

## COMMUNITY RE-CREATING OF A SMALL INDUSTRIAL TOWN IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE: LESSONS FROM FIENI, ROMANIA

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### *Summary*

*Under communist rule, the development of many small and medium-sized industrial towns in Southeast Europe saw manufacturing industry become the engine of the local economy. The resulting deindustrialisation of the 1990s severely affected them. This*

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*study explores community perceptions within Fieni – formerly the most industrialised Romanian town – about its present development conditions and prospects. It also seeks people’s opinions to inform future planning through a participatory governance process.*

*To analyse the inhabitants’ insights on the impact of deindustrialisation on their community, 69 street interviews were conducted with randomly selected people. The results highlight both a sense of nostalgia and pride for the town’s industrial past, and a deep dissatisfaction with its current socio-economic situation. However, younger respondents tended to hold optimistic hopes of discovering and developing new local economic niches. Additionally, there are conflicting perceptions between the general population and the decision makers on the planning of the town’s future, suggesting the need for more intense and cooperative development approach.*

*Keywords: Deindustrialisation, small post-socialist industrial towns, industrial nostalgia, participatory planning, Fieni, Romania*

## Zusammenfassung

### WIEDERBELEBUNG DER ORTSGEMEINSCHAFT IN EINER KLEINEN INDUSTRIESTADT IN SÜDOSTEUROPA: FALLSTUDIE FIENI, RUMÄNIEN

*In der vorliegenden Studie werden die Wahrnehmung des gegenwärtigen Zustands in der kleinen, aber traditionsreichen rumänischen Industriestadt Fieni und die Perspektiven des Gemeinschaftslebens unter den veränderten Rahmenbedingungen der Deindustrialisierung untersucht sowie diskutiert, wie die Forschungsergebnisse die Planung für die Zukunft beeinflussen können. Unter kommunistischer Herrschaft wurde die verarbeitende Industrie durch das Entstehen vieler kleiner und mittlerer Industriestädte in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa zum Motor der lokalen Wirtschaft. Fieni war mit 81 Prozent der Beschäftigten in der verarbeitenden Industrie die am stärksten industrialisierte rumänische Stadt. Die Deindustrialisierung nach 1990 traf Fieni daher besonders.*

*Um die Wahrnehmungen der Bewohner zu den Auswirkungen dieses Prozesses auf ihre Gemeinschaft sowohl aktuell als auch zukünftig einschätzen zu können, führten wir 69 Straßeninterviews mit nach dem Zufallsprinzip ausgewählten Personen durch, die alle in Fieni lebten und arbeiteten. Wir stießen sowohl auf ein Gefühl der Nostalgie und des Stolzes auf die industrielle Vergangenheit der Stadt als auch auf große Unzufriedenheit mit der aktuellen wirtschaftlichen Situation. Jüngere Befragte zeigten sich jedoch eher optimistisch, dass sich neue wirtschaftliche Nischen auf tun. Es offenbarten sich auch widersprüchliche Wahrnehmungen der Bevölkerung im Allgemeinen im Vergleich zu denjenigen Personen und Institutionen, die gerade die Zukunft der Stadt planen. Dies wiederum weist auf die Notwendigkeit einer intensiveren Zusammenarbeit zwischen den Bewohnern der Stadt und den Verantwortlichen für deren zukünftige Gestaltung hin.*

*Schlagwörter: Deindustrialisierung, kleine postsozialistische Industriestädte, industrielle Nostalgie, Stadtplanung, Fieni, Rumänien*

## 1 Introduction

Small industrial towns in Europe's previously communist countries have often experienced great difficulties in adapting their economies to the market-oriented reforms delivered by the governments (BOREL-SALADIN and CRANKSHAW 2009; KANDŽIJA et al. 2017). Deindustrialisation negatively affected most European small industrial towns with only one type of manufacturing or materials processing (LEVER 1991; TREGENNA 2015; BEG et al. 2017). They were unable to recover compared to regional urban centres, which already had a healthy tertiary sector to build upon (IANOŞ 2000). RODRÍGUEZ-POSE (2018) also concluded that many small industrial towns face continuous economic and social decline even if there is resurgence in subsistence agriculture. And they continue to face numerous socio-economic challenges beyond the loss of manufacturing jobs: deteriorating urban infrastructure; environmental degradation; and reduced living standards in terms of household income and available health care or educational services (OSTRY et al. 2002; GOSPODINI 2006; WALSH et al. 2010; McIVOR 2017; NOSRATI et al. 2018; EMERY 2019; SCHEIRING and KING 2022). All such conditions help drive the emigration of working-age residents, further resulting in demographic ageing and urban shrinking (HELLER and IANOŞ 2004; STRANGLEMAN 2017; WASTL 2020).

Several recent studies have sought to identify and advocate different redevelopment models for small and medium-sized industrial towns, especially those identified as having economic potential. One option is to redevelop industrial production (PIPAN 2018), while other analysts focus upon the development of creative industries, commerce, information technology, and other more modern industry sectors as a way forward (EVANS and SMITH 2006; BOLE 2008; BALOCKAITE 2012; PARASCHIV 2012; SELADA et al. 2012; BREITBART 2013; BORSEKOVÁ et al. 2015; SORENSEN 2016; JIGORIA-OPREA and POPA 2017; JUCU and PAVEL 2018; RODRIGUES and FRANCO 2019).

An important contemporary focus sees a variety of benefits arising from urban renewal projects involving the reuse of former industrial buildings and brownfield sites for a range of community services (MARTINAT et al. 2018; WICKE et al. 2018). For example, MOMMAAS (2004), PREITE (2006), CERCLEUX et al. (2012), MERCIU et al. (2015), DUŞOIU (2018), and LOUSTAU (2020), all focus on the enhancement of local environment and culture, including arts festivals. Alternatively, MERCIU et al. (2017) see tourist potential arising from urban renewal strategies. Moreover, several authors, including PETRESCU (2009), CORDEIRO et al. (2011), HOLDEN (2011), PASCARIU and PASCARIU (2013), FATHULLAH and WILLIS (2018), and BOZDAĞ and INAM (2021), advocate place-based solutions wherein strong community participation helps to frame planning and development processes. In another context, SORENSEN (2020) brings all these themes together in his explanation of how the current fourth industrial revolution is severely reshaping the opportunities and threats facing local communities and how they might best be managed advantageously at regional level.

Romania's transition to a market economy and the significant withdrawal of previous state-driven financial support for many manufacturing enterprises often led to their closure and a drastic decrease in industrial jobs (IANOŞ 1998). Such deindustrialisation was not uniform nationally and it particularly affected small towns, whose typically narrow-

ly based economies contributed greatly to their economic and social collapse (SĂGEATĂ 2013; CERCLEUX et al. 2018; LAZZERONI 2019). In Romania, as in many other European countries such as France, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Sweden, small towns, by definition, have populations less than 20,000 inhabitants (ESPON 2006; JOUSSEAUME and TALANDIER 2016; STEINFÜHRER et al. 2016).

Small towns also often encountered difficulties in refocusing on alternative economic activities, which leads in turn to intense outward migration, both national and international (POPESCU 2014; IANOȘ 2016; POWER 2018). While in most developed economies manufacturing employment has been in long-term decline, the process was more severe in many Central and Eastern European countries (CIZMOVIĆ et al. 2021). The entry to the European Union also exposed their domestic industries to international competition from more efficient and up-to-date competitors triggering strong social-economic change (ARCHER and MUSIĆ 2016).

On a positive note, the complex transition to a free market (MILOŠEVIĆ and ĐORĐEVIĆ 2015; JUCU 2016; YASKAL et al. 2018) also boosted the development of businesses and employment in the services sector (KUNC et al. 2014; CHOROMIDES 2017). However, the decline in manufacturing employment often proceeded much more rapidly than the creation of service jobs. This large phase shift saw employment in Romania's manufacturing sector declined by 47 percent, from 4.98 million in 1989 to just 2.63 million jobs in 2018 (National Institute of Statistics 1991 and 2019). In contrast, the service sector employment rose by 44 percent over the same period, from 2.79 million to 4.02 million jobs. The total employment in both sectors together therefore declined by 1.12 million jobs over the 28 years. For these reasons, Romania's transition to a democratic market economy was, for the average citizen, a controversial process, often involving substantial dislocation (CIUTACU and CHIVU 2015).

This adversity of the socioeconomic transition was especially characterising locations such as the small town of Fieni. It was for a while the most industrialised town in Romania, with an artificially created economy resulting from decisions made by a highly centralised socialist government possessing little, if any, respect for human rights (DUMITRESCU 2008). Thus, this study focuses on finding the answers to three key questions: (1) How well did Fieni adapt to the creation of a market economy? (2) What are its prospects, especially when viewed from the perspectives of its current residents? (3) Finally, could a more participatory urban planning and development strategy counter many residents' adverse perceptions of those prospects to create a more agile and dynamic economy and society?

Employing the case of Fieni – a shrinking small industrial town in Romania – the aim of this study is two-fold. It analyses connections between (a) perceptions of the residents about their town's current socio-economic structure and its future urban development and (b) how planning in the post-industrial era might best proceed. Since more participatory approaches are becoming essential in decision-making processes about towns' post-industrial development, various community interpretations or opinions about current conditions and opportunities are likely to be important in establishing a beneficial framework for future sustainable development in small industrial towns both in Romania and elsewhere in Europe.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Study Area

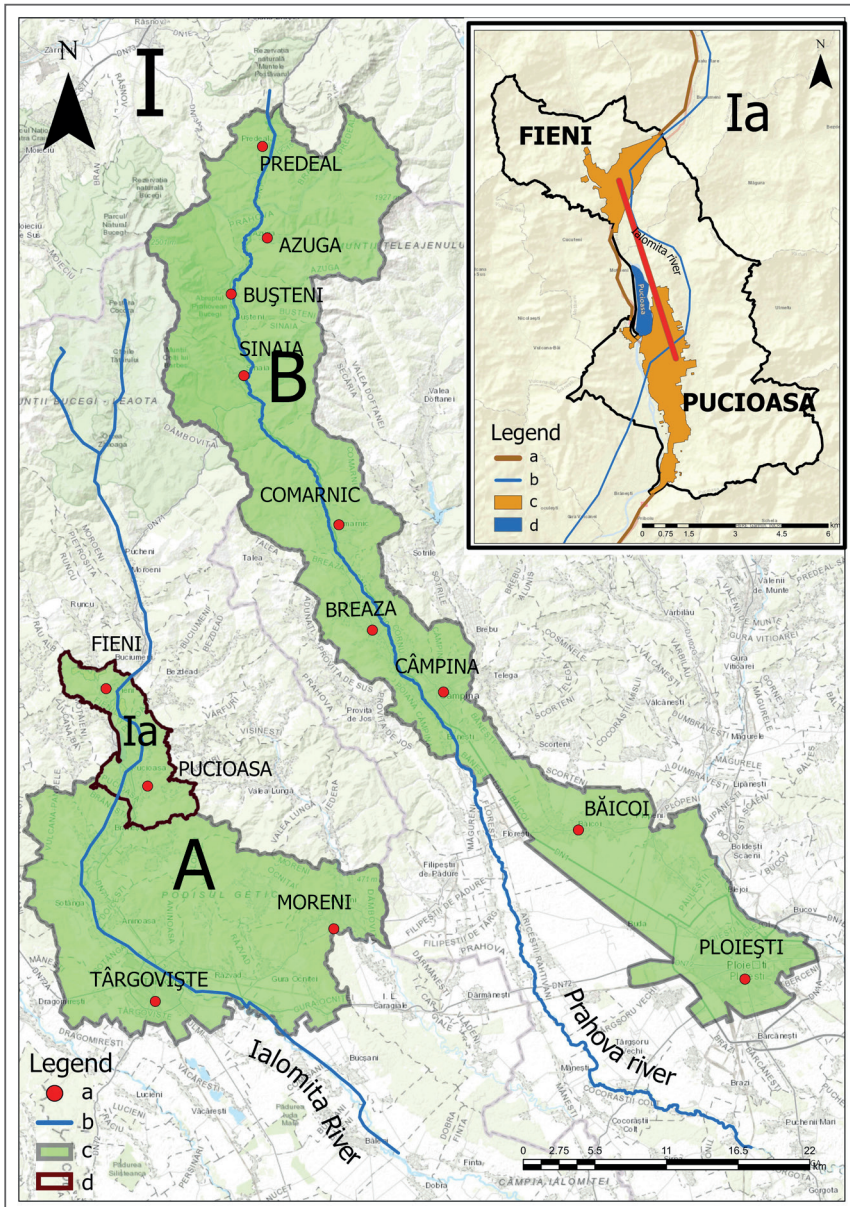
Fieni, whose 2019 population of 7,399 people is 12.8 percent less than in 1992, is in the central-southern part of Romania, in Dâmbovița County (Figure 1). Its territory is hilly, being in the sub-carpathian area of Ialomița and adjacent to the mountains of Bucegi and Leaota. Its local physical resources include limestone, gypsum, marls, and wood, all of which enabled communist industrial expansion in the locality.



Source: The authors, own design

Figure 1: Location of Fieni town in Romania

Fieni's industrial role and capacity as a regional centre has dramatically diminished over the last 30 years, also negatively impacting surrounding districts. For example, Fieni's former light-bulb factory acquired inputs from such places as Sinaia, Breaza, Târgoviște, and Titu, in the adjacent Prahova and Ialomița valleys (Figure 2). In addition, numbers employed in Fieni's industries declined hugely from 7,716 people (5,036 for the bulb factory, and 2,680 for the cement factory) in 1989, to about 800 people (only the cement factory) in 2019. This, in turn, led to a large decrease in the number of daily commuters,



I. Two urban concentrations: A. Ialomița Valley; B. Prahova Valley. – Legend explanations: a. cities/towns; b. river; c. major urbanized areas; d. Fieni-Pucioasa area. – Ia. Twin towns: Fieni-Pucioasa: a. complementary functional relationships; b. river; c. urban area; d. Pucioasa Lake

Source: The authors, own design

Figure 2: Fieni town in the regional territorial context

from about 2,850 persons to around 150 (National Institute of Statistics 1991 and 2019). Today, Fieni's influence on regular mobility from its hinterland is limited to (a) its high school, which attracts pupils from the surrounding rural areas, (b) a medical centre with limited capacity for urgent cases, and (c) the weekly supply of food and other retail goods.

During the communist regime, Fieni also had a complementary functional relationship with Pucioasa, located 10 kilometers to the south. While Fieni focused on such heavy industries as cement and light bulb production whose workforces were merely males, Pucioasa specialised in textile production and service provision, whose workers were dominantly females.

Until 1990, 81.17 percent of Fieni's workforce was employed in manufacturing and materials processing, representing the highest proportion nationally (National Institute of Statistics 1991). The post-socialist closure of the light bulb factory and the diminished cement production transformed the formerly attractive town in terms of employment into a repulsive small urban centre plagued by population loss and abandoned real estate (CERCLEUX et al. 2018). After 1990, the town's industrial workforce declined to 59.32 percent of the total in 2002, and to only 25.2 percent in 2011 (National Institute of Statistics 2019). Moreover, MERCIU et al. (2018) note that 25 percent of Fieni's registered labour force lives and works in other Romanian cities, such as Târgoviște or Bucharest, or even in other European countries.

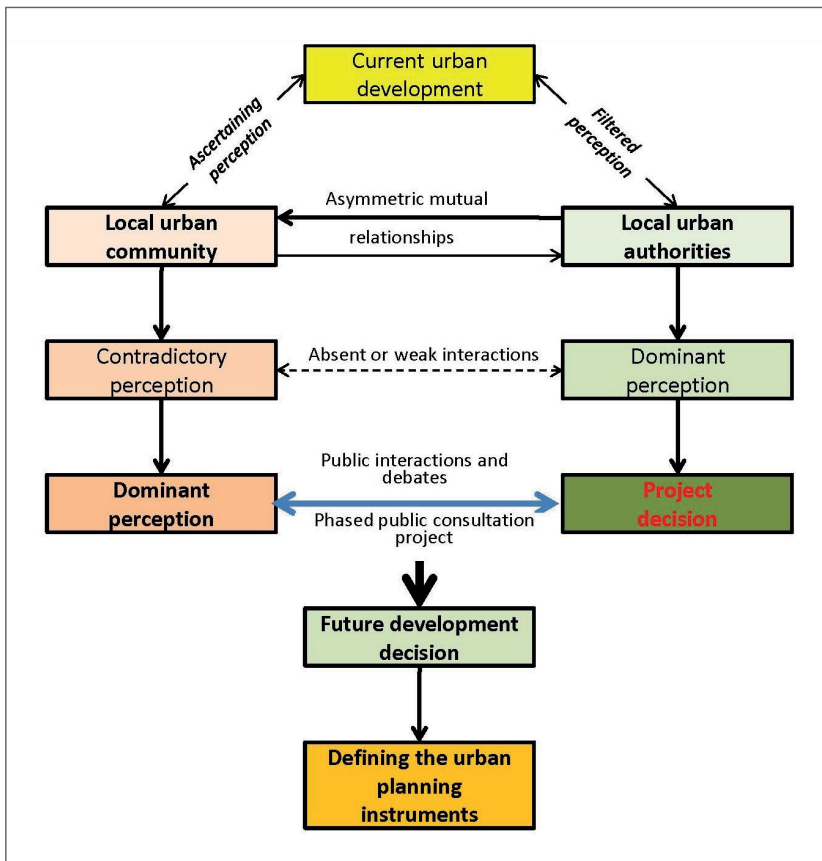
## 2.2 Theoretical Approach

Abrupt deindustrialisation in small towns heavily dependent on manufacturing activities has often contributed to their socio-economic disintegration whether in Romania or other parts of Eastern Europe (SCHEIRING and JEANNET 2022). Such urban dynamics can enhance several aspects of people's dissatisfaction. These typically include democratic development processes (JEANNET and ALLEGRI 2020), loss of younger and more spatially agile people, increasing urban poverty, enhanced nostalgia, and other associated issues (POPESCU 2014). In our case study, it is crucial to learn local community perceptions about present and future developments. Such knowledge can thereby potentially help cooperation with local decision-makers and enhance the value of endogenous resources, geographical position, and existing opportunities (GROS-BALTHAZARD and TALANDIER 2020).

Community perspectives on many issues such as the physical planning of urban spaces or the local economic development may also vary significantly from one circumstance to another (NEWBURY and GIBSON 2015; LEARY-OWHIN 2016; REK-WOŹNIAK and WOŹNIAK 2020; HAJDUKOVÁ and SOPIROVÁ 2022). This in turn raises the prospects that leaderships may need to tailor consultation and decision-making processes differently from one problem and opportunity to another (ROSSITER and SMITH 2021; VANHOOSE et al. 2021; LÓPEZ 2022). Such fluidity requires adaptive capacity from both government and society, which is much more likely where the two components are in regular discussion with each other (WALKERDINE and JIMENEZ 2012) (Figure 3). Top-down decision-making is increasingly irrelevant the more complex problems and issues become (SORENSEN 2020).

Thus, to accelerate local development, it appears increasingly insufficient to grant decision makers entire freedom to define strategies, priorities, and procedures. Our idea is that stronger involvement of local populations is likely to be more fruitful by enabling better valuation of individual perceptions, whether complementary or contradictory. This diversity of feelings and ideas can supplement beneficially the dominant perceptions of local authorities. Thus, a high rate of participation by local communities can help improve local government’s strategic and operational objectives and implementation processes (POLJAC ISTENIČ and KOZINA 2020).

The theoretical model in Figure 3, suggesting an optimal route to follow in developing new or revised urban planning strategies, was our basic research philosophy in this applied analysis of Fieni. However, this model will likely work in investigating additional issues important for the local economic development, like infrastructure supply and management, business development, and delivery of community sourced services.



Source: The authors, own design

Figure 3: Community perception in the local decision equation



### 2.3 Methods

Our study of residents' perceptions on Fieni's future requires information on people's development preferences while investigating how reasonable, practical, imaginative, and creative those perspectives are. We also explore the diversity of opinions and relate them to people's economic and social backgrounds.

Conventional social participatory methods for the study of similar topics include public surveys (LOWENTHAL 1989; ŞANDRU 2014; MURGAŠ 2019), interviews or questionnaires (HARUȚA and RADU 2010; HÄYRYNEN and SEMI 2019), focus groups, workshops (POSNER 2016), or modern methods such as digital participation (FATHULLAH and WILLIS 2018; SEJATI et al. 2020). Taking into consideration the population structure in Fieni (predominantly aged and with low level of education), the degree of inhabitants' confusion regarding the future, and the previous relevant results obtained through the deep street interview method, used during a former project (CERCLEUX and BOLE 2019), we decided to apply the same methodological technique.

This task employed qualitative and quantitative data collected through 69 street interviews with Fieni's local population, conducted during two investigation episodes. Forty interviews occurred in July 2019 and 29 occurred a month later. Fortunately, we also interviewed some people who had previously emigrated to other countries in Europe but had temporarily returned home for their summer holidays.

The conducted interviews were semi-structured, with discussions focussing on 17 key questions concerning interviewee's perceptions of former and current urban life in Fieni, with a special emphasis on the urban development of this small town, as well as its relations with the surrounding area (Table 1).

No.	Interview questions
1	What is the general image of Fieni? Why do you consider that?
2	How would you describe the past economic situation of Fieni in comparison with its current economic situation (especially concerning the industrial activity)?
3	Which are the (symbol) industrial buildings that are still to be found in Fieni and how would you describe their current condition?
4	Do you feel fond of the town? Why do you feel that?
5	Do you know if Fieni has a development strategy/plan?
6	In which direction do you consider that the future of the town should be managed? Which would be the development opportunities of the town? Which factors/risks could limit the development of the town?
7	How do you appreciate the quality of the social services available in Fieni (also education, medical services)? Does the local public transport meet to the community needs?
8	How do you appreciate the dynamics of the social life of the community in relation to the diversity of public spaces? Which examples of public spaces and cultural activities that bring together the members of the community do you know?

No.	Interview questions
9	Are you confident in the decisions taken by the representatives of the local public administration in relation to the development measures of the town? Where can the citizens consult information/news/announcements on what it's happening at local level?
10	Do the citizens involve themselves in actions destined to solve different problems of the town where you live? Which examples can you offer us? Would you like to get involved/ have you already got involved in the past?
11	Are there initiative groups (NGO-s, Local Administration Groups) that militate for the development of Fieni? Which specific activities could you enumerate?
12	Do you consider that the population could have, or it already has a voice on the evolution of the town? How could the voice of the citizens be heard? /How is the voice of the citizens already heard?
13	Have you ever thought to move out of the town? If yes, why? Where would you leave and why?
14	What is the relationship between the town and its rural surroundings? How strong do you consider it to be?
15	Would you consider a common development between the towns of Fieni and Pucioasa? If yes, how would you connect the two of them?
16	Which activities would better suit the unused space belonging to the light bulb factory?
17	What should be done with the abandoned space in Fieni? Could you suggest some specific activities that would fit these areas?

Table 1: Semi-structured street interview issues conducted in Fieni

Researchers warned the potential interviewees at the start that the discussion could take up to one hour, which led to about two-thirds of the 249 people approached declining to participate, and to an overall high rejection rate of over 75 percent.

The socio-demographic profile of the street interviews' participants evidenced a strong gender balance between male (47.6 %) and female (52.4 %) respondents (Table 2). The age structure was also balanced and in relation to the actual demographic structure of the town as Fieni's population aged 65 and over is statistically listed at a share of 29.8 percent, while the number of respondents in this age bracket was a little higher at 33.3 percent. The respondents' educational attainments were also highly varied, with roughly half having passed through high school or acquired professional skills. Finally, the respondents had a wide range of occupational backgrounds, which is also relevant to the study.

Prior to our interviews with the survey participants on the topic of local planning and development processes, the researchers arranged three informal meetings with the residents and local entrepreneurs, and several of Fieni's emigrants to discuss the appropriate strategies to evaluate the effectiveness of the town's planning processes. We also discussed with the mayor and the council staff on their opinions about the form and quality of the town's urban plans and processes by which they were generated. This background knowledge could be crucial for the evaluation of both the system and residents' perspec-

Present-day occupation							
Pensioner	Socially assisted person	Pupil	Unqualified worker	Worker in services	Public servant	Housewife	
37.7 %	4.3 %	4.3 %	2.9 %	14.5 %	20.4 %	15.9 %	
Age							
18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65 years and over		
2.9 %	8.8%	20.3 %	18.8 %	15.9 %	33.3 %		
Last level of education							
No studies	Primary school	Secondary school	Professional school	High school	Post-secondary school	University	Post-university
–	2.9 %	15.9 %	23.2 %	29.0 %	10.1 %	13.0 %	5.9 %

Source: Interviewed persons in Fieni. Data processed by the authors

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewed people

tives on it (SORENSEN 2016). Our focus included the assessment of Fieni's urban master plan and its delivery strategies, the maintenance of environmental quality, the adaptation to climate change, and the provision of both social and physical infrastructure services.

Local newspapers and such regional journals as "*Jurnal de Dâmbovița*" and "*Gazeta Dâmboviței*" also provided useful additional information on Fieni socioeconomic aspects in the recent and current period. Romania's National Institute of Statistics delivered relevant socio-demographic (e.g., the age and gender population structure; the migration rate) and economic (e.g., the active population on different economic sectors) statistical data from the post-socialist period through population censuses conducted in 1992, 2002 and 2011.

### 3 Results

#### a) Social-economic Assessment

The interviews revealed the respondents' indisputably strong attachment to Fieni (MARAIS et al. 2019). Such attitudes are particularly dominant among the town's elderly people, over 55 years old, who comprised over 49 percent of all interview participants:

*"I am very attached to this town. I have lived my entire life in Fieni and my children are all living in the town. No one should further ever leave this town."* (Female, 67 years old)

In contrast, many working-aged people note the current Fieni's multiple post-industrial defects, including abandoned industrial buildings, vacant sites, empty homes, and the rising social and economic inequalities:

*“The old buildings of Fieni are degraded and there could have been more investment in their regeneration. But the investment monies are lacking, or they are not well managed.”* (Female, 38 years old)

The families with children in Fieni are also fond of it, but they are skeptical for their future life within the town, and they have plans for giving support to their children to follow their highschool and university studies in another urban area in Romania or outside the country.

The respondents also underlined the future demographic trend of strong depopulation by natural causes in Fieni, while also adding the consequences of the current strong working emigration (JÓZEFOWICZ 2022). During an informal discussion, the mayor of Fieni estimated approximately 1,100 people aged less than 45 years old now working abroad.

Most of the interviewees claimed that their financial situation under communism was incomparably better than now. Back then, many families had one or even two employees in Fieni's factories or in nearby Pucioasa town. However, all the inhabitants noted one negative aspect of Fieni's previous economy, namely the very high pollution levels generated by the cement production. Most town buildings are covered in white cement powder and many people suffer from having pulmonary diseases, arising from asbestos concentrations (STANCU 2002).

A little over 50 percent of the interviewed people were satisfied with their current economic situation. This reflects the fact that many households have usually two family members who have retired from work, while the youngers are employed in a variety of more poorly paid service activities, often in the private sector. This perspective was reinforced by one of the working emigrants who remarked as follows:

*“If I have had a decently paid job, I would not have left home. Formerly, my parents were very pleased with the salaries that they had on the two big factories in town. I would have stayed to work here if they had not been closed or replaced by other companies. That is why I think that the economic situation was more satisfactory back then as opposed to nowadays.”* (Male, aged 43)

However, about 12 percent of the interviewed participants around 35 years old tended to express some more optimistic views on Fieni's future development:

*“I am confident in the development opportunities of Fieni – the town has the capacity to build more attractive jobs, based on the local industry heritage, culture and handicrafts.”* (Female, aged 34)

They mentioned possible new economic activities including tourism, niche agriculture, timber products, and limestone exploitation. Additionally, others noted that new business arenas, entrepreneurship, domestic and international markets, and good management prac-

tices could all be aided by digital communication technologies and the fostering of local professional networks.

### **b) Perceptions of Service Quality**

The interviewed participants' perceptions on the quality of urban public services, including public transportation, were generally favourable. Unfortunately, the sudden high unemployment arising from deindustrialisation could not be absorbed quickly by the services sector given the relatively low financial power of the local investors and the deficient entrepreneurship competences of the former industrial workforce. Only now, after a significant out-migration, the commercial workforce supply and demand have become more balanced with a pre-pandemic unemployment rate of about 6 percent (National Institute of Statistics 2019). Unfortunately, the supply of such specialised services as health, professional education, and internet maintenance, is strongly deficient. For example, 63.8 percent of the interviewees were satisfied with the existing local medical services but only about 7 percent of them rated this service provision highly.

About 68 percent of the respondents identified the lack of public transport as an important deficiency in Fieni's urban services, especially as the town's built-up area stretches about 4 km along a major national road. Better public transport could especially benefit the town's large and growing cohort of elderly people. In contrast, another 17 percent of interviewees thought that the public transport provision is unnecessary because the town is too small for it to operate efficiently, thereby increasing the local taxes.

Both perspectives (the aged and the young residents) recognise the existing strong social relations within the community, partially shaped through such public facilities as the town's stadium, the bowling arena, and the Municipal Cultural Centre.

### **c) Views on the Quality of Local Governance**

68 percent of the interviewed persons were generally satisfied with the planning decisions taken by the local government. Such an outcome no doubt realistically reflects both Fieni's limited financial resources and the complexity of local urban redevelopment problems. However, more than a quarter of those believe that Fieni's local council should better prioritise its planning actions and not dissipate the available funds on small projects with limited development outcomes.

Under the Romanian law, the local government authorities are obliged to consult with residents when proposing certain measures or projects and before making the final decisions. However, in Fieni's case, more than half of the interviewees said that they were not informed about the council's proposed strategies and plans or on how they could communicate their opinions. But almost a third of the inhabitants got information on these projects directly at the town hall or on the municipality website. The difference exists because most of Fieni's adult residents, and especially the elderly, cannot access the electronic media.

Regarding citizen participation, whether by personal initiative or organised by the town hall, only 25 percent of the locals in Fieni get involved, while almost 30 percent rarely participate. The rest of the population either does not seek to participate in community discussion of government initiatives or are unaware of them.

#### **d) Urban Planning Assessment**

The respondent's views on the quality of Fieni's local planning and development processes reveal several deficiencies requiring improved cooperation between all the stakeholders. One prominent result of this study's interviews was that most participants did not know (a) of the masterplan's existence, (b) where they could consult the relevant government adopted documents or (c) about the stage reached in each project.

Fieni's landscape deficiencies reflect the negative impacts of deindustrialisation, including abandoned properties and infrastructure – whether commercial or social. We also sought interviewees' ideas on how to remediate such defects given the current extremely slow urban renewal. Their ideas focused on such themes as:

- i. improving people's knowledge on Fieni's masterplan and development strategy;
- ii. discussing activities better suiting the unused space belonging to the former light bulb factory – the suggestions included uses as office space, for cultural activities and services, open green areas, and public playgrounds;
- iii the functional restructuring of Fieni's town centre to include more public services and car parking spaces; or
- iv recruiting new industrial activities.

Almost 57 percent of those interviewed considered that the integration of unused urban spaces was the main priority for Fieni, possibly through various forms of public-private partnerships. Half of those interviewed agreed that a part of these abandoned lands and buildings should have new social uses, developing typical activities in the social economy. Suggested ideas included a seniors' club, a light bulb museum, a gallery displaying wooden artefacts, an improved health-care system and pre-school education facilities. An even higher 74 percent proportion of respondents thought that the town should attempt to recruit new industrial activities.

The need for a strategic territorial planning at regional level also arose during the interviews. The nearby town of Pucioasa and Fieni both developed to some extent in tandem. Pucioasa's population of 14,500 people is much larger than the one of Fieni and it has two active textile industrial enterprises, several medical health and treatment units, and other complementary services which nearby Fieni's residents also use. Over 81 percent of the interviewed participants considered that both towns, together with their adjacent rural localities, should have a mutual development strategy and a dedicated masterplan seeking to harness the potential of the entire joint area. The complementarity of both towns' industrial activities was mentioned by 21.7 percent of the respondents, while around 60 percent of them noted their interaction with the urban services of Pucioasa and especially its very well-developed medical services. On the other hand, Fieni complements Pucioasa's resi-

dents with various vocational training services. Some 73.9 percent of Fieni's interviewees raised the need for jointly developing a regular public transport system between and within the two urban areas and their surrounding hinterlands as a first strategic priority.

## 4 Discussion

Our participatory approach aimed at evidencing the voice of Fieni's population serves two functions. First, it highlights the town's complex post-industrial economic and social transition characteristics. Secondly, it reveals several different perceptions and interpretations of both the town's former conditions and their potential evolution. These outcomes validate the previously detailed theoretical model of our research approach. We now debate three core themes.

### a) From Nostalgia and Despair to Embracing the Future

Many residents in the local community exhibit a sense of pride and nostalgia for its past industrial development and social ties (VELIKONJA 2009; RHODES 2013; CLARKE 2015; REKŚĆ 2015; PETROVIĆ 2017):

*"I am an honorary citizen of Fieni. The image of the town is built upon its cement and light bulb industry. This is where the cement technology started in the country. We are cement factory workers from father to son."* (Male, aged 75)

And, generally, the population of Fieni experiences the current local development issues in the national context of political and economic instability. The structural problems of development in Romania impact especially Fieni's young population who mainly prefer building their professional and personal life outside the country (NAYAK 2006; THOMAS et al. 2018; ODOARDI and LIBERATORE 2021). As opposed to the youth who did not experience the town's socialist industrial development, its aged population remains hopeful for Fieni's economic recovery resulting from new industrial developments.

However, some of the younger respondents highlighted several potential new economic opportunities drawing on the current local and regional resources employed within an emerging cultural context. For example, the rising quality and availability of the internet and other communications services could accelerate the development and entrepreneurial uptake of many new business opportunities or hybrid practices (LANGE and BÜRKNER 2020). In addition to economic growth, improvements in such facilities will likely enhance beneficially many needed social aspects of the community.

When comparing the results of the interviews in Fieni with the information obtained during other previous research (CERCLEUX and BOLE 2019), we find few dissimilarities in people's attitudes, feelings, impressions, from conclusions reached in other studies of small industrial towns located in former communist European countries (HOLUL 2016; PETROVIĆ 2017; STOJČIĆ and ARALICA 2018; POLJAC ISTENIČ and KOZIMA 2020).

## b) Empowering Community Perception within the Urban Planning Equation

Given these specific results, we consider it important that community perceptions, whether from organisations or individuals, be considered systematically in governance processes, and more specifically within urban and territorial development planning strategies. Broader participatory processes in problem definition, strategy development and approval processes are likely to produce better outcomes by drawing on a wider range of knowledge and ideas (SORENSEN 2020).

This research, however, highlighted some major problems in Fieni. For example, the critical issue of high-quality leadership in both government and community received little attention. Secondly, the conceptions of, and priorities for, ways forward in the town's economy, society and environmental quality appear to be very limited – albeit more prominent for the younger people. Also, somewhat murky is whether the current government boundaries and administrative responsibilities are appropriate for delivering good development outcomes. In this respect, however, our discussion of the functional relationship between Fieni and Pucioasa was nevertheless relevant. An additional important issue can be the rethinking of urban land reuse, targeting multifunctionality and multibenefit development solutions (JIANG et al. 2022).

Towns are often perceived differently by various community groups and local authorities. Local populations, as revealed in our general interviews often have multiple perspectives. Some are wedded to the past, while professional staff employed by the local government tend to have more rigid and present-day views. The latter also tend to have more influence in thinking about and shaping the urban future because the community residents often have highly various and sometime conflicting perspectives, especially among different age groups:

*“The municipality should take measures for building new jobs, new affordable homes, and improving transport infrastructure, to keep people in the town and prevent them from leaving.” (Male, 19 years old)*

*“Fieni does not have development opportunities anymore. The people have already left, and they used to work in the town factories. Nowadays, the union workers request their rights before working.” (Male, 70 years old)*

National laws require public debate on proposed government projects and plans, and strong leaders are much better placed to present and negotiate the community views on them. But the residents of Fieni have failed to realise that their future rests heavily in their hands by participating actively in debates over their problems and the possible solutions to them in conjunction with their elected mayor, town council, and professional staff. So that, the development task is for community and government leaders to construct a dominant and shared perception of the town's future and the processes needed to attain it.

Fieni's predicament is probably like that of many small urban communities whose deindustrialisation led to such damaging phenomena as out-migration, further resulting in both population decline and ageing (CERCLEUX et al. 2019). Many of these emigrants are



in young age cohorts, which is likely to affect greatly and adversely Fieni's future development. The town's average age is moving sharply higher, while the reduced human capital, adaptive capacity, and ability to network suggest that Fieni's capacity to find a pathway to urban revigoration may be difficult.

These outcomes emerged as prominent concerns in our study and two main work hypotheses were validated. First, the street interviews provide a valuable participatory tool in the diagnosis of urban conditions in a small former industrial town. Secondly, the interviewees' dominant perceptions of the present conditions and the prospective urban development can become an important input into remedial strategies for such damaged communities.

### **c) Building the Community Perception Typology in a Case Study**

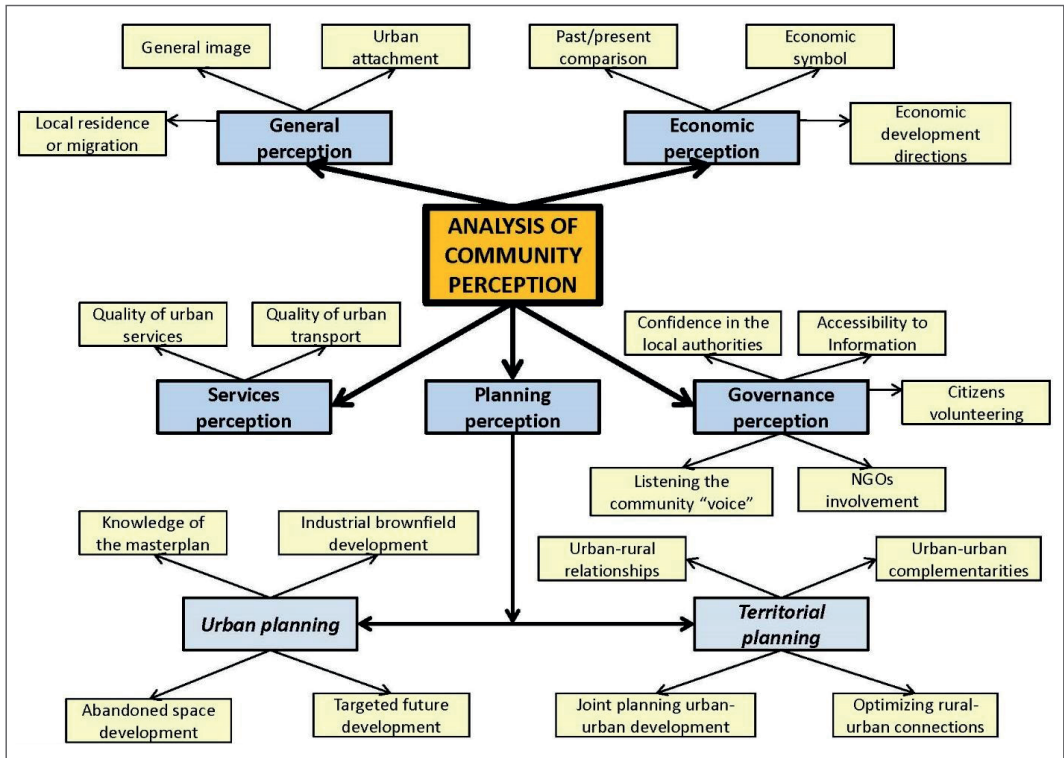
The community perception of the local governance model is closely correlated with the success of the urban management process in delivering good quality services efficiently and in a timely way (MUNTEANU and SERVILLO 2013; BUČEK 2014). Although Fieni's rescue from deindustrialisation cannot be effective without financial support, it was crucial that the interviews targeted the citizens' perceptions of their important role in local development, the quality of their relations with the local authorities and the effectiveness of community participation in the decision-making processes shaping the town's future.

The following community perception analysis model shown in Figure 4 attempts to summarise the enormous but rather unstructured range of interviewees' foci on many different aspects of Fieni's urban planning and future development – both in terms of the often complex and evolving issues raised and their difficult management whether now or in the future. The population's views on these issues are also highly diverse and frequently conflicting. These difficulties may worryingly pre-empt effective urban management by the government and community members alike.

The relational model of community perception analysis likely also applies to other small industrial towns in Romania and in Central and Eastern Europe. However, the relative importance of both relevant issues and urban processes will undoubtedly vary spatially. This, in turn, will depend on the history of economy, society, governance mechanisms and resources at each location, together with their prospects and threats both within their nations and internationally, and from impending technologies.

## **5 Conclusions**

Our participatory approach highlighted the significant elements for the local community by reference to the factors and consequences that influence the urban development of a small industrial town in Romania. Analysis of community perceptions of Fieni reveals the dominance of two types of feelings in connection to the former, current, and future development of its urban space. On the one hand, its elderly population showed strong feeling of nostalgia and pride for the industrial past, while, on the other hand, younger



Source: The authors, own design

Figure 4: An example of community perception analysis connected with the planning and development of a small former industrialised town

respondents, and especially youth, revealed an increasing hope for the next years that the local community will succeed in solving its current problems together by following a coherent urban development process. The two urban perspectives are built under the influence of the differences between generations and their life experiences within the town. However, old age is clearly a handicap in developing the best culture and focus for reinventing the future of a community shaped in a top-down fashion by the former communist regime which dictated the evolution of economy and society.

The dominant community feelings associated with Fieni stem from the formerly active population prior to 1990 and they reflect the transition from the positive impact of industrialisation processes in the communist period to the negative consequences of the deindustrialisation process after 1990. The latter's negative effects are still a challenge for the current young generation. These include (a) the low number of locally or regionally available jobs; (b) the strong out-migration of young people; (c) the difficulty to attract new investment in (re)developing local industries and other economic activities; and (d) the expansion of the grey or abandoned urban landscape.

The main findings of the study resulted from the qualitative assessment of the local population's perception of Fieni's current conditions and future development prospects. They suggest the conduct of future research on several other directions. First, we need to refine optimal relationships between community perceptions and the process of strategic planning and development. The goal here is how best to deliver a strong participatory governance framework whereby significant public perceptions held by business community groups, and environmentalists are actively considered in planning processes. Such negotiations will require agile leadership by all participants. Another issue is how to raise sufficient capital for businesses, infrastructure, environmental enhancement and so on.

Then one might want to create strong processes to review alternative and sometimes conflicting developments and their benefits. For example, tourist development, industrial agriculture, and maintenance or enhancement of environmental quality might conflict with each other. In addition, strong urban or development planning could be best delivered by up-to-date knowledge of effective processes in other places and especially other small de-industrialised towns. Such collective knowledge about effective and innovative strategies could best be developed at the national or even international level. For example, many communities across Romania and Central or Eastern Europe have experienced difficulties in navigating the transition from socialist to market economies.

Finally, we should note that individual small communities' futures are also increasingly at the mercy of a huge range of factors over which they have little or no control and whose impacts could be highly significant providing a steep learning curve. Critical here are such issues as an increasing range of rapidly evolving and truly transformational technologies, increasing international trade agreements, evolving business models, the management of climate change and its unavoidable environmental impacts, international migration trends, demographic ageing, and an increasing range of international conflicts. Effective survival of small towns and regions will likely have to develop an agile local culture able to foresee threats and opportunities relating to their well-being with sufficient vigour, albeit sometimes supported by higher tiers of government. We stress the importance of place agility and those small towns that survive will likely have to be energetically adaptive rather than conservative and possess strong and visionary, but broad-based, leadership.

Many of these themes emerge in a recent book on small towns, edited by BAŃSKI (2022). It deals with growth or decline trends in small towns across many nations, their causes, and development dilemmas. But it also testifies to the huge variety of problems, opportunities, development strategies and achievements confronting small towns.

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