, Ferentari was a semi-rural area, populated mainly by workers drawn by the proximity of Bucharest's first industrial zones. After the earthquake of 4 March 1977, the communist authorities designed an extensive plan for the systematic urbanisation of the neighborhood—part of the broader phenomenon of “systematisation”, a technical instrument gradually turned into a political one over the course of twentieth-century Romanian history (Vais, 2022)—a plan that could not be completed for lack of funds and because national priorities shifted; until 1989, Ferentari thus remained a patchwork of disparate constructions with precarious infrastructure. The political and economic shock of the December 1989 Revolution produced, in turn, a second rupture: the closure of the factories that had sustained the local economy, the massive loss of jobs, and the near-complete withdrawal of authorities from the day-to-day administration of public space rapidly turned the neighborhood into fertile ground for social marginalization. In the absence of coherent social policies, residents with stable incomes gradually left the area, replaced by vulnerable families arriving from other regions of the country.

The consequences of this double rupture—seismic and political—have proven persistent. Long-term ethnographic research on the neighborhood shows a disproportionate concentration of the Roma population (85.6% of residents in the seven most deprived areas of the neighborhood, according to Sector 5's own urban regeneration plan) and extreme forms of housing precarity: approximately 84% of residents in the most affected areas are informally connected to the electricity grid, and 64% lack access to sewage, a direct consequence of their status as occupants without legal title, unable to sign utility contracts with local authorities (Teodorescu, 2019)—findings confirmed and extended by more recent research on the residualisation of Romania's public housing stock (Vincze, 2024) and on the historical processes through which the Roma population was dispossessed via successive urban plans (Lancione, 2022). Tensions between residents and authorities culminated in the 2006 riot, triggered by a police attempt to cut illegal electricity connections—an episode that illustrates exactly the mechanism proposed in this paper: the authority intervened, in the strict sense of law enforcement, but the intervention itself generated

conflict rather than order, precisely because the minimum requirements of the social pillar—access to basic utilities—had not been met through any other legal channel.

It is significant that local authorities have not remained passive in more recent years either. The “Ferentari Urban Regeneration” plan, drafted by the Sector 5 City Hall in 2017, and the “Practical Solutions for Ferentari” report, published by the World Bank in 2019, both represent explicit attempts to reverse the decline. Nevertheless, field research shows that results remain, to date, modest: Sector 5's technical urban-planning commission was not, for a long period, even constituted, with the sector's planning files redirected to the General City Hall's technical commission, amid institutional overlap and confusion (Teodorescu, 2019)—a phenomenon revisited in the next section, devoted to the administrative pillar.

The Ferentari case thus illustrates precisely the central tension of the urban triangle: the social force—concentrated poverty, marginalisation, housing precarity—was strong enough to repeatedly undermine the urban order that authorities had attempted to establish: first through communist systematisation, interrupted by economic crisis, then through post-1989 regeneration, delayed by a combination of underfunding, insufficient administrative capacity, and legislative incoherence regarding the division of competences between the General City Hall and the sector city halls.

Table 1. Examples of Decline of Romanian Urban Sites Despite Authorities' Intervention

Urban Site	Type of Condition	Social Causes	Manifestations of Decline	Authority's Intervention	Outcome
Mining towns of Valea Jiului (Petroșani, Petrila, Lupeni, Vulcan, Uricani, Aninoasa)	Ordinary (structural process)	Post-1990 deindustrialization; migration of young labor; demographic aging	Progressive depopulation; oversized housing stock; underused utility infrastructure	Formal continuation of local administration and planning documentation; no dedicated instruments for shrinking cities	Persistent urban contraction (shrinking city)
Bucharest's central historic area	Ordinary (uncoordinated regulation)	No correlation between outdoor-advertising legislation and urbanism legislation	Uncontrolled invasion of street advertising; degradation of protected urban landscape quality	Formal sectoral clearance, with no assessment of cumulative impact	Slow, cumulative qualitative degradation
Ferentari–Rahova neighborhood, Sector 5, Bucharest	Extreme (double shock: earthquake + political rupture)	1977 earthquake (unfinished systematization plan); post-1989 economic collapse; concentrated poverty	Pronounced residential segregation; informal utility connections (c. 84% electricity, 64% without sewage); 2006 riot	Ferentari Urban Regeneration Plan (2017); World Bank report (2019); sector planning commission non-functional for a long period	Persistent decline, modest regeneration outcomes

Source: Author's synthesis based on the sources cited in the text (Constantinescu, 2012; Suditu et al., 2016; Teodorescu, 2019; Vincze, 2024; Sector 5 City Hall, 2017).

4.3. The Other Side of the Coin: Uncontrolled Expansion of Metropolitan Areas

If the small and medium-sized towns illustrated above are contracting, Romania's large metropolitan areas are experiencing the symmetrical, and at first sight opposite, phenomenon: an uncontrolled expansion of built-up surfaces, chiefly at the expense of neighboring agricultural land. Recent research applied to the country's five most dynamic metropolitan areas developed an “urban sprawl restrictiveness index”, computed for 96 local administrative units, with values ranging from 0.14 (Petreștii de Jos commune, Cluj-Napoca metropolitan area) to 0.74 (Dumbrăvița commune, Timișoara metropolitan area), a variation that shows how unevenly the effort to limit this type of development is distributed at the local level (Cocheci & Petrișor, 2023a). The particular case of Bucharest is analyzed separately by Florescu and Cocheci (2023),

who document how the Capital's spatial planning has been eroded by decades of piecemeal, derogatory development, and by Ianoş and Jones (2019), who describe the rural-urban fringe of the Bucharest metropolis as a space of chaotic, insufficiently regulated transition. Related research (Grădinaru et al., 2023) documents, in turn, the structural conflict between the decisional autonomy of local authorities, which have every fiscal interest in approving new developments, a source of local taxes and fees, and the European-level target of no longer converting natural or agricultural land in the long run (“no net land take”).

Apparently opposite, the contraction of small towns and the expansion of metropolitan areas are, in fact, two sides of the same structural coin: the absence of a legislative and institutional framework capable of coherently steering the country's demographic and economic dynamics toward balanced territorial development. This is exactly the type of failure the urban triangle proposed in this paper can explain: the social force—here, demand for cheap single-family housing on the outskirts of large cities—is strong enough to systematically outpace the regulatory capacity of local public administration, which is frequently the direct fiscal beneficiary of this uncontrolled expansion.

5. Pillar II. The Role of Public Administration in Managing Romanian Urbanism

5.1. The Framework of Competences: Between Decentralization and Fragmentation

The role of public administration in urbanism is defined, at the level of principle, by a legislative tandem: Law No. 350/2001 on spatial planning and urbanism, which sets out the general framework for urbanism activity, and Government Emergency Ordinance No. 57/2019 on the Administrative Code, which regulates the organization and functioning of public administration authorities, including the division of competences between the central and local levels. Under Article 6 of Law No. 350/2001, central and local public administration authorities are jointly responsible for spatial planning and urbanism activity, while Article 2 of the same law explicitly enshrines the principles of decentralization, local autonomy, partnership, transparency and public participation in decision-making, principles that echo, at sectoral level, Article 120(1) of the Romanian Constitution, under which local public administration is founded on the principles of decentralization, local autonomy and deconcentration of public services. The Administrative Code, in turn, rigorously distinguishes, in Article 5, between exclusive, shared and delegated competence of local public authorities—a distinction essential for understanding how responsibility for urbanism is, in practice, distributed among the Government, the line ministry, county councils, the Bucharest General Municipal Council, and local councils.

This formal architecture, though coherent in the letter of the law, generates in practice significant zones of institutional ambiguity, especially in large cities with their own administrative subdivisions. The most visible case is that of Bucharest, divided into six sectors, each with its own local council and mayor, under the formal coordination of the General Municipal Council. This two-tier overlapping structure has, over the past decade, generated recurring disputes over the competence to approve zonal urban plans (PUZ). The Romanian Order of Architects has taken an explicit stance against legislative proposals to transfer PUZ-approval competence to sector city halls, arguing that such fragmentation would eliminate the possibility of coherent city-wide regulation, narrowing it to a partial view (Romanian Order of Architects, 2023). Local-administration representatives, for their part, have drawn attention to the overload of the General City Hall's Technical Commission for Spatial Planning and Urbanism, which must review documentation for all six sectors, generating significant delays in project processing (HotNews.ro, 2023). The dispute is thus not one between “law” and “absence of law”, but an internal dispute within the legislative system, between two equally legitimate conceptions—metropolitan-scale urbanistic coherence versus sector-scale decisional proximity—that the legislature has not settled with sufficient clarity.

5.2. Effective Administrative Capacity: The Case Study of Bucharest's General Urban Plan

Beyond the formal distribution of competences, the effective administrative capacity of Romanian public authorities to produce, approve and implement urbanism documentation remains a structural problem. The most emblematic case is that of Bucharest's General Urban Plan (PUG), the Capital's main operational planning instrument under Article 46 of Law No. 350/2001. In a public statement from December 2025, the President of the Romanian Order of Architects warned that the stalling of Bucharest's PUG places the city in a “critical situation”, noting that the delay stems both from legal reasons and from a lack of communication between the General City Hall and the consortium tasked with drafting the documentation (Jurnalul.ro, 2025). The practical consequences of this stalemate are dual and, on the surface, contradictory: in some parts of the city, real-estate development continues chaotically, through successive derogations from existing regulations; in others, any construction initiative remains entirely blocked, in the absence of an updated reference framework (Jurnalul.ro, 2025). The Capital thus faces the paradox of a city in which the de facto absence of an updated planning instrument produces, simultaneously, too much and too little regulation, further proof that the problem lies not in the insufficiency of the norm but in the administrative incapacity to produce, update and apply it in time.

This incapacity is also reflected in the functioning of instruments for controlling the legality of construction. Under Law No. 50/1991 and Law No. 10/1995 on construction quality, state control over spatial planning, urbanism, authorization and construction-quality matters falls to the State Construction Inspectorate and its territorial inspectorates, which hold the legal competence to order the halting of works carried out in breach of legal provisions. In practice, however, the ratio between the volume of authorized—and, even more so, unauthorized—construction and the human and material resources available to this institution remains profoundly unbalanced, a problem consistently acknowledged by professional organizations in the field (Romanian Order of Architects, 2023), which severely limits the real capacity to sanction breaches of construction discipline, regardless of the formal rigor of the legal text.

Table 2. Levels of Public Administration and Their Urbanism Competences

Administrative Level	Competent Authority	Main Documentation / Instrument	Legal Basis	Main Challenge Identified
Central	Government; line ministry	National spatial-planning policies and strategies	Law No. 350/2001, Arts. 2, 7, 14	Insufficient coordination of sectoral strategies at the territorial level
Local — municipality (whole)	Bucharest General Municipal Council / local councils	General Urban Plan (PUG)	Law No. 350/2001, Art. 46	Capital's PUG stalled for years; development either chaotic or entirely blocked
Local — subdivision (sector)	Sector city halls	Zonal Urban Plans (PUZ) — disputed competence	GEO No. 57/2019, Art. 5(r)–(t)	Overlap and fragmentation of approval competence between the General City Hall and the sectors
Control and sanctioning	State Construction Inspectorate (ISC) and territorial inspectorates	Control of the legality of authorization and execution of works	Law No. 50/1991	Insufficient human and material resources relative to the volume of construction subject to control

Source: Author's synthesis based on Law No. 350/2001, Law No. 50/1991, GEO No. 57/2019 and the public positions cited (OAR, 2023; HotNews.ro, 2023; Jurnalul.ro, 2025).

The phenomenon described above confirms, at the level of the administrative pillar, exactly the same conclusion drawn from the analysis of the social pillar: Romanian public administration is not, in the vast majority of the cases analyzed, formally absent. Competences exist, are regulated, and the responsible institutions are, at least nominally, functional. What is systematically missing is effective administrative capacity—qualified human resources, financial resources, inter-

institutional coordination and, not least, institutional continuity beyond electoral cycles—necessary to translate formal competence into coherent, timely administrative action.

5.3. Recent Reform: Digitalization and Procedural Accountability under GEO No. 31/2025

Aware of the limits of administrative capacity described above, the Romanian legislature intervened on 30 April 2025 through an emergency ordinance adopted at an unusually accelerated pace, the draft was publicly announced on 24 April and published in the Official Gazette six days later (JURIDICE.ro, 2025c). Government Emergency Ordinance No. 31/2025 on measures to simplify procedures in the field of urbanism and construction and to accelerate investment was justified, according to its explanatory memorandum, by the need to meet a conditionality assumed under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan: the digital updating of local administrative units' general urban plans, with an August 2026 deadline, at a time when the structural reform—the future Code of Spatial Planning, Urbanism and Construction—had not yet been adopted (Government of Romania, 2025).

The measure most relevant to this analysis is the introduction of a “tacit approval” mechanism: if the institutions empowered to issue clearances and approvals for urbanism documentation do not request additional information or fail to respond within the legal deadline, the clearance is deemed granted (Portal Codul Fiscal, 2025). The mechanism essentially shifts responsibility from the applicant to the public institution—a direct reversal of the traditional administrative logic, under which the authority's silence effectively amounted to a *de facto* block on the project. The same ordinance explicitly prohibits conditioning the issuance of one clearance on the prior obtaining of another, with the exception of the opportunity clearance and that of the chief architect, attempting to eliminate precisely the type of institutional overlap documented in section 5.1 of this paper.

It is still too early for an empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of GEO No. 31/2025—the ordinance had not, at the time of writing, even completed a year of application. What can be stated with certainty is that the very pace of its adoption—an emergency ordinance, rather than a parliamentary-debated law, explicitly motivated by the delay of structural reform—confirms this paper's central diagnosis: the combined pressure of European deadlines and real-estate market needs (the social pillar, in the broad sense used in this paper) was strong enough to force a rapid administrative intervention, even in the absence of the unified codification that specialists have, for over a decade, regarded as the necessary structural solution (Duțu, 2000).

6. Pillar III. Pillars of a Legislative System to Secure Urbanism in Romania

The preceding analysis has shown that Romanian urban decline does not, as a rule, result from a legislative vacuum but from the imbalance among social pressure, administrative capacity and—the subject of this section—the internal coherence of the normative framework itself. We propose, in what follows, five minimal normative pillars that we consider necessary to secure Romania's urbanism legislative system in the long term. Each pillar is derived directly from the dysfunctions identified in the preceding sections.

6.1. Normative Codification and Unification

The first structural dysfunction identified is the excessive fragmentation of legislation applicable to urbanism, distributed across Law No. 350/2001, Law No. 50/1991, Law No. 10/1995, the Administrative Code, Law No. 422/2001 on the protection of historic monuments, and a considerable number of secondary normative acts. The need for unified codification is acknowledged even within the legal and professional community itself: the draft Code of Spatial Planning, Urbanism and Construction has been under public debate for several years, and specialists such as Professor Mircea Duțu—recognized as the founder of this branch of law in Romania and, since 2008, a consultant to the joint Franco-Romanian commission for drafting an urbanism code—have emphasized the central role that the general principles of urbanism law should play in the architecture of such a code (Duțu, 2000). A first normative pillar thus consists

in finalizing and adopting a unified codification that eliminates the current overlaps and contradictions among sectoral normative acts.

6.2. Predictability of Regulation and of Its Judicial Interpretation

The second dysfunction is legislative instability. In its 2023 official position, the Romanian Order of Architects documented an accelerating trend of “deregulation” through numerous successive interventions in legislation affecting urbanism and construction, warning against the risk of confusing legitimate simplification of the norm with the removal of entire domains from public oversight (Romanian Order of Architects, 2023). A secured legislative system, by contrast, requires predictability: rules that are stable over the medium and long term, amendable only through transparent impact-assessment procedures, not through piecemeal amendments that are difficult for owners, investors and authorities alike to anticipate.

This legislative instability is compounded, to a degree often underestimated, by an equally pronounced jurisprudential instability. Figure 3 summarises the chronology of the past decade's constitutional and case-law-unifying jurisprudence with a direct bearing on urban planning documentation.

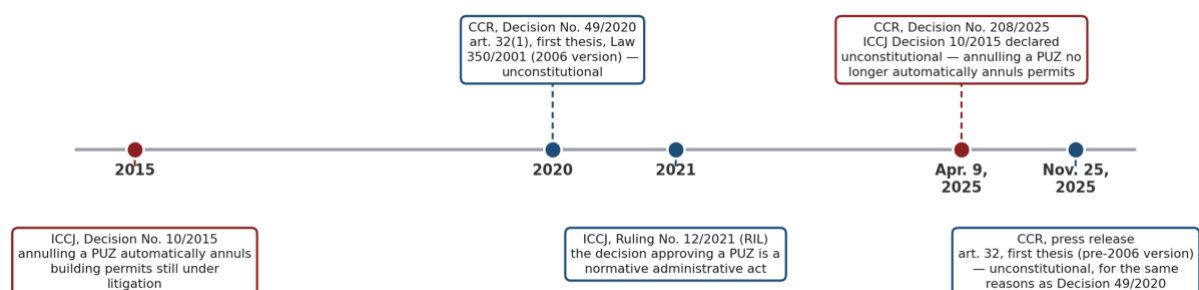


Figure 3. Timeline of constitutional and case-law-unifying jurisprudence on urban planning documentation (2015–2025)

Source: original timeline by the author, based on decisions published by the Constitutional Court of Romania and the High Court of Cassation and Justice (see Notes 13–17 and the References).

The starting point of this chronology is Decision No. 10/2015 of the High Court of Cassation and Justice, issued in a preliminary-ruling procedure, under which the judicial annulment of a zonal urban plan (PUZ), a normative administrative act, automatically entailed the annulment of building permits issued on its basis, even when those permits were already under litigation at the time of annulment. For a decade, this interpretation generated profound legal insecurity for real-estate developers, whose investments could be retroactively compromised by the annulment of an urban plan to which they had not been party. On 9 April 2025, acting on a referral from the Ombudsman, the Constitutional Court, through Decision No. 208/2025, declared precisely this interpretation unconstitutional, holding that it affects the legal security of the beneficiaries of the individual administrative act issued in application of the annulled normative administrative act (Constitutional Court of Romania, 2025a). The decision was described by specialists as “historic”, with some commentators speaking of the avoidance of a “legal cataclysm” for the real-estate market (Gandul.ro, 2025)—further proof, if any were needed, of the enormous practical stakes that a seemingly narrow question of procedural interpretation can carry.

In parallel, a second jurisprudential thread confirms the same structural conclusion. Called upon to settle, through an appeal in the interest of the law, the legal nature of decisions approving PUZs—an issue on which Romanian courts had, for years, issued divergent rulings—the High Court of Cassation and Justice held, through Ruling No. 12/2021, that such decisions are normative administrative acts, regardless of whether the documentation concerns an individual project or an entire city zone (High Court of Cassation and Justice, 2021). The clarification, welcome in itself, generated new practical difficulties: the normative classification of the PUZ excludes recourse to

the imprescriptible plea of illegality, replacing it with a five-year limitation period from approval, introduced by Law No. 151/2019 (JURIDICE.ro, 2025a).

Finally, a third episode in the same chronology confirms the persistence of the problem even after the 2020 intervention. Through Decision No. 49/2020, the Constitutional Court had already declared unconstitutional one form of Article 32(1), first thesis, of Law No. 350/2001—the text that allowed local authorities to approve derogations from existing urban planning documentation—on the grounds that the wording used was confusing, elliptical and lacking legal rigour (Constitutional Court of Romania, 2020). On 25 November 2025, the Court was compelled to rule again on the same type of provision, this time in its pre-2006 form, upholding the plea of unconstitutionality on grounds nearly identical to those retained in 2020 (Constitutional Court of Romania, 2025b). The fact that the same drafting flaw—the absence of clear criteria for derogations from urban planning documentation—survived, in successive forms, from at least 2006 to 2025, is perhaps the most concise possible illustration of this paper's central thesis: the central problem of Romania's urbanism legislative system is not the absence of the norm but the system's inability to produce, over time, a norm clear enough not to require repeated judicial correction.

Table 3. Constitutional and Case-Law-Unifying Jurisprudence on Urban Planning Documentation (2015–2025)

Court	Decision	Date	Subject of the Decision	Effect on the System
HCCJ	Decision No. 10/2015	May 11, 2015	Interpretation of Art. 23 of Law No. 554/2004 (administrative litigation)	Annulling a PUZ automatically annuls building permits under litigation
CCR	Decision No. 49/2020	February 4, 2020	Art. 32(1), first thesis, Law No. 350/2001, 2006 version	Unconstitutional — lack of clear criteria for derogations from urban planning documentation
HCCJ	Ruling No. 12/2021 (RIL)	June 28, 2021	Legal nature of the decision approving a PUZ	Normative administrative act; 5-year limitation period; plea of illegality excluded
CCR	Decision No. 208/2025	April 9, 2025	Interpretation given by HCCJ Decision No. 10/2015	Unconstitutional — annulling a PUZ no longer automatically annuls permits
CCR	Press release / decision	November 25, 2025	Art. 32, first thesis, Law No. 350/2001, pre-2006 version	Unconstitutional — same reasoning as Decision No. 49/2020

Source: Author's synthesis based on decisions published by the Constitutional Court of Romania and the High Court of Cassation and Justice

A secured legislative system therefore requires, beyond the predictability of the statutory text, predictability in its judicial interpretation as well—a dimension often absent from public debates on urbanism reform, which focus almost exclusively on the text of the future Code of Spatial Planning, Urbanism and Construction.

6.3. Genuine Public Participation

The third dysfunction, visible especially in the Ferentari case, is the frequently formal character of public participation in urbanism decisions. Although Law No. 350/2001 explicitly enshrines the principle of public participation in decision-making, and Romania has ratified the Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters, the translation of these principles into concrete, accessible administrative procedures remains uneven, especially for vulnerable communities, most often lacking the resources needed to engage effectively in complex clearance procedures. A third normative pillar thus requires public-participation mechanisms adapted to the real capacity of affected communities, not merely formal posting-and-consultation procedures.

6.4. Territorial Coherence of Administrative Competences

The fourth dysfunction, illustrated by the dispute over PUZ-approval competence in Bucharest, is the absence of a clear normative hierarchy among the administrative levels involved in urbanism decisions. A fourth pillar thus requires a firm delimitation—at the level of statute, not variable administrative practice—of exclusive, shared and delegated competences in urbanism matters, so that administrative-territorial fragmentation (sectors, municipalities, counties) does not automatically translate into a fragmentation of the overall urbanistic vision.

6.5. Socio-Spatial Equity and Heritage Protection

Finally, the cases analyzed in the section devoted to the social pillar show that an urbanism legislative system cannot be considered secure if it addresses only the technical dimension of regulation while ignoring its distributive effects. A fifth normative pillar must explicitly integrate socio-spatial equity objectives—preventing residential segregation, guaranteeing access to basic public utilities, treating informal housing as a social emergency rather than merely as a sanctionable breach (Vincze, 2024; Lancione, 2022)—alongside the already well-regulated objectives of protecting built and natural cultural heritage, explicitly enshrined in Article 8 of Law No. 350/2001.

7. Discussion: The Interdependence of the Three Pillars and Directions for Reform

The analysis of the three pillars confirms the validity of the analytical model proposed in section 3: none of the cases examined—Valea Jiului, uncontrolled metropolitan expansion, Ferentari, Bucharest's General Urban Plan, and the 2015–2025 jurisprudential chronology—can be fully explained by reference to a single pillar. The decline of Valea Jiului's mining towns is, first and foremost, a socio-economic phenomenon (the collapse of a mono-industry), but its effects on the built stock were amplified by a local administration lacking the fiscal resources necessary for urban regeneration, within a legislative framework that, at the time of the economic transition, provided no specific instruments for demographically shrinking cities. Ferentari's decline is, at its origin, the result of a dual social rupture—seismic, then economic—but its persistence over nearly three decades is explained by the institutional fragmentation of urbanism competences at the Sector 5 level and by the insufficiency of legal mechanisms for including the vulnerable population in the decision-making process. Bucharest's PUG stalemate is, on the surface, a purely administrative problem, but its roots also lie in the legislative incoherence regarding the territorial division of competences between the General City Hall and the sector city halls. And the 2015–2025 jurisprudential chronology shows that instability is not confined to the text of the law: even when Parliament or the Government intervenes, the judicial interpretation of that intervention can itself remain a source of uncertainty for another decade.

This interdependence suggests that the reform of Romania's urbanism legislative system cannot be conceived sectorally, pillar by pillar, but must be designed as a systemic intervention. A unified codification—the legislative pillar—lacking the administrative resources necessary for its application—the administrative pillar—or genuine mechanisms for incorporating social needs—the social pillar—risks reproducing, in a new form, the same dysfunctions documented in this paper. The paper's central recommendation is, therefore, that the codification process currently under public debate—the Code of Spatial Planning, Urbanism and Construction—be accompanied, explicitly and simultaneously, by measures to strengthen local administrative capacity, by institutionalized mechanisms for the participation of vulnerable communities, and by greater attention to the stability of judicial interpretation, on pain of repeating, at national scale, the pattern already observed in Ferentari, in Valea Jiului, and in the past decade's jurisprudential chronology.

8. Conclusions

This paper has proposed an analytical model—the urban triangle, composed of the social driving force, public administration, and the legislative system—to explain a phenomenon otherwise

difficult to understand: the decline of Romanian urban sites despite authorities' visible efforts to preserve the urban order they had established. The analysis of the three pillars, applied to paradigmatic cases of contemporary Romanian urbanism—the mining towns of Valea Jiului, uncontrolled metropolitan expansion, the Ferentari neighborhood in Bucharest, the stalemate over the Capital's General Urban Plan, and a decade of contradictory constitutional jurisprudence — has shown that the absence of regulation is, in most of the cases analyzed, a mistaken diagnosis. The central problem of Romania's urbanism legislative system is not the lack of norms but the persistent imbalance among the social pressure that these norms are called upon to manage, the administrative capacity necessary for their enforcement, and the internal—including jurisprudential—coherence of the norms themselves.

On this basis, the paper has proposed five minimal normative pillars for securing Romanian urbanism in the long term: normative codification and unification, predictability of regulation and of its judicial interpretation, genuine public participation, territorial coherence of administrative competences, and socio-spatial equity, alongside heritage protection. Far from exhausting the problem announced in the paper's title, these conclusions instead open a further doctoral research agenda, oriented toward the empirical evaluation of whether the future Code of Spatial Planning, Urbanism and Construction, together with adjacent reforms such as GEO No. 31/2025, will succeed—or fail—to coherently articulate the three pillars of the urban triangle proposed in this paper.

Acknowledgment

This paper is part of the doctoral research project “The Problem of Romania's Urban Planning Legislative System in Its Contemporary Social, Economic and Cultural Context.”

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