

## **THE RECONFIGURATIONS OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE- TERRITORIAL ORGANIZATION OF ROMANIA AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE EVOLUTION OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY AFTER 1989**

**O. POIANĂ**

**Oana POIANĂ**

PhD Researcher, European Research Institute  
Faculty of European Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj  
[oana.poiana@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:oana.poiana@ubbcluj.ro)

### **ABSTRACT**

*The main objective of this study is to analyze the evolution of Romania's administrative-territorial organization and study the impact of each stage on the regional development process after 1989 in order to identify national features that could contribute to the improvement of Romania's current regionalization process.*

*Starting from the premise that any proposal for Romanian regionalization must be based on a rigorous research of the historical context in which the territorial administrative reconfigurations took place, the present study aims to present a synthetic analysis of different territorial configurations proposed by various regimes as well as the political and social circumstances in which they were implemented.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Regional development, Regionalization, Administrative-territorial organization, Decentralization, Regional disparities.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Regardless of all its economic, political, and social metamorphoses as well as its many administrative-territorial organization reforms over the last 100 years, Romania's regional design did not suffer major transformations. Even to this day, Romania's regionalization plan remains an open and rather sensitive subject of debate.

Considering Romania's sinuous path towards territorial-administrative reorganization and the high degree of centralization and forced urbanization specific to the communist period, the current study wishes to investigate whether Romania has internalized and accepted regions as territorial-administrative units and not just as economic functional units. Additionally, it seeks to analyze whether the current development regions represent viable structures for conducting a successful regional development policy or they should be modified to insure more even development levels.

The main motivation underlying this study is the relative absence of complex analysis in the academic literature on the historical impact of different models of administrative-territorial organization on modernization and regional development in Romania. The evolutionary analysis of regional development is a topic that has been relatively avoided in academic circles. Instead, it appears to be found more often in political discourses and parliamentary debates. As Marchis argued, "the political debates on Romanian regionalization

were mainly focused on political interests, without taking into account an important series of factors that can spur growth and socio-economic development across our regions.’’<sup>1</sup>

Another observation that contributed to the substantiation of this study is that the debate on regionalization came rather as a response to the necessity of meeting all the requirements of the European Union, being largely related to excessive centralization and its effects on the degree of structural funds absorption and less to the actual need to implement the regionalization process with all the elements it comprises. Moreover, following the debates on regionalization, we find that at the governmental level, Romania does not intend to initiate a process to reduce the development gaps of its regions until very late, and despite all the efforts that have been made recently toward achieving a convergence to the EU average, the disparities between Romania’s regions are still significant.<sup>2</sup> If during the communist period Romania has attempted to diminish these regional differences by increasing their industrial development, once Romania transitioned to a market economy, the regional disparities issue reappeared.

Thus, any discussion on the process of regionalization, decentralization and reduction of development gaps between Romania’s regions has to be based on an in-depth understanding of the development dynamics specific to each historical period, paying particular attention to the influences brought by each territorial-administrative organization model that has been implemented to this date.

### **ROMANIA’S ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL ORGANIZATION DURING THE (1918-1968)**

Between 1918-1981 Romania has passed through eight major administrative-territorial reconfigurations having a highly unstable territorial policy that fluctuated from short attempts of centralization followed by experiments meant to introduce the principles of decentralization and local autonomy (administrative regionalism) to a gradual reinsertion of centralism. The interwar legislation that refers to the 1925 administrative unification law and the 1923 Constitution represented a corollary that contributed to the adoption of a very centralized administrative system and in the same time to the consolidation of the unitary national character of the Romanian state. At this stage, Romania’s territory was divided, into counties, urban and rural communes that have associative rights. The 1925 administrative law remains a reference law in Romanian public administration being considered the first law that brought real transformations in the administrative field and a proof of the democratic evolution of the Romanian society at that time.<sup>3</sup>

However, the 1929 administrative reform is believed to be the first law that aimed to achieve real administrative decentralization through the creation of seven superior regional structures that had legal personality and were coordinated by seven local ministerial directorates. Moreover, the local councils were now directly elected.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in 1930, Romania’s territory was divided into seventy-one counties, 322 ‘plăși’, 172 towns and 15, 201

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriela Marchis, ‘‘The Potential Sources of Change in Romania Regional Policy’’, *European Integration - Realities and Perspectives. Proceedings*, 2015, p. 657

<sup>2</sup> Country Report on Romania, COM, 2019, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file\\_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-romania\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-romania_en.pdf), accessed on 02. 09.2020.

<sup>3</sup> Gheorghe Calcan, ‘‘The Administrative Unification of the Completed Romania. The Stages of the Administrative Integration Of Transylvania 1918-1925’’, *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, No. 30E/2010 p. 26

<sup>4</sup> Antonescu Daniela, *Studiu retrospectiv privind organizarea administrativ-teritorială a României, în ultimii 100 de ani*, Munich personal RePEc Archive Paper, 2018, pp. 30-31.

THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL  
ORGANIZATION OF ROMANIA AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE EVOLUTION OF  
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY AFTER 1989

villages.<sup>5</sup> However, this decentralization tendency was halted by a new administrative law created in 1936 that considerably increased Prefect's prerogatives while decreasing the importance of local self-governing bodies.<sup>6</sup> The last Romanian administrative reform of the interwar period took place in 1938 and was implemented under the government of King Carol II. This new administrative law created a new type of macro territorial structure, a 'proto-region' called 'ținut' (province) and abolished the legal personality of the counties. The 10 provinces were geographical and economic defined units larger than the old limits of the historical provinces.<sup>7</sup> According to old statistics, the provinces were including 71 counties, 429 plăși, 179 towns and 15891 villages.<sup>8</sup> According to Dobre, the current regional division of Romania is to some extent inspired by the 1938 reform in the sense that the territorial divisions designed then and the idea of creating regions through associating the counties were preserved but the post-communist regimes rejected the principle of political regionalization.<sup>9</sup> However, this model of administrative-territorial organization had a very short life. During the summer of 1940, the Romanian government accepts the Soviet ultimatum (26<sup>th</sup> of June 1940) and the USSR invades Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and Herța region. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 1940, Romania loses a great part of Transylvania according to the second Vienna arbitration and on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1940 surrenders the entire Cadrilater to Bulgaria. Thus, in only 74 days, Romanian lose approximately 33,8% of its territory and 33,3% of its population. The newly installed Antonescu government adopted a law that eliminated "ținutul" as the main territorial-administrative unit offering legal personality to counties but without maintaining the County Councils.<sup>10</sup> The military dictatorship of Antonescu's government left very little space for the survival of any form of decentralization or legal autonomy.

The first Romanian communist and pro-soviet government was installed on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1945. Although by then "the bureaucracy became rigidly centralized and operated under a strict hierarchical model, both vertically and horizontally"<sup>11</sup>, the 1948 Constitution did not bring major changes regarding the model of territorial-administrative organization. This Stalinist type of constitution changed the name of the state into Romanian People's Republic and preserved the classification of the territorial-administrative structures into counties, communes and plăși.

It is only in 1950 that this type of territorial-administrative organization model is being drastically changed with a new Soviet type of organization that was artificially imposed without considering any geographical or historical criteria not to mention, the Romanian realities of that time. Thus, the new administrative reform dissolved the counties and created 28 regions that were directly subordinated to the central structures, 177 rayons (districts) 148 towns and 4052 communes. The Soviet influence was reflected even in the toponymy of these units. Old Romanian traditional names disappeared or were replaced with imported names such as the name of Brașov region which was replaced with the name Stalin. The creation of two new administrative units (rayons and regions) emulated the already existing model of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 22

<sup>6</sup> UNDP, The 2003-2005 National Human Development Report (NHDR) for Romania, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/romania.pdf>, accessed on 02. 09. 2020

<sup>7</sup> Armand Călinescu, "Spiritul noului regim administrativ", *Enciclopedia României*, II, 1938, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Vasile M. Zaberca, *Istoria administrației publice în România*, Editura „Eftimie Murgu”, Reșița, 1997, apud., Sorin Bocancea (coord.), *Constituția României. Opinii esențiale pentru legea fundamentală*, p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> Ana Maria Dobre, "Romania: From Historical Regions to Local Decentralization via the Unitary State" in Frank Hendriks, Anders Lidström, and John Loughlin (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe*, 2010, p. 688

<sup>10</sup> Viorel Stănică, *Politici Administrativ-teritoriale în România Modernă și Contemporană*, Accent, 2010, p. 86

<sup>11</sup> UNDP, The 2003-2005 National Human Development Report (NHDR) for Romania, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/romania.pdf>, accessed on 02. 09. 2020

administration on the USSR territories. The political rationale for introducing this model was the willing to replace the old administration, gain control and prevent any type of political resistance, while the economic one referred to the need of new territorial divisions that served the purposes of collectivization and planning policies.<sup>12</sup>

However, due to the high number of regions and rayons the new system proved to be economically inefficient and relatively difficult to handle from a political point of view. Consequently, a new debate regarding the reduction of their number emerged and only two years later, the 1952 Constitution together with the 331 Decree eliminated 10 out of the 28 regions through agglutination. Four years later (1956) another two regions (Arad and Bârlad) will disappear from Romania's territorial-administrative map. The same Decree created the Autonomous Magyar Region (a replica of the Soviet *oblast*) which was based on ethnic criteria and enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy.

Taking advantage of the favorable momentum created after Stalin's death in 1955, the Romanian Worker's Party leaders decide to work on their long-term plans of de-Sovietization. According to Băncilă, the 1956 territorial-administrative reform represented Romania's first step towards detaching itself from the Soviet sphere of influence.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as a result of the Soviet troops withdrawal from Romania in 1958, Dej's policy became more oriented towards Romanian traditional values and Romanian communism moved away from the Soviet-type of communism to a more nationalist type.<sup>14</sup>

The second step towards this direction was the 1960 territorial reform that maintains the same number of regions (16) but changes once again their structures and delineation as well as their names back to their traditional versions. The Autonomous Magyar Region becomes the Mureș Autonomous Magyar Region and Stalin region regains its older name.<sup>15</sup>

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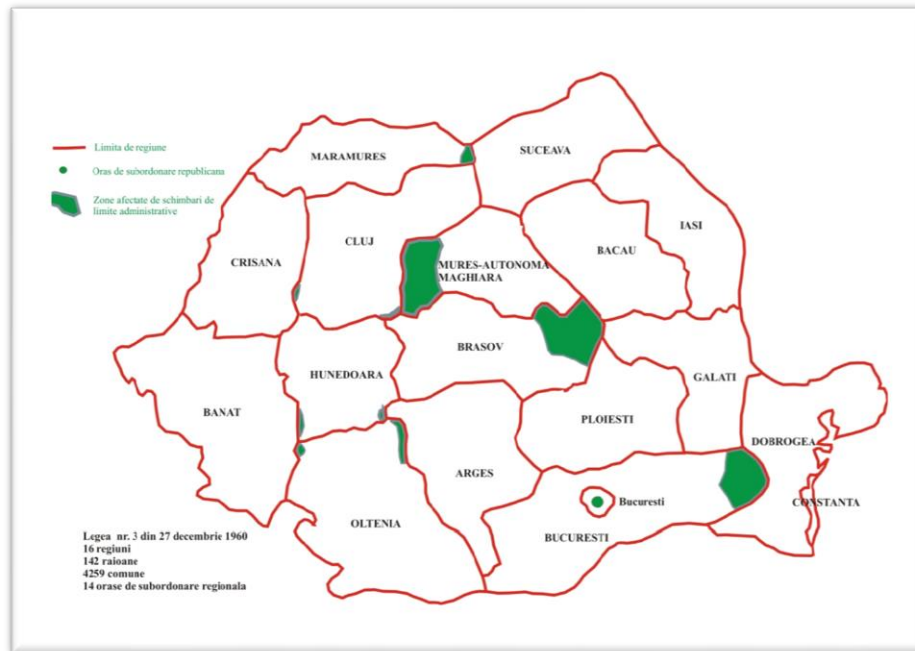
<sup>12</sup> Florin S. Soare, *45 de ani de la ultima reorganizare administrativ-teritorială a României*, IICCMER, 2013, available at: <https://www.iiccmr.ro/45-de-ani-de-la-ultima-reorganizarea-administrativ-teritoriala-a-romaniei/>, accessed on 10. 09. 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Băncilă, Andi Mihail, "Reforma Administrativ-Teritorială Din Anul 1956, Primul Pas Spre Emancipare De Sub Tutela U.R.S.S.", *Impactul transformărilor socio-economice și tehnologice la nivel național, european și mondial*; Nr.6/2015, Vol.6, 2015, pp.160-161, available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2670451>, accessed on 10.09. 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Radu Săgeată, "A Proposal For Romania's Administrative Organization Based On Functional Relations In The Territory", *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, No. 46 E/2015, p. 184.

<sup>15</sup> Legea nr. 3/1960 pentru îmbunătățirea împărțirii administrative a teritoriului Republicii Populare Române, publicat în Buletinul Oficial nr. 27 din 27 decembrie 1960.

# THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL ORGANIZATION OF ROMANIA AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE EVOLUTION OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY AFTER 1989



**Fig. 1-The territorial administrative organization of Romania (1960-1968)**

Source: Radu Săgeată, "Reformele Administrative Din România – Între Rațiunile Politice Și Realitățile Geografice", *Geograful*, anul III, nr. 2, p.8

As stated by the 1965 Constitution, the official name of the state becomes the Socialist Republic of Romania and its territorial-administrative organization is changed once again. According to the new constitution, the territorial division included counties, towns, and communes.

## ROMANIA'S ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL ORGANIZATION DURING THE (1968-1989)

The establishment of the Socialist Republic of Romania coincided with an increased level of centralization and major transformations in the territorial-administrative organization of the state. According to Chen, "the degree of centralization under the Ceaușescu regime exceeded even that of the Gheorghiu-Dej regime. By the time Nicolae Ceaușescu became first secretary of the party in 1965, the party already firmly established its domination over the administrative structure."<sup>16</sup>

In a report on the measures to improve the management and planning of the national economy and the administrative-territorial organization of Romania presented at the P.C.R. National Conference on the 6th of December 1967, Ceaușescu argued that the qualitative development of the society together with the changes that have occurred in the population's structure and within the profile, dimensions and the living conditions of towns, communes and villages, represent the main arguments or reterritorialization. He criticized the two middle structures introduced in 1950 (regions and rayons) for complicating the relations between the central structures and the basic units, delaying the implementation of the central directives, creating a great dispersion of forces and for generating a large volume of civil servants that

<sup>16</sup> Chen Cheng, "The roots of illiberal nationalism in Romania: a historical institutionalist analysis of the Leninist legacy", *East European Politics and Societies*, 17(2), 2003, p. 187

determined inflation of the administrative apparatus. For all these reasons, he supported the re-establishment of the counties as the main territorial units.<sup>17</sup>

One year later a document entitled *The basic principles for improving the Romanian territorial-administrative organization and the systematization of rural areas* was discussed and adopted at the Plenary session of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party on January 14. Based on this document, law no. 2 (2<sup>nd</sup> of February 1968) regarding the territorial-administrative organization of the Socialist Republic of Romania reintroduced the inter-war administrative system of organization and divided the territory into 39 counties, 236 towns (45 out of them were municipalities) and 2706 communes (see fig. 2). However, this system of territorial-administrative organization did not copy entirely the administrative configuration that was in place prior to 1950. 19 counties from the prior configuration were no longer present and others had their names partially or completely changed.<sup>18</sup> Unlike previous territorial-administrative configurations, the 1968 configuration was able to withstand for a longer period without major changes.

A new organization of the state's territory comes in 1974 with the promulgation of law no. 58 on the territorial systematization of urban and rural areas. This law aimed to create a balanced distribution of the productive forces according to the centrally planned economy idea determining a forced industrialization and a pseudo- suburbanization that lead to the destruction of millions of households, most of them in rural areas.<sup>19</sup>



**Fig. 1-The territorial administrative organization of Romania (1968-present)**

Radu Săgeată, *Organizarea administrativ teritorială a României, Evoluție. Propuneri de optimizare*, Academia Română, Institutul de Geografie, 2013, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Nicolae Ceaușescu (Secretar general al C.C. al P.C.R.), *Raportul cu privire la măsurile de perfecționare a conducerii și planificării economiei naționale și la îmbunătățirea organizării administrative-teritoriale a României. Prezentat la Conferința Națională a P.C.R., 6 decembrie 1967*, Editura Politică, București 1967.

<sup>18</sup> Antonescu Daniela, "Evoluția reformelor administrativ-teritoriale din România în ultimul secol", Academia Română, Institutul Național de Cercetări Economice, 2013, p. 9, available at: <http://www.studii-economice.ro/2018/seince181218.pdf>, accessed on 02.09. 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Antonescu Daniela, *Studiu retrospectiv privind organizarea administrativ-teritorială a României, în ultimii 100 de ani*, Munich personal RePEc Archive Paper, 2018, p. 29.

## THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL ORGANIZATION OF ROMANIA AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE EVOLUTION OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY AFTER 1989

The beginning of Ceaușescu's regime was characterized by high levels of centralization and during the first decade of his rule, "national bodies such as the Grand National Assembly and local organs like the People's Councils became almost symbolic institutions, with little political responsibility or authority."<sup>20</sup> In addition to the high degree of centralization that was inherited from his rule, the regional specialization policy imposed by Ceaușescu determined also high inter and intra-regional imbalances that left their mark on Romania's post-communist regional development.

The last territorial-administrative organization reform of the communist period took place in 1981 when by Decree no. 15 the reorganization of Calărași, Giurgiu and Ilfov counties was established. The Ilfov Agricultural Sector was created around Bucharest. Starting with this year, Romania's territorial-administrative map entered a period of relative stability that lasted even in the post-communist period and it is still in place at present. On December 22, 1989, the new state leadership structure was created, called the National Salvation Front. As a result, new county, municipal, town and communal councils subordinated to the Front are organized throughout the country.

The new leadership structure promises to eliminate all forms of centralism and exaggerated bureaucracy promoted by the communist rule. According to Rus, the Decree no. 2/1989 can be considered as a provisional mini constitution that destroyed all power structures established by the 1965 constitution and replaced them with new ones that were meant to form a committee responsible for drafting the project of the new constitution.<sup>21</sup>

### THE EVOLUTION OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY AFTER 1989

After the collapse of communism, Romania has made efforts to implement a post-socialist democracy system which among others, meant also a step towards decentralization. However, the newly created Romanian Constitution (1991) stipulated the reestablishment of the counties (41 counties along with the municipality of Bucharest) as the main territorial unit marking thus a return to the old, centralized territorial-administrative paradigm. According to Dragoman, despite the fact that "Romania was born by binding together different provinces, such historical entities as provinces remained only as cultural denominations."<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the current composition as well as the names of Romania's administrative-territorial units are established by the 1986 no. 2 Law which after 1989 suffered around 200 modifications. As stated by Soare, Romania remains the only state of the former Soviet bloc that, after the collapse of the communist regime, did not experience a drastic administrative reform to correct a series of malfunctions and update to its current realities.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of Romania's candidacy for accession to the European Union in 1995, a new direction<sup>24</sup> regarding territorial-administrative organization emerged. As a consequence

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<sup>20</sup> Chen Cheng, "The roots of illiberal nationalism in Romania: a historical institutionalist analysis of the Leninist legacy", *East European Politics and Societies*, 17(2), 2003, p. 187

<sup>21</sup> Angela Rus, "Considerații Privind Adoptarea Primelor Reglementări Cu Caracter Electoral Din România Postcomunistă. 1990-1996", *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie «George Barițiu» din Cluj-Napoca*, tom LIII, 2014, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Dragoș Dragoman, "Regional Inequalities, Decentralisation and the Performance of Local Governments in Post-Communist Romania", p. 649.

<sup>23</sup> Florin S. Soare, *45 de ani de la ultima reorganizare administrativ-teritorială a României*, IICCMER, 2013, available at: <https://www.iiccmr.ro/45-de-ani-de-la-ultima-reorganizarea-administrativ-teritoriala-a-romaniei/>, accessed on 10. 09. 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Felix Angel Popescu, "Teaching regional development courses and seminars to different university specializations in Romania", *Human Education Today for Tomorrow's World*, No. 16, 2019, p. 23.

of starting the negotiations on the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, the regional development policy became an important component on Romanian Government's agenda. Consequently, the 151/1998 law adopted the creation of 8 development regions (see Fig. 3) designed according to European NUTS II level, which were reconfirmed by law no. 315 in 2004. Neither of these regions are territorial administrative units, nor do they have legal personality, but the entire regional framework was configured around them so that Romania was able to attract European financial assistance.<sup>25</sup> According to Dobre, these regions are voluntary associations of four to six counties that serve solely statistical and regional development purposes legitimizing the current distribution of competences between central and local levels of government. As such, they do not possess any political, fiscal or policy-making powers.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, these regions were not founded on any historical, cultural, or geographical grounds and cannot claim having any cultural identity that is usually a prerequisite for the creation of a region.<sup>27</sup>



**Fig. 3- Romania's current development regions**

Source: <http://www.artlitera.ro/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/>

If in 1950 Romania was importing a Soviet model that was forcefully fit to its territorial-administrative structure, the 1998 configuration of the new regions can be regarded as another attempt to artificially impose a model where the region is constructed solely to serve the purpose of implementing EU's regional development policies.

According to Art. 2 of Law 151/1998 (which became Law 315 in 2004), the main objective of regional development in Romania refers to the "reduction of existing regional im-

<sup>25</sup> Gabriela Marchis, "The Potential Sources of Change in Romania Regional Policy", *EIRP Proceedings*, Vol 10, 2015, p. 536.

<sup>26</sup> Ana Maria Dobre, "Romania: From Historical Regions to Local Decentralization via the Unitary State" in Frank Hendriks, Anders Lidström, and John Loughlin (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe*, 2010, p. 701

<sup>27</sup> Jose Ruano, Marius Profireoiu, (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Decentralisation in Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. P. 366.



## THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL ORGANIZATION OF ROMANIA AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE EVOLUTION OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY AFTER 1989

balances by stimulating balanced development, by accelerating the recovery of delays in the development of disadvantaged areas as a result of historical, geographical, economic, social, political conditions, and the prevention of new imbalances."<sup>28</sup> However, regional development in Romania is very uneven. Not only that the gap between the capital city region and the other regions is extremely wide but at the same time, there is growing disparity between regions that are located in the western half of the country and those located in the middle east.<sup>29</sup>

These inequalities have only increased during the last decade. Thus, the wealthier regions became even more developed while the underdeveloped ones lagged further behind. The favoring factors that lead to the perpetuation of this regional development heterogeneity vary from historical legacies, excessive centralism, corruption, political capitalism, to lack of financial and administrative capacity that translated into low absorption of funds.

According to Dragoman, the historical legacies that influenced such an uneven regional development refer to the fact that "modern Romania has integrated provinces previously run by multinational empires. Provinces like Transylvania and Bukovina, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were wealthier and more urbanized and industrialized, than the Kingdom of Romania, which was dominated for centuries by the Ottoman Empire."<sup>30</sup> Historically one of the wealthiest regions of Romania, Transylvania came up with a proposal for a regional restructuring in 2000 but since the proposal was based more on cultural and political arguments and less on economic ones, it triggered a strong oppositions from the Romanian nationalists. Benefiting from this competitive advantage and willing to increase their absorption rate, 4 Municipalities (Cluj, Timișoara, Arad and Oradea) have forged in 2018 the Western Alliance. A similar alliance was created shortly after including 3 Municipalities (Bucharest, Brașov and Constanța). Both alliances aim to decrease the level of centralization and improve the local administrative capacity in order to attract more funds.

There is also a direct correlation between the low absorption rates and the lack of administrative capacity that mainly refers to inefficient public administration. The administrative apparatus often includes underpaid or underqualified personnel and politicians that are putting the interest of their party above the public interest. Improving institutions and the performance of their employees would increase the absorption rate which for 2019 was of just 26%, below the European average.<sup>31</sup> In addition to this, probably one of the most underrated factors that hinder Romania's regional development, is the political capitalism that appeared during the post-communist period. Unfortunately, Romanian government structures at all levels continue to be negatively affected by excessive bureaucratization, lack of transparency, endemic corruption, nepotism, and bribery.<sup>32</sup>

Between 2013-2014 there were many political debates regarding the necessity of modifying the existing regional design but they were mainly focusing on institutional reform and on nomination procedures of representatives rather than seeking to improve Romania's institutional capacity to contribute to a harmonious economic and social development of the regions.<sup>33</sup> Although in 2019 the Romanian president, Klaus Iohannis has stated that he intends

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<sup>28</sup> Law 151/1998, available at: <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/15220>, accessed on 20.09.2020.

<sup>29</sup> Simona Biriescu, Antoaneta Butuza, "Regional Development - Past, Present and Future in Romania", *Annals of the University of Petroșani, Economics*, 11(1), 2011, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Dragoș Dragoman, "Regional Inequalities, Decentralisation and the Performance of Local Governments in Post-Communist Romania", p. 657.

<sup>31</sup> Lucian Paul, "The Role of Cohesion Policy in the Development of Romania", *Studies in Business and Economics* no. 14(3), 2019, p. 107.

<sup>32</sup> Laurențiu Petrila, *Administrație publică în România. De la discursul politic la acțiune socială*, Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2020, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Marchis, Gabriela, "The Potential Sources of Change in Romania Regional Policy", *European Integration - Realities and Perspectives. Proceedings*, 2015, p. 551.

to relaunch the public debate regarding Romania's regionalization, this discussion seems to be abandoned at the moment. If we are to consider the ongoing global pandemic that sifted government's priorities worldwide and the fact that 2020 represents an electoral year with great stakes for the Romanian political parties, it is safe to infer that the public debate regarding Romania's regionalization process will be again postponed.

## CONCLUSIONS

Currently, Romania has a territorial division system that is regulated by a law dating back to 1968 (with its subsequent modifications). From a legal point of view, more than fifty years have passed since the last territorial-administrative reorganization and meanwhile, the Romanian society has passed through numerous social, economic and political metamorphosis that all ask for an updated territorial-administrative organization law adjusted to the realities of the new socio-economic context. Laws, like societies are not meant to be static and the fact that now Romania is still relying on a model adopted in the communist period, reveals a lack of political commitment for the actual development of the state.

The current study has shown that the historical context of each territorial-administrative reform has left a mark on the current configurations of Romania's regional development. What we now call setbacks of what could have been a harmonious regional development process, are in fact measures that became well entrenched in the Romanian administrative system because they have been present for a very long time. For example, as Papadimitriou and Phinnemore argued in their work *Romania and the European Union, From marginalisation to membership*, Romania's centralism must be regarded as a cultural-historical phenomenon that can be traced back to the early life of the Romanian state in 1860.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, centralism was reinforced by more than forty years of communist rule and this can partially explain why it was perpetuated by the post-communist governments and is still present in our society after more than three decades of transition.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, the uneven regional development tendency can be traced back to the age of empires and to the political decision of borrowing the Soviet model of administration in 1950. The process of adjusting to the market economy system that followed immediately after the collapse of the socialist regime, has only deepened the already existing inter-regional development gaps. The configuration of the new development regions in 1998 was justified solely by the need to adjust to the EU norms in order to attract EU financial assistance which plays a crucial role for Romania's future development. Although today we are witnessing an accelerated economic development of large cities that are turning into growth poles (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara) and despite their attempts to informally relaunch the regionalization process, Romania's absorption rate is still very low, the inter-regional disparities are growing and the decentralization process proves to be extremely challenging.

Any future territorial-administrative reconfiguration must be based first and foremost on a close historical analysis that allows us to understand state traditions and to identify patterns of development for individual administrative units. Secondary, this process should focus on those economic aspects that could significantly contribute to the closing of the inter-regional development gaps and we believe that improving basic infrastructure by attracting EU funds would represent one of the most important steps towards achieving this goal. Of course, increasing the EU funds absorption rate cannot be done without improving local,

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<sup>34</sup> Dimitris Papadimitriou and David Phinnemore, *Romania and the European Union, From marginalisation to membership*, Abingdon: Routledge 2008, p. 120

<sup>35</sup> Ana Maria Dobre, "Romania: From Historical Regions to Local Decentralization via the Unitary State" in Frank Hendriks, Anders Lidström, and John Loughlin (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe*, 2010, P.689.

THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL  
ORGANIZATION OF ROMANIA AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE EVOLUTION OF  
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY AFTER 1989

regional, and central institutions and their management performance. Last but not least, this entire process has to be equally based on cultural, geographical and political grounds. As president Iohannis argued, the real issue at hand now is to decide whether we need to create new regions as administrative units (regrouping the counties) and a secondary intermediary unit or to maintain the current territorial division and start a serious process of decentralization.<sup>36</sup>

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