

## **Empowering local communities as a form of good governance.**

### **Case study: the locality of Novaci through the lens of mental mapping.**

#### **Part I**

Prof. univ. dr. Radu Baltasiu (University of Bucharest)

PhD candidate Ovidiana Bulumac (University of Bucharest)

PhD candidate Gabriel Săpunaru (University of Bucharest)

*Community 'empowerment'* represents their *habilitation* to pursue their own economical and cultural interests in local administration (regardless of political party in power), aimed at *community welfare* as an effective entity in relation to particular interests of members. In international literature, community empowerment has been theorized by four additional concepts: independence, self-determination, national development through local development and self-reliance (Fetterman, 2001, 2005; Craig and Mayo, 2004; Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland, 2006).

From the perspective of political sociology, *community empowerment* is one of the main formal aspects that the administration takes at communitarian level. In Durkheim's sociology of *normality*, *community empowerment* is the safety frame in respect to anomy through which the individual can pursue its interests. Thus, in terms of social action, communities may be placed in a dual typology of the ideal-type: that of the initiative with collective purpose versus the social and civic inactivity. The ability of a community to preserve its past and manage and project its future becomes, in this logic, independent of the macro-social organization of the state. At best, the community can make use of state initiatives in order to facilitate obtaining positive results locally. Meanwhile, if the formal institutional mechanisms do not meet the needs of local self-steering, communities can develop their bypass mechanisms. When we say inefficient for the community, we mean the state's and territorial institutions' inability to provide a formal social protection and create new *patterns of collective social action* (Spicker, 2000: 144), based on the valorization of pre-existing systems of social action (D. Ashford, 1986: 107), in our case on the communitarian type.

The framework implemented on the social level ‘down-top’ proposed by the terminology of *empowerment* can be effective only in the case of an active and aware community of its existence and ‘destiny development’. This *habilitation* of the local by the center for the benefit of the former can be found in a contrary situation, of weakened administrations, in which *self-determination* resumes to a sum of private initiatives manifested, more or less coherently on the collective level. Thus, ensuring the legal framework (judicial, economical, political, cultural, and social) is not automatically translated into the communities’ ability to manage its frames and to have the right manifestations. In other words, the efficiency of policy implementation in order to *habilitate* the local plan depends largely on the *ability* of communities to relate to a given context, part of a broader concept, that of ‘*self-steering*’ as a branch of *administrative decentralization*. The case study we are analyzing (Novaci, Gorj county) is intended to support these assumptions by reviewing the temporal (historical and present), administrative, symbolic and material frames, in relation to the efficiency of empowerment policies and the stock of reactions from the community (self-steering). From this point of view and as a conclusion of the field research conducted in the summer of 2010, the city of Novaci can be divided into three levels developed during the work, important in terms of reaction at communitarian level in relation to the principles of empowerment policies: 1) the period preceding the second world War (characterized by a ‘bottom up’ built order, both by individual initiatives with collective purpose – see D. Brezulescu, and by some group initiatives, specific to space and time – see transhumance or common indivisible ownership order – ‘obște’), 2) the communist era (in which individual reaction and the old order began to be opposed to the new regime that brings about community atypical and space incompatible phenomena such as industrialization and commuting), and 3) post-revolutionary period (which seems to have remnants of order going back to the order compatible with the community’s status – see restoration of common indivisible ownership abolished by the communist regime – but that seems to work in a disparate manner, thus creating a chaotic order (sic!) and a parallel system with the mechanisms established by the state – be it social, cultural or economic – which no longer has the ability to preserve the ordering of spaces for their preservation and development).

We can observe that where the *empowerment of communities* doesn’t have any content, meaning it has associated an inefficient self-steering, the local economic market is weak, it’s circuit not having the ability to generate sufficient revenue. Consequently, the town

enters a negative demographic spiral that makes it lose the most professionally competent people, as well as its youngest population. Statistically, between 1996 and 2006, Novaci recorded a negative migration level. The strongest negative accents of migration levels were recorded in 1990 (-76) 1998 (-76) and 1999 (-77)<sup>1</sup>. Also, objective data can be backed by local meanings of key persons: teachers in Novaci admitted that they instruct students to appear as ready as they can at contests of admission in the universities of Timisoara and Bucharest (the main poles of attraction), some public authorities send their own children in other more developed cities to have a chance at a better future, residents and doctors in the regional hospital of Novaci permanently have their resume on the desk etc. We therefore understand that not only qualified work force leaves its home, but also the intellectual elite (present or future – young people).

In other states as well, issues of the inefficiency of institutional power transfer from the center to local plan became a central topic in public debate. For instance, in UK the discussion is very present in the economic crisis conditions. For most countries in the Western Hemisphere, welfare is directly ‘delivered’ to the citizens, through a unique combination, particular for each country, between the voluntary, corporate and government services, that still lets exist a mixture between the ‘welfare state’ and the ‘welfare society’ (Gould, 1993). British debates on this topic agglutinate around the idea that the welfare state is somehow forced to turn into welfare society in order to contain budget costs. We here refer to the concept of ‘Big Society’ that David Cameron is advocating for, a reform whose essence is taking over more of the state’s responsibilities not only by local communities, but also by individual citizens through voluntary action<sup>2</sup> (limiting pressure on the central budget and assuming the responsibilities of the governing elite in London). The basis of this reform critic is that in the name of reducing costs, by ‘freely’ transferring responsibilities, there is not a more effective governance about to take place, but, in fact, the state and political elites are becoming less responsible, a shorting of their responsibilities that is overlapping the background existence of inefficient local oligarchies<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> See National Institute of Statistics Gorj county department, Locality of Novaci data sheet. Obtained with the support of Gorj and Novaci authorities.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Economist*, 12<sup>th</sup> August 2010, **Reforming the state**, available at the address: <http://www.economist.com/node/16791720> (June 2011) and *The Economist*, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2011, **What’s wrong with David Cameron’s “Big Society”**, available at the address: <http://www.economist.com/node/18114475> (June 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Idem.

But when the *empowerment of communities* is done correctly, it becomes part of *good governance*, essential for the *democratic* character of institutions and, finally, of states. The concept of *good governance* leads back, from our point of view, to the classical liberalism of the eighteenth-century England. Adam Smith is the theorist who was concerned with the *Wealth of Nations*, thus treating the question of a ‘great society’ (Rostow, 1990: 18), therefore he viewed the society as a whole, a sum of economic changes with social purpose. Addressing this issue, Smith uses the *invisible hand* concept, supplementing the selfish approach of man in economic interaction – avarice and greed in economic activities come from human predisposition to commit ‘sins and errors’ (ibid.) – and providing the *frame of free encounters in the community of private interests*.

Thus, through the role of the *prince*, individuals find the frame of freely expressing their personal wills. Ruling elite function is that of updating the social reality by providing the *constitutive* categories of social activities – economic and spiritual – or those with *regulatory* role – political and legal (Gusti, 1968, vol. I). In this manner, we observe that good governance refers to a moral settlement of economics and politics, where the morale is what produces social cohesion (Durkheim), namely the public interest. In the EU practice, the concept of *good governance* has as pillars the [institutional] *openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness* and *coherence* of measures undertaken (Commission, 2001: 10). The principles are purposed to democratize the governing, be it on the global, European, national, regional or local level. Thus, the sections of good governance can be grouped into two big dimensions: more active participation of the community (civic involvement) and effectiveness of policies adopted. Increasing civic engagement sends us to the concept of *community empowerment*. In addition, democratic governance would increase local autonomy and citizen participation in public affairs. In Romania, by Law no. 215/2001 (republished), local autonomy refers to “the right and effective capacity of local authorities to address and manage, on behalf and in the interests of local communities they represent, public affairs, under the law”<sup>4</sup>.

Remaining at the same level of analysis, we find that *empowering communities* is part of the *functional capacity of the institutions*. The ability of institutional action is what makes the difference, on national level, between functional democratic states and *weak states*

---

<sup>4</sup> See Article 3, alin (1), available at the address: [http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis\\_pck.htm\\_act\\_text?id=27123](http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htm_act_text?id=27123) (June 2011).

(Krasner, 2005). Public institutions are that more efficient as they *directly* represent the interests of the community, both in terms of covering the locals, but especially integrating them in the landscape of power distribution's informal infrastructure in the local community. We note that the concept of **informal distribution of power in the community** represents the channels through which the community exercises its influence over its members and projects its ability to organize (procurement and distribution) resources. This is the level at which the paper intends to use the mapping methodology.

**The mapping methodology** used in this paper is based on conducted unstructured or semi-structured interviews, regarding the subjects' current and past centers and directions of interest. As well, we could determine the main lines or space 'corridors of interest' of the community through secondary analysis of interviews, based on interlocutors' mentions on the progress of their priorities. Much of the data on the past, used as a means of comparison, come from consulted monographs and, as already mentioned, from the oral history of the place. Mapping method is employed upon the frame of the neointerpretative methodology that focuses on getting most accurate data from a community in terms of limited resources (budget, time, people, etc.), using a mixture between *Weber's comprehension*, the operationalization in frames and manifestations of reality according to the *monographic method* of the Sociological School from Bucharest<sup>5</sup> and components of noologic sociology<sup>6</sup>. The neointerpretative approach aims to "identify the elements that define the potential for survival and recovery of the rural world through techniques of 'extraction' of data rather than 'stripping', as the monographic methodology involves" (Baltasiu et al, 2009: 127). Moreover, "it has the purpose of extracting the local specific without losing sight of the context, a social context defined by the actor himself" (Baltasiu et al, 2009: 137).

The analysis of field data (both qualitative and quantitative), we find that at local level there is a relatively degree of (formal) local autonomy between city hall and county agencies (County Council and Prefecture). Not at any time have our interlocutors hinted that local problems should suffer because of these higher-level authorities. Thus, it appears that the **main pillar responsible for the community's welfare is the local quality's distribution of resources and power**. On the other hand, symbolic axes that we could cartographically identify do not give the predominant role to local administration as formal institution,

---

<sup>5</sup> Through the belief that the reality is of a very delicate complexity, described under the form of the "law of parallelism".

<sup>6</sup> Experiencing as a way of living in reference to symbolic coordinates.

confirming our hypothesis that the daily flows of community's life are largely dealt with in other plans. *Community empowerment* and *self-steering* in the case of Novaci seem rather part of the social actions backstage rather than of the first plan and, in any case, they seem not to coincide with formal administration channels. As a result, the administrative area of Novaci seems to develop chaotic – see Râncea issues, from architecture to ecology or, in terms of fragments, upon the ability of expressing in space of the various pieces of local power.

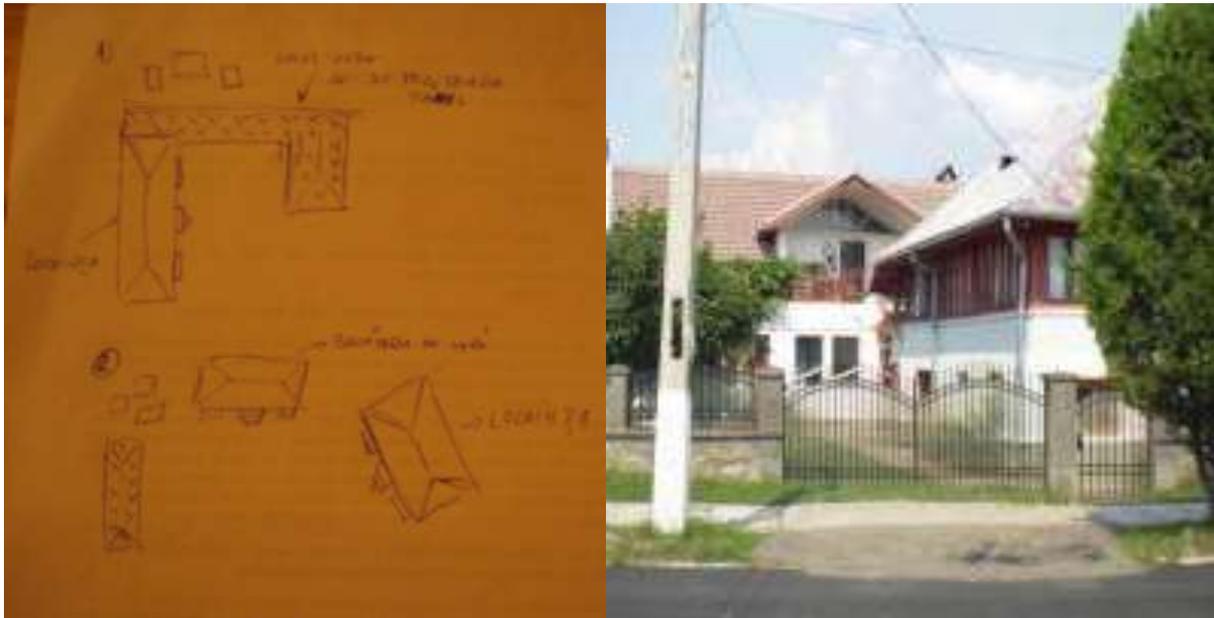
We therefore found three plans of resource distribution. The first is at **family level**, where resources are managed relatively autarchic in small households or on *individual* businesses with sheep or (internal and international) transports. Private economic activities rarely take place in the context of new institutions, *enterprises*, often remaining in the formulation of more or less localized concerns. **At communitarian level, there can be noticed the revival of common indivisible ownership**, some of which seem to have enough success in the distribution of resources. We'll see how they, still maturing, will regain the pre-war role of the frame's major administrator and therefore, becoming a significant source of local authority-autonomy. The third plan is the **local market economy**, where there can be noticed the persistence of a phenomenon of weak aggregation of demand for products and job opportunities in relation to the offer. The community in Novaci does not have its own axis of industrial, agricultural and service activities needed to ensure a *satisfactory* integration of the local workforce in the circuit of modern economics, through the question of wages. The city hall and a medium-small size 'milk factory' remain the most significant employers.

The problem of dismantling the interests of local households from those of local administration is that self-steering produces chaotic results in the city, due to the lack of coordination of particular interests. Moreover, the phenomenon of *self-reliance* as the *sum* of individual self-mastering leaves its mark on the *diminishing of local collective cultural specifics* on the organization of space. We notice the dissipation of reference points in architecture when we are told, for example, that shepherds "build houses as they are struck"<sup>7</sup>. The phenomenon is visible in the ecology of living, in the organization of living space and its symbolism. For instance, there is a trend, although still not at large scale, it has an impact on the local space: reducing the household simply to a living space. In these cases, the house consumes nearly the complete space of the former rural household, sometimes even its garden which, when it survives, becomes a grassy space or, depending on the tastes of the owner,

---

<sup>7</sup> Interview Novaci, July 2010.

garden with various arrangements, including garden furniture. For instance, the *map of the new* living space to the *traditional* one is:



**Figure 1 (Left) Household as rural living. Sketch resulted from the field observation and interviews, summer 2010, Novaci. (Right) The household becomes only living space by emphasis on comfort.**

The local administration's large-scale failure in managing the community<sup>8</sup> and its chaotic development as a result of the *sum* of particular interests can be observed in the field's projection lack of structure in terms of urban development where, literally, every house-interest seems to have its road (Rânca-Novaci):

---

<sup>8</sup> The function of local government, according to article 10 of the Local Public Administration Law of 2001: "Local authorities manage or, as appropriate, dispose of the financial resources as well as public or private ownership of property of the communes, towns and counties, in accordance with the principle of local autonomy." Under article 4, paragraph 2 of the Public Administration Law: "Local autonomy regards the organization, functioning, expertise and attributions, as well as resource management which, by law, belong to the village, town or county, as appropriate."

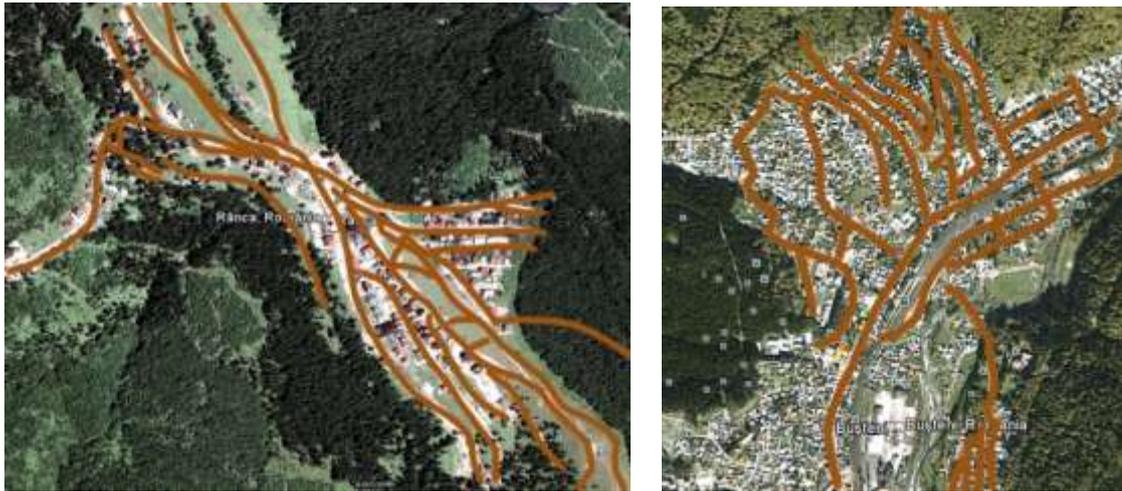


Figure 2 Disorder and the sense of development upon the road chain. Râncea locality, under the administration of Novaci and Baia de Fier authorities, viewed from the satellite, has a redundant chain of roads without geometry, and the surface seems to surpass the lived area (left). Bușteni (Prahova) has roads that take into consideration the structure of the mountain and respects a principle of geometrical alignment in reference to the national road (DN1) and with housing distribution (right).

One of the indicators of formal self-steering's inefficiency is the local economic market weakness. In the mapping methodology, its effectiveness can be approximated by illustrating the directions of material and symbolic manifestation. The intensity of these directions is established by identifying the content on the field (institutions as such), checking their dynamics in terms of statistics and by interviews. The axes of the community's dynamics with projection in the field have, as such, both objective and subjective content. **Material axis** represents the directions of manifestation in production and distribution of economic resources. **Spiritual axis** refers to the main routes of symbolic circuit, part of the communitarian order. As an immaterial axis, symbolic axis subordinates the **administrative axis**, which represents the quality of the perceived tension-relation by community members between the main bodies responsible for public order: city hall, judicial court etc. The two axes represent the capacity's infrastructure of self-steering and, consequently, the degree of *empowerment* of the community.

Thus, the **material axis** evolved in three temporal stages. **Before World War II**, its starting point refers to the *banking activity of Gilort common indivisible ownership (Bank of Gilort)*, the *hydropower on Gilort (one of the first in Romania)*, *sheep breeding*, and the *Friday fair*. All these activities were localo-centric, bringing revenues to the village, being oriented *towards* Novaci. Bank of Gilort was the largest common indivisible ownership bank in Romania, with international activities, the hydropower subsidized electrification of a region that stretched almost to Râmnicu Vâlcea, and sheep breeding, largely inside these common

ownerships, held an industrial and service activity with high intensity at the time, partly sent in the communist period as well. The *Friday fair* ensured not only the junction between supply and demand of a very dynamic rural economy, but also provided the connection of Novaci with the other local rural economies, in a broader complex of exhibitions as part of a peasant regional economy missing today, a space of spiritual confluences and inter-communitarian<sup>9</sup> communication.

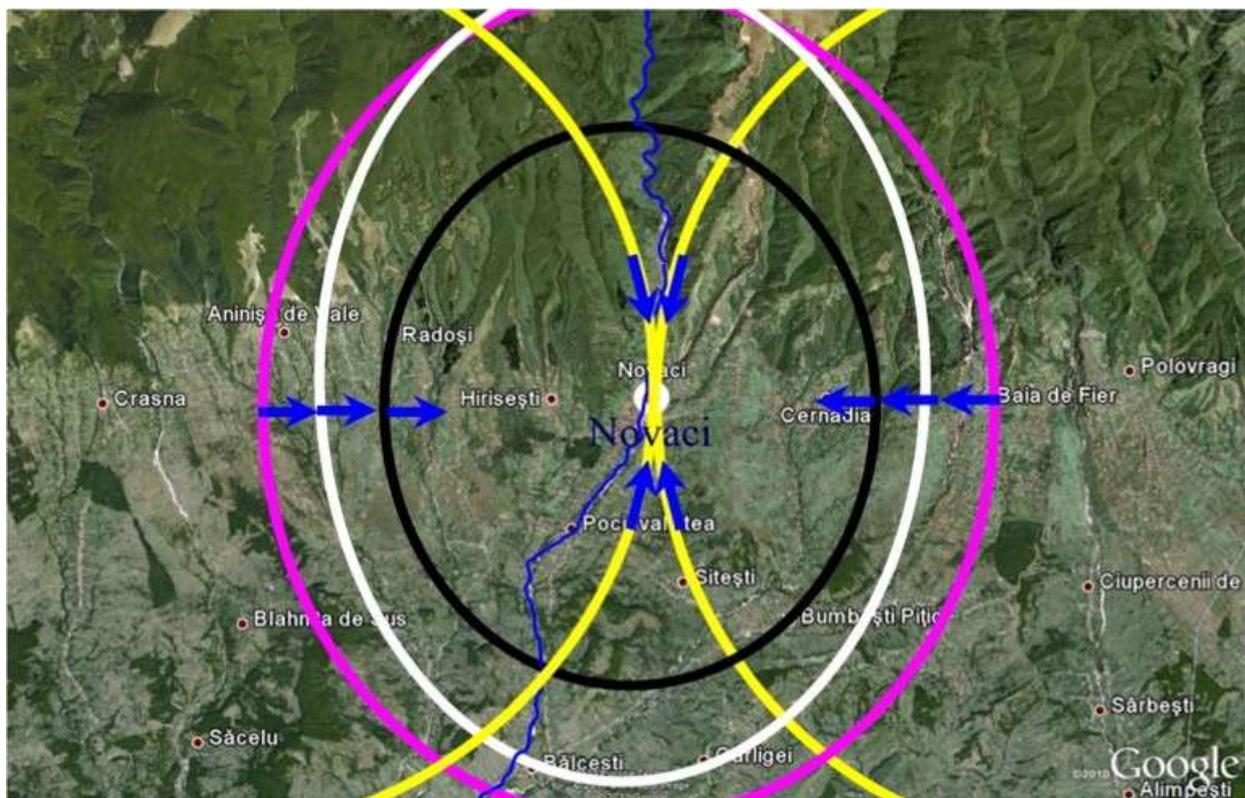


Figure 3 Novaci: the action spheres of the material axis until 1948. With yellow: the *national* sphere of influence of the Bank of Gilort – the economic power of the parishes (*‘obște’*); pink – the *regional* sphere of social action (the free of charge electrification) of the hydropower station; white – the area of socio-economic action of the parishes, towards Transylvania and Oltenia beneath the mountains; black – the area of the social action of the market (Friday fair), a recipient of the economic activity and ferment for the social activity beyond the borders of Novaci. All these have as a geographical and spatial axis the Gilort River (blue) and led to significant incomes for the commune, being local-centred.

**Between 1948-1989**, the material axis industrializes, *the sawmill appears and another hydropower plant is built*. In this period, the Friday fair<sup>10</sup> from the interwar times is being converted into a *market* – a presentation space for the zootechnic and vegetable local

<sup>9</sup> After the disappearance of fairs during the communist period, the rural withdraws in a predominantly self-sufficient household economy, in the house of culture’s popular costume exhibitions, in popular music recordings. Today, its symbolic manifestations almost entirely disappeared, leaving only autarchic households surrounded by more and more of a living without household, of urban owners largely absent, as a result of conquest by the city of mountain settlements.

<sup>10</sup> Initiated in 1937-1938, on the same space as the market today

production, built on the same spot as the fair. The parishes are abolished, and the financial activity is nationally coordinated by the Communist Party. The industry offers jobs for most of the inhabitants, and the sheep breeding survives inside a relatively strong un-cooperativized agriculture. The economic activity allows the existence of a prosper and *partially informal self-relied community*. The lack of enrolling in the socialist agriculture of individual properties constituted the basis of an economic and informal administrative autonomy (*de facto*, Novaci was a privileged community, with access to products that at national scale were hard to get, that benefited from little administrative constraints “from the county” (Tg. Jiu) or „from the center”.

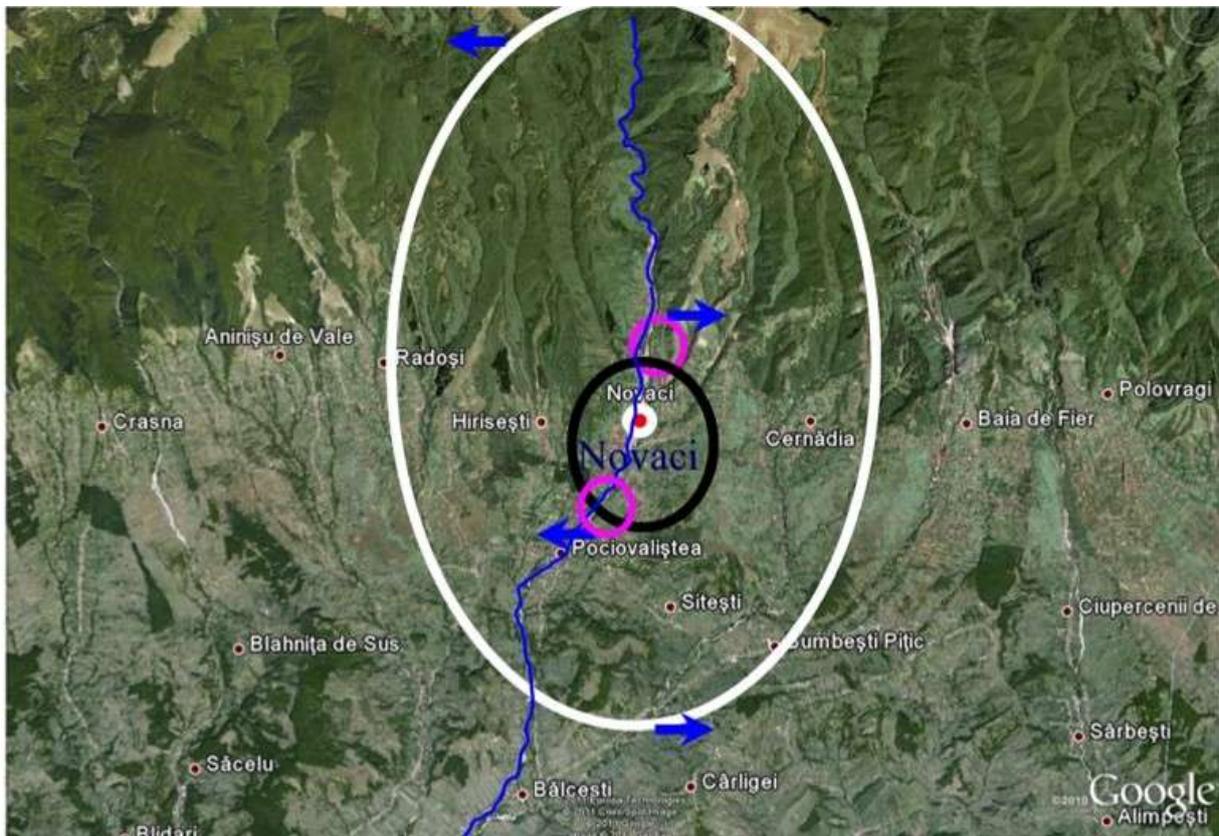


Figure 4 Novaci: the spheres of action of the material axis until 1989. With pink – the area of social and economic action of the two hydropower plants, together with the sawmill (in the Northern part). The hydropower plants are *extracted* from the local economic circuit, being part of the national economy, somehow exterior to the community, except for the jobs available, while the sawmill was the main supplier of jobs; white – the area of socio-economic action of the sheep breeding, towards Transylvania and Oltenia beneath the Mountains that is pretty well maintained. But the sheep breeding is mostly state controlled, even if it continues to directly sustain the community inside an informal economy, tolerated by the regime; black – the area of the market’s social action that is limited to selling the products of the households (that are becoming autarchic) under the conditions of a disintegration of regional linkages made in the name of “integration” of villages in the “socialist agriculture”.