

## Regions and the Territorial Cohesion

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**Abstract:** Territorial cohesion is an important target of European Union, constantly promoted by its institutions and their representatives. In the context of the Europe 2020 strategy, one of the most important support documents, the region represents a very important issue, being considered to be the key to its successfulness. The region is seen as a support for the smart growth and all the operational policy concepts try to make use of the spatial potential, by taking better account of the territorial specificities. Two main questions play attention: the need to transform the present-day developmental regions into administrative ones is a priority? What kind of regionalization it must be promoted? Correlating these issues with already defined territorial cohesion, the administrative region is a real tool for the future territorial development. The experience of the last 14 years asks urgently the building of a new territorial administrative reform, giving competences to regions. For instant, each development region is a construction resulted from a free association of the counties. Their role in the regional development is much reduced one, because their regional councils are not elected; decisions taken at this level are consultative for the social, economical, cultural or political actors.

**Keywords:** region; territorial cohesion; legitimacy; specificities

**JEL Classification:** R; R1

### 1. Introduction

The paper is based on two main concepts, a very old and controversial one (the region), and the second, relatively new, asserted as a key concept for the territorial development policies in Europe (the territorial cohesion). The relationship between these concepts can be a fertile topic of discussion or is it just a teaching matter or an excuse to repeat already known issues? We believe that both for Romania and for the European Union (EU) the theme is topical and the region is considered to be the most appropriate level to achieve a goal: reaching territorial cohesion by integrating socio-economic cohesion within a cultural diversity. In addition, this is

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an essential prerequisite for the sustainable and balanced development, on a continental scale, as Europe is an example for other parts of the world in achieving solidarity between nations with varied histories and cultures, but with the same political will.

Romania is lagging behind concerning the implementation of the territorial cohesion policies because of the present inefficient institutional framework in which the arbitrary of the regional configuration is based on associative principles and not on efficient territorial management principles. The lack of functional regions as an expression of decentralisation, with a determinant role in implementing projects between counties or regions, is reflected in the low degree of EU funds absorption, in keeping the regional competencies at central level or/and at the level of the counties, in the low efficiency of the state institutions responsible for territorial development.

## **2. General Scientific Context**

Territorial cohesion is an important target of the EU Strategy for the 2014-2020 interval. Even if this is not specified in the strategy, the simplest logic leads to find out that the unifying factor of the three big growth pillars for the next stage has a spatial projection. In such a frame, the importance of reconsidering the territory as one of the main sources for a sustainable and balanced development is clear, also by capitalising the strengths and potentials of each place. The rethinking of the territory as a product of networks of socio-technical practices, namely flow networks (Painter, 2010), is a requirement for future development. The relatively recent history of the concept of territory, underlines a rapid transition from the initial container approach (with emphasis on the three-dimensional perspective) to the systemic type, through an intermediate vision based on mechanistic logics (Ianos & Heller, 2006).

By conceiving the territorial development as a sequence of imbalances, Alfred Hirschman (1958) formulates the “theory of unbalanced growth”, according to which industrialisation, seen as a solution for diminishing territorial imbalances, has its clear limits. It is important to use mechanisms that generate and focus the human energies towards precise objectives. The creation of an activity baseline imbalance will cause significant connection effects upstream and downstream. Gunnar Myrdal (1963) proves that the development analysis can't be based only on economic variables, but also on non-economic ones and that the regional growth processes are the result of a circular and cumulative causality. Important Contributions are being brought by Allan Pred (1965, 1973), who explains the differentiated cities growth, defines among others the importance of the cluster economic activities, of the innovation and of the permanent information changes among cities having a certain hierarchical structure. During the last decade of the

XXth century, the economic geography has been reconsidered, mainly due to Paul Krugman's work (1995). His theory, essentially, considers less important the initial growth cause, emphasizing the "path dependency" as a dominant tendency in the contemporary territorial development.

Developing regions must take into account the proposals made at the EU level. It is important to predict how European territory will look like over the next fifteen years by providing qualitative-quantitative territorial scenarios for an enlarged Europe, under different assumptions about the future direction in which the driving forces affecting the development will turn over (Capello & Fratesi, 2009).

Territorial complexity faces interrelated methodological, conceptual and policy challenges. The feature of model evaluation is important, both to understand and to meet these challenges. They include methodological issues such as sensitivity and complex scaling; the conceptual challenges of conflating pattern and process, and reconciling simplicity and complexity; also, it includes policy issues brought by the science. The importance of these challenges and the centrality of model evaluation in meeting them are demonstrated through examples drawn from human-environment systems, with particular reference to global changes (Manson, 2007).

Achieving territorial cohesion implies the existence of a permanent and cooperative process, by involving a variety of actors in the development and administration field. The dialogue between these actors and the cooperation achieved through the so-called **governance** is the very essence of the territorial cohesion process. Explicitly, we believe that only the joint action of the public and private sector, of the scientific communities, NGOs and other categories of actors might ensure a strong territorial response to the global changes faced by Europe and the global society (Territorial Agenda, Leipzig, 2007).

The planning activity, including strategies, policies and sectorial programs, as well as specific documents integrated in the aim of the balanced and sustainable **spatial development**, becomes essential in achieving territorial cohesion. The improvement of this activity involves individualising operational spatial entities, such as regions that become fundamental in the rational territorial planning process, in the environmental protection and in the achievement of socio-economic objectives (Spatial planning charter – Torremolinos Charter, 1983).

For future territorial cohesion, the different regional structures will have an important role, frequently perceived as urban-rural interfaces, respectively peri-urban interface. This interface is characterised as a process where the place and identity are being reconfigured and contested (Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2006). It's a big challenge to find an appropriate regional configuration to ensure the future development and to keep regional identity too.

The discussion about the modality in which underdevelopment can be diminished at the local and regional levels during a crisis period, has got a positive side,

despite some question marks regarding its realism. In such a stage, the orientation of organizations and public institutions, private or civic, towards the spaces where reality is extremely rigid, can attenuate the effects of the crisis. Up to present, representative institutions in the field are targeted almost exclusively towards territorial areas from a superior level of the hierarchy, by the global development coefficient (Bojnec, 2006).

As recent studies demonstrated, there are big discrepancies regarding development at macro-territorial level (Ianos, 2010; Lefter & Constantin, 2009), and their increasing tendencies are indubitable. National space, as essential part of the European space, can be seen only in correlation to this (Toderoiu, 2009). Consequently, it is very obvious that after a period in which the speed of recovery in the development field is much higher than expected, another period follows, in which initial discrepancies deepen.

In the process of territorial development, the convergence of administrative units is reached after an initial increase of discrepancies. In Romania's case, Williamson's curve (1965) is partially examined, showing that territorial discrepancies increase up to a certain level, and when a saturation threshold is reached, its development generalises and discrepancies diminish very much (Szörfi, 2007). We say "partially", as Romania's development level did not exceed the phase of territorial discrepancies' increase, even if the relation between the capital and the other extreme counties proves the reaching of the maximal level and the start of these discrepancies' decrease process. This is a sign by which Pal's affirmation (2009), according to which countries from the Eastern Europe have got problems regarding regional disparities and their capitals are continuously increasing, seems to be contradicted.

Globally, the territorial convergence process is not visible yet, due to the increase of regional discrepancies between extreme counties. Thus, between the counties Timiș and Vaslui, the increase of the existing disparities continues. The difference between the two counties also confirms the increase of the disparities between the west and the east of the country, except for those of core-periphery type (Petraikos, 2009).

In order to reduce these disparities, except for the process of endogenous development of each state, the EU offers, by the means of Structural Instruments, substantial financing. This is the reason why it is considered that the main challenge for new EU member states is the efficient absorption of the funds allocated for the Territorial Convergence objective. This objective is primary in the policy of European cohesion, attracting 81.5% out of the total financing. Previous experience shows great difficulties in absorbing these funds, as there is not a sufficiently developed culture to create real mechanisms at different levels, in order to access with more efficiency such a financing and especially to use these funds

for creating the bases for the future development. The present Romanian system does not encourage enough the setting up of partnerships between authorities at local, county, regional and central level, on one hand, and between the public administration, civil society and entrepreneurs, on the other hand (Bischoff & Giosan, 2004).

In the conditions of the poles' revitalization and the growth centres' theories, as an instrument for the diminishing of the inequalities among the EU member states (Salmon, 2008; Lopez-Rodriguez, 2008; Pocol, 2009; Ianoş, 2010), using it at the level of the highly disadvantaged areas can be a way of recovering. For the present context, considering the fact that the big challenge is represented by the gap between the western and eastern part of the EU, territorial development is much more important at macroscale level (Eposti, 2008). The development at lower levels refers to national, regional, county or local policies (Huber, 2006).

Most of the studies related to present territorial dynamics focus on the regional framework, and consequently the conclusions refer to the differences at macro-scale and the ways of decrease at this spatial level (Antonescu, 2001). Otherwise, it is well known that intraregional differences are more obvious than interregional differences; therefore the orientation of studies towards measuring the development process at meso- and micro-scale level can be extremely useful too.

As we already mentioned, regional policy is challenged by the globalization and regionalization of political and economic structures, the implementation of sustainable development, and the reform of political and administrative structures. Most European countries have started to reformulate their regional policy. The approach includes the political system and sectorial policies with regional impact and comprises six elements: public and private actors; institutional structures and processes; top-down and bottom-up approaches; exogenous and endogenous strategies; economic, social, and environmental dimensions; and policies at regional, national, and European levels. This integrated perspective is complemented with considerations on how this approach in practice could look like at the national and regional level (Thierstein & Egger, 1998).

### **3. Short History of the Administrative Regions in Romania**

Romania has its history in which there have been experienced different types of administrative forms, having either a beneficial or abhorred role. Until the beginning of the communist regime, the forms of administrative organization have mostly used regional or sub-regional traditions, the historic relations between settlements being key factors to their functioning. During the communism new form of organization copied exogenous models: regions and districts have replaced the provinces (ținuturi), counties (județe) and smaller districts (plăși), disrupting

the historic role of territorial dynamics that some cities have had. In addition, many traditional entities such as “countries” (țări, pays) have lost part of their functionality (Ilies and Ilies, 1999), due to their high fragmentation, following the emergence of the new administrative form called “raion”.

At a sub-national level, the disorder of the ensuing years has been an obstacle for the development process, even if the motivations behind successive reorganizations have always had economic and social extent. In short, in 1950, Romania is separated into 28 regions, in 1952, their number is reduced to 18, as in 1956 remain only 16 regions (Săgeată, 2011). Apparently, all this evolution regarding administrative organization at the sub-national level seemed a natural one: cost reduction on the efficiency of the public administration and territorial development. There should be reminded that one of the slogans of the entire communist period was “the harmonious development of all country regions.” In fact, regional and “raion” competencies channelling resources only towards the capital cities of the regions have increased regional centralism in relation to local communities.

Therefore a return to the traditional sub-national administrative organization, which was the county (județ), has become a necessity. The way this reorganization was conceived in 1967 (becoming operational in 1968), with the participation of many specialists, gave functional consistency to new configurations that could support (with comments on administrative structure of counties around Bucharest), the transition to a new type of territorial development. Recommendations of specialists were taken into consideration at the time (it was during the first years of the arrival to power of Nicolae Ceausescu), which was reflected in the durability of these structures.

During the preparations for joining the EU structures, this administrative ‘cut’, equivalent to NUTS III in member countries, proved to be unable to sustain regional development with the priority objectives to mitigate internal gaps, as well as between Romanian counties and European regions. The county has a much lower level of resources than European regions, and its potential doesn’t allow it playing an important sub-national role, requiring the necessity of new configurations compatible with those in the EU.

Romania started promoting a genuine regional policy only after 1998 when a law was promulgated in the field. This is how the 8 regions have been individualized with the role of the regional councils and regional development agencies, to managing the funds allocated from the state budget and European funds for balanced national development.

Therefore, from that date on the institutional framework was set up for implementing programmes and developing projects. The achievements were more and more obvious from one stage to another even if they were contradictory sometimes – either due to the egalitarian mentality of the members of the local

councils, or to the rather downsized maximal quantum of the projects versus the expected effects. The applications for the PHARE program via this institutional framework, and later on for SAPARD, were as many important experiences for developing an entrepreneurial culture at the level of the small businessmen. Even if cautious at the beginning, they have relatively quickly learned how to use all the opportunities that might appear in a market economy, the offer of unredeemable funds for regional development included.

Is there a model of uneven development specific to Romania? We dare to say yes: there exists a certain historical inheritance of the regional gaps and of their perpetuation, irrespective of the successive political regimes that kept following one another. Therefore, the attempts to implement policies able to smooth the territorial development differences had good effects, although temporary: after the restrictions specific to the respective regimes had been eliminated, the negative effects were even more visible.

The present strategy of Romania's polycentric spatial development, also inspired by the decisions taken at the level of the United Europe, could be defined by concrete, sectorial, or global policies that, if implemented, would contribute to the attenuation of the above gaps (Țurcănașu & Rusu, 2007). If the new regional policy – an older one as a matter of fact (known from the 1960s and 1970s, but forgotten at the European level) – could be accompanied, or rather preceded by a policy for the major infrastructure development, able to connect the poles by a highway network, the results could be quite remarkable. If not, the attempt might be a failure since the interconnecting capacity of the respective poles and the connecting one with the growth centres ranked according to different levels remain very weak.

To diminish the gaps among the country's greater regions and inside them, a policy should be set up of producing temporal inequalities in the much lagging-behind spaces and of supporting poles/ centres able to play the role of genuine engines of territorial development (Ianoș & Heller, 2006). Even if the latest evolutions of the country's regions show a relative approach of their development levels, in absolute values they hide deepening gaps.

After about 15 years of the setting up and functioning of the 8 development regions, the problem of administrative reorganization comes up in the public debate, for the region, as an administrative level needs a change of the Romanian Constitution, that must be agreed by referendum.

#### **4. The Administrative Regions, between Whim and Necessity**

Launching the debate on the idea of generating a new administrative delineation created a real hysteria among politicians, experts and ordinary people. In this context ever more creative ideas are issued, some aiming towards restoring the old communal division and the reconfiguration of existing counties, creation of new ones and diminishing of others and so on. Yet the fiercest discussions are focused on the way counties should be organized to form future administrative regions.

For a part of the population, that is not well informed about the discussions on regionalization in Romania, these aspects appear as a capricious idea: "In circumstances of deep economic crisis, our politicians deal with the problems of a new territorial crop? Other priority issues should be considered and not a new regionalization!" Obviously this means better and consistent information to citizens is needed, using all channels: from school to current mass-media.

The new stage of functional integration of Romania into the EU involves increasing the capacity of interaction with both Member States and European regions. Do counties have current capacity to fulfil the role of regions? Surely not, because there is no needed for critical mass to impose themselves as important actors in the relations with European regions: they do not have economic potential and financial support to enable joint development projects; they do not represent, through their functions, administrative structures able to induce significant development on extended areas. In addition, under increased decentralization, their limited space and low population make them less operational in territorial management.

Why not using developing regions still as tools for territorial cohesion? The present framework for policy development was conceived as a temporary one and has no elected bodies and as a consequence they have no power for decision. This decisional capacity should be defined by the Constitution and laws deriving from the implementation of a real decentralization. Being associative structures, current development regions may not perform specific administrative tasks such as credit ordering structure and cannot be responsible for regulating development process at higher territorial level (above county). Therefore, the necessity for an administrative cut-out to enhance and benefit from the decentralization process and to stimulate regional development becomes obvious.

Why now and not later? This is another question that logically arises among the population and specialists, as irrespective of the way this administrative reform is accomplished, it will incur costs. In the context of a crisis it is rather unusual to proceed to such an action, involving costs not only for the operation of the new regional institutions, but also costs caused by potential disorder of flow decisions.



To demonstrate that the time is right, there should be an emphasize on the fact that according to the way cohesion funds are managed at European level, the financial programming period 2014-2020 is a distinct one, and building a framework that would increase the capacity to absorb more European funds is a necessity. Disappointing achievements of the period 2007-2013 showed that one of the weaknesses is the lack of a regional structure able to take over tasks form central level and manage activities that can attract private funds through European projects. Moreover, the international conference organized by the European Commission and the Government of Romania in 1997 (Proceedings, 1997), clearly stated that the lifetime of the development regions is about 10 years. It has been almost 15 years, and these regions have not been replaced with administrative ones. Later on, it may be too late!

The development of administrative regions does not mean abolition of county, but keeping them while reducing their competencies, as some of them will be transferred to the new regions. Counties have built a certain identity, they represent a traditional structure, specific for the Romanian nation and they have a certain functionality given by the role of the county residence, also by the structure of the county system of human settlements.

The conclusion is that a new administrative organization limited to setting up of administrative regions is a necessity which must be solved soon to become relatively quickly operational.

## **5. Territorial Cohesion, a “Lady Morgana”?**

Territorial cohesion has been defined in various ways; all showing that it still goes through conceptual clarification and methodological processes. For example, in some European documents the Green Paper for Sustainable Spatial Development, territorial cohesion is seen as a tool to enhance the diversity of the continent. Faludi (2009) notes that this concept can be considered both as a product and a process having an important role in the future European architecture. Territorial cohesion requires both solidarity and interdependence, including urban-rural and / or manufacturing-residential dimensions. In our opinion, territorial cohesion can be defined by a certain amount of interdependence and a series of feed-backs, contributing to the sustainable growth of the quality of life of human communities. Territorial cohesion has great potential to reduce certain types of conflict, especially those that originate from social discrepancies (Ianoş, 2011).

One way to interpret such territorial cohesion, with a special particularity, is the border areas. Here, where the case arises, there may be a high consistency on both sides of the border, but there are no synergies (for example, border areas between EU and non-EU countries). On the contrary there are situations when there is a

high consistency on both sides of the border and relations between the two spaces are synergistic and issue a special type of cohesion. The specificity of situations in border areas leads to the idea of several concepts, such as asymmetric cohesion or cohesive ruptures in an apparently homogenous territory.

In other words, we define territorial cohesion (CT) as requiring a degree of internal consistency (C), and a synergistic effect of territorial processes (S), respectively:



In terms of approach, territorial cohesion can be analyzed from a political perspective, aiming to promote the most effective local governance leading to reduced disparities, to increase competitiveness and ensure sustainable territorial development. From the academic perspective, territorial cohesion represents high compatibility between components of a territorial system to produce maximum efficiency with minimum losses during the operation of that system. From this angle, we can consider territorial cohesion as a product with inputs (those ensuring the close links between natural and anthropogenic components being the dominant ones, targeting to specific objectives) and outputs, materialized in results (Figure 1).

As the sustainable development, territorial cohesion has a high degree of relativity, therefore appears to be a “Lady Morgana”. The general impression is that when finally reached the territorial cohesion, suddenly new disturbances appear (including positive ones by knowledge leap) and so a lower cohesion. Consequently we are discussing a relative “product” that cannot be achieved because of the development of the society and its spatial structuring through “creative destructions”.

Multiscale analysis of the territory revealed the invariability relationship between fragmentation and integration, hence the need for a cohesive development. Fragmentation takes into account the management of an area distinguished by human communities for the purpose of continuous improvement on living conditions of the inhabitants, but also turning to economic performance by different territorial actors. At the same time, integration involves the exploitation of complementarities by communities at national or regional scale, or by multinational companies. Relationship between land fragmentation and its integration is strongly disrupted by globalization through which, increasing competition between cities, centralization is favoured at a higher level as well as urban growth in several metropolitan systems (Sallez & Verot, 1993), which induces the breakage of initial cohesion. This implies an increased fragmentation, regions becoming territorial building blocks of the global economy (Oosterlynck,

2010), whether they are called economic areas, industrial districts, regional innovation systems, learning regions, etc.

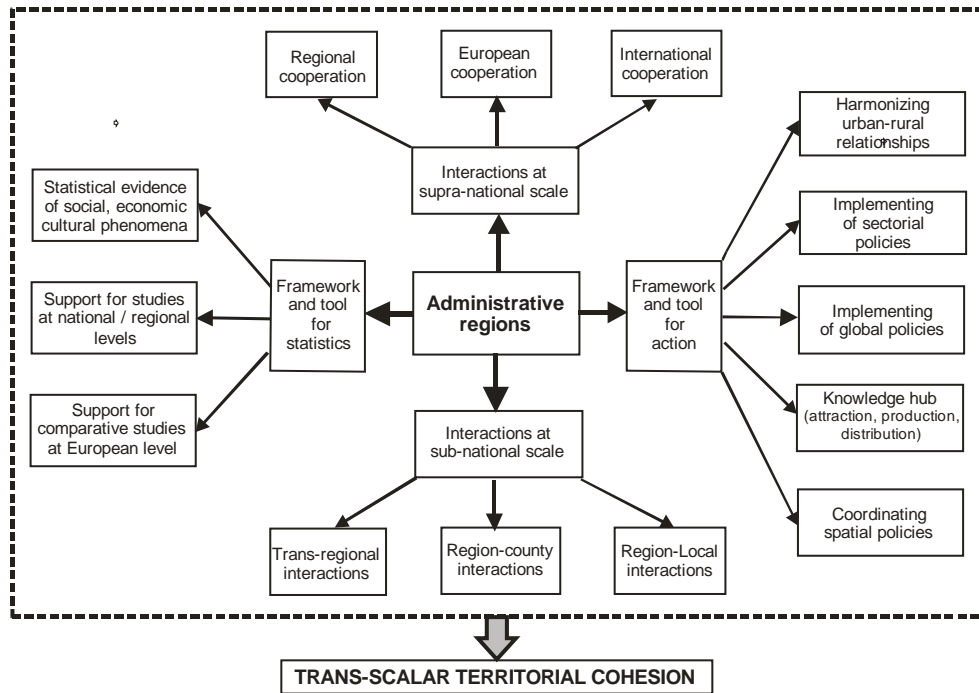


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the trans-scalar perspective of territorial cohesion

### 6. The Advantages of the Present Development Regions to be transformed in Administrative Ones

The region, as a functional territorial partition became a key level for strategic economic governance, being placed somewhere between the local and the national and it is often dependent on an agency. Such institutions manage political, social, economic and cultural processes whereby functional territorial structures are generally created and dismantled).

As we already mentioned, regional policy is challenged by the globalization and regionalization of political and economic structures, by the reform of political and administrative ones and by the implementation of sustainable development. Most European countries have started to reformulate their regional policy. The approach includes the political system and sectorial policies with regional impact and comprises six elements: public and private actors; institutional structures and processes; top-down and bottom-up approaches; exogenous and endogenous

strategies; economic, social, and environmental dimensions; and policies at regional, national, and European levels. This integrated perspective is complemented with considerations of how this approach in practice could look like at national and regional level (Thierstein & Egger, 1998).

Administrative decentralization is an important part of cohesion increasing. Two examples are decentralization in the structure of public administration, and decentralization in provision of regional services, which seems to be more complicated. Frequently, fragmentation could be assimilated with decentralization; nevertheless there is a big difference among them. In East - Central European countries, parallel to the structural decentralization, different new forms of integration are emerging, simply as a result of the establishment of local institutions in place of former monopolies. This non-administrative but functional integration seems to be very important for the development of effectiveness in a coherent development (Horváth, 1997).

The spatial structure of administration is influenced on the one hand by the requirements of administrative logic and on the other by the fact that an administrative structure has to exist within a broader and generally more complex functional structure. The main criteria for organising the spatial structure of administration under such conditions can be satisfied in the context of a hierarchical urban system (Parr, 2007).

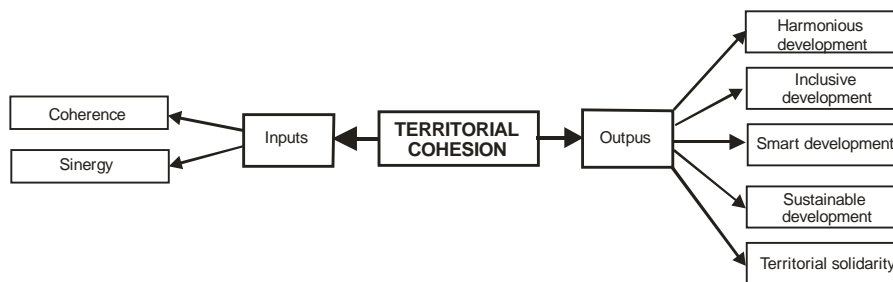
Analyzing the actual situation of the 8 regions, we can summarize their main advantages provided by:

- a critical mass of population that can represent a great potential in trans-regional and trans-European cooperation, by its creative and consumption capacity. It is about going beyond a critical threshold of 2 million inhabitants;
- conditions for cooperation due to complementary of natural and human resources of the component counties of a development region: all regions (except Bucharest-Ilfov) including counties with specific natural resource for different geographical areas. Underground resources which are complementary, such as oil, natural gas, mineral resources such as coal, ore, non-metals etc., are sometimes associated to the three major landforms;
- conditions for stimulating intraregional solidarity through the existence of both developed and underdeveloped, or strongly affected by economic restructuring during the transition period counties;
- regional functionality performed by ordering of functions on structural levels of urban hierarchies; either we refer to the monocentrism, bicentrism or polycentrism, relations between settlements of any region are relatively ordered on the basis of services offered by the city on the upper level.

Among the weaknesses of these regions there can be mentioned only one related in some cases to a lack of regional identity, built in historic time. For example, the South-East region could be harder accepted. Yet, if combined with its bicentrist character, the lack of a unique regional identity is diminished.

## 7. Conclusions

The administrative region, born from the development one, is among the most appropriate tools for territorial cohesion. We must bear in mind that it fulfils four main functions: a framework and a reference for national and European statistics, another one as an action framework and a tool for increasing territorial cohesion, a third environmental one for the interactions at a sub-national scale, and the last one as a favourable element of interactions at a supranational scale (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. The Territorial Cohesion as a System**

Performing such functions, the newly created administrative regions will be the most appropriate tool for achieving decentralization, a very necessary process in the future development of Romania. Based on an optimization of distribution of territorial functions regarding the administrative organizational structures, decentralization will support territorial cohesion. Highlighting the aforementioned functions leads to developing a type of cohesion of a trans-scalar character, which will be reflected by highly differentiated levels of cohesion at different levels of organization.

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