

Overview of the Discussions in the Public Space regarding the New Territorial Organization of Romania

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Abstract:

Our paper summarizes the discussions from the public space on the new administrative organization of Romania. In this perspective, the existing counties may be dissolved, and, as a result of joining several counties into larger territorial divisions, they may constitute regions. Such large territorial units have existed before in the Romanian history, namely provinces during Charles II and regions, in the first stage of the communist regime (e.g. Stalin Region or the Autonomous Hungarian Mureş Region etc.). As they were not considered viable, county has been validated and acknowledged by our history as the most appropriate administrative territorial unit, both in size and name. For these reasons, we consider launching such discussions as being, at least, unfortunate.

Keywords: Romania, administrative and territorial reform

1. Introduction

Our work aims to make several reflections on the discussions that have been launched in the public space after the collapse of the communist regime about a new administrative territorial organization of the country. We shall make several considerations on the way the administrative territories of the country have developed over time, focusing mainly on the similarities between what is now proposed and what has existed before. In the end, we shall make our own conclusions.

2. Brief presentation of the Romanian administration evolution

In terms of administration, ever since their organization and state consolidation, Wallachia and Moldova were organized in counties. This organization is to be linked to the name of Mircea cel Bătrân and Alexandru cel Bun. The first mentioned county of Wallachia was Jaleşul from Oltenia (1385), and the first one in Moldova was Tutova (1432). The age of these territorial administrative units is however more impressive, they having their beginnings “probably early in the period before the formation of states, i.e. in the unions of rural communities, usually grouped along the valleys of rivers whose names they borrowed (Argeş, Dâmboviţa, [...] Prahova and Buzău etc)” [1]. This organization has survived in the Romanian Middle Ages and throughout history, even if

the number or scope of these administrative units varied from one historical epoch to another [2].

Communes Law and that stipulating the establishment of the County Councils, adopted during the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, in 1864, consecrated this traditional administrative division and subscribe it to modernity, Romania being then organized in counties and communes [3].

On 14th August 1938, King Charles II, as part of the complex actions to strengthen his personal power, abolished counties and divided the territory of "Great" Romania into 10 provinces. They had legal personality and were led by royal residents appointed by the king himself [4]. According to the same law, mayors were appointed for a six-year term of office [5]. Banishment of the King, in 1940, led to the removal of his entire legislation and, as a result, the country has returned to the traditional organization into counties.

The Communist regime during the period 1944-1947 imposed a new administrative territorial model of Soviet inspiration. Thus, in the period 1950 – 1968, Romania was reorganized several times (i.e. 1950, 1952, 1956 and 1960) in regions, districts and communes. The number of regions decreased from 28 (with 177 districts in 1950) to 16 (in 1956). In 1952, there was formed, based on ethnic criteria, the Hungarian Autonomous Region which was renamed in 1956 as the Autonomous Hungarian Mureş Region [6].

In 1968, by Law no. 2/ 16th February, they returned to the traditional territorial organization into counties and communes, regions and the districts being abolished. This form of administrative organization into counties is still in operation today.

3. Public discussions on a new territorial organization of Romania

After the collapse of communism in Romania, there was initiated a lively debate on the territorial administrative reorganization, debate that had numerous ups and downs. In 1998, as a result of joining county councils, there were created eight regions, without legal personality whose aim was to access PHARE funds allocated by the European Union and thus to implement regional development projects by attracting European funds. When Romania joined the European Union in 2007, these regions

became members of the Regions Committee. Discussions on possible reorganization of the country were launched once again in 2001, when a group of intellectuals from Cluj, coordinated by the political scientist Molnar Gusztv, proposed the regionalization of Romania by providing legal personality to these administrative structures. As a result, there emerged various opinions and variants of reorganization. The number of possible regions fluctuated from 8 to 16, as well as their names, being proposed the use of the cardinal points or the names of the historical provinces. In favour of regionalization, there were major parties and their representatives in the government or Parliament. In 2002, Adrian Năstase welcomed the idea of regionalization, but had reservations to the initiative of the group from Cluj. In 2010-2011, the Democratic Union of the Hungarians from Romania invoked the opportunity of including the counties populated predominantly by Hungarians in one region. In 2011 Traian Băsescu and the Liberal Democratic Party proposed the establishment of eight regions, or large counties; in 2013 - 2014 Victor Ponta, Liviu Dragnea and the Social Democratic Party also considered the possibility of founding eight regions, but by also maintaining the existing counties [7].

4. Overview of the public discussions on the new territorial organization of Romania

As far as we are concerned, we have our reservations against such proposals. We believe they come from public voices whose authority is almost exclusively in the political sphere. The Romanian political class has not convinced by their performance or management, as reflected in the economic developments and results after 1989. Referring to the profile of this post-December period class, academician Florin Constantiniu characterizes it as "the most incompetent, most greedy and the most arrogant in the history of the Romanian people" [8].

We appreciate that the proposals on the country's territorial administrative reorganization should come from specialists in the history of administration, in administrative law, in economics, geography, sociology etc. We strongly believe that, when designing a new administrative configuration of the country, it would vital to analyze economic outcomes and the psychological impact that prior administrative reforms had on the Romanian society.

The administrative organization of the country in large territorial units has failed. Both the provinces established by Charles II and the regions proposed in the early stage of communism were invalidated by the passage of time. Moreover, these administrative territorial units triggered resentment at the level of collective mind. In this respect, if we refer to the provinces established during the reign of Charles II, they are often assimilated to the authoritarian regime of the king, which was very much influenced by the Italian fascist model. In turn, the regions from the period 1950-1968, were reminiscent of the practices and of the Soviet model imposed to the Romanian authorities of that time, i.e. the name "Stalin" attributed to both Braşov city and the homonymous region in the center of the country. Regionalization also recalls the Autonomous Hungarian Mureş Region, and involuntarily the autonomist tendencies of today's Hungarian community. Another reason against regionalization would be that the names of the previous divisions had no connection with the name Romanian tradition.

In the regions from the communist era, the economic, social and cultural development was focused almost exclusively on the capital city of the region and the other cities of the region, although they had a considerable history back-ground, remained in the shadows. We refer here to the former region of Ploieşti, where Târgovişte, the former capital of Wallachia, or Buzău, former capital of the homonymous county and bishop center from the early 16th century, had only the rank of district residences. Therefore, we appreciate that a return to the administrative organization into large units, comprising between three and five counties, will inexorably generate a similar situation. In the collective mind, the proponents of such a decision will be exclusively inhabitants of the city that, rightfully or not, will become the capital of the region. For example, one can imagine the attitude of Prahova county residents in case such a proposal to regionalize the country becomes real and their county, with an uninterrupted existence from the medieval period, would dissolve, and Ploieşti, capital of the „black gold”, the city of prominent cultural personalities such as Caragiale, Nichita Stănescu, Toma Caragiu etc., center of technical superior education, and leading “actor” of the contemporary economic life would lose face in front of another city, such as Călăraşi, for example. This theoretical exercise can be further practiced to imagine the disappearance of many villages. Therefore, we consider that one must not forget the

importance of tradition and local history in determining the attitudes and citizen involvement in public affairs.

Thus, if we analyze other past measures, we can also mention the decision of the administrative law from 1929 to settle large communes, of at least 10,000 people [9] and an average of 30-40 villages, which made local administration very heavy to manage. Proved to be unsustainable, this formula was dissolved after only two years [10].

Financial issues, often invoked when arguing the need for administrative territorial reorganization of the country, may be real, but they are not enough to start such an action leading to the overthrow of a traditional system which has proved its viability. We consider that in order to cope with such issues, a modern state can prosecute those mechanisms able to ensure a certain administrative “comfort” to its citizens. A modern state could not have allowed lack of public electricity or maintaining in communication isolation (roads, streets, railways, schools etc.) of small or isolated settlements, based on the principle of their economic efficiency. At this point of our discussion, we consider useful to recall the fact that the Romanian administrative law from 1864 provided, in the communes law (art. 5), the possibility that those rural communes which could not secure their financing may associate in order to satisfy this requirement. Subsequent administrative laws, i.e. Commune Law from 1887, the Law on the organization of rural communes from 1904, the law on administrative unification from 1925, maintained the same principle: “rural communes that do not have the means, can become associates in order to sustain the services they need and to jointly pay their administrative, technical, medical staff etc.” (Art. 3 of the 1925 Law for the Administrative Unification)”[11].

The opinions often expressed in the public space today that the Romanian state could not attract more EU funds because of the administrative organization seem unfounded. Romania has a traditional administrative organization, somehow similar to that of France, country that has no problems in attracting European funds and does not even think about a new territorial administrative configuration. When discussing the issue of attracting European funds, we strongly believe that the problems affecting this process are generated by the lack of interest from the Romanian state to achieve a

nationwide “school” and the necessary “training” to manage European projects, by the profile of the people invested by state’s institutions with the status of “project managers”, by diversion of funds or excessive bureaucracy etc. What is often presented as an argument pro regionalization, namely the small number of inhabitants of a county related to a large project, is irrelevant, since the association of two or three counties in achieving European projects seems to be very easy to accomplish and depends exclusively on the willingness of local authorities to associate in order to do something. On the other hand, the existence of eight regions passes as a compromise already accepted by the Romanian society.

Since the discussions and the issue of a potential territorial reorganization have their origin mainly in the political sphere, we consider necessary, if not vital, to involve specialists in this debate and to use a fundamental instrument of the social democracy, namely the referendum, in order to solve the problem of administrative reorganization.

5. Conclusions

From our brief analysis there results that large territorial units existed in the Romanian history. We refer to provinces settled during Charles II, to regions organized in the first stage of the communist regime and to “giant” communes from the period 1929-1931. Their existence has not proved viable and, moreover, was not well perceived in the collective consciousness.

The county represents the administrative territorial unit that, both in terms of size and name, has been validated and acknowledged by our history. In such circumstances, there, involuntarily, appears the question: If something goes well, why should anyone intervene to spoil it?

For these reasons, we consider launching such discussions (and especially the alternative of dissolving counties) as being, at least, unfortunate. Consulting and directly involving specialists are more than necessary, and I would even say a sine qua non of a success in this matter.

Any potential change in the territorial structure of the country, at such a scale, would require organizing a national consultation by referendum.

As witnesses to the public discussion, we believe that the debate on administrative reorganization is extremely necessary and that one should not have preconceptions, think of conditions or pre-conditions. Intolerance against a point of view or another is inadmissible and all the opinions which have been or will be expressed in connection with this topic are valuable in the process of making a decision. Our reflections, far from pretending to be something sententious, provide a specialist's point of view, adding to the portfolio of the already expressed opinions in the public space.

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