

Subjective Well-Being and Urban Capabilities: A Perception-Based Analysis of Romanian Cities

Authors:

Gabriela Carmen Pascariu, PhD Professor, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania;

gcpas@uaic.ro (presenting author)

Ioana Ursache, PhD Student, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania;

ioanamariaursache@gmail.com

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Recent literature on urban liveability emphasizes its multidimensional and relational character, going beyond the traditional approach based on economic conditions and performance. It is the result of complex interactions between the opportunities offered by cities and their vulnerabilities, both economically, socially and environmentally, between perceptions and structural urban performance, between objective and subjective determinants. In this perspective, cities are not only engines of growth, but also spaces of common convention and conviviality, as well as of unequal distribution of opportunities and vulnerabilities, in which well-being depends on access to economic, social and institutional capabilities (Sen, 1999; Golubchenko et al., 2024; OECD, 2020); Samavati, 2024; Uchida, 2024; Vittersø, 2025).

Specifically, in Central and Eastern Europe, post-socialist transformation processes have generated differentiated patterns of urban development, characterized by socio-economic polarization, digital divide, various forms of gentrification and infrastructural disparities (Lang et al., 2015), which are still insufficiently analyzed and known, as a key condition of urban transformability in contemporary development processes.

The present study aims to contribute to reducing this knowledge gap, by investigating the relationship between subjective well-being and capabilities, using survey data collected in 10 cities in Romania (over 130,000 inhabitants, excluding Bucharest) and urban structural indicators. The research conceptualizes liveability as a dependent variable resulting from the interaction between urban opportunities and structural vulnerabilities and highlights the particularities and inequalities of urban development in Romania. Well-being is operationalized through a composite index derived from items on general life satisfaction, existential meaning, work-life balance, energy level and perception of control over one's life. The perception analysis is carried out according to 4 clusters of determinants: (1) economic (job opportunities, housing accessibility, financial stability); (2) social/institutional (cohesion, safety, quality of public services, and trust in administration); (3) digital (access, skills and technological use, digitalization of public services); and (4) environment–infrastructure (environmental quality, mobility, utilities, urban investments).

Methodologically, the research is focused on exploratory factor analysis to validate the cluster structure, associated with multivariate regressions and hierarchical models (HLM) to estimate the relative contribution of each cluster to determining well-being. To highlight inequalities, interactions between clusters and socio-demographic variables (income, education, age) are included, as well as inter-city comparisons based on standardized scores. The existence of cumulative or compensatory effects between

dimensions is also tested (for example, whether digital performance can mitigate economic vulnerabilities).

The research identifies and analyzes specific patterns of liveability, inter- and intra-city differences, and highlights the mechanisms through which economic, digital and environmental inequalities translate into well-being gaps. The main contribution lies in the development of an integrated empirical framework that allows the simultaneous assessment of structural determinants and their unequal distribution in urban space, from the perspective of perceived well-being.

Keywords: urban liveability; subjective wellbeing; urban inequality; perception-based analysis; structural urban performance

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