

## **The Pertinence of the Regionalization Project in Romania**

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**Abstract:** The concept of “unified” or “homogeneous” state authority (in which the local authorities act as representatives of the central government, equivocally subordinated to its directive and control) was rejected and replaced with a dual system, in which the state and the local management act each in its own sphere of influence. However, we should not be surprised by the fact that the reality of local management partly lags behind the normative ideal. Europe is a space of decentralized local communities, the emphasis being placed on decentralization to enable the development of contacts which the hyper-centralized state would not have promoted and could not have tolerated. The decentralization is one of the ways which leads to a sort of European “normality” and that it participates in achieving this goal. Thus, the actual context is quite favourable to diminishing the role of the state, which should focus on its major functions: diplomacy, defence, monetary policy, preserving the economic macro-balance etc. those which stem directly from the national sovereignty, which only the state holds, no matter if it is a unitary or federal one.

**Keywords:** national sovereignty; state; decentralization; regional interests

The direct influence of the European Union (EU) over the administrative systems of the Member States is quite limited. In fact, the Union has no direct competence in this area. The administrative organization of Member States is a matter that falls only within their competence. But there are many sources of indirect influence of Member States and of those who adhere to EU.

In the last three or four decades we have seen in all Western European countries, a genuine change of mindset regarding the role of state systems and the continental regions. Late “80s brought the European system in front of two processes that have questioned the unique position of states as relevant international actors; these are the processes of integration and fragmentation. Through the changes they have generated, these processes have increased the importance of the regions once with the importance of the civil society to the detriment of the state. We are speaking

more and more about a “Europe of regions” and it is increasingly perceived that the region is not only an intermediate level between central and local authorities, but it is a third point (along with states and local authorities) that defines the triangle in which the European integration process is developed.

In our days, like any other form of power, the political power in the democratic state is also limited in several cases. Thus, both in home and foreign relations, governments are required to comply with communities to which they belong (it is the case of EU members and candidate states) and with the norms contained in treaties and conventions of international law.

From a political point of view, the administrative regionalization expresses democracy through local participation in the management of public communities and administratively, it enables the regions to achieve an administration which knows the regional needs and interests. Regarding this, EU offers a certain definition for “region” whose character is rather administrative “echelon immediately below that of the state”. This benchmark, depending on what powers are given (for centralized systems) or which were granted (if federal systems), manages the administrative and territorial political community whose size may vary a lot.

The growing importance of regions in Europe, whatever the definition used for the region (institutional or political) is a striking phenomenon of recent decades. Denis de Rougemont has not only predicted it, but he also inserted it as a fundamental element of the European construction process of the century. For him, federalism and regionalism were inseparable. (Rougemont, 1978)

Each country in its own way and according to its historical tradition, seeks to meet regional problems, regionalist trends it is confronted with, directing them, minimizing them, ignoring them or rejecting them. Given these we can observe the causes which reduce the government capacity for action and often generates the giving up of structural reforms which could be achieved only in the long term such as the introduction of the region as an administrative-territorial unit.

Currently, the EU considers the regional level as an administrative level which has its place in the administrative hierarchy of Member States in a position immediately below the central level. According to the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) each Member State in its structure possesses three

types of territorial units which are positioned on hierarchical levels in terms of size of territory: the local, the departmental or intermediate level and the regional level.

The issue raised by the regional current is a concern posed by the European space and reshaped by the new internal equilibrium of states which claims with difficulty the political monopoly. Indeed, the question is whether governments “have adapted to European area” because “the national general trend, it seems to be, the decentralization and the integration into European structures.” But if trends are detected with difficulty, question marks on the region model are of great importance: Region - reform or revolution or Region - one of Europe's new political models.

Regional development policy is one of the most important policies and the most complex of the European Union status arising from its objective of reducing economic and social disparities among different regions of Europe. It acts in significant areas of development such as, growth, transport, agriculture, urban development, environmental protection, employment and vocational training, education etc.

Designed as a policy of solidarity at European level, the regional policy is mainly based on financial solidarity, i.e. the redistribution of a part of the EU budget (contribution made by Member States) to regions and poorer social groups<sup>1</sup>. In fact, it can be said that regional development policy is highly instrumental and through its funds helps finance other policies - such as the agricultural, social and environmental policy.

The complex nature of regional development policy is stressed and by the way it integrates three key objectives of the EU: the economic and social cohesion, the extend of the principle of subsidiarity and of sustainability. However, this strategy is not only European but global as well and it is promoted worldwide through various international agreements, which underline once again the complex nature of the regional development policy and the internal coherence of the Community objectives.

The principles of regional development policies have been envisaged at European level since 1957, with the Treaty of Rome, when the six signatory countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands) agreed on the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, between 2000 - 2006, the given amount represented one third from the EU Budget, more precisely 35% from the EU budget [http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy)).

need of reducing disparities between different regions and of supporting the less favoured, in order to achieve a strong and unified EU economy.

The regional development acquis does not define how to set up specific structures for the implementation of EU requirements it only mentions these and leave it to the Member States.

In Romania the unit for regional development policy implementation at local level is the development regions, such regions being formed by voluntary association of neighbouring counties without being an administrative-territorial unit, without legal personality. The following eight development regions were established:

**Table 1. Development regions in Romania**

<i>No.</i>	<i>The development region</i>	<i>Associated counties</i>
1.	Sud	Argeş, Călăraşi, Dâmboviţa, Giurgiu, Ialomiţa, Prahova, Teleorman
2.	Sud-Est	Brăila, Buzău, Constanţa, Galaţi, Tulcea, Vrancea
3.	Sud-Vest	Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinţi, Olt, Vâlcea
4.	Nord-Est	Bacău, Botoşani, Iaşi, Neamţ, Suceava, Vaslui
5.	Nord-Vest	Bihor, Bistriţa-Năsăud, Cluj, Maramureş, Satu-Mare, Sălaj
6.	Vest	Arad, Caraş-Severin, Hunedoara, Timiş
7.	Centru	Alba, Braşov, Covasna, Harghita, Mureş, Sibiu
8.	Bucureşti-Ilfov	Municipiul Bucureşti, Ilfov

These regions are formed on the basis of the existing system at EU level, i.e. the system of classification of territorial units NUTS. According to it, they are regions at NUTS II level (ie to have a population up to 2.8 million inhabitants).

Romania, once focused on the concept of “regional interest”, requires the study of the existence of the socio-cultural values which underlie the sense of affiliation to a regional community. This configuration implies the emergence of identity areas in the form of “variables, relatively durable, highly structured, which leads to the phenomena of group identity” that may be materialized in historic areas. Two key

observations distinguish between the rural-conservatory area and the urban-innovatory one:

- regional identification is stronger than the communal one, ownership increases with the size of the reporting community;
- local identification is stronger than the occupational one.

The regional feeling of belonging in our country was affected in the last century by the standardization of administrative, cultural and also economic needs, leading to changes in the complex of values, which generated social and cultural coherence and which in turn induced a breaking of cultural borders that defined the cultural areas. (Sandu, 1996, p. 238)

**Table 2. Cultural and Historical Areas**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Cultural and historical areas</i>	<i>Associated counties</i>
1.	Muntenia	Argeș, Teleorman, Dâmbovița, Giurgiu, Prahova, Călărași, Ialomița, Brăila, Buzău București
2.	Dobrogea	Tulcea, Constanța
3.	Oltenia	Mehedinți, Gorj, Dolj, Vâlcea, Olt
4.	Moldova	Suceava, Botoșani, Neamț, Iași, Bacău, Vaslui, Vrancea, Galați
5.	Maramureș	Maramureș, Satu-Mare, Bihor, Arad
6.	Banat	Timiș, Caraș-Severin
7.	Transilvania	Sălaj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Mureș, Harghita, Covasna, Alba, Sibiu, Hunedoara, Brașov

The regional differentiation of the identity sources and the importance of socio-demographic structure do not confirm the characteristics of cultural continuity in Romania today. In the latter respect the analysis of regions and the development of cultural areas attracts some observations:

- historical regions are socio-cultural layers of depth over which overlapped, new layers of high consistency and vision that made the historical regions

to remain relevant to the differentiation of cultural life in Romania, although they appear less definite and have wider areas interpenetration;

- the emergence of new cultural areas in Romania by dividing historical regions and the emergence of inter-contact areas about networks of cultural similitude, staple which integrate discontinuous areas in the form of territorial unit;
- cultural and historical groups are more relevant for the deep structures of social and cultural life of the country, and cultural groups are closer to the daily, to the relatively independent culture, to the historical experience in the area;
- in this moment, the county, as a territorial entity, is not only a purely administrative body, but also a sociological complex structure showing consistency. It is an artificial construct which gained, over the last decades, a natural character with a deep identity.

Twelve years experience in operating the system of regional development in Romania shows that the system requires certain measures to be taken, with a view to improve, complete (legally, institutionally and procedurally) and meet all requirements of the European Commission. Therefore, the question is whether the current development regions are the best solution for promoting the regional development policy or there are other alternatives. At least in terms of efficient management of EU funds, an alternative might be the administrative regions, which give regional councils greater discretion and a regional approach to development rather than a communion of local interests.

The administrative-territorial reform through its importance at the state level requires solutions needed to be studied and subjected to public debate in order to find the most viable, the most accepted ones by society.

From the doctrine remedies we will present below some of them, those which we consider to be achievable, with minimal regulatory, financial and institutional effort<sup>1</sup>:

1. reshaping the existing development regions based on different criteria, using indicators of economic, demographic and infrastructure components stress being

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<sup>1</sup> Other remedies identified are: keeping the actual territorial divisions - 42 counties and 8 development regions, or creating regions taking into consideration the cultural identity. Knowing the critics of these two, we considered it appropriate not to do conduct our study along this lines.

laid upon the potential of developing counties and upon unitary common policies by imposing the principle of complementarity and functionality;

2. reshaping the existing boundaries of counties taking into account their common features that can unite and promote collaboration in industrial areas or similar economic profiles.

As we can see, the two role models for Romania would not only bring it in the category of French-type administrative regions (which does not double the political decision of government) but it will also increase its efficiency through the sharing of expertise and it will produce the strongest effects on the administrates.

In conclusion, regarding the authority of the region, it should be noted that the state does not delegate its powers, but some of the authority it possesses in order to exercise these attributes. Thus, we are dealing with a national-democratic decentralization (by delegation of authority) opposed to autonomist-ethnic decentralization which means devolution of attributes (single language, unified legislative authority) that could bring the erosion of state authority.

To establish regions as administrative-territorial units require some changes in the legal framework. The most important is the fundamental law by introducing in the art. 3 para. 3 a new administrative unit or by adding the following sentence "..., other forms of organization of the administrative-territorial units may be established by law." As a result, starting from the constitutional amendments, the other legislative acts, consequently, will correlate with the fundamental law. Thus, the current overlapping of legal rules relating to public administration in Romania would support major changes or additions to the Law 215/2001, Law 90/2001, Law 340/2004 etc.

Equally important, it is to take into account the harmonization of the adjacent legislation on the one side and on the other the recommendations of the international bodies working in the field.

During the accession process to the EU, the European Commission, through the voice of the Commissioner for Regional Policy - Michel Barnier, reiterated that "the EU does not intervene in the territorial-administrative organization of any Member State, whether member or candidate. We are not in a great European state and for that Brussels did not ask to be involved in the development of the administrative-territorial organization of Romania, this is an internal problem of the country. What interests Brussels is if there are areas for implementation of its

programs (funded by the EU), to ensure efficient use of funds and to do not increase bureaucracy”.

Furthermore, it must be said that the Council of Europe has had extensive discussions on European regions for some years, namely on the issuance and adoption of a particular type of regulation (Recommendation or Framework Convention) to provide a unique setting for a degree of regional autonomy.

European construction highlights global reconsideration of the pre-eminence of the states. They alone are considered to be too small to meet the new challenges arising from global levels, such as the defense policy, the technological innovation and the monetary policy. In the mean time, states are considered too large to effectively address the many problems of its citizens who are prepared to find solutions at regional or local level. As the sociologist Daniel Bell said “*There are things that states are too small to do, and instead there are others which are too big for them*”.

Remaining the basic structure of social organization, the state is subject to a double evolutionary process - first in the process of reunion of states in joint structures, and secondly the decentralization process and / or recognition of regional autonomy within a united Europe. If the first challenge is the result of a process of growing comprehensive military, political, economic, technological and cultural areas, the second one results from a process started within national states. Its local protagonists are trying to support their political and cultural identity. These challenges have weakened the state in the world but especially in Europe. The state witnesses a crisis of legitimacy and in some cases even a loss of political and economic power.

Therefore, Europe cannot continue to be only the Europe of Member States, but it should also develop a strategy on the path of building a Europe of regional cultures, which will make the deepening of democratic values more viable. It is therefore necessary to bring Europe closer to social realities, which may be done through the idea of regions and local entities.<sup>1</sup> (Alexandru & Bădescu, 1997)

To conclude, we can say that regionalization is so important for a country or Europe, should get a better balance in distribution of wealth by trying to raise the less developed areas. In turn, regionalism is the golden rule for the decision to reach the region in all its components, both as identity-memory and identity-action.

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<sup>1</sup> See more about in and *Dezvoltarea euroregională – Programe de cooperare din Europa Centrală și de Est*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Romanian Office, Bucharest, 2004.



These brief reflections on what a region may be, on the processes of (re) discovery of authentic regional area or community, the identity, the dialogue and participation enable a better understanding of dual relationships which are established directly among regions and between regions and the European institutions. This dual relationship is part of the dialectics of regionalisation, more or less intense, depending on each state.

Western Europe became aware of the gaps existing in the national paradigm, which dominated a long time and passed, economically, politically and culturally, to a new paradigm that integrates the national horizons into the European one.

And for Eastern Europe, the European paradigm is now a condition of cultural relevance and, perhaps more acutely, of survival. Only illusory the cultural relevance could be achieved through the national paradigm jumpstarting a century ago or more. It never refurbished, it is simply accepted *contretemps* with the civilized world experience of today, and its cultivation is counterproductive. Including Romania, the paradigm shifts from the national to the European and regional, it is a question of lucidity and, ultimately, of responsibility. (Marga, 1995, pp. 6-7)

Modern society is characterized by contradiction and pluralism, involving a variety of social behaviours. Therefore, it is not enough to take the decisions at the central level, it is also necessary to adapt them to the local specificity. At present, we speak more and more about the “subsidiary state” which could replace the “providence state”, which promotes democratic passivity; although it is clear that without the assistance of the civil society the state would be quickly paralyzed and powerless.

The decentralization characteristic to “the subsidiary state” allows the state to realise optimal social justice, to develop solidarity, to provide decisions on the area where they take effect. The citizen will be informed in advance, will be directly involved in drafting the decision and therefore in the effective participation in the process of solving public problems.

Europe is a union of decentralized local authorities, with emphasis on decentralization, and allows the development of contacts which the hyper-centralized State would not promote and which, however, could not tolerate. It can be argued that decentralization is one of the roads leading to a kind of European “normality”.

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