

## Perspectives of the Administrative Regionalization of Romania

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### **Abstract**

*The study analyzes the possibilities in which the intermediate administrative level, namely the region, may function, as well as the evolution of the regional development institutional framework in Romania, given the current intensive discussions on a possible administrative regionalization of the country. There have been also considered several directions of reflection on the results that the administrative regionalization may have. Furthermore, the study includes various aspects of the existing administrative regions in different European countries.*

**Key-words:** *regions, administrative regionalization, local communities, regional development, regional strategies.*

### **1. Introduction**

From the very beginning, it is necessary to mention that the term “region” has several meanings, depending on the context of analysis. The word "region" comes from the Latin word "regionem" and it is found in most European languages with the meaning land, expanse of land with boundaries and with more or less accurate characteristics. But the common element of all definitions is the idea of a space representing an entity, so that one can talk about the region as a unit.

Firstly, from a global perspective, the term “region” means a “geographical area” which includes several countries (such as the Balkans, Baltic Region).

Secondly, in terms of regional development, the region is seen as a “zone”, an area within a country, which is geographically homogeneous, with common or similar cultural traditions, ethnic characteristics, etc.

Thirdly, the term is used to denote the association of the regions within the European Union member countries, in order to jointly achieve one or more of their objectives (the so-called Euro-regions). [1]

One may observe that, when delimitating the boundaries of a region, there can be used three categories of criteria: the homogenous criterion, the functional criterion and the administrative criterion. The downside is that administrative boundaries are not the same as the boundaries imposed by economic criteria, in this case the political

decision in the region being more difficult to implement. From the perspective of European development policies, the region designates a territorial division of a country, which may be administrative or not.

The term “region” suggest a functional and relational entities related to governmental and non-governmental efforts to determine the development of national communities through more efficient social policies. Thus, the “region is a constituent of social progress, representing [...] a fundamental space type congruence of political, social and economic processes” [2].

Therefore, the regions are “entities created by the force of relationship: economic, administrative or symbolic/cultural maintained against central state authorities” [3]. Viewed in this way, the degree of regionalization will always depend on how the central power will understand or accept to delegate some of its authority to the sub-national level.

## **2. Conceptual distinction between “development region” and “region”**

It should be noted that, in the historical evolution of the administrative organization, the concept of “region” can be defined as a territorial unit, which does not identify with the concept of “development region”, the basic structure of the regional policy of the European Union. [4] The distinction between these two concepts results from their defining elements. Whereas the development region constitutes strictly on the basis of economic criteria, the region as a territorial unit (existing in the administrative structure of Romania during 1950-1968) was formed on administrative criteria.

As one could notice, in different stages of Romania’s evolution the administrative territorial structures had different names and were organized on one, then two or three levels, having direct relations with the central power of the state or relationships that were mediated by other territorial structures, created by the state. In all these cases, legal relations towards the state represented relationships of hierarchical subordination, the state maintaining full power over the administrative units created on its territory [5].

The doctrine used certain concepts and terms such as “administrative-territorial organization”, “administrative-territorial improvement”, “administrative-territorial reorganization”, “administrative-territorial division” etc. It was considered [6] that the notion of “administrative-territorial organization ” is the primary action that aims at

constituting several administrative units within the state, for the first time, without paying attention to the number of levels or to the relationships between them. Any other further intervention over this primary organization can be considered either an "improvement" or an administrative "reorganization" of the territory.

An analysis [4] of the regulations on the administrative-territorial organization of Romania has revealed that the notions of "county" and "region" were concepts that defined the administrative-territorial units of Romania, according to the regulations adopted during its historical evolution.

Assembly of the Regions (AER) defines regions as "those political entities positioned on the next level below state that has certain powers exercised by a government that is accountable for his actions before a democratically elected assembly".

Thus, elements to be taken into account in defining a region must to identify territorial issues; must to help identify appropriate locations for certain types of actions for funding, applying differentiated taxes, cooperation or partnerships, etc.; must be based on substantiation made by regional development experts, decision makers and citizens in the regions.

The regional level [7] as "an administrative level having its place in the administrative hierarchy of the Member States in a position immediately below the central level" i.e., "echelon immediately below that of the state", echelon that depending upon the competences that have been granted (if centralized) or who gave them (in federal systems), manage administratively and politically a territorial community whose size varies widely [8]. A definition are in The Community Charter of Regionalization [9], where the European Parliament, 1988 gives also a definition, in Article 1, stating regionalization "as a territory forming geographically, a net unit or a similar assembly of territories having continuity, the population have certain common elements and wants to keep the resulting specificity" a various names and the legal and policy title that these entities can receive in the various states - autonomous communities, provinces, nationalities, etc. does not exclude them from the considerations set out in the Charter. EU member states are invited, "given the will of the people, their historical tradition and the need for efficient and proper administration of their functions - especially in the field

of planning their economic development, to institutionalize regions in their territories (or maintain them, where the case), according to Art.1 of the Charter.”

It is difficult to give a unitary definition of the region, taking into account the characteristics of each country, their cultural traditions, the existing economic and social policies, their legal and institutional systems or the endogenous resources etc. The legislative and institutional framework in the EU member states on the administrative structures and regional institutions involved in the regional economic development also argue the difficulty of finding a full definition of the concept. [10]

It is noticed [4] that, at EU level, the concept of “development region” imposed at the economic level, aiming at a balanced development of all areas, within the European regional policy. Within regional policy, the principles that have been developed are based on economic criteria and are to be considered in all member states, despite some ethnic or political interests. Thus, it is considered [11] that at European level, the EU's global economic competitiveness can increase the diversity of the regions and may even influence a certain tendency towards micro regionalization of some broader macro regions, following the triangular relationship between the main institutional actors, namely the sub-national, national and transnational ones.

The attempt to define the “region” encountered two obstacles in the context of the social and economic cohesion. The former took into account the absence of a clear demarcation of the region, from an economic point of view, the latter was given by the administrative-territorial heterogeneity of the European Community member states. These two aspects led to the decision that, starting with the Treaty of Rome, the word “region” should designate a geographical area, generally considered [12]. Another major change occurred in 1988, with the revision of the regulations on the Structural Funds and the State aid. From this point, areas that are subject to development policies are designed according to the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS). [13] NUTS divisions are based on two criteria, one administrative and the other regarding the number of inhabitants. According to the administrative criterion, the region is “a geographical area resulting from the division of the territory of the EU member state in a finite number of spatial units based on the powers of local authorities.” Thus defined, the region reflects the political will, it usually has a statutory character in the administrative

practice of the member state, it is clearly defined and universally recognized, being relatively stable in terms of division.

In the member states of the EU, NUTS II units, similar to those existing in Romania bear different names: provinces in Belgium and the Netherlands, regions in France, Ireland, Italy, autonomous communities in Spain, Bundesländer in Austria, Regierungsbezirke in Germany. [14]

Within the European Union, the role of the regions has grown significantly, these becoming partners of the European Commission in the foundation, development and implementation of the European policies financed through Structural Funds.

### **3. Reasons for the administrative regionalization of Romania**

It is important to reflect on the idea that regionalization is one of the main features of the contemporary world, because it does not have only a geographical dimension, as it might seem to common knowledge, but also other dimensions - economic, political and security ones - that are interconnected. Regionalization coexists with globalization, which may seem impossible, if there were considered only the most common definitions of the two processes. Moreover, regionalization is closely related to regionalism, to which it is not always in harmony. As a result, the regionalization process proves to be complex and nuanced, which leads to the need of a thorough analysis at the theoretical level.

The administrative regionalization of Romania is one of the topics widely debated by the media, by the experts in the field, and by politicians alike. Currently, it seems that society begins to realize the benefits of a multi-level governance and the fact that this process can bring economic growth of the regions and may contribute to diminishing economic disparities between regions. But there also arises a sensitive, natural question: What will happen if the regionalization process is not achieved efficiently and is reduced to a political decision? The efficiency of this process must be supported by an ongoing dialogue with the representatives of civil society and of the private sector [15].

The regionalization of the national territory, i.e. the creation or de facto acceptance of regions, represents a geopolitical action of strategic importance, oriented by different needs or various political, economic or development interests. [16] The

stake here is not their territorial segregation, but the harmonious development of the areas created for socio-economic development [17]. Some regions are deeply marked by their history, so that their specific relationships and attachments are more powerful than the state buildings whose part they are today.

Any administrative-territorial organization aims to increase the efficiency of public authorities activity as well as their initiative and efficiency in public service, to improve the relationship between central and local authorities, particularly with base units, and to ensure better control and more support to the competent administrative units [18]. The general progress of the society is closely related to a proper organization of the territory and of the local government, thus favoring rational placement of public investment in the country and a proper development of different areas (regions) and municipalities.

A possible paradox at the national level is the obvious contradiction between the existence of certain morphological, cultural, economic and historical features that could define regions and a frail assertion of regionalist currents in the public discourse [19]. Originally conceived as a space for economic development, the region strives to gain in Romania too, an administrative dimension. The proposed amendment to the Constitution of Romania, prepared by the Parliamentary Committee constituted in this regard, states that administrative-territorial units in Romania will be the village, the town (city), the county and the region. Like other administrative-territorial units, the region will have elected administrative authorities - regional council and president of the regional council and the manner of their election shall be determined by law. It will have its own budget, patrimony and staff. Regarding the designation of representatives of the region, the legislature should remain consistent with formula established for designating authorities at village, town or county level that means by choosing them directly by the community, and not to opt for the indirect election from among elected local or county. Of course, this should be correlated with duties which will fall after the regional administrative-territorial reorganization because tasks must relate to legitimate authority that has the authority and the place it holds in the institutional architecture of the state [20].

One should also take into account the fact that the purpose of local government reform in Romania, aiming regionalization, is to make it able to fulfill its functions, in

order to contribute to the economic and social development of the country. A strategy of developing regional communities should aim at determining their long-term goals and objectives, at adopting local and regional policies and at allocating resources to achieve the proposed goals, taking into account the needs and wishes of the citizens and the components of the local political system. In the central decision-making mechanism there should be also included the regional and local decision-making bodies.

The administrative regionalization of Romania implies strengthening the capacity of NUTS II regions to sign relevant decisions regarding the content of programmes and of regional development projects, by co-working with all partners that are relevant at the regional level and by developing the potential to prepare appropriate projects and specific measures.

In other words, the administrative regionalization of the national territory must be made for an effective governance and administration and in order to reduce regional disparities. These may be achieved through two courses of action, namely the administrative-territorial reorganization, by creating regional institutional framework for better functioning of public administration, and the reform of public administration, by means of decentralization and simplifying law and administrative procedures for more efficient public services. As a result, the primary mission of future regional institutions shall be to provide public authorities all the necessary tools to design and implement strategies of balanced development. In the long run, the purpose is the modernize the Romanian society as a whole, by reducing the existing imbalances between regions, by linking various government and sector policies at the regional level and by stimulating regional and local initiatives. [21]

Both theoretically and practically, regionalization is beneficial for initiating and providing participatory approach towards local and regional, allowing citizens to participate in decision-making at national level, and to have a picture of the problem to be solved locally. In a system based on decentralization one can speak of social control over the political decision; citizens that have more control over local government exercise a certain pressure on the political decision so that it shall approach regional needs. In case the regionalization process does not take place in several stages, on

several levels, with the support and help of civil society and the private sector, the regionalization of Romania is likely to turn into an administrative chaos. [15]

There are a number of proposals aimed at a possible model for optimizing the administrative-territorial organization made by [22] should be based on central (national), regional (most important, consisting of administrative regions formed on the basis of historical provinces), departmental (county), communities (cities, towns and villages) and sub-community level (administrative districts within cities and hamlets in the villages). Bridging gaps, harmonious development involve essentially new programs, additional financial resources and people trained to implement regional development programs.

As previously mentioned [20], one can appreciate that the utility of regionalization is intrinsic and undoubted; still, the manner in which Romania will perform administrative and/or a social-economic regionalization should be debated. For the success of administrative regionalization, there should be involved the Romanian Parliament, the legislative authority, but also other central and local public authorities. The Parliament has, as the main task, to create the legal framework necessary for the implementation of the regionalization process [23], representing also a discussion forum open to all representatives of the currently existing administrative units [24].

An analysis of the relevant assumptions, launched by specialists indicates that Romania, in a future regional configuration, could be between minimum 8 and maximum 16 regions, but when will be assessed all assumptions it might conclude that the optimum is 12 or 13. It would be preferable, in terms of lower costs, bringing together territories of 2-4 actual adjacent counties to provide a new region. [25]

Functional criteria recommended by teachers and experts [26] who have analyzed the possibilities of future boundary regions are:

1. Spatial extent of the region, to include at least four counties.
2. Accessibility of administrative residence - are preferable circular regions - and the existence of specific infrastructure (international airport European road, rail, etc.).
3. The existence of multiple growth poles within the region.
4. Creating a network of human communities by locating balanced public services.
5. The existence of common interests and problems between counties within the region.

6. The presence of a diverse labor force with skills in several areas to serve as many productive activities within the region.
7. Natural economic resources are sufficient and varied to ensure the diversity of the local economy.
8. Economic competitiveness in terms of economic indicators.
9. High degree of multiculturalism.
10. Demarcation of regions based on the delimitation of the current counties.
11. The capacity of the new structures to take regional administrative skills.
12. The existence of regional development strategies.

One mention that must be made is that the lines between regions are simple formal administrative boundaries, such as the present boundaries of counties. Between regions will not be boundaries in the sense of frontiers. So the phrase “how Romania will be divided” is erroneous; Romania will be not divided into regions, but will be administratively organized in regions (as it is currently administratively organized in counties, towns and villages) [27].

One should also discuss the fact that, in agreement with the subsidiarity principle, the newly created regions must have legal personality, which involves changing the Constitution. Therefore, it appears the hypothesis of an increased bureaucracy by creating new structures, even if it started in parallel with partially overlapped structures, but as long as the duties, powers and responsibilities of each part are clearly defined, this problem is to be solved along the way. In this way, some will disappear naturally, but the decision-making process should go down to the regional level.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Considering all these, one can appreciate that the administrative regionalization of Romania is impossible to be effectively achieved in a very short time, e.g. within a year [20]. Discussions and proposals on regionalization should be based on analysis and regional impact studies, intended to prepare the administration for such a complex process. Otherwise, we risk creating new regional institutions without a clear understanding of responsibility and tasks. To avoid a possible regional administrative chaos that encourages clientelism, bureaucracy and corruption, we believe that civil

society and private sector representatives should be involved in decisions on the regionalization process and how it will be achieved. However, the regionalization process should coincide with decentralization [15], which transfers to the regional government decision on tax collection and sharing of resources.

Decentralization triggers major implications in terms of equity, both horizontally - between regions - and vertically - between different socio-economic groups within society. Decentralization is expected to have a positive effect on efficiency [28]. Responsiveness is given by the way in which regional authorities, benefiting from an increased local autonomy, will meet the needs of regional communities. The decentralization activity must be accompanied by the design of development strategies at counties and regions level, by developing their own investment programmes, by improving the efficiency of regional and local government, by finding financial support for activities to be conducted. The key element [29] will be the economic development, in relation to problems and opportunities that are specific to each region, with respect to local development objectives.

As a conclusion of our study, we can conclude that the existence of administrative regions could create the prerequisites for a domestic offer of regional solidarity-based development [19]. Regional development processes will generate much higher absorption capacity and, thus, will increase the absorption of development funds, which are more substantial than in the current system. There are also opinions [15] considering that it is wrong to interpret regionalization as a means to get better absorption of EU funds. In this respect, regionalization should be made in order to have a more effective governance and administration and to reduce regional disparities.

It is nowadays almost universally accepted the fact that the structure and functioning of the development regions management do not allow the emergence of regional projects, inside them taking place a "battle" for financing local or county projects. Surveys on the field and the results of the projects unrolled through these institutional structures have revealed the existence of disparities. The only utility of the current territorial decoupage is of statistical nature, serving Eurostat to define the NUTS II units for Romania. But, even from a statistical point of view, the current grouping of

counties in development regions only masks regional disparities (i.e. between and within counties) [30].

As far as the number of the administrative regions is concerned, from various positions taken by policy makers, there has resulted no consensus on the subject, currently circulating several versions. What should be considered throughout this process is that the administrative-territorial reorganization should not start from the person who will lead the region or from the place where will be the capital of the region, but from principles and values. In this respect, the citizens, as beneficiaries of public administration, need to know why it is necessary to establish a new administrative or bureaucratic level, what the powers of regional authorities will be, on what criteria there will be grouped the current counties in future regions and what changes regionalization will bring to local communities and the benefits for the citizens.

In the European Union “the need for solidarity among people and regions is an accepted principle, kept in an unwritten code, known as the European social model, which combined traditional attempts to promptly secure the highest possible standards of welfare and to adopt distribution policies in order to fulfill them.”[31] In the concerns [32] for ensuring a balanced development of a country’s territory, the issue of disparities in the regional economic growth constitutes a landmark, arousing vivid discussions both in terms of conceptual and methodological approach, as well as in terms of their implications over economic and social practice.

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