

**PRICE OF THE QUALITY OF LIVING CASE STUDY:  
THE *NEW POPEȘTI* NEIGHBOURHOOD,  
POPEȘTI-LEORDENI, ILFOV**

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*This paper is concerned with the analysis of some worrying present tendencies of urban sprawl in the large, important economic centers of Romania. It focuses on the tendency of building new residential apartments on the outskirts of the big cities. Most of these developments target young people that belong to a still-developing middle class. Big problems emerge, however, when real estate investors take advantage of the buyers' lack of experience and of the authorities' poor management, offering small, badly-built apartments in new residential areas which are designed around only one function: housing. The absence of complementary functions that could support the development of communities gravely impairs the inhabitants' quality of life.*

*At the local level, I was able to identify two main problems: the absence of the necessary infrastructure to support such a massive increase in population, and the absence of local amenities. On a larger scale, the consequences are significant as well: chronic traffic jams due to the large number of people who commute to Bucharest daily, for work.*

*Even though at first Popești-Leordeni (a satellite-town of Romania's capital) was considered a good housing option, the people living there are rapidly becoming highly unsatisfied with their quality of life. In their opinion, the biggest problems of this urban area are the absence of green spaces, of leisure services, of parking options, and of means of public transportation. To these complaints, the inhabitants add dissatisfaction with the general problems caused by the endless building sites, which also represent one of the main causes for the lack of cleanliness, bad roads, noise and pollution plaguing the area.*

*This paper, based both on the analysis of statistical data and on empirical research, aims to show that Popești-Leordeni, especially the New Popești neighborhood, is an example of bad housing caused by corruption, investors' greed, bad management on the part of the authorities, and the young buyers' inexperience.*

**Keywords:** *quality of life; urban sprawl; satellite-town; mono-functionality; community.*

## INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the concept of *quality of life* and on how it is affected, today, by the lack of information, by chaotic building development and corruption. This paper aims to emphasize, by means of an empirical research coupled with statistical analysis, the unwanted effects that urban sprawl has, at both local and city levels. In addition, I touch on the sensitive subject of the new residential aggregates (Acasandre, 2013: 39–48) as gated communities, a very common form of habitation found in today's city-life, and in urban environs.

The empirical analysis side of this paper is based on questionnaires, which focus on the newly formed neighborhood called *New Popești*, located in Popești-Leordeni town, Ilfov County. Popești-Leordeni is a town near Bucharest, situated in the south-eastern vicinity of the Capital city. It is part of Ilfov County, and is also considered to be part of the Metropolitan area of Bucharest. It covers a surface of 55.8 km<sup>2</sup>, and according to figures provided by the National Institute of Statistics in 2016, the number of residents has reached 29 643.

This town has grown rapidly, especially after the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when it changed its status from a rural community, to an urban community situated on the outskirts of Bucharest. However, this was not the only reason why it changed its structure. The influences from the past few years, the economic crisis, and the *emerging capitalism* of post-communist Romania engendered an increase in focus towards the new residential aggregates, built as enclaves, individual entities, on large parcels of land, on the outskirts of large cities.

This research paper starts by defining the concept of quality of life. It is considered to be a difficult concept, difficult to define and work with (Zamfir, 1984: 15–16; Mărgineanu, Bălașa (eds.), 2005). Over the years, social scientists from all over the world have struggled to understand and to find pertinent data that would help measure the comparative quality of life of different countries and societies. In the case of Bucharest, I found it best to define this concept from the European perspective (Hagerty et al. (eds.), 2002, 6). As a result, this article aims not only to analyze the quality of life of the individual citizens, but also the quality of the society they belong to, as part of the overall concept of quality of life (Hagerty et al. (eds.), 2002, 6). The concept of quality of life, stemming as an offshoot of the more general concept of *welfare* (Heinz-Herbert Noll, 2002: 49–50), arose at the end of the 1960s, in pursuit of the main goal of finding ways to increase material prosperity (Heinz-Herbert Noll, 2002: 50). The *quality of life* concept is, as a result, a more elaborate version of the concept of *welfare*. It encompasses both the material and immaterial dimensions, both objective information – quantitative data on living conditions – and subjective information – perceived quality of living, qualitative data (Argyle, 1996: 50).

This article is a case-study on Popești-Leordeni, a newly-named town (since 2003), tangent to Bucharest (situated in the south-eastern part of the Capital). The

first part of the research focuses on presenting the quantitative data regarding the town's population growth and demographic potential. Hence, the description of Popești-Leordeni focuses on the access to different amenities, such as the number of educational facilities, or health and culture facilities found in the town, as well as on the number of housing facilities, and on different economic enterprises found here. The second, qualitative part of the paper, discusses the *town according to the inhabitants*. Thus, we search to understand how all these facilities are perceived by the inhabitants, what they feel that is missing, and how the general atmosphere of this area is perceived by them.

Last but not least, the paper also contributes to an economic description of the reality I discuss. It provides a general zoning of the newly established neighborhood which was formed out of new residential buildings, in order to bring into focus the issue of real estate pricing, and of how equitable it is (or not), when set against the actual living conditions being offered. This is likely to show whether the social environment being analyzed is in a state of *well-being* (good living conditions and positive subjective well-being), *dissonance* (good living conditions and negative subjective well-being), *deprivation* (poor living conditions and low subjective well-being), or *adaptation* (poor living conditions and high subjective well-being) (Zapf, 1984: 52) (Heinz-Herbert Noll, 2002: 51).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The most important reason for the urban growth is the numerical increase of the urban population. The reasons for this growth could come down to both natural factors, and migration (Bhatta, 2010: 17). If not approached carefully as part of a coherent strategy, both situations could generate major problems, which would ultimately result in a decrease of inhabitants' quality of life.

Urban growth is not relevant in terms of raw statistical data, unless analyzed in the context of patterns, processes and impact on the population's general way of life (Bhatta, 2010: 18). Thus, this research paper presents the way in which population growth has developed in Popești-Lerodeni (whether it was through natural causes, or because of migration), and how it has changed the patterns of other relevant social metrics, such as marriages and divorces, structure of the population according to age and gender, workforce distribution. Research has shown that it's not just air pollution or chaotic urban sprawl which affect the inhabitants' quality of life, but that more subtle factors, such as the strength of marriages or the health of children, that also have an impact (Loewenstein, 2008 in Krueger, 2008: 87–88).

The concept of *quality of life* is commonly used to describe “*health status, physical functioning, symptoms of psychosocial adjustment, well-being, life satisfaction or happiness*” (Ferrans, 2005: 14). This research paper explores the concept by using both statistical data, and the more subjective perspective of the

*inhabitants' perceptions. "At the heart of the problem is the very nature of the idea of quality of life, which is uniquely personal in its essence. The difficulty lies in the need to define quality of life for groups of people, in order to provide some sort of approximation of quality of life"* (Ferrans, 2005: 14).

First of all, I interrogate and I attempt to quantify *quality of life* by focusing on the relation between *the growth of the population, the rising number of available facilities, the numerical increase of housing units, and the development of infrastructure*. By tracing the correlative evolution of these metrics from 1992 to the present, I should be able to highlight the pressure that might be put on one or the other of the aforementioned variables, leading to a potential decrease in the inhabitants' quality of life. Secondly, the concept of *quality of life* is assessed from the perspective of the inhabitants. Through this empirical, more personal approach, the inhabitants of New Popești will not only identify the most important perceived components of their quality of life, but they will also allow me to show the degree to which the objective statistical data is able to function as an accurate indicator of the population's subjective level of satisfaction.

According to Krueger, the gross national product (GNP) fails to fully capture the essence of that which makes life worthwhile (Loewenstein, 2008, in Krueger, 2008: 87–88). In other words, the good quality of life, of the population does not consist only of low air pollution, health services or number of jails (Loewenstein, 2008 in Krueger, 2008: 89). Kennedy and Krueger both argue for the idea that people's quality of living, as well as their general wellbeing, is highly influenced by subjective aspects, such as: the health of their children, the quality of education, and the moral integrity of public officials (Loewenstein, 2008 in Krueger, 2008: 89). In addition to this hypothesis, according to Bird, the availability of both individual and public resources provides better chances to promote and sustain employment (Bird et al, 2011: 139), which eventually leads to an overall better quality of life, as well. A particularly important role is played here by public transportation, which is considered to be a facilitating resource (Bird et al, 2011: 139).

### **AN INTRODUCTION TO POPEȘTI-LEORDENI**

Popești-Leordeni has a continuously changing population, both demographically and socially. This is mainly due to its proximity to the Capital city. Among the strengths of this town, besides its closeness to Bucharest, is the easy access it provides to the M1 metro line, which crosses Bucharest from North to South and stops in the main central squares (Unirii Square, University Square, Romană Square, Victoriei Square). A secondary quality of this town is the remarkably low-priced overall housing, compared to other areas of Bucharest, or to nearby places. Offering a relatively similar connectivity the Capital's city-center, but requiring a larger budget from the prospective home buyer, other similar areas

are much less affordable to low-budgeted young citizens than Popești-Leordeni has. This last quality, on the other hand, comes with many shortcomings, which I am going to highlight in this study.

The main functional purpose of Popești-Leordeni is to accommodate people, and provide housing for them. As a result, it has become a real-estate boomtown for many investors which target the young couples that work in Bucharest, but cannot afford an apartment there, because of the costs it would involve. Thus, Popești-Leordeni acts as an extension of Bucharest. To better understand living conditions in this area, we used the statistical data from the INS (National Institute for Statistics), in order to see to what extent the number of flats in Popești-Leordeni has increased over the past few years. In addition, I also focused my analysis on the increase in the number of building permits issued during the past decades. The results are astonishing, as they show the exact manner in which this *housing business*, composed almost entirely of small cheap flats, has developed over the past years. Interestingly enough, the year 2012 was a major development period, despite also being, financially speaking, one of the harshest times in Romania, due to the repercussions of the 2008 economic crisis.

Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the main occupations of the inhabitants of Popești-Leordeni were agriculture and vegetable farming. According to the sustainable development strategy of Popești-Leordeni, this was due to a couple of factors: the proximity to Bucharest, and also the fact that, in the past, Popești-Leordeni was a village belonging to the *Ilfov Agricultural Area*. The proximity to the Capital city was always an influential factor for Popești-Leordeni. In the past it represented a major advantage, because Bucharest was the main market for the agricultural produce yielded by the region's agricultural lands and vegetable gardens. In addition, during the communist period, Popești-Leordeni hosted a big tyres factory, Danubiana, a powerful work center providing for the people of the entire region, including Bucharest.

The area has a very fertile soil, the main crops according to the local soil structure being grain, industrial plants, fruit trees and vineyards. Before it became a town in 2003, Popești-Leordeni had a significant production of corn, wheat and sun flower (INS, Tempo data).

Over time, the agricultural lands and vegetable gardens were replaced by the extensive housing projects being developed in the area. Due to the ever-growing urban areas, it is very likely that this process will continue and accentuate over the near and not-so-near future.

All of these aspects, and others, which represent the object of this study, contributed to the rather radical transformation of Popești-Leordeni during the last few years. Certainly, the remarkable demographic growth, and the accompanying changes in the local social structure have triggered other issues, which now need long-term solutions.

## METHODOLOGY

The quantitative statistical analysis that I am proposing is structured around four major themes: *population growth, facilities, housing, structure and evolution of economic activities*. The time frame of the data being considered runs from 1992 to the present day. The statistical data used is drawn from the INS yearly statistical reports for the year 1992–2017.

Furthermore, the qualitative *perception of the population* represents the conclusions drawn from the responses given by the inhabitants of New Popești to the 621 questionnaires which I have drafted and distributed, then collected and processed. These results cannot be generalized, as they do not belong to a representative sample, but they most certainly do point out the objective problems and subjective perception of the population regarding *the quality of life* in their town. The purpose of this part of the analysis is to highlight the ups and downs of living in a satellite-town, as well as the shortcomings that stem from low-priced housing in an area such as this.

My paper, therefore, aims to open up a line of investigation potentially leading to a more general evaluation of the social and economic price that Romanian citizens have to pay in order to get a relatively cheap house in an easily accessible area, on the outskirts of a big city.

## RESULTS

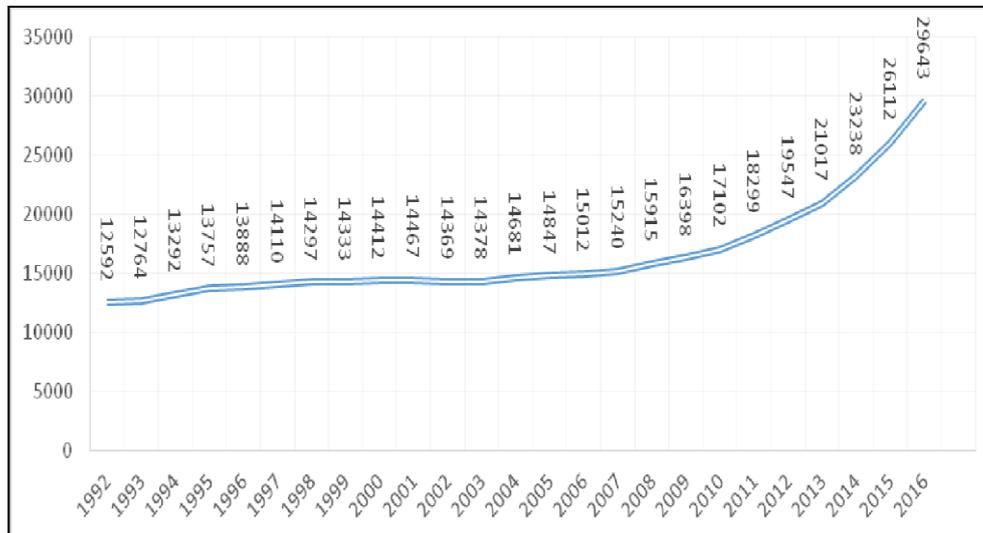
### Demographic data

#### *Growth of the population*

The number of inhabitants of Popești-Leordeni increased dramatically over the past few years. Its geographic location, in the South-Eastern environs of Bucharest, represented a big draw for real estate investors: *the area had numerous large plots of land that could be converted into real-estate developments*. Consequently, from the beginning of 2007, Popești-Leordeni became a very attractive option for the newly developing middle class. It was located in an area with remarkably numerous resources in terms of space, it offered low-priced apartments, and a relatively easy access to the center of Bucharest. As indicated in the adjoining graph, the number of inhabitants of this town increased during the 2007–2016 period from 15,240 to 29,643, which means that the town's population has almost doubled in only nine years.

Figure 1

## Growth of the population between 1992–2016, in Popești-Leordeni



Source: INS, Tempo.

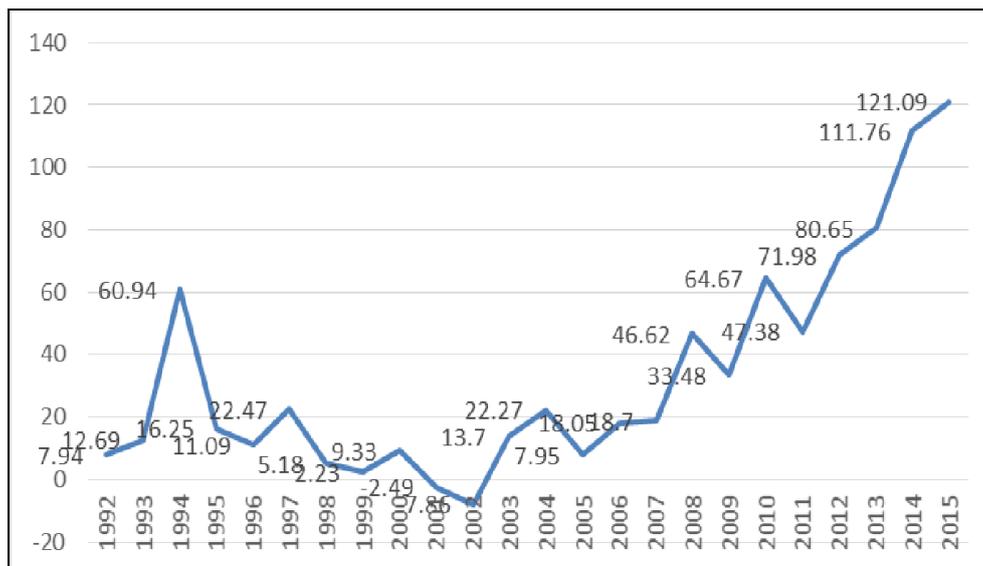
The area became a town in 2003. It is plain to see that shortly after this watershed moment, the number of inhabitants started increasing rapidly. Furthermore, a great population boom is noticeable after 2007, when massive building projects resulting in the construction of large residential ansambles were begun here. As highlighted at the beginning of the article, there could be two reasons for the growth of the population: migration and vital statistics. The vital rate between 1992 and 2008, as inferred from the information given by the National Institute of Statistics, was negative overall. It is only after 2008 that a positive trend can be perceived, which could be a sign of either the quality of life starting to improve, or the structure of the population by age groups starting to change (with younger people migrating in). When analyzing the migration-rate it becomes obvious that, in fact, the main explanation for the sudden spike in population growth is *migration*.

It is plainly noticeable that the migration rate begins to rise slightly after 2002, and evermore rapidly from 2007 onwards. This is the time when the number of inhabitants in Popești-Leordeni is starting to grow rapidly, reaching a peak of nearly 30,000 people in 2016. As I emphasized earlier in this study, Popești-Leordeni became a town in 2003. Thus, the population growth is due to *an increase in the region's attractiveness due to its becoming an urban area* (Popescu, 2014: 189). In addition, the *heavy migration of population from the former small monoindustrial towns to the big cities, caused by deindustrialization*, worked as

well in favor of this small town, Popești-Leordeni, which exists merely as an extension of Bucharest. As I explained earlier, the population of Popești-Leordeni is not, actually, *functionally* living there. It is, in fact, functionally part of Bucharest's population, with Popești-Leordeni being perceived by its inhabitants as a mere extension of the Capital. In order to drive this point home, perhaps it is important to say again that Popești-Leordeni has not developed as an individual, autonomous entity. It is a satellite-town, which has had its population increase artificially. Popești-Leordeni consists of three villages: Popești-Conduratu (also known as Pavlicheni), Popești-Români and Leordeni. During the past fifteen years, a new area of Popești-Leordeni has rapidly emerged, known as *The New Popești*, with a population whose socio-demographic characteristics resemble more of the population of Bucharest than of that of the rest of the Popești-Leordeni town.

Figure 2

Migration rate between 1992–2015



Source: INS, Tempo.

### ***Marriages and divorces***

As Loewenstein mentions, a very important aspect of quality of life is represented by things such as the strength of marriages, and the stability of relationships (Loewenstein, 2008: 87–88). Even though one might think that this does not affect the urban life of a society, I feel that it does influence the general *quality of life*, in the sense in which I am addressing it in this paper. Also, in order to achieve a comprehensive overview of the analyzed community, it is important to

understand the type of lives the people lead, and the way in which they choose to conduct their day to day activities.

The evolution of marriages and divorces in this town shows stability. The figures correspond to the general tendencies of Romanian society. The lowest values in terms of marriages were registered between 1997–1999 and 2003–2005, whereas, in the present days, a positive trend is visible. This might be caused by the recent, massive migration of young and middle-aged people.

The divorce rates also fall within the normal value range for Romanian society. However, one can notice an increase in the number of divorces as well, which might equally be explained by the migration of young people to Popești-Leordeni.

### ***Structure of the population, according to the main social criteria***

The analysis of the population structure according to age and gender allows us to understand the way in which the demographic image of the population has changed over the years. According to the demographic standards of the INS, the young population is considered as being comprised in the interval 0–14 years old. Adults belong to the 15 to 64 year-old age category, and elderly people are counted as the subset of the general population surpassing 64 years of age.

Popești-Leordeni has an increasing number of adults. Between 1992 and 2016, the number of adults in this town has increased from 67.29% in 1992 to 72.08% in 2002, and finally 76.51% in 2016 (INS, Tempo). This shows us that the area has a great potential for attracting active people, aged especially 30 to 50. This data comes in support of the assumption that Popești-Leordeni represents an attractive alternative for young adults, thanks to its proximity to Bucharest (it is situated at a distance of only 9 km – or 30 minutes by metro – from the center of the Capital).

By deploying a careful analysis on narrower age groups, I came to see that the population age range having experienced the most growth was the 20 to 40 year-old group, with an especially sharp increase in the number of 25 to 40 year-olds. Here is some data which interprets the graph presented below:

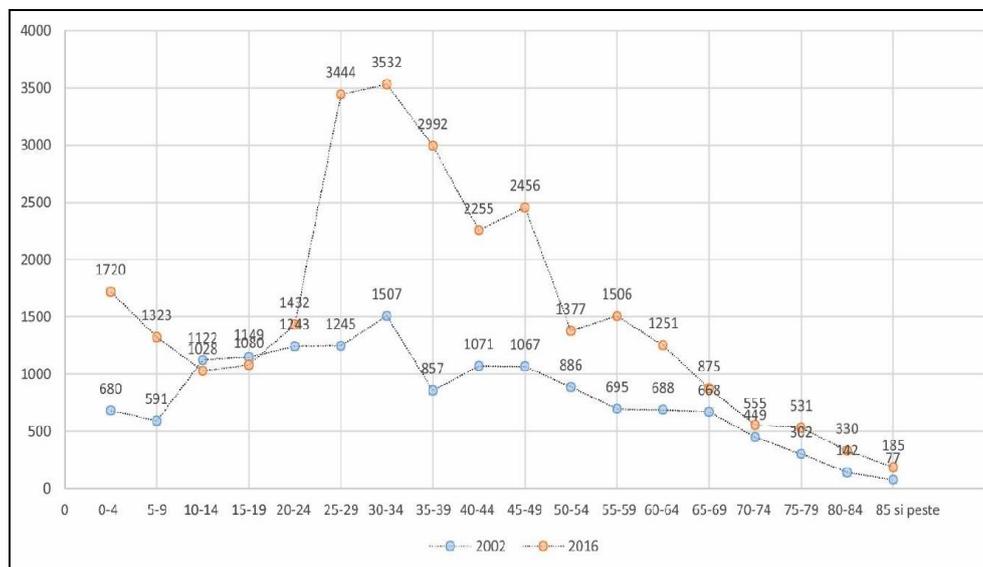
- The population of new-born children increased by 152.94% between 2002 and 2016;
- The population subsection which remained almost the same is represented by people between 10 and 20 years old;
- The population between 25 and 29 years old increased by 176.63% between 2002 and 2016;
- The population between 30 and 34 years old increased by 134.37% between 2002 and 2016;
- The population aged between 35 and 40 increased by 249.12%.

The dynamics of the population structure according to gender shows that the female-to-male proportion remains fairly stable, and in relative equilibrium (INS,

Tempo), thus supporting the hypothesis that most of the people having moved to Popești-Leordeni throughout the previous years came in gendered pairs, as heterosexual couples.

Figure 3

Evolution of the population according to age group, between 2002–2016



Source: INS, Tempo.

### Workforce

As a satellite-town of Bucharest, or more precisely, as a functional extension of the Capital city, the number of employed people of this area does not show surprising changes. Even though the number of inhabitants has increased immensely over the past fifteen years (especially after 2008) which might be expected to produce a rise in unemployment, we can see, on the contrary, that the trends in terms of unemployment show a clear decrease for approximately the same timeframe (that is to say, from 2008 to the present day).

This effect is due to the fact that most of the residents of Popești-Leordeni are strongly connected to Bucharest, and most probably have a job there. Their buying a house/ apartment in Popești-Leordeni was likely motivated by the lower housing prices when compared to Bucharest properties, and by the proximity of the subway

station which connects the satellite-town to Bucharest (namely, the Dimitrie Leonida metro station).

### ***Conclusions drawn from the demographic analysis of Popești-Leordeni data***

Popești-Leordeni has experienced a virtual doubling of its population over the last twenty years, thanks to some qualities pertaining to its proximity to Bucharest, to the presence of a subway station nearby, and to the prospect of very affordable housing. This is what is commonly known as an *artificial growth*, given the fact that it was caused by external factors, rather than the internal qualities of the town, such as services, urban mixture, facilities and so on.

In 2016, the National Institute of Statistics in Romania announced that Popești-Leordeni had a population of nearly 30,000 inhabitants, which is 2.35 times more than its population in 1992 and 2.06 times more than in 2003, when it became a town. This population growth was only marginally due to natural factors. It was mostly caused by massive migration into the region.

The tendency is caused, partly, by some general factors registered at a national level. For instance, it is readily observable that throughout the past decades, people have had the tendency of choosing cheaper housing on the outskirts of a large metropolis. On the other hand, Popești-Leordeni has managed to attract more people than other towns or villages neighboring Bucharest, and this is likely caused by the increased accessibility to public transportation (at least on a theoretical level – see the presence of the metro station nearby). Also, the town sported many cheap apartments which were very attractive to the young people at the beginning of their careers.

The number of investments in the development of apartment complexes in Popești-Leordeni has increased dramatically, and this is readily observable in the increasing number of residential buildings having been erected during the past 15 years. It is visible as well in the number of people that have moved to the town, during that same period of time. The number of young people, aged 20 to 40 years old, having moved here is particularly remarkable. The town is gradually, and quite spontaneously, developing a valuable quality: *attractiveness to the young, active population*.

## **FACILITIES**

### **Education**

One of the most important factors in the definition of a community's quality of life is education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1992: 28). Statistically, this town has a lot of potential, particularly

on account of the large diversity of education facilities. Popești-Leordeni benefits from a large diversity of educational facilities, offering establishments not only for kindergartens, but also for primary education and even high-schools (the “Radu Popescu” Theoretical High-School). However, it must be said that even though all these facilities are present in the town, they were outstripped by the rapidly growing number of young families with children. In addition, there is also a tendency to privatize most educational and health institutions, which is clearly deleterious to the community. Let’s not forget that the population living here is part of a still-growing middle class, which couldn’t afford the costs of living in Bucharest proper. Most of the inhabitants are therefore not wealthy, which renders the need for public education and health services particularly stringent.

The number of children being registered in kindergartens has had a positive evolution, seeing a particularly rapid increase from 2013 to present. According to the official website of the town’s public administration, Popești-Leordeni has a total of seven kindergartens, out of which four are private and three are public.

### **Healthcare**

The number of doctors active in the public sector has remained approximately the same between 2002 and 2011. From 2012 onwards, this number started to decline. Also, during the same time period, the number of doctors in the private sector showed a slow increase, from four to seven doctors between 2004 and 2012. From 2012 onwards, however, their number began increasing rapidly. This phenomenon is due to a general national tendency of transitioning from public to private medical care, a trend generated by the better working conditions and increased salaries of the medical private sector, when compared with the public healthcare system.

Similar changes also occurred in the dental-care department, and among GPs acting as family-care doctors, who left the public sector for private employment during 2012–2016. The data shows that after 2012, Popești-Leordeni started benefiting from very high-quality medical service in the field of general medicine. It is clear, however, that this privatization tendency is present in all the sectors of medical care.

### **Culture**

Culture and leisure are two aspects of the town’s life which highlight, more than any other, the satellite-town status of this community. Unfortunately, Popești-Leordeni is still largely devoid of a true cultural life, and there are few leisure activities. The town’s inhabitants rely on Bucharest to provide them with leisure and cultural entertainment, which causes serious problems for the population of Popești-Leordeni. Not having any opportunity to spend one’s free time in the town where one lives is a sign that the community is not functioning properly.

Economists have actually demonstrated that the decline in the amount of working hours represented a major source of improvement in the average American's quality of daily life, over the last centuries (Fogel, 1999: 77). Popești-Leordeni has only three libraries, a number which hasn't changed since 2003. According to the town's development strategy, the existant libraries are:

- In the “Leonardo Murialdo” oratory (catholic);
- In the community house of the Catholic Church;
- In the community house of the Orthodox Church.

It is obvious that, from this point of view, the inhabitants of Popești-Leordeni are highly dependent on Bucharest. The aforementioned libraries are no more than annexes of the two Christian denominational communities, – Orthodox and Catholic –, present in the town, a fact which renders them highly specialized, not at all oriented towards general interest topics. In fact, the INS data informs us that the number of readers has remained more or less constant over the past years.

### **Leisure**

As a town which is deeply connected to Bucharest, and actually acts as an extension of the Capital city, the leisure facilities here are almost inexistent. This is one of the worst aspects of this urban area, as far as quality of life is concerned.

### **Conclusions from the facilities analysis**

Even though Popești-Leordeni is a satellite-town of Bucharest, the town is making efforts to develop some services of local interest. However, these are far from sufficient for a population which is constantly growing, due to the enormous number of apartments that are being built there.

The most significant improvements have emerged in the areas of health and education. In these two respects, the town satisfies the necessary proximity requirements, at least from a statistical perspective. For instance, the town has some kindergartens and primary schools, necessary for the formation and education of the young population. It is remarkable that it also has a high-school, which, even though small, seems to be increasing its number of pupils every year.

The health sector is another domain which fulfils the necessary requirements of Popești-Leordeni, even if nowadays it is mostly run by private capital. Thus, the town seems to be continuously developing the necessary facilities for pharmacies, dental-care clinics and general-care clinics. This growing, positive trend has started in 2012.

The cultural life in Popești-Leordeni is almost nonexistent. Being a satellite-town of Bucharest, this town only has some local cultural facilities – some of them not sufficient – while other facilities, which could be contributing to the town's attractiveness and increasing the population's quality of life, have been disregarded, and as such remain totally absent. However, a good quality of life, a

good community, is generated through diversity (Jacobs, 1961: 160), and even though it is almost impossible to specify which characteristics are the most important to a community's quality of life and why (Ingrid Gould Ellen et al, 2010: 833–834), it is generally accepted that no community could ever work properly based on only one function: *housing*.

## HOUSING

### Buildings

The data gathered for this study has shown a rapid increase in the number of apartments in Popești-Leordeni from 2006 onwards, with a sharper upward trend starting in 2012. We can see the evolution of the total number of flats from 4,412 in 2002, to 18,992 in 2015. Thus, over the past 13 years, the number of flats in this town has increased by 330.46%. Most of them are privately owned (99.89%), while only 0.11% represent public holdings. In 2002, on the other hand, the percentages were indicating a proportion of 97.23% private property vs. 2.77% public property. Meanwhile, the average living area of the flats is estimated at around 50.19 m<sup>2</sup> per apartment, and it has remained relatively constant over the years.

In 2008, the economic crisis deeply affected Romania's economy. That event represented a great opportunity for many real estate investors, and it turned out to be the most successful year for real estate development in Popești-Leordeni. After 2008, the rate of real estate development registered a slow decline, but following 2009 and 2010, even though the number of buildings being built decreased considerably, this number was still higher than the number of structures erected in the 1992 to 2000 period. This is a sign that Popești-Leordeni had become an attractive alternative for the population, by providing new and relatively cheap apartments in a time of economic crisis. The main sources here were the private investors, who built residential flats with private funds, most of them obtained from the population. Thus, the impressive increase in the number of finished flats in 2008, more than 452.79% in comparison to the previous year, is explainable by the fact that banks had been offering substantial credit programs to the general population during the previous years.

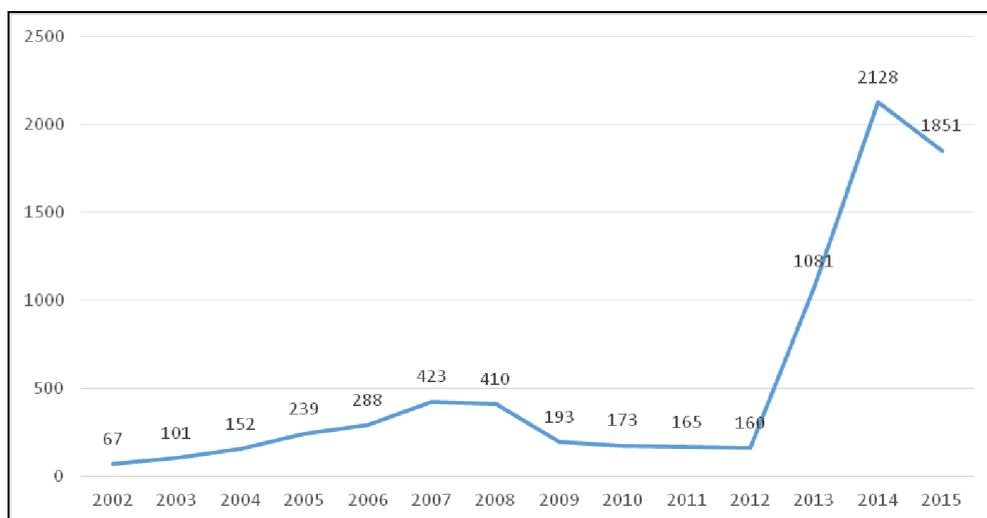
Popești-Leordeni continued its real estate business development throughout the following years as well, even though at a somewhat slower pace. This trend went up again in 2012, and it culminated with a maximum of 3,269 finished flats in 2014. The data presented here proves that all these real estate developments were built, almost entirely, via access to private funds.

Similar to the number of finished structures, this graph (see below) on the number of building permits issued for residential buildings highlights a small upswing between 2002 and 2007. After that interval, between 2007 and 2008, it shows a relative decrease. Between 2008 and 2009, there was the most rapid

decrease registered for the number of building permits for residential buildings. Starting in 2012, the real estate market in Popești-Leordeni registered a rapid growth. In only two years, between 2012 and 2014, the number of building permits for residential buildings reached 2,128, which represents 1 125% more than in 2012, when only 160 permits were issued.

Figure 4

Evolution of the number of building permits for residential buildings, between 2002 and 2015



Source: INS, Tempo.

### Infrastructure

Popești-Leordeni has an appropriate infrastructure. In fact its infrastructure, as a means of connection to Bucharest, is probably the main quality which attracted all the investors, as well as all the buyers of the newly constructed apartments. Among its means of transportation, in Popești-Leordeni one finds: a subway station (where the New-Popești neighborhood emerged), the Olteniței road, which facilitates travel to Bucharest through public transportation, or by personal car, and Bucharest's Belt Road, which is doubled by a railway.

Many studies conducted at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Yoshino, 2000), consider infrastructure to be an important factor in the development of production. Therefore, it is not surprising that many real estate investors saw the potential Popești-Leordeni had, in terms of its connectivity to Bucharest.

## **Roads**

The structure of the transportation network is dominated by national and regional roads.

The main roads in Popești-Leordeni are:

- National Road 4 București – Oltenița;
- The Berceni Road (the south-west limit of the town);
- The Dâmbovița River waterway (the northern limit of Popești-Leordeni);
- The Belt Road of Bucharest.

According to the development strategy of Popești-Leordeni (2011), the town was, at that time, supposedly featuring an extended road system of nearly 60 km, with countless local roads. However, the town did not have a clear hierarchy set in place for roads and junctions. As a consequence, the intersections, especially in the most transited areas of the town, were problematic. The total length of the town's roads seems to have increased slowly up to 2015, when it was estimated at 74 km.

## **Railroads**

According to the sustainable development strategy of Popești-Leordeni, the town is traversed by approximately 10 km of railway, which are part of the railway belt of Bucharest. At the moment, this railway is only used for freight transport, and it presents a great deal of potential for the future development of Popești-Leordeni's local economy. However, for the moment, this railway is acting more like a barrier than a connecting element, since there is no railway station in town.

## **Utility infrastructure**

The town boasts a water supply network of 49 km in length, and a waste water network of 42 km in length. Given the rapid growth of Popești-Leordeni, as well as the number of new edifices being built, the utility network is starting to be outstripped by the ever-increasing demand.

Regarding the electric energy network, according to data from 2011, the area was being managed by Electrica Muntenia South SA – SDFEE Ilfov, and it had 6 700 consumers out of a population which, at that time, was estimated at 18 299 inhabitants.

## **Conclusions regarding the housing analysis**

The rapid rate of real estate development represents the main draw of Popești-Leordeni. The town's population growth is mainly driven by its easy commute and closeness to Bucharest. From the data presented in this chapter, the most noticeable aspect is the spectacular increase in the number of apartments in the area. The rapid real estate development that has dominated this region over the past few years led to the rise of extremely tightly packed, low quality, low-priced

apartments. This trend continues today as well, as a result of the fact that investors find here a very profitable real estate market.

However, the town's accessibility has suffered of late, because of the continuous growth in the number of inhabitants. It is plain to see that not only the road network, but also the utility networks have become overwhelmed in just few years, given the fact that flats continue to be built, the number of cars continues to grow, and the need for electricity and other utility supplies is also increasing.

### ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Over the past century, the area of Popești-Leordeni was mostly used for agriculture. As a matter of fact, before 2003, Popești-Leordeni was only a village in the Ilfov County. Today, the town has a balanced economic profile. The industrial heritage left over from communist times has gradually lost most of its economic importance, especially after the partial abandonment of some large industrial sites. This phenomenon has led to massive unemployment and to a great economic deficit during the 1990s. Afterwards, it was mitigated due to some investments coming in. At the same time, numerous small and medium industrial enterprises have been set up, along with logistics companies, storage facilities, technical services and so on. These new businesses have slowly taken the place of the former industrial areas, diversifying their activities.

The main domains of activity in Popești-Leordeni are:

- Services and commerce;
- Transportation;
- Small industry (clothing, alimentary products etc);
- The construction of public and industrial buildings;
- Business and administration management and consultancy companies;
- Transportation and water distribution, electric energy and gas works, etc.

The industrial park fills out the economic potential of the area, and offers the perspective for a new generation of production and service activities to emerge. However, the good accessibility of this town, and its external openness are both diminished by the lack of infrastructural development. For instance, even the existant railway is underused, because of the absence of a stop or a station inside the town. The existence of a railway station would make this area not only a transit hub for goods, but also an area of exchange and exploitation of this valuable existent infrastructure.

Popești-Leordeni, as a satellite-town of Bucharest, is advantaged by its proximity to the most important economic center of Romania, the Capital city, accessible by way of a conveniently proximal metro station (*Dimitrie Leonida*). This fact generated a great opportunity for development in the first phase of growth, but has thereafter become the greatest threat to the local community. It has triggered the interest of many real estate developers, dramatically increasing the

supply of new residential buildings. Of course, the demand coming from the population represented the main engine of development. Because of the economic crisis and the unstable economy, the availability of cheap, newly built apartments – which were also situated in the relative proximity of the Capital – seemed like *a dream come true*. The reality on the ground was far from ideal, however, especially because of the many disadvantages that came along with the “cheap” flats.

Today, the town suffers from obvious disadvantages pertaining to the built environment, and to the complementary functions around the collective housing. There are some functions dedicated to education and health in Popești-Leordeni, but most of them are private. In addition, in comparison to the number of children in this town, which is rapidly growing, the number of these facilities is relatively low, and is considered to be insufficient.

The official data regarding habitation shows a spontaneous, uncontrolled and unbalanced development, which is generating numerous problems for the infrastructure and utility networks. Popești-Leordeni has four means of connection to the Capital city. However, these commute connections are constantly overcrowded – at most times of the day, not just at rush-hour –, and thus prove to be grievously undersized when considering the number of people using them daily.

Popești-Leordeni has great economic potential, mainly because of the young population which has moved here, thus influencing the image of the town. As a consequence, this massive migration has reshaped even the southern part of Bucharest proper, which has become more attractive as a residential area over the last few years. This part of the Capital, which not long ago was considered to be unattractive, on account of being inhabited by a poorer subset of the population, has, of late, been distancing itself from these stereotypes, and has become a good residential option for many highly educated young people, most of them aged 20 to 40.

### **THE TOWN ACCORDING TO THE INHABITANTS**

Towns like Popești-Leordeni constitute dynamic and surprising places. However, they haven't managed to depend on their own resources, and they are significantly influenced and shaped by the economic and social forces of the vicinity. In this particular case, the community's evolution was due especially to the vicinity of Bucharest. With it being a perpetually changing social and physical landscape, it is important to analyze the image of this area through statistical data. On a more sensitive level, however, it is very important to understand the reality of the town through the eyes of its inhabitants.

This study, therefore, also includes a sociological investigation, based on an online questionnaire, disseminated among the population through socialization networks, on the internet. Thus, this part of the study consists of the data gleaned and processed from 621 questionnaires. The results cannot be generalized, as they

do not belong to a representative sample, but they most certainly point out the problems and perception of the population with regard to the quality of life in this town.

The purpose of this part of the analysis is to highlight the ups and downs of living in a satellite-town, as well as the shortcomings entailed by low-priced housing in an area such as this. We are going to evaluate the economic and social cost that citizens have to endure, in order to get a relatively cheap house in an easily accessible area, outside a big city, in Romania. A secondary objective of this study is to see whether or not the local population thinks that, in the end, moving to a satellite-town was worth it.

### **The investigated population**

Historically, Popești-Leordeni is divided into the Leordeni area, the Popești-Români area and the Popești-Conduratu area. Each of these subdivisions carries the name of one of the former villages which were merged together to eventually form Popești-Leordeni. Thanks to its development as a community tangent to Bucharest, and because of the tendencies of the last few years, we were able to identify, in this town, a newly formed, recently created zone, namely the neighborhood of *New Popești*. This area is characterized by the presence of numerous new residential assemblies, which were built particularly after 2008. *New Popești* is located in the south-western part of the town. This is the area closest to Bucharest, as it is located between the Berceni Street of Bucharest (near the Metro station) and Olteniței Street (DN4).

This study is focused specifically on this new “district” of Popești-Leordeni, as it represents the “*wholesale product*” of the chaotic, cheap and irrational real estate development of the past few years, stemming from the economic uncertainty caused by the economic crisis, mixed with the inhabitants’ long-term desire of owning an apartment. The gender rate of men vs. women questionnaire respondents is kept as balanced as possible. Women responded in a proportion on 55%, while men responded in a proportion of 45% – percentages which quite accurately reflect the gender structure of the population.

### **Perceived qualities**

The inhabitants were asked to name the three main qualities of the town (the question was open-ended, with spontaneous answers).

The first three qualities named by the inhabitants were:

- 1. Proximity to the metro network.**
- 2. Tranquility.**
- 3. Proximity to Bucharest.**

Some other qualities having been mentioned by respondents are: *clean town, safe town, the prices are lower, new buildings and facilities, young people.*

To sum up, Popești-Leordeni is perceived by its inhabitants as a quiet and safe place, which continues to develop, and offers numerous opportunities for purchasing an apartment, especially for the young middle-class population. It is also very close to Bucharest, and boasts relatively quick access to a metro station, which represent great advantages.

### Representative places

*“A town with friendly people such as ours deserves a town center, which is easier to identify”*  
(man, 36, TV sound engineer).

Most of the inhabitants don't perceive the presence of a well-defined town center in Popești-Leordeni. In an overwhelming proportion of nearly 83.8%, the respondents answered negatively to the question *“Do you consider that Popești-Leordeni has a town center?”*. That said, the few positive answers to this question identified the town center as being located in front of the Town Hall, next to the statue.

### The town center of Popești-Leordeni

The inhabitants were asked to identify the landmarks of this town (the most frequented places, which are well-known and often used). The people had to give a spontaneous answer, without any pre-defined response options: they could choose a street, a public space, a green area, an edifice, etc.

The most frequently mentioned **street** was *the Fermei Street*, a fact which can be largely attributed to the massive amount of new construction work which was done there. It seems to be the most *emblematic* street of New Popești, to date. Second in line is the **Olteniței Street** (DN4), it being a significant street, which connects Popești-Leordeni to the Capital.

**The Saint Mary Market** and *the Monument of the Heroes*, in front of the **Town Hall**, together with the Town Hall itself (most of the time they were mentioned together) were the most frequently named landmarks of the town. In addition, as previously stated, the Town Hall was singled out as being the town center in most responses, with **Mega Image** and **Lidl** in second and third place. It is, however, obvious that none of these locations constitute leisure areas or places where people might meet to socialize and relax. The Town Hall features prominently as the town center, on account of its being a symbol of the local administrative authority, very frequently identified with centrality in the context of small towns or villages. However, the presence of the markets is an indicator of the functional criterium. In other words, these places are considered landmarks because they are the most frequently used, for utility purposes.

The **Popești Park** situated on the Alexandru Garian Street was also mentioned. Most of the inhabitants are not pleased with the state it's in, and they

consider that the absence of green public spaces, especially in the new areas of the town, constitutes one of the key problems in need of resolution.

As a consequence, one can confidently say that the town has its center in the Town Hall area (which functions not only of a physical center, but also as the symbolic center). The statue is the main monumental landmark. The statue, the Town Hall and the market adjacent to this area are considered to be symbols of the town. Secondly, *another important area of the town* is located along the Fermei Street. This is the street most often mentioned by the respondents.

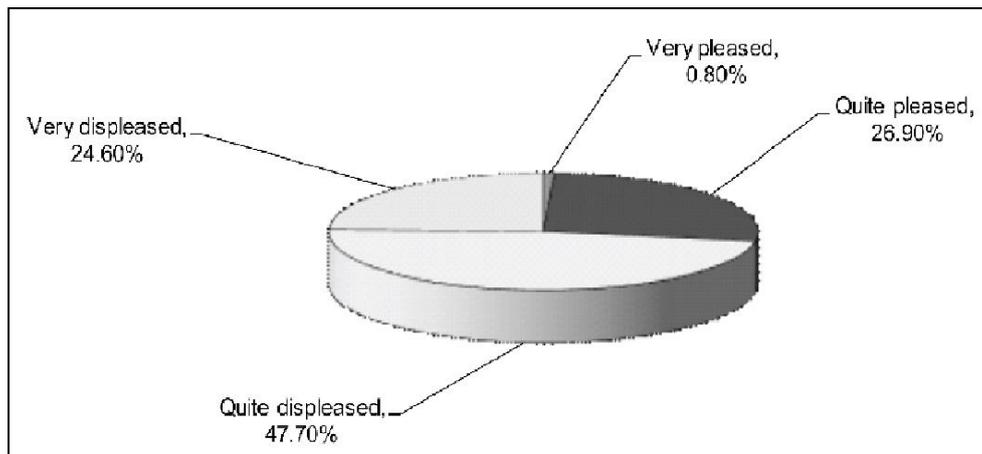
### Evaluation of the living conditions

Most of the inhabitants are displeased with their living conditions. Less than 30% of respondents answered positively to the question pertaining to their living conditions.

### Satisfaction with the living conditions in Popești-Leordeni

Figure 5

The satisfaction with the living conditions



Source: Author.

The inhabitants see the proximity to Bucharest as a great advantage. The proximity of the *Dimitrie Leonida* metro station is an important factor of attractiveness, particularly since Popești-Leordeni is the only town tangent to Bucharest which has access to a metro station. However, the new and cheap built environment, the area's dense, cluttered urban tissue, the endless construction sites, and the rapid occupation of every vacant parcel of land with evermore new

apartment buildings are considered to be factors which lower the inhabitants' quality of life: *"every free piece of land becomes an apartment building"*.

The inhabitants were asked to mention three major problems of their town. The questionnaire's results brought to light that the most important problem is seen as being *the urban chaos caused by the densely packed residential buildings, and by the inadequate infrastructure* (27.54%). Other problems seen as grave are, in decreasing order of perceived importance: *absence of green public spaces* (19.65%), *absence of sidewalks or total occupancy of sidewalks by cars* (17.03%), *the inadequate utility networks (sewerage, water supply, etc)* (16.20%).

The respondents also mentioned other specific problems related to the *utility infrastructure* (such as inadequate water pressure, inadequate public lighting, or the presence of the garbage dump nearby), or to the state of *roads* (very slow and bad traffic, coupled with a lack of parking spaces – which has led to the major problem of cars parking along/ on the sidewalks; a lack of traffic signs, and badly managed traffic in general).

The town's rapid development by way of these new residential aggregates, which provided numerous benefits to young people with modest incomes, has nonetheless burdened the town with many reckless modifications, giving rise to many difficulties, and it's the local population that has to bear the brunt of it all.

**The following aspects are considered problematic:**

**Complementary amenities for living:**

1. Lack of public green spaces; the inhabitants resent the absence of vegetation in Popești-Leordeni, and place this problem at the top of the list of their grievances;
2. Lack of playgrounds for the children;
3. Insufficient educational facilities given the ever-increasing population numbers – especially the many young couples with children which feel the need for more schools and kindergartens close to home;
4. Privatization of nearly all of the kindergartens, which renders their services more expensive, and increasingly unaffordable for the population;
5. Lack of proximity shops in New Popești.

**Utility networks:**

1. Overburdened utility networks (sewerage, water supply, etc.) – on account of the large number of buildings and users;
2. Low water pressure;
3. Bad sewerage.

**Infrastructure:**

1. Absence of public lighting or insufficient public lighting on some streets;
2. Some streets are not paved, others are permanently under construction on account of constant connections to the utility networks having to be made for the new apartment blocks. The respondents complained that New Popești takes on the

aspect of a continuous construction site (complete with the accompanying noise, pollution, and mud);

3. The streets are overcrowded by cars, and the lack of traffic lights makes the situation even more difficult;

4. The inhabitants resent the absence of parking spaces and sidewalks (because of the absence of parking spaces, the small and narrow sidewalks are entirely occupied by cars). As a result, the area is very dangerous for pedestrians, as the people are forced to walk through traffic, on the actual roadway;

5. Even though the most important advantage of this area was perceived as being the proximity to the metro station, numerous respondents have mentioned that, after the number of inhabitants increased, the public transportation network has become overwhelmed. Moreover, it seems that the only residential buildings which benefit directly from the presence of public transportation in the area are those located close to the metro station. The rest of the population decries a major lack of diversity in public transportation options able to connect the town to the adjoining regions.

6. Popești-Leordeni is perceived as being an extremely crowded town. A majority of respondents (43.6%) answered that, in terms of traffic, the town is *very crowded*. A percentage of 38.3% perceived it as being *fairly crowded*, 17.9% perceived it as being *crowded only in some areas*, and only 0.3% said that they see it as *not crowded*.

When asked to evaluate the living conditions in their town, the inhabitants maintained a critical attitude, giving fairly bad grades on almost all of the aspects inquired upon. The highest grades were given to the buildings (*even though this top grade was only 5.80 out of 10.00*), while the lowest grades were given to the green public spaces. Only a few of the investigated aspects of living got grades above 5.00: buildings, commercial supplies, safety in the public space, and the general image of the town.

Table no. 1

**Average of the grades given by the population on different aspects of their living conditions**

	<b>Average</b>
Buildings, image and state of the buildings	5,80
Commercial supplies	5,57
Safety in the public space	5,35
General image of the town	5,00
Public lighting	4,57
Cleanliness	4,40
Quality of the air	4,21
Noise	4,20
Quality of the roads	4,00
Public transportation	2,75

Parking spaces	2,32
Playgrounds for children	2,16
Leisure services	2,07
Parks, green public spaces	1,60

Source: Author.

The individuals were asked to identify the most important investment that the public administration should make, and the answers were complementary to the identified problems. Thus, the most stringent problem is considered to be **the lack of green public spaces**. More than half of the respondents considered that this is the aspect which needs to be immediately addressed in Popești-Leordeni. The other aspects which were evaluated and received extremely critical responses were also considered as priority investments: namely, *public transportation and parking spaces*.

Table no. 2

**Amenities which need to be developed urgently, according to the population**

Parks, green public spaces	53.8%
Public transportation	17.4%
Parking spaces	15.2%
Playgrounds for children	3.5%
Food Market	3.0%
Leisure facilities	1.8%
Commercial areas	1.0%
Banks	0.5%
Others	3.7%

Source: Author.

When asked what they would have done if they were the mayors of Popești-Leordeni, most respondents answered spontaneously (as it was an open-ended question) in the following order of importance:

1. Parks, green public spaces and playgrounds to be built for children;
2. Improvement work to be done on the quality of the utility networks (lighting, water supply, better waste management);
3. Broadening of sidewalks and construction of parking spaces (the two issues are related, because the narrow sidewalks in existence are being used as parking spaces);
4. Work on infrastructure, better traffic management;
5. Development of the public transportation network.

The respondents also mentioned the need for leisure facilities for young people and for the inhabitants in general, a desire for development of more cultural

activities, the provision of more nurseries and kindergartens, and a requirement for better management of the public space in terms of safety.

I quote below some critical remarks cited directly from the questionnaires, which express the general dissatisfaction of the inhabitants with respect to the town's management:

*"I would plant a tree for each citizen. I would have the inhabitants do it. I would plant some flowers, I would allot more space to the sidewalks. I would clean the place, the same as I do in my own home. I would close the garbage dump, which smells horribly. I would give fines to the people whose fences and courtyards are dirty. I would pave the new streets, even if they only have a few houses on them. I would have the stray dogs taken away. I would put more policemen on the streets. I wouldn't give any more building permits for building such ugly, crooked, crowded and tasteless flats"* (woman, 27 years old, photographer).

*"I would rethink the water supply infrastructure, the sewerage and the rainwater collectors. I would take a large field and make a park there (benches, trees), and also a playground"* (man, 33 years old, engineer).

*"Paved streets, street lighting, sidewalks, road signs, pedestrian crossings, green public spaces, playgrounds, keeping the town clean, building a new public school and a kindergarten, commercial areas, public transportation. I imagine it is not easy and that it will take a while until everything is in order here, but I want to think that something will happen in this direction. And I hope that this research is not just a joke..."* (woman, 34 years old, financial manager).

### GENERAL CONCLUSIONS ON THE SUBJECT

The results obtained via this sociological analysis have shown that the population of New Popești is **significantly younger and more educated** than the population of other parts of the town. The results I have presented highlight the inhabitants' perception as to the positive qualities and also to the problems identified in this area.

The population of Popești-Leordeni perceives their **town as quiet, and in continuous development, which presents great perspectives for a good life**, especially in the eyes of the young population with modest incomes. The area has the advantage of proximity to Bucharest and quick access to a metro station.

From a symbolic perspective, Popești-Leordeni has a poorly developed identity, with most of the population believing that **it doesn't even have a town center**. However, **the Town Hall area is perceived as having the potential of becoming a town center in the future**, which is to say not only a physical town

center, but a symbolic town center as well. The statue in front of the Town Hall and the Town Hall itself were the main landmarks according to the respondents. However, an important area in New Popești is considered to be the Fermei Street (the street which is most often mentioned as a landmark).

**The inhabitants' level of satisfaction with their own town is rather low at the moment.** Even though they believe that **the proximity to Bucharest is a great advantage**, the people feel that, at a local level, **the town can't grow into a fully developed community, because of the traffic, noise, pollution, endless construction sites and lack of necessary utilities.**

**The urban chaos** caused by **the high density of buildings** and **poor infrastructure** represent the main problems of the town, in the inhabitants' opinion. The locals are displeased with **the absence of green public spaces, the narrowness of sidewalks, as well as with the narrow streets, lack of parking spaces, poor sewerage, low water pressure, poor lighting, and presence of the garbage dump.** When asked to evaluate the living conditions inside the town, the inhabitants had a very critical attitude, giving very low grades to all investigated aspects of life. **Even the general image of the town was given only a 5 (out of 10).**

The answers to all the questions in the questionnaire have revealed an overall very **critical attitude of the inhabitants with respect to their living conditions in Popești-Leordeni.**

The inhabitants of New Popești feel that the *absence of leisure facilities dedicated to socialization, the poor state of the utility networks, the insufficient public safety and poor infrastructure significantly detract from their quality of life.* They deem that the solving of the major issues mentioned above would significantly contribute to an increase in their general wellbeing, and would constitute a starting point for their township's eventual transition from a mere *satellite-town* of Bucharest, to an **independent, sustainable (urban) community.**

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