RAIS Journal for Social Sciences | Vol. 10, No. 2, 2026
ISSN 2574-0245 (Print) | ISSN 2574-1179 (Online) | DOI:10.5281/zenodo.24522387

The Urban Planning Structure of Romania's Administrative-Territorial Units: Legislative Framework, Professional Training, and Administrative Discrepancies

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Abstract: This study examines the urban planning structure of Romania's 3,181 basic administrative-territorial units, comparing national legislative requirements with administrative realities. The analysis traces the evolution of the legal framework, from Law no. 350/2001 on territorial planning and urbanism and Law no. 50/1991 on construction authorization, to the 2019 Administrative Code and the recent Code of Territorial Planning, Urbanism and Construction (CATUC), adopted in 2026. The study reviews legal requirements for planning documentation, including General Urban Plans and Zonal Urban Plans, as well as the professional qualification requirements imposed on chief architects and registered urban planners. Official data published by the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, the National Institute of Statistics, the Romanian Court of Accounts, the World Bank, and the Order of Architects of Romania are analyzed. The study finds substantial discrepancies between legal requirements and administrative practice. The chief architect position was filled in only 0.66 percent of communes, compared with 52.4 percent of municipalities. Coverage with updated General Urban Plans remains, even in large cities, below one third of the sample analyzed. Authorization procedures averaged 507 days, nearly four times the national target of 135 days. Local budget self-financing capacity ranged from 82.5 percent in large cities to 27 percent in communes. The study documents profound rural-urban disparities in digitalization and administrative capacity. It recommends strengthening inter-communal planning structures, expanding continuing professional development, and prioritizing digitalization in rural areas.

Keywords: Urban Planning, Territorial Planning, Administrative-Territorial Units, General Urban Plan, Chief Architect, Administrative Capacity, Legislative Reform, Rural-Urban Disparities

Introduction

Urban planning in Romania is governed by an extensive and historically unstable legislative framework, while the administrative-territorial units (ATUs) responsible for implementing it vary enormously in size, population, and institutional capacity. Romania comprises 3,181 basic ATUs—2,862 communes, 216 towns, and 103 municipalities—organized into 41 counties, plus the city of Bucharest with special status (Fanatik.ro, 2026). Each ATU is simultaneously obligated to prepare and update a General Urban Plan (PUG) and empowered to authorize construction through urban planning certificates and building permits. This study examined the gap between these legal obligations and the resources actually available to ATUs to fulfill them.

The stakes are considerable: how a small commune or a large city plans its growth affects housing quality, exposure to natural hazards, and long-term territorial equity. The

government's own National Integrated Urban Development Strategy 2022-2035 acknowledged that few Romanian cities possessed up-to-date planning documentation (Government of Romania, 2022). This study is further situated at a moment of legislative transition: on 25 August 2026, Law no. 169/2026, the Code of Territorial Planning, Urbanism and Construction (CATUC), entered into force, replacing the twenty-five-year-old Law no. 350/2001 and Law no. 50/1991 with a unified code (artevis.ro, 2026). The analysis therefore documented both the "classic" regime and the newly introduced framework, whose effects remain to be empirically verified.

The study relied on a qualitative and quantitative documentary analysis, combining primary and secondary legislation, official statistical and institutional reports (the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, the National Institute of Statistics, the Romanian Court of Accounts, and the World Bank), specialized academic literature, and position papers from professional and associative bodies, including the Order of Architects of Romania (OAR) and the Association of Communes of Romania. Given the impracticality of an individual inventory of all 3,181 ATUs, data were aggregated by typological category (county-seat municipalities, other municipalities, small towns, and rural communes).

Legislative Framework and Professional Qualification Requirements

Romania's post-1989 urban planning system developed incrementally. Law no. 50/1991 regulated construction authorization amid the initial liberalization of property rights, while Law no. 350/2001 established the framework law for territorial planning and urbanism, remaining in force for twenty-five years despite at least six major amendments, most notably Government Emergency Ordinance (GEO) no. 79/2021, which altered the qualification regime for the chief-architect position (Government of Romania, 2021). The Administrative Code (GEO no. 57/2019) consolidated the civil-service position of chief architect, the key decision-making role in local urban planning, responsible for issuing urban planning certificates and building permits and for coordinating planning documentation (Government of Romania, 2019). Under Law no. 350/2001, planning documentation followed a four-tier hierarchy: the National and County Territorial Planning Plans, the General Urban Plan (PUG), mandatory for every ATU and valid for approximately ten years, the Zonal Urban Plan (PUZ), and the Detailed Urban Plan (PUD). Preparing this documentation legally required signature rights granted either by the Order of Architects of Romania, which also manages the National Register of Architects, or by the Romanian Register of Urban Planners (RUR), which administers a supervised internship and mandatory continuing professional development (Superior Council of the Romanian Register of Urban Planners, 2010).

The chief-architect qualification regime was substantially relaxed by GEO no. 79/2021, which allowed construction engineers and economists with supplementary training to fill the position in towns and communes, and permitted delegation to inter-communal development associations. The reform was criticized by the OAR leadership, who compared it to having an information-technology specialist perform heart surgery (HotNews.ro, 2021), and an impact assessment published eighteen months later found that only 46 of 92 advertised positions were filled, an improvement of just 0.7 percentage points (Order of Architects of Romania, 2023). The 2026 CATUC reform consolidated this fragmented legislation into a single 584-article code, introducing considerably shorter deadlines (a maximum building-permit duration of 30 calendar days, compared with a prior empirical average above 500 days), a four-tier technical verification system, and a digital National Construction Register (gsarhitect.ro, 2026; Forbes Romania, 2026). Whether these shorter statutory deadlines translate into faster practice depends on the administrative capacity documented in the following section.

Administrative Reality: Empirical Evidence of the Discrepancies

Official and academic data revealed systematic gaps between the legal framework described above and administrative practice. The chief-architect position was filled in only 19 of 2,862 communes (0.66 percent), compared with 76 of 216 towns (35.2 percent) and 54 of 103 municipalities (52.4 percent), according to the explanatory memorandum of GEO no. 79/2021 (Government of Romania, 2021; HotNews.ro, 2021). The OAR disputed the completeness of these figures, estimating only about 450 chief-architect positions established nationally, far below the roughly 5,000 theoretically required (HotNews.ro, 2021). Figure 1 illustrates this distribution.

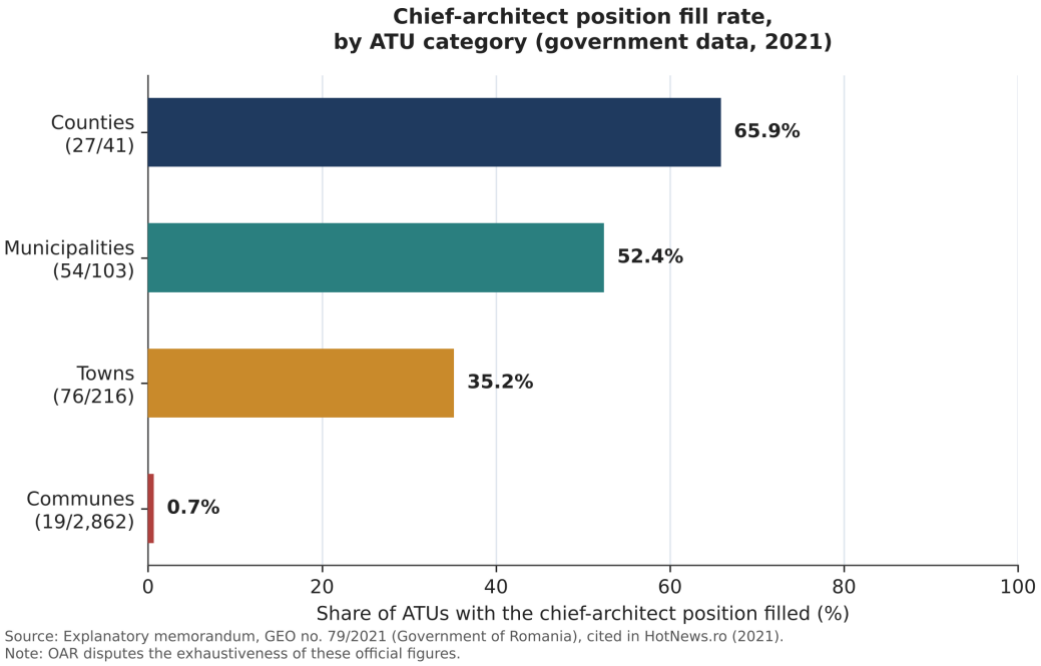

Figure 1. Chief-architect position fill rate, by ATU category (government data, 2021)

Source: Government of Romania (2021); HotNews.ro (2021).

Coverage with updated planning documentation showed a comparable gap. Romania's Urban Policy 2035 estimated that only about one third of ATUs had an updated PUG nationally (Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, 2021), and a 2024 World Bank study of nine of the country's largest cities found that only three, Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, and Timișoara, had an updated PUG (World Bank, 2024). Bucharest's PUG, approved in 2000, remained operational through successive extensions for over two decades.

Procedural duration was a third key indicator. An analysis of over 2,700 publicly funded contracts found an average of 507 days between obtaining an urban planning certificate and receiving a building permit, nearly four times the 135-day target set under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Senat.ro, 2025). Disparities among large cities were considerable: Oradea issued permits in 53 days on average, compared with 382 days in Iași (Apix.ro, 2024). Figure 2 compares actual procedure duration with legal and policy targets.



Figure 2. Duration of urban planning administrative procedures: reality vs. legal framework/target

Source: Senat.ro (2025).

These gaps correlated closely with financial capacity. Large cities achieved own-revenue self-financing of 82.5 percent, compared with 41.6 percent in small towns and about 27 percent on average in communes, with only 38 of 2,862 communes financially self-sufficient (Istrate & Muntele, 2026; actualdecluj.ro, 2025). Qualified professionals were similarly concentrated: 38.75 percent of practicing architects registered with the OAR belonged to its Bucharest branch alone (Order of Architects of Romania, 2024). Digitalization, funded substantially through the Local Fund of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the "Date Locale" national platform, remained concentrated in a handful of large municipalities, such as Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara, with limited reach into rural communes (Monitorul de Cluj, 2021). Uncontrolled urban expansion and legal challenges to planning documentation adopted without an updated PUG were direct consequences of this capacity gap, particularly around Bucharest (Suditu et al., 2014; JURIDICE.ro, 2021).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 summarizes the central discrepancies identified across legislative requirements, observed reality, and documented sources.

Table 1. Summary of discrepancies between legislative requirements and administrative reality

Dimension	Legal requirement / target	Observed reality
Chief-architect position	Mandatory in every ATU	0.66% communes; 35.2% towns; 52.4% municipalities
PUG updating	Revision cycle of approx. 10 years	Approx. 1/3 of ATUs nationally; 3/9 large cities analyzed
Certificate + permit duration	PNRR target: 135 days	National average: 507 days
Budget self-financing	Local financial autonomy	82.5% (large cities) vs. approx. 27% (commune average)
Qualified professionals	Balanced national coverage	38.75% of practicing architects in Bucharest alone

Source: Author's synthesis based on the sources cited in the text.

These discrepancies reflected interacting structural causes: administrative-territorial fragmentation (2,862 communes, nearly half under 3,000 inhabitants); an imbalance between professional qualification standards and the specialized labor market, concentrated overwhelmingly in Bucharest; chronic financial dependence of small ATUs on government transfers; asymmetric continuing-education provision, with National Institute of Administration and RUR programs explicitly excluding commune-level personnel (National Institute of Administration, 2025); and legislative instability. These causes interacted circularly: fragmentation drove financial dependence, which limited salary competitiveness, which deepened the personnel shortage, which delayed plan updates, which generated legal uncertainty and further legislative intervention, including CATUC itself (JURIDICE.ro, 2021).

Whether CATUC's shorter deadlines resolve these discrepancies depends on whether ATUs, especially small communes, gain the human and technical capacity to meet them; a legal deadline alone does not substitute for administrative capacity. Some CATUC provisions, such as the digital National Construction Register and the planned centralization of Bucharest's building-permit authorization from 2028, directly targeted the structural causes identified (verificatori.ro, 2026; Forbes Romania, 2026). A rigorous impact assessment 18 to 24 months after CATUC's entry into force, using the same indicators, was recommended.

Broader institutional developments reinforced this analysis. Local autonomy in urban planning is constitutionally grounded but under-resourced (Constitution of Romania, 1991/2003; Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, 2011), and the recent legal framework for metropolitan areas (Law no. 246/2022) offered a plausible, though still untested, instrument for coordinating planning beyond individual ATU boundaries (Apostol Tofan, 2022).

Conclusions

This study found that Romania's urban planning legislation, despite the 2026 CATUC reform, has been marked by persistent instability, while the administrative capacity required to implement it, in terms of qualified personnel, updated planning documentation, procedural speed, and digitalization, remained profoundly unequal between well-resourced municipalities and small, under-resourced communes and towns.

Four recommendations were proposed. First, inter-communal urban planning structures, already legally possible but underused, should be strengthened to allow small communes to share a chief architect or planning department. Second, continuing professional development programs administered by the National Institute of Administration and the RUR should be extended to commune-level personnel, currently excluded. Third, digitalization of planning documentation should be accelerated with explicit prioritization of rural ATUs. Fourth, a public, periodic monitoring mechanism for the indicators used in this study should be established to evaluate progress, including the effects of the CATUC reform, over the next 18 to 24 months.

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