

## **TRENDS REGARDING THE ADMINISTRATIVE- TERRITORIAL REORGANIZATION OF ROMANIA PART I - THE HYPOTHESIS OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SECOND INTERMEDIATE LEVEL**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study tries to analyze the trends regarding the administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania in the period after 1989, when the issue of administrative-territorial reorganization was often discussed, many of the government programs having it as an objective. The governments established after the Revolution often asked themselves the problem of improving the administrative organization. Although the governors in the period after 1989 seemed interested in a possible administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania – no significant measures were taken and all the projects regarding the reorganization have been abandoned. The difficulty of finding a perfect administrative organization is due to the fact that, as emphasized in the doctrine, there is no ideal organizational system that can be invariably applied to any people.*

**KEY WORDS:** *administrative-territorial organization, reorganization, regionalization, local administrative authorities, local autonomy.*

**JEL CLASIFICATION:** *K22.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

One of the intensely debated issues, both here and in other states, refers to the optimal dimensions of local communities, as well as the optimal number of "levels of administration" (Ziller, 1993, p. 204), because regardless of state form, unitary, federal or regional, all the states of the European Union face the same question: "what is the ideal number of levels of local authorities to have an effective public action?" (Guerard, 2012, p. 4). Therefore, within administrative-territorial organization, the establishment or dissolution of an administrative-territorial unit is of obvious importance; also, the smaller or larger area of the administrative-territorial unit

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influences the rational functioning and efficiency of the activity of the authorities that are organized at its level.

## **2. REGIONS - AS A SECOND INTERMEDIATE LEVEL**

A first theory regarding the administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania is the one that promotes the establishment of new administrative-territorial units, the regions, as a second intermediate level. Even if we do not embrace such a position, we believe that the emergence of such a theory was determined, mainly, by three factors.

First of all, the outline of some theories regarding the regionalization of Romania was determined by the increase in the importance of regions in Europe, which became a striking phenomenon of the last decades, as a result of a true mutation of mentalities regarding regions (de Rougemont, 1978, p. 98). In this sense, the specialized literature mentions that since the 1990s there has been talk of a "Europe of regions", in which the region was perceived not only as an intermediate level between central and local authorities, but as a third point of the triangle in which the European integration process could develop (Alexandru, 2009, pp. 165-166; Gorun & Gorun, 2009, p. 51).

It was opined that the ascendancy of the regional reality in the last decades in Europe is based on the contribution of the regions to economic development and to the achievement of the objective of economic and social cohesion, to the necessary togetherness of the citizens of the European Union, thus making possible a greater institutional democratization and to the promotion of the coexistence of the most diverse cultural, linguistic and social realities (Roca, 1995).

Another explanation of the many discussions regarding the reorganization of the administrative-territorial structure of our country is also represented by the fact that, in the context of joining the European Union, the need was felt to build territorial entities larger than the counties (development regions) that would have the responsibility of managing pre- and post-accession funds allocated for the purpose of economic and social development.

Another argument that was the basis for the establishment of development regions was also represented by the difficulties generated by the collaboration between counties and regional structures in European states (Popescu, 2002, p. 40; Preda, 2006, p. 79), in the context in which prior to the emergence of Law 151 of 1998 by which the development regions were established, we did not have structures similar to regions in the European states.

Thus, according to art. 2 of Law no. 199 of 1997 for the ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, so prior to the establishment of the development regions, Romania declared that through the notion of regional authority, provided for in art. 4, para. 4 and 5 of the Charter, it is understood according to the national legislation the county authority of the local public administration. From this manifestation of the will of the Romanian state, it results that the counties were assimilated with the regions, this being also a recognition, even at the national level, of the reality that the regional structures from the European states had no correspondent in our country at that time except at the county level.

In this context, we consider that, prior to the emergence of the 1998 Law on Regional Development in Romania by which the development regions were established, regarding this relationship between the counties in Romania and the regions in the European states, but especially regarding the obligations that the counties in Romania should have faced in relations with the European regional structures, the counties had the disadvantage of a reduced territorial extent and as a direct consequence there was also the disadvantage of a reduced financial capacity compared to the European regions.

In this context, we cannot fail to notice the reality resulting from the comparison of the administrative-territorial organization of our country with that of other European states, organized, as a rule, on three levels, not only on two, as in Romania, in which case it is possible to see that the number of our existing intermediate-level local collectivities at present, namely the counties, is large compared to the number of European ones, which, as shown in the specialized literature (Popescu, 1999, pp. 126-131), generates a reduced importance and a small economic force of the intermediate-level administrative-territorial unit, with repercussions not only on the capacity to collaborate with European regional structures, but also on local autonomy.

This was therefore the context in which Law 151 of 1998 appeared, through which development regions were established, thus trying to solve this problem of collaboration with European regions, specifying that, obviously, this law should not be interpreted in the sense of an administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania, because through this normative act these development regions were created, as functional structures through which the preparation of the institutional framework corresponding to the absorption of European funds and effective collaboration with the regions of other states of the European Union was sought, and the development regions currently existing in our country are not administrative-territorial units.

In fact, time has shown us that, as the Commissioner for regional policy and institutional reform from the European Union showed during a national seminar that had as its theme the regionalization of Romania and which took place in October 2002, not the European Union, but Romania is the one that has to decide its future territorial organization, this being an internal problem of Romania (Nicola, 2013, p. 34). It follows that regionalization should not be decided depending on the accession to the European Union, because it did not represent a condition, an aspect that was confirmed on the occasion of Romania's accession to the European Union, when there were development regions, but without them constituting administrative units - territorial.

A third reason for which we believe that a series of discussions, both at the doctrinal and political level, regarding the regionalization of Romania, consists in the need to start the reform of the organization of the public administration after 1989. Thus, considering the national and European context, aspects such as the rethinking of the administrative-territorial structure of Romania were increasingly brought into discussion, especially when the question of an effective process of financial decentralization (Kovacs, 2000, p. 199) and of public services was raised.

Considering the different types of regionalization adopted within the European Union by the member states, we can conclude that each of the member states chose the model that they considered appropriate to their political, economic or social realities, in

the case of many of them even different forms of regionalization coexist and adaptation measures being taken whenever the objective reality requires this. From the perspective of studying the regional institution, some authors have grouped the states of the European Union into: federal states (Germany, Belgium and Austria), regionalized states (Spain and Italy) and unitary states (the vast majority of them, such as France, Great Britain, Portugal, Greece, Netherlands, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Luxembourg). Regionalized states are characterized by a reduced degree of autonomy compared to the component states of a federation, but much higher compared to the regions of a unitary state (Gorun & Gorun, 2009, p. 51).

Whatever the solution adopted in the eventuality of administrative-territorial reorganization, it will have to take into account, on the one hand, an abstract element that is in the general and higher principles provided by the science of administrative law, and on the other hand, a concrete element that it lies in the natural needs of our people.

A great author of the interwar period showed, even then, that a serious administrative-territorial organization presupposes two main directions: the elimination of unnecessary intermediate structures and the independence and greater responsibility for all administrative officials (Negulescu, 1934, p. 611). We also believe, along with other authors, that these remarks are still valid today (Apostol Tofan, 2004, p. 39). So, in order to obtain an efficient public administration, we must, first of all, eliminate unnecessary structures, and in this context, we do not see the efficiency of creating a second intermediate level.

### **3. PROJECTS IN THE PERIOD AFTER 1989 REGARDING REGIONS - AS A SECOND INTERMEDIATE LEVEL**

The governments established after the Revolution often asked themselves the problem of improving the administrative organization. In the period 1992-1996, the problem of improving the administrative-territorial organization represented one of the main objectives of the government program, without this objective materializing in taking measures worthy of appreciation, these being limited only to increasing the number of cities and municipalities. The government from 1996-2000 considered that it had completed its objective regarding the improvement of the administrative-territorial organization by adopting Law no. 151/1998 on regional development. During the 2000-2004 government, a new law on regional development was adopted and at one point there was a project for the administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania which sought to grant legal personality to the 8 regions that would then replace the 41 counties. In the 2004-2008 and 2008-2012 governments, the head of state brought up the administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania many times, making a series of proposals regarding regionalization. In the following governments, 2012-2016 and 2016-2020, the administrative-territorial reorganization was no longer a topic of interest. The most important aspect at the legislative level regarding public administration is represented by the appearance in 2019 of the Administrative Code, which expressly repealed all normative acts in the sphere of public administration,

representing a large-scale legal act that currently contains the regulation of the majority of legal relations in the sphere administrative law.

Although the governors seemed interested in a possible regionalization, as was also emphasized in the specialized literature, those in government should first try to answer two big questions: is regionalization necessary? And what is the opportune moment for regionalization? Questions that can only be answered after carrying out an impact study highlighting the economic, social, cultural, institutional, patrimonial effects, etc. (Nicola, 2013, pp. 35-36).

A similar fate had the project "Memorandum on the regional construction of Romania" presented in Cluj at the end of the year 2006, which was harshly criticized. The document proposed for public debate "ideas related to the political and administrative construction of a Romania of the regions, in agreement with the debate taking place at the European level about the future of united Europe". The signatories proposed an administrative reform that would redefine the status of existing territorial entities and introduce new administrative and political forms. One of the main goals of rethinking the administrative system was a more efficient allocation of resources at the local level, as the supporters of this theory believed that the money intended for local development was lost in the super-centralized administrative hub.

Thus, although throughout the post-December period there were draft laws on the granting of legal personality to development regions drafted by some parliamentarian, but also studies with proposals regarding the administrative-territorial division developed at the level of the Romanian Academy (Oțiman, coord., 2013, pp. 37-41) and the Romanian Geographical Societies. Also, the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration contained a distinct section dedicated to regionalization, in which the establishment of regions in 2013 was foreseen, however, no measure of administrative-territorial reorganization has been taken until now.

The reason why we believe that all these projects have been abandoned, in all governments, is due to the fact that an administrative-territorial reorganization implies a far-reaching reform that requires immense efforts, if we think, first of all, of the multitude of specialists who would should be consulted in order to find the optimal form of administrative-territorial organization, then if we think about the extensive legislative measures that should be taken for the new administrative-territorial organization to take legal form (and we are referring here, first of all, to the revision of the Constitution and then to the modification of all normative acts aimed at local public administration) and, last but not least, to the financial resources necessary to implement this reform.

First of all, in order to establish the regions, according to the legislation in force, referendums should be organized through which the citizens are consulted on the administrative reorganization in mind, according to article 95 of the Administrative Code, which establishes that Any modification of the territorial limits of the administrative units -territorial regarding their establishment, re-establishment or reorganization can only be carried out by law and after the mandatory consultation of the citizens of the respective administrative-territorial units by local referendum, under the conditions of the law. In the same sense, in addition to the Law on local public

administration, the Law on the organization and conduct of the referendum no. 3/2000 establishes in art. 13 para. (3) that the draft laws or legislative proposals regarding the modification of the territorial limits of communes, cities and counties are submitted to the Parliament for adoption only after the prior consultation of the citizens of the respective administrative-territorial units, by referendum, in this case the organization of the referendum is mandatory (Trăilescu, 2010, p. 35; Preda, 2000, p. 528). This obligation of the state to consult the territorial collectivities in case of any modification of the local territorial limits must be seen as a materialization of the protection of local autonomy (Gîrlesteanu, 2011, p. 64). Only then could we proceed to the revision of the Constitution regarding the administrative-territorial organization of the country, because the use of any other technique to achieve the administrative-territorial reorganization, such as the assumption of responsibility by the Government or the adoption of an organic law, would be unconstitutional, as was also emphasized in specialized literature (Mitoiu, 2012, p. 218).

If the creation of the regions were to be accepted, the adoption of some major changes in the legislation would have to be taken into account, because the establishment or abolition of a level of administrative organization of the state territory necessarily implies a new delimitation of the competence between the public authorities that it also represents, implicitly, a change in the legal relations between them, the state having direct legal relations, as a rule, with the public authorities from the administrative-territorial units with the largest extension (Preda, 2007, pp. 4-8).

In this sense, we believe that, first of all, the Constitution should be amended (Drăganu, 2000, pp. 335-336), in the sense of nominating the region among the administrative-territorial units, or by amending art. 3 paragraph (3) of the constitutional text that refers to the administrative-territorial organization, in the following form "The territory is organized, administratively, in communes, cities and counties, as well as through other forms of territorial-administrative organization that can be established on the basis of law" (Alexandru, 2009, p. 174). In the case of the introduction of the region among the administrative-territorial units, we believe that it will be necessary to amend Title III, Chapter V, Section 2 relating to local public administration by introducing an article relating to regional authorities.

Amending the Constitution in the sense of what has been specified would determine the completion and modification of the normative acts that contain applicable provisions in the matter: Administrative Code, Law no. 554/2004 regarding administrative litigation, in the sense of the express reference to the organization and functioning of regional authorities.

The consequence of their modification may have direct repercussions on Law no. 315/2004 on regional development in Romania, a law that should be radically modified in terms of the institutions, attributions and means necessary for a real regionalization process, because, as it was also emphasized in the specialized literature (Panduru, 2006, p. 115), the current framework law on regionalization is a palliative, the expression of a lack of political will shown by all the governors after 1990, which cannot be said to allow obtaining real benefits for regional communities. Practically, through this law, regions were created, representing groups of counties based on geographical criteria, having diluted institutions and being characterized by centralism

and bureaucracy. The eight regions, without administrative status and without legal personality, have a correspondent in the member countries of the Union only at level II, without having any other correspondent in terms of their institutions and way of organization.

By amending the normative acts listed above, the institutional structures and financial resources necessary for the functioning of the regions as administrative-territorial units will be created, offering the possibility of clearly establishing the representative bodies, their election procedure, the powers of these authorities that will be established to fulfil the duties from the level of this new form of administrative organization. Such an action must take into account, first of all, the economic, social and organizational implications and effects that regionalization determines and establish the appropriate measures to solve them. Thus, for example, the creation of new administrative-territorial units implies the establishment of measures regarding the organization of elections for the new authorities at the regional level; equipping their premises and estimating the costs they involve.

#### **4. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF REGIONS - AS A SECOND INTERMEDIATE LEVEL**

In the situation where the establishment of the region is chosen, it must be emphasized that the regionalization is to be only an administrative one, in order to prevent any manifestation of federalist tendencies, contrary to the characteristics of the Romanian state: national, sovereign and independent, unitary and indivisible, according to the Law fundamental (Panduru, 2007, p. 82).

Supporters of the region argue that among the advantages of the establishment of the region is the fact that it does not weaken the state, but eases its tasks by allowing it to focus more effectively on its attributions, but without presenting concrete arguments to support its claims.

Another aspect that constitutes an argument in favour of the establishment of regions refers to the fact that when the counties were established (1968), they were conceived as units with reduced dimensions, so that the county seat would be more easily accessible to the inhabitants, but at the present time when there are fast means of transport that are accessible to everyone, this argument is no longer valid. Also, some politicians believe that regions represent the best administrative solution for cross-border developments. Also, as shown in a geographical study (Săgeată, 2006, p. 13), some county seat cities have a strong inter-county influence, an argument that can impose them as true regional epicentres.

As shown in a study, which presents, among other things, decentralization in France, the creation of the French region as an administrative constituency responded to the need to extend the problems of economic development and territorial planning to a larger area than that of the department (Apostol, 1993, p. 112). This study also emphasizes the idea that the creation of the region is justified if, on its territory, it can fulfil a role that neither cities, nor departments (in our case, counties) nor the state could fulfil (Savy, 1992, p. 10).

However, there is another current in the specialized literature, according to which the "much-trumpeted" regionalization has neither economic, nor social, nor political motivations, and the administrative-territorial organization must continue to be based on counties, as administrative-territorial units of application in the territory of the national socio-economic and political programs, as well as autonomous bodies of management and regional coordination (Nicola, 2013, p. 50).

As disadvantages of the region, as the second intermediate level, we believe that it should be emphasized first of all that regionalization will represent an expensive process because the creation of regions implies the increase of the administrative apparatus, it being obvious that more officials generate more expenses. In addition, as it was shown since 1926 (Guțan, 2001, pp. 194-195; Argetoianu, 2001, pp. 106-107), in order to form the region, as an administrative division over the county, it is necessary to - we give him attributions, and we can take them from the county and from the basic level (cities and municipalities), reducing their sphere of action and weakening them, or even from the central power, there is a risk of threatening the unity national, that's why, for our part, we believe that the competences of the administrative-territorial units from the basic and the intermediate level should be studied first and seen if it is necessary and possible to have another intermediate level.

The creation of a second intermediate level through the establishment of the region would also have the disadvantage of complicating the decision-making process, removing the decision from the citizen and centralizing the decision instead of decentralizing it, matters that are not in accordance with the principle of decentralization, which we consider to be currently at the basis of the organization and operation of the local public administration. Moreover, a feature of the administrative act is its opportunity, and in the conditions in which we still have an intermediate level, the question would arise whether we still have a celerity (rapidity) of the application of the decision and a suppleness of the administration's activity in the conditions in which the decision it has to go through two links before it reaches the recipient.

Therefore, the main disadvantage of creating a second intermediate level is the complexity of the system and the overlapping of the levels' attributions, creating parallelism and generating unnecessary additional costs; specifying that the supporters of the establishment of a second intermediate level are of the opinion that the existence of two intermediate levels should be seen as a positive element, because it generates competition between the levels, and this defends the state against the risks of one of the levels becoming too strong, in this case, another positive consequence is the development of local autonomy (Popescu, 1999, pp. 131-132).

For his part, Ralf Dahrendorf, one of the fierce critics of the regional current, sees the disadvantages of regionalization as: fragmentation, anarchy, chaos. We emphasize the idea of developing a project that is based on concrete data, because until now only proposals have been developed regarding the establishment of regions and deliberative and executive authorities at their level, without any of the promoters of these projects bringing into question the financial effort what will have to be done in order to implement a reform of such scope or the concrete way in which this establishment of the second intermediate level will lead to an increase in the efficiency of the activity of the local public administration.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

An administrative-territorial reorganization that would involve the creation of regions, as the second intermediate level, requires taking into account legal, economic, sociological, geographical considerations, taking into account the multitude of aspects of social life, in order for the territorial reorganization to be as efficient as possible. In the case of a territorial reorganization, one must proceed from the consideration that there is already a territorial arrangement, which must be modified, improved, but which cannot be ignored, thus, a territorial reorganization should be done without completely erasing the old organization. In this context, we agree that we cannot stick to an outdated form, just for the sake of tradition, but we must not fall into the other extreme either, that is, of adopting a change just for the sake of modernity.

In addition, territorial reorganization is a matter of national interest, as it appears from the text of Law no. 3/2000 on the organization and conduct of the referendum, according to which the organization of local public administration, of the territory, as well as the general regime regarding local autonomy are considered issues of national interest and, consequently, the draft laws or legislative proposals regarding the modification of the territorial limits of municipalities, cities and counties are submitted to the Parliament for adoption only after the prior consultation of the citizens of the respective administrative-territorial units, by referendum, in this case the organization of the referendum is mandatory (Preda, 1995, p. 43).

Thus, an administrative-territorial reorganization interests all the citizens of the country, not only those who have the official task of realizing it, therefore it must be done with prudence, moderation and taking into account the desire of the majority of citizens (Stahl, 1969, p. 19, pp. 22-23) The establishment or re-establishment of administrative-territorial units cannot be an arbitrary action, it must be based on objective factors, on scientific criteria and respond not only to present requirements, but also to prospective ones (Preda, 2007, p. 75).

Although, as we showed at the beginning, we do not support the idea of establishing the regions as a second intermediate level, in the situation where the decision to establish a second intermediate level would still be taken, we believe that the simplest option would be to grant legal personality to the regions of development already existing, between them and the historical provinces not being very big differences, with some small exceptions they overlap, that is why we consider that the historical provinces are unjustifiably preferred by some analysts. In addition, as shown in a recent study, regions that have reached the stage of mental spaces they are the most viable to be invested with administrative status (Săgeata, 2013, p. 25). We believe that the shortcomings of the development regions are not related to the way in which they were demarcated, but rather to the way in which their operation was conceived and their powers were conferred.

We also consider that in the event of such an administrative-territorial reorganization, an important conclusion of the French specialists should be taken into account, who went through this experience on the occasion of the establishment of the regions, namely that if one opts for the creation of the regions, as the second intermediate level, the essential of this reform must be taken into account, namely the

achievement of a real transfer of competence in order to achieve the objective pursued, respectively that of creating a more efficient administration. With the specification that this transfer of competence must necessarily be accompanied by the transfer of the appropriate resources, which can be done in several ways: transfer of taxes, increase in budget allocations, etc.

The administrative-territorial organization of Romania within a regional system is not an unknown concept for our country, because such an organization was characteristic of the period 1950-1968, when the region was an administrative-territorial unit composed of several districts with legally established attributions, forming a second intermediate level. In the specialized literature, it was emphasized that the administrative-territorial divisions created in the second half of the 20th century - regions and districts - were unnatural and inappropriate for the Romanian space, thought through the prism of the newly established political regime (Nicola, pp. 1-3) and, as such, they only resulted in the existence of excessive centralism (Apostol Tofan, 1999, pp. 4-5). We believe that historical experience should make us think twice before establishing regions as the second intermediate level, because the experience of the last century has shown us that they did not lead to an increase in the efficiency of local public administration activity.

We note that in the period after 1989, although the issue of administrative-territorial reorganization was often discussed, many of the government programs having it as an objective, until now, the establishment of regions, as administrative-territorial units, has not taken legal form, we believe due to the complex aspects that such a large-scale reform entails.

As for an administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania that would materialize through the establishment of a second intermediate level through the creation of regions, it must be specified that up to the present time, although there have been numerous discussions regarding regionalization, both at the doctrinal and political level, no one has made a calculation of the actual costs that this action entails, in its entirety and for each of its elements, in order to be able to see if there are the necessary resources for a reform of such scope to be carried out and if it will also bring with it the much-desired increase in the efficiency of the activity of the local public administration. Although we do not support the establishment of a second intermediate level, because we consider that it would involve too many costs and there would be too many ranks of authorities, both at the basic local level and at the first and second intermediate local levels, if such an extent, we believe that the simplest would be to confer legal personality to the already existing development regions.

The difficulty of finding a perfect administrative organization is due to the fact that, as emphasized in the doctrine, there is no ideal organizational system that can be invariably applied to any people.

Whatever the solution adopted by the legislator regarding the administrative-territorial reorganization, it will have to be taken into account, mainly, an efficient and harmonious economy at the basic and intermediate level and take into account the fact that it is not necessarily a priority a regionalization but the harmonization and efficiency of local autonomy.

We also consider that at the present time the main objective must be a strengthening of local autonomy in its financial aspect and not an administrative-territorial reorganization (Cenușe, 2014, pp. 13-18), which is why we agree with the opinion expressed in the specialized literature (Preda, 2007, pp. 3-7) that at the present time the administrative-territorial reorganization seems neither necessary nor opportune.

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