

## The Politics of Fantasy Meet Precarity of Place

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**Abstract :** Within the EU accession process, Romania, as well as other CEE countries, have embarked on the post-1990 urbanization wave aiming to reduce the gaps between 'older' and 'new' EU member states. While post-socialist urban transitions have been extensively scrutinized, little is known about the developing trajectories of these new towns across the CEE region. To start addressing this knowledge gap, we wish to bring to the fore one of the most humble expressions of urbanism, that of the small, new towns of Romania. Despite rural-to-urban reclassification, urbanization levels have remained persistently low over the last three decades. In this context, it is timely and legitimate to ask about the prospects of new towns for a 'successful' socioeconomic performance within the urban network and avoidance of precarity and marginalization and adequate measure of place performance within the urban/settlement network and understanding the drivers that trigger towns' socioeconomic performances. To answer these, we create a socioeconomic index of the place in order to compare the profile of the 60 new towns with large cities, old small towns and rural. We conceive 'successful' and 'precarious' performance in terms of a locality's index value being above or below all small towns' index average. Second, we performed logistic regression to interrogate the relevance of some key structural factors to the new towns' socioeconomic performance (i.e. population size, urban history, regional location, connectivity and political determination of their local governments). Related to the first research question, our findings highlight the precarity of place as a long-standing condition of living and working in the new towns of Romania, particularly evident through our cross-comparative analysis across key category along the rural-urban continuum. We have substantiated the socioeconomic condition of precarity in rural places, with the new towns still maintaining features of 'rurality' rather than 'urbanity' - except a few successful satellites of economically striving large cities, particularly the country capital of Bucharest, which benefited from spillover effects. Related to our second research question, we found that the new towns of Romania have significantly higher odds of being characterized by precarity as a socioeconomic condition than all other small towns and urban places, but less so compared to the even more marginalized rural areas. Many new towns contain resource-dependent rural communities with a poor response to the context of change. Therefore, issues pertaining to local capacity building to adapt to the new urban environment should be addressed by the spatial planning policy. Our approach allowed us to bring to the fore the idea of precarity as a condition of whole localities. Thinking of precarity of place is important as it brings the whole institutional and political apparatus of spatial planning, urban and regional, into conversation with other causative or substantive axes of precarity developed in the literature. We recommend future research on the new towns in Romania and elsewhere.

**Keywords :** politics of fantasy, precarity of place, urbanization, Romania

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