

**CERTAIN ASPECTS REGARDING THE GENESIS, EVOLUTION  
AND URBANIZATION PREMISES OF CHIȘINĂU MUNICIPALITY**

**UNELE ASPECTE PRIVIND GENEZA, EVOLUȚIA ȘI  
PREMISELE URBANIZĂRII MUNICIPIULUI CHIȘINĂU<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Concrete knowledge about the genesis of a settlement has a great theoretical and practical importance, especially in a systematic process of territorial towns and villages. To know the genesis of settlements does not mean a simple historical "dating" or schematic reconstitution of a landscape. Such an approach, the genetic one, primarily involves knowledge about the capital feature of a nation, and its ability to develop into a stage or another, conditions that generate a way of life or another. Genesis of a settlement requires a good selection of socio-economic and natural factors ensuring the viability of any settlements, whether rural or urban, older or newer. Progress and current situation of the municipality of Chisinau is the result of complex socio-economic and natural factors, whose role and weight was changed over time and space according to the historical-political conditions. The evolution of the territorial Chisinau city is the result of the development of the functional settlement, in time and space, the gradual emergence of functions and development of existing and interconditioning of these with the demographic factor.

**Key-words:** genesis of the city, geographical position, borough, urbanization

**Cuvinte cheie:** geneza orașului, poziție geografică, târg, urbanizare

Chișinău Municipality – the political, administrative, economic, scientific, and cultural centre of the Republic of Moldova – is located in the central part of the country, within a favourable geographical region for inhabitancy and human activities, from both landscape and economic point of view. Chișinău benefits from its geographical location at the crossroads of important lines of communications, which allowed it to exert its influence upon a vast territory. It represents an important polarizing centre, both through its administrative function and its economic potential. Chișinău is classified as a city of geographical position, meaning the role of certain resources and natural local conditions was and still is secondary, as compared to the dominant role exerted by certain major positional elements – intersection of great lines of communication and its central position within Basarabia, elements that partially inter-condition each other. Morphologic

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factors – the valley and terraces of the Bâc River and the hydrological factors – the presence of rivers and springs played an important role in the localization of the city. Natural components were favourable for the development of the population process characterized by sedentary activities.

The genesis of towns refers to the town appearance and setting up process, as a specific form of human settlement clearly differentiated from the rural settlement. Generally, the appearance of urban settlements is triggered by a series of profound structure and superstructure transformations in the life of a certain human society (Cucu, 1974). In terms of genesis, Chişinău represented a rural implant, which appeared within an old and dense population area. Chişinău belongs to the medieval generation of towns acquiring the town status in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it represents the result of the urbanization of some old villages. The city knew a polynuclear evolution incorporating the rural settlements located in its proximity. The presence of a dense network of rural settlements 15-20 km around Chişinău (more than ten settlements documentary-attested in the 15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) represented a solid economic background for the future town and a demographic source of great importance. Thus, in the next period, Chişinău becomes more and more important playing the role of a first-rank settlement for the villages located within its hinterland.

The location of Chişinău was chosen not only due to the favourable geographical factors, but also due to the commercial routes that linked this settlement with the most developed economic and political centres of the feudal Moldova – Iaşi, Suceava, Hotin, Soroca, Tighina. Chişinău was a crossroads for the main lines of communications in medieval Moldova: the road towards the north of Moldova to Tighina and the road of Crimea, “the great Tartarian road”, which linked the crossing sites from the Prut River to the customs of Tighina to the one that linked the cities from the Danube and the Black Sea – Chilia, Izmail and Cetatea Albă to Hotin, Soroca and Orhei. On the other hand, Chişinău was midway between the old commercial centres of Moldova, Orhei and Căuşeni. The development of the city and its transformation into an urban settlement was also conditioned by the decline of Lăpuşna borough.

The appearance of the borough or town of Chişinău was mainly induced by the separation between trade and agriculture. Handcrafts and trade development, the social and territorial labour division, increase of social inequity, conditioned the development and evolution of the town. Chişinău is the result of force and production relations at an internal level. However, the development of the town was threatened and jeopardized many times, especially in the Middle Ages, by the Tartarian and Ottoman incursions.

The first documentary mention of Chişinău as a human settlement located on the valley of the Bâc River dates from July 17, 1436, when the rulers of Moldova Country, Ilie and Ştefan, Alexandru cel Bun's sons, gave to chancellor Oancea many villages on the Răut, as a reward for his good services. However, it is possible that Chişinău had been a small rural settlement during the Alexandru cel Bun's rule (1399-1432).

The transformation of Chişinău from a rural settlement into an urban centre was a gradual and lasting process starting by the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of an exchange market, handicraft and trade development played a decisive role finally bringing to the inhabitancy concentration. One of the difficult issues, mostly theoretical, of the history of Chişinău is that regarding the moment when the rural settlement became an urban one. A document dating from Duca-Vodă's time, emitted on May 2, 1666 mentions the "townsmen form Chişinău", which makes us suppose it already was a borough in 1666. However, we cannot exactly precise when it became a borough. The last document mentioning Chişinău as a village dates from 1642, copied in 1750, from Vasile Lupu – "in the village, at Chişinău". It is supposed that Chişinău acquired the rights of a borough from Istrati-Vodă-Dabija between 1661 and 1665. This fact is mentioned in a drawing the boundaries document emitted by Mihai Vodă Racoviţă "...with other witnesses that went in front of the ruler to truly confess that Chişinău became a new borough during Dabija Voievod's rule".

In 1677, the chronicler Miron Costin in his work "The Polish Chronicle" includes Chişinău in the list of the 11 towns from Lower Moldova. The same author, but in 1684, in "The Polish Poem", enumerating and describing the provinces of the Country of Moldova, shows that the town of Lăpuşna and the "small town of Chişinău" are to be found in Lăpuşna Province.

By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, although Chişinău developed much compared to the neighbouring settlements, it still displayed the aspect of a big village. Besides trade and handicrafts, many inhabitants still had agricultural preoccupations. Thus, feudal towns preserved an important agricultural function practiced within the boroughs' estate where they cultivated cereals, breed animals, bees etc.

The end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century represented a severe period for Moldova's towns, population reduced significantly and their normal development was hindered. Consequently, numerous foreign travellers characterized the towns of Moldova as towns, small towns, boroughs or even "deserted villages" during short periods. In spite of all these, gradually, during the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup>, Chişinău became an important trade centre in the country, where permanent fair trade consolidated. However, there are no data about the population's number. Nevertheless, taking into account the number of churches, one may say that Chişinău had a great number of inhabitants, certain historical sources mentioning 1,500. Besides the native population, who usually practiced agriculture, viticulture, animal breeding, and trade, there were also Jewish and Armenian merchants.

Chişinău is represented on D. Cantemir's map and it is briefly characterized by the author in "Moldova's Description", as well as in the narrations of certain foreign travellers. Cantemir describes Chişinău as "a small and insignificant borough, located on the Bâc River". Although it was mentioned as a small borough, it displayed the aspect of a village, especially when it was visited after the numerous wars and foreign invasions.

Another internal historical document mentioning Chişinău as an urban settlement is “C. Mavrocordat’s Book” (1741-1743). All the urban settlements mentioned in the work, except for Iaşi, are classified as boroughs. The place and the role of the borough in Moldavian trade, both internal and external, was the preponderant one. The generic name of these settlements through their etymologic sense indicates them as exchange centres, where trade was performed.

The town quality in the 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries was documentary proven by the suffixes “torg” and “gorod”. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in Moldova, there distinguished at least four types of urban settlements: fortress towns, towns, boroughs, and small boroughs. However, documents do not make a clear distinction between the notion of town and that of borough. Historical research proved that boroughs were present in Moldova by the time of the Romanian-Slav life together from the 6<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the name itself being a proof. The term of “borough / târg”, which comes from the Slav “trǔgǔ”, is the oldest in the Romanian language for the notion of human settlement; the term of town is considered newer, dating probably from the 13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Giurescu, 1967).

It may be said that the genesis of Chişinău occurred during a long period, but the qualitative leap towards the crystallization of the urban life took place by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century – the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the borough or small town of Chişinău, as well as other Romanian towns, was less developed as population’s concentration and density, economy – especially in terms of industry and urbanization, compared to the towns from Western Europe. The causes triggering this kind of development were related to the prolonged Ottoman domination, with its system of economic and fiscal plunder, the Tartarian incursions, numerous wars taking place on the territory of the Romanian countries, accompanied by epidemics and famine, as well as the feudal relations from the previous centuries. These are the main reasons of a slower economic and demographic evolution.

An important factor in the evolution of Chişinău was the annexation of Basarabia to the Russian Empire and the establishment of foreigner colonists within this region. The central position within Basarabia Province made the town acquire the function of administrative centre in 1818 and, in 1873, centre of the province. Thus, Chişinău acquires not only a first-rank political status but also increased possibilities of economic development and demographic absorption. Chişinău was selected as residence of the Russian province due to its central position among other urban centres that do not had a well-emphasized hierarchy, which proves that the administrative and political system may impose a certain doze of voluntarism to the urban hierarchy and human settlement system. Without an urban tradition and located at a secondary crossroads, Chişinău did not prove before the Russian occupation, that it could become a first-rank urban settlement in the functional and demographic hierarchy of historical Moldova. The remodelling of the road network able to impose the centrality of this town was made according to the morphology of the landscape. It clearly appears a relation between the

physical-geographical and the human elements, which induces a functional complementarity among the constitutive elements of the settlement system that impose coherence to the territory.

Of a territorially limited handicraft and commercial centre, Chişinău transformed into an important administrative, political, economic, and cultural centre of Basarabia, which attracted the first foreign colonists, especially of Russian origin, coming from the Russian Empire. Starting from these arguments, many important sources at that time characterized Chişinău as “a new town, settled at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century... The place the town is presently developed used to be occupied by a small and insignificant village in the past” (Arbore Z, p.232).

All the travellers that passed through Chişinău between 1830 and 1850 remarked the staggering development of the town, which gradually lost its Moldavian character. In 1835-1844, Chişinău knew 18,000-population increase or, in other words, 53% compared to 1835, which means an annual increase of 2,250 persons. This increase occurred on the base of the immigration policy promoted by the Russian Empire, which stimulated the settling down of many foreigners in the town, especially Russians, Ukrainians, Jewish, Bulgarians, Armenians etc. After 1812, Chişinău increased territorially and changed ethnically.

Due to political dissensions, many inhabitants left the town crossing the Prut River, while many other foreigners came there from farer or closer regions attracted by the liberties the new inhabitants benefited from. In only 100 years, Chişinău transforms from a small town of about 7,000 inhabitants (1812) in one of the biggest urban centres from Eastern Europe and Russian Empire. In 1856, Chişinău already had 63,000 inhabitants, which places it on the fifth place among the towns of the Russian Empire, after Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa, and Riga. At the 1897 census, Chişinău counted 108,500 inhabitants, concentrating 36.9% of the urban population of Basarabia, exceeded thus Iaşi and other European towns, such as Bratislava, Zagreb, Ljubljana or Riga.

Before the First World War (125,000 inhabitants in 1910), Chişinău, the main town of Basarabia, appeared as a town with an intense social-cultural and economic life. Although between 1909 and 1914, the economic life of Chişinău is marked by a certain economic revitalization, which was stopped by the First World War. In the next period, the social-economic life of the town knows no vitalization, but, on the contrary, social-political confrontations with major implications for the economy of the city, its demographic evolution with slow increase (due to reduced birth rate, wars, and increased death rate). After the Second World War, Chişinău, ruined and depopulated, becomes the capital of a union republic. In the next decades, Soviet authorities restored the objectives destroyed during the war.

In 1960-1980, Chişinău knows an accelerated socio-economic development becoming an important industrial city of Soviet type, East-oriented and isolated in terms of the economy and infrastructure from the rest of Europe. We also notice a great increase of the inhabitants' number, which is mainly conditioned by migration processes. Marked by the status of capital of a union republic (SSRM),

the development proportion and dynamics of Chişinău were triggered by Soviet developmental ambitions, without synchronizing them with the development of the Moldavian province. In 1970-1980, it continues to extensively develop through a forced industrialization and urbanization.

After the disappearance of SSRU, Chişinău becomes the capital of an independent state marked by the effects of the transition process towards market economy and by the effect of a profound economic crisis. Presently, Chişinău is a polyfunctional city, the most important political, economic, and cultural centre of the Republic of Moldova – a mega-capital that absolutely polarizes the entire national territory. The effects of transition amplified even more the difference between the capital and the province, Chişinău concentrating the national resources progressively.

In the contemporary period, we may speak about a uniformity of the districts, the disappearance of the unique centre, and the development of a new dominant aspect – high blocks of flats. The historical-national aspect of the city and its individuality disappeared once the industrialization started. The lack of architectural individuality represents a result of the Soviet period. After the Second World War, Chişinău gradually lost its image of European city becoming, as most of the cities located within the ex-Soviet space, a series product. It is quite poor architecturally speaking and the few architectonic monuments that remained untouched are not well preserved. The radical change of the physiognomy of the city occurred in a short period (1954-1995), generating partly a uniform aspect of a new city the historical personality of which is hard to find. The reconstruction and reorganization of the central area seems to have erased a city full of history to make place for a new one, resembling many other cities within the ex-Soviet space.

As a conclusion, we mention Chişinău makes part of the generation of old towns from our country. For six centuries, it was the most prominent expression of material culture, social life concepts, a special symbol and geographical-historical reality common for the entire human settlement system of Basarabia; the medieval borough is the continuation of an old inhabitancy process underlining a superior stage, that of urbanization; a normal result of economic development, of political importance increase, Chişinău consolidated its transformation in administrative centre of the province and then in capital of a union republic and capital of an independent republic. Along its history of almost 600 years, Chişinău developed especially under the influence of the external geopolitical factor, being less affected by the internal economic realities. The geographical location in South-East Europe determined and continues to categorically determine the vocation, status, aspirations, spatial organization, architectonic features, social-economic, cultural, and spiritual environment of Chişinău.

Through its geographical location, the town defined itself in different evolution processes reflected both by its territorial extension and increase of the inhabitants' number. In this sense, the geographical space of Chişinău was not conceived only as a geographical reality where isolated and independent

phenomena occurred, but, on the contrary, during its existence it represented an area marked by continuous contact with the outer world, a catalyst of civilization permanently connected to the other towns in Basarabia and Eastern and Central Europe.

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