

GOVERNMENTAL ACTIVITIES REGARDING REGIONALIZATION IN ROMANIA IN 2013

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ABSTRACT

THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON REGIONALIZATION IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA BECAME MORE VISIBLE IN THE LAST FEW YEARS. THIS RESEARCH AIMS AT ANALYZING THE STEPS TAKEN IN 2013 AT GOVERNMENTAL LEVEL IN ORDER TO IMPLEMENT THE REFORM OF REGIONALIZATION IN ROMANIA. IN OTHER WORDS, WE WILL IDENTIFY THE ACTIONS DEVELOPED IN THIS SENSE BY THE MAIN GOVERNMENTAL BODY, THE MINISTRY OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION - AN INSTITUTION SPECIALLY DESIGNED IN 2013 TO MANAGE THIS REFORM. A SERIES OF PUBLIC DEBATES AND MEETINGS WERE ORGANIZED IN THE ABOVE-MENTIONED PERIOD AND THROUGH A QUALITATIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS WE WILL UNDERLINE THE VARIATIONS IN APPROACH IDENTIFIED IN 2013 WITHIN THE ROMANIAN POLITICAL ELITE IN POWER AT THAT TIME – FROM AN URGENT REFORM TO A REFORM WHICH HAS TO BE IMPLEMENTED ATTENTIVELY, WITH NO HURRY. THE ANALYSIS IS MAINLY BASED ON THE TRANSCRIPTS OF THE PUBLIC EVENTS AND PRESS RELEASES.

KEYWORDS: REGIONALIZATION, DECENTRALIZATION, GOVERNMENT, GOVERNMENT PROGRAM, YEAR 2013, MINISTRY OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, PUBLIC DEBATES;

INTRODUCTION

The analysis of the evolution of the regionalization issue in the local political discourse after 1989 can be achieved by reference to separate analysis units. This article examines how governmental activity has articulated the regionalization process in Romania. As regards to the temporal delineation, the study focuses on the measures adopted in this period by looking at the measures taken in 2013 at institutional level and in the field of public consultation. The option for this year is justified by the fact that only towards the end of 2012 the governmental program lists among the reforms that of regionalization, which led in 2013 to the broadening of the debate on this matter.

In order to elaborate the previously mentioned analysis, we first need to define the concept of regionalization. The definition actually depends on how the basic unit of this process is understood, namely the region: “while there is consensus that the term refers to space, the notion of space itself can have several meanings: territorial space, political space

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and the space of social interaction, economic space, functional space (...) the region is the result of the meeting of various concepts of space”².

A significant contribution in this regard is the study by Gérard Marcou on the types of regionalization existing within the Member States of the European Union, which identifies a number of models of regionalization that fall within the definition of the region previously mentioned: "administrative regionalization, regionalization through existing local communities, regional decentralization, political regionalization or regional autonomy, regionalization through federal authorities"³. There is no hierarchy in these models, since there is no *ideal-type* of regionalization, all of these being applicable to different contexts. States are complex and different from each other, even more regions within a state are different from each other, so it is impossible to identify a single regionalization model that can respond to such multiple requests. Therefore, what we can identify is a set of principles that can be applied in accordance with various situations encountered at state level⁴.

Another analysis on regionalization, still from the perspective of the functioning of the European Union, highlights the importance of regionalism and more specifically of the regions as basic units of this process: “the less institutional autonomy a region has, the more disadvantages it accumulates (...) regions without an elected tier of government are unable either to wield the same influence in national and EU politics or to impose priorities and organize support internally. And not only are the less-organized regions less able to extract EU funds, EU funds are also less able to help them”⁵.

An outlook on the governmental programs in the years after the fall of communism reveals that in the early years of transition, given the large number of reforms necessary to implement democratic mechanisms, the shift from a centralized to a decentralized state was rather tentative, without taking into account the need for an administrative-territorial cutout that would ensure a balanced development of the national territory. With the start of accession to the international bodies, such efforts have been stepped up, on the one hand in order to meet the European requirements and standards, and secondly due to the need for internal development. Thus, in recent years, governmental programs started to plead for the introduction of a new administrative layout, complementary to the administrative and financial decentralization, which, under the principle of subsidiarity, is meant to ensure a balanced development of the state, to meet the requirements and needs of citizens and to take better advantage of the European convergence policies (finance, development, etc.).

Yet most of the initiatives following the accession to the European Union were confined to introducing the region of development that lacked legal personality and therefore an administrative character. It was only after 2012 that a governmental program advocated the modernization of the state through decentralization associated administrative regionalization.

Specifically, the governmental program pertaining to the Victor Ponta II Government (December 21st 2012 – 05th March 2014)⁶ is the first governmental program in which the process of regionalization (along with administrative and financial decentralization) is expressly indicated as a course of action. Once stating these guidelines, it mentions the aspects of the reforms required for its implementation: it is primarily about establishing a

² Patrick Le Galès, Christian Lequesne (eds), *Regions in Europe* (London: Routledge, 1998), 11

³ Gérard Marcou, “La régionalisation en Europe”, European Parliament, (1999):1-34

⁴ Andra Karla Sienerth, “Aspecte teoretice privind regionalizarea”, *Polis*, 1(3) (2014): 41

⁵ Martin Rhodes, *The Regions and the New Europe: Patterns in Core and Periphery Development*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 10

⁶ Decision no. 45 of 21st decembre 2012 on the granting of confidence to the Government (Bucharest: Official Journal of Romania, no. 877 of 21st decembre 2012)

roadmap for accomplishing administrative and financial decentralization, by means of creating the institutional and regulatory frameworks of this new system of administrative-territorial organization. Victor Ponta Government III (March 5, 2014 - present) ⁷ retains the same provisions in the governmental program, which is actually identical to the one adopted by the Ponta II Government, previously presented.

THE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE - THE MINISTRY OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Following the previously exposed situation in 2013, when the debate over regionalization widened on the Romanian political scene, a new body – the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration (MDRAP) – was set up through a Government Decision which provides that "The Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration is a specialized body of the central public administration, with legal personality, which is organized and operates under the Government, established by reorganizing the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism and by taking over the work in public administration, structures and institutions specialized in this field from the Interior Ministry." ⁸

Given that this ministry was set up in a political context where the regionalization process was listed as a priority, its central mission was to coordinate the reform of the Romanian public administration (at central and local levels), namely the administrative-territorial reorganization processes of decentralization and regionalization.

From the Ministry's perspective, the regionalization process should be designed in conjunction with the administrative and financial decentralization process and its implementation must be done in several stages, including the establishment of working structures and organization of debates and meetings with representatives of local authorities and associative structures (civil society).

After setting this roadmap, further steps for regionalization are, firstly, the adoption of the Memorandum⁹ and the establishment of working groups and, secondly, the organization of meetings and debates. As far as the Memorandum is concerned, it sets forth the end of 2013 as the moment for introducing the regions in the administrative-territorial structure of Romania, which requires three processes running simultaneously: the revision of the Constitution, the setup of the legal and regulatory framework for the new administrative structure (the region) and finally the devolution of powers to local and regional levels.

Regarding the first step, the working groups set up in the Ministry are: Regionalization Advisory Council (CONREG) – being structured in three branches: the academic working group, that of the local officials and dignitaries and that of the civil society, as well as the Inter-ministerial Technical Committee for Regionalization - Decentralization (CTIRD). Their role is to propose, based on the expertise of their members, the new administrative formula based on regions and to coordinate the process of decentralization.

⁷ The Program from 11th March 2014 over which the Cabinet has assumed responsibility pursuant to art. 114 par. (1) from the Constitution of Romania in the joint session of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (Bucharest: Official Journal of Romania, no. 185 of 14th March 2014)

⁸ Article 1, Governmental Decision no. 1 from 4th January on the organization and functioning of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration (Bucharest: Official Journal of Romania, no. 14 of 18th January 2013)

⁹ Memorandum on the adoption of necessary measures for initiating the process regionalization-decentralization process in Romania, February 2013, website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, last accessed on 01/23/2015

As already mentioned, among the stages of regionalization is also found the one consisting in organizing public debates and meetings. Next we analyze these representative moments in the course of the regionalization-decentralization process, namely the public debates and meetings.¹⁰

PUBLIC DEBATES AND MEETINGS

The first such event was public debate organized at the Romanian Academy in April 2013 on the topic "The process of regionalization-decentralization in Romania", which was attended, apart from the representatives of political institutions (notably Victor Ponta - Prime Minister, Liviu Dragnea - Deputy Prime Minister, Crin Antonescu - President of the Senate), by a number of academics and experts¹¹. Analyzing Deputy Prime Minister Liviu Dragnea's speech, it results that from the very beginning he emphasizes how central the regionalization process is for the current government, given that his appointment was specifically aimed at coordinating the regionalization and decentralization process. Further, it highlights the importance of debates and meetings, arguing that although the implementation of regionalization is a political decision pertaining to the Cabinet and Parliament, there must be public support, and the latter can only be achieved by keeping the public informed, which in turn presumes involving local officials. Regarding the relevance of regionalization, he argues against the small size of the counties that could impede them to generate consistent projects, as opposed to regions, which could achieve this goal. In fact, the size of the regions is considered an important decision because they must be large enough to generate large projects, yet not too large in order to never depart from the local needs. A key point of the speech is stating that 2013 is the year when regionalization should occur, in order for the new structure to exist in the new financial framework of the European Union. At the end of the speech, in order to disperse any fears in this respect, he notes that the regionalization process does not bring prejudice to the unitary character of the state. In the same register fits also the discourse of the Senate President Crin Antonescu, who additionally emphasizes that regionalization is an undertaking that Romania assumes not to join the foreign trend, but for its advantages.

From this first moment of public debate on regionalization, following the discourse analysis, it appears that political leaders have placed the achievement of regionalization high on the political agenda of 2013, given the benefits envisaged, noting that its implementation requires the completion of several stages, in particular that of informing and consulting the stakeholders through public debates and meetings.

The second seminar organized by MDRAP, also benefited from the presence of foreign experts, representatives from the Council of Europe and CONREG working groups¹². The purpose of this event was, on the one hand, to emphasize the progress made up to that point in Romania in the field of regionalization, and on the other hand to identify the objectives pursued by other countries in implementing similar processes on their territory. Again, Deputy Prime Minister Liviu Dragnea delivered the introductory speech, focusing this time on the underlying reasons for regionalization (e.g. an unbalanced development of different areas in Romania), while noting that the establishment of regions will not cause

¹⁰ The materials used for this analysis are the ones contained on the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, accessed on 01/23/2015

¹¹ Analysis on the press release from the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, accessed on 01/23/2015

¹² The seminar took place in the period 11th – 12th April 2013 in Bucharest; the discussions of the participants according to the documents from the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, last accessed on 01/23/2015

these disparities to fade away instantly. Foreign experts have also expressed a few remarks on the process of regionalization-decentralization in Romania: Pawel Swianiewicz referred to differences between Romania and Poland regarding the process, stressing that in Romania regions do not replace the existing counties, which retain their status and thus no loss is foreseen due to the new layer. Gérard Marcou refers to the criteria to be followed in the demarcation of the regions, and more specifically to the role of historical regions in shaping the new regions, arguing that the reform should be carried out by mainly looking into the future, since excessive reference to the past may undermine the modern state. In this direction unfolds also Rudolf Bauer's speech, who pointed out that in Slovakia, in the initial draft the new configuration was drawn along the historical regions, whereas the final version was based on economic criteria that do not fully overlap with the historical regions.

We conclude regarding the second debate that the need for regionalization was felt in other states, as is the case Romanian, but it is a complex process that must take into account many considerations in shaping the regions (e.g. the role of historical regions, economic criteria, etc.) – a complexity illustrated by the case of Italy, which saw a lengthy process that resulted in regions with different sizes and statuses. This debate can be considered an important step, since it was conceived as a best practices and learning exchange.

With a similar aim, the Romanian Senate organized a Franco-German seminar¹³. The host of the event, Senate President Crin Antonescu, argued in the first part of his speech about the importance of regionalization, after which he signaled two issues that the media considered as central in the debate on the subject, but were not actually essential. We note in this sense the question of the fundamentally understanding the importance and challenges of regionalization, in terms of establishing the number of regions, their residences, and their administrative (management) structure. A highly relevant aspect is that although there is time pressure due to the new European Union financial framework 2014-2020, the process should not be done in haste; it must be done as soon as possible, but in a sustainable manner. We find this approach particularly interesting, because in the first debate, Deputy Prime Minister Liviu Dragnea emphasized that regionalization should occur in 2013 specifically in order to introduce the regions in view of the upcoming European financial framework, whereas now there is no longer a sense of urgency, but rather a cautionary approach to its implementation.

The following debates were organized by the Ministry at local level. Hence, from May to July 2013 there were nine meetings taking place in: Iasi, Craiova, Timisoara, Cluj, Galați, Constanța, Sibiu, Baile Balvanyos and Ploiesti. These events followed the same pattern: similar topics and similar categories of participants (local and central government representatives, civil society, academia, etc.). Thus, we will summarize the key issues, individualizing cases where the political leader Liviu Dragnea's keynote speech had an essential feature¹⁴:

The underlying reasons for regionalization are the unbalanced development and persisting disparities in the country, and thus regionalization aims at reducing these gaps, the excessive bureaucracy due to centralization, and difficulties in absorbing EU funds. Liviu Dragnea argued that regionalization is a process concomitant to decentralization, which requires also the revision of the Constitution, and insisting that definitely not all fields will be decentralized, such as: the army, the judiciary, the intelligence services, the gendarmerie, the foreign policy and the national fiscal policy. The clarification of the relationship between

¹³ The seminar "Regionalization: Franco-German Comparative Approaches", 17th April 2013, the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, last accessed on 01/23/2015

¹⁴ Analysis of the communiqués of the public debates/meetings published on the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, last accessed on 01/23/2015

regionalization and the unitary state is also noteworthy: the regionalization does not mean federation, as regions are administrative structures that have a president and a governor in the place of residence instead of the capital. Furthermore, the Regional Councils do not pass laws but decisions/regulations, and have competences in terms of regional development, whereas the administrative competences remain in the responsibility of the County and Local Councils. Drawing the regions requires determining of optimal size enabling pursuing large-scale projects, while remaining attached to the needs of the local citizens. In fact, it was argued that a circular shape would facilitate collaboration and administrative coordination between regions, as the distance between them is smaller than in the case of elongated shapes. As regards to the timeframe for completing this process, he referred to the current year, 2013 or the following year (idea expressed in the debate in Ploiesti, July 17, 2013). Worth mentioning in this context is the statement in Iasi (23 May 2013) that at that moment there was no regionalization project undergoing. The lack of a completed project by mid-year can explain why, in Ploiesti, the deadline of the project was no longer (necessarily) at the end of 2013, as expressed in early 2013, but rather somewhere in 2014.

Analyzing these speeches and referring to the items identified and presented above, we can conclude that the role of these meetings was to clarify the fundamental issues related to regionalization, to inform stakeholders on the process and to gather suggestions from these stakeholders, in order to integrate them into the final draft of the regionalization. The need to clarify any uncertainty arising either from the incognizance of the undertaking was highlighted. Towards the last consultation sessions, there the sense of urgency for implementing the regionalization in 2013 started to fade away.

In addition to these consultations held in the territory, there took place also a working meeting concerned with the devolution of powers from the central government to the local and regional levels¹⁵, which was attended by participants from central and local administrative bodies, members of CONREG working groups and representatives of the associations of local public administrations. The topics debated were the same as those identified above: the relevance and need for regionalization, the transfer of powers and responsibilities between the various administrative levels.

These local consultations were followed again by meetings in which, in addition to national stakeholders, foreign experts also took part. Such a seminar was attended by representatives of the Committee of the Regions (CoR), with the extraordinary participation of CoR President, Ramón Luis Valcárcel Siso¹⁶. From Romania, Deputy Prime Minister Liviu Dragnea's speech was built on the same ideas - the importance of the process, the need to select criteria for the new layout and current state of the project. From the international side, CoR leader welcomed Romania's decision on regionalization (and decentralization), noting that decentralization contributes to increased welfare, whose main beneficiaries are the citizens. He argued that in this project Romania must use the European resources and design the regionalization policy on the principle of subsidiarity.

This seminar had a rather formal character, ascribable to the diplomatic practices of presenting the projects initiated by Romania to its European partners and the European institutions concerned, in order to find out how they perceive the undertaking and to receive constructive feedback.

¹⁵ Analysis of the communiqués published on the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, last accessed on 01/23/2015

¹⁶ The event took place on 5th July 2013; analysis of the communiqués of the public debates/meetings published on the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, last accessed on 01/23/2015

Given that one of the aims of regionalization is to ensure better absorption of European funds, a Romanian-Polish seminar was organized on this subject¹⁷. From the Polish side, the Minister of Regional Development, Elżbieta Bieńkowska, presented the Polish case regarding the regionalization and status of the regions in the absorption of European funds. The Romanian counterpart, Liviu Dragnea, in addition to presenting the advantages of regionalization in the context of accessing European funding, said that the draft project of regionalization and decentralization is completed and that comments from the local associative structures are being expected, and that later a meeting will be held for final decision. In other words, after carrying out local-level meetings, the feedback gathered from the debates, along with the analyses made by the working groups, will contribute to the design of the regionalization - decentralization project.

By the end of 2013, two more such debates were held, namely the one by the General Assembly of the Association of Municipalities of Romania and the public debate on the decentralization project. If the former debated about the status of the proposals for improving the legal framework for local government in Romania and was attended by the mayors of municipalities in Romania and governmental and parliamentary representatives, the latter focused on the bill regarding decentralization and benefited from the participation of representatives of non-governmental organizations and trade unions¹⁸. Their main mission and contribution was to clarify the powers and duties after decentralization.

CONCLUSIONS

These were the main undertakings by the actor under scrutiny: the establishment of an institutional structure to implement this reform centered on regionalization-decentralization and public debates and meetings held during 2013 on this topic. By looking at the latter, it can be noticed a decrease in the "dynamics" concerning the implementation of the reform: even though the intention of achieving regionalization was maintained at the same levels throughout the whole year, by the end of 2013 the deadline for implementation had faded away. As it results from the speeches, this deferral was due to uncertainties and the motivation not to carry out the process at haste and fail. It is noteworthy that debates were indeed organized, their importance being crucial in the implementation of any such large-scale reform: firstly, to properly inform all stakeholders on various aspects of the project in order to remove uncertainty and reduce misunderstandings, secondly to capitalize on the feedback received during the meetings and finally to integrate the relevant views into the project. It must be noted also the international dimension in these meetings and debates, which allowed for the best practices exchanges with representatives of countries that have gone through similar experiences and for obtaining recommendations from European experts.

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¹⁷ Romanian-Polish seminar on the impact of the regionalization-decentralization process on the absorption of European funds, 27th September 2013; analysis of the communiques of the public debates/meetings published on the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, last accessed on 01/23/2015

¹⁸ The first debate took place on 18th October 2013, the second on 12th November 2013; analysis of the communiques of the public debates/meetings published on the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, www.mdrap.ro, accessed on 01/23/2015

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