

Universitatea din București

ABSTRACT OF THE HABILITATION THESIS

**Local Democracy, Regional Development, and Institutional
Performance in Romania**

Domeniul: Științe politice

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I am an associate professor with the Department of Political science from the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, teaching courses on comparative politics systems, alongside statistics in social and political science. Although I have a PhD in Sociology, the territorial aspects of political issues have been at the heart of my academic career.

The current habilitation thesis on institutional capacity and local autonomy during a long process of decentralization is multifaceted. As it addresses a complex economic, political and social process, numerous perspectives have been used. Those perspectives derive mainly from the peculiar research interests expressed during the period spanning from the PhD thesis till now. The outcome is a mix of legal, economic and sociological perspectives and research tools, aimed at grasping the complex phenomenon.

From the PhD thesis on "Social capital and democracy in Romania", the research interest migrated from the prerequisites for trust and cooperation towards the contexts engulfing those relationships. Those contexts are the local settings where democracy evolves from the interactions based on trust, commitment, engagement, and solidarity, yet keeping a competitive allure. The actors engaged in local, rather urban contexts, are small grassroot parties that successfully manage to compete with larger, established parties. Despite the fact that is the case of two ethno-regional parties (a German and a Hungarian party), the accent was rather put on the overall competing environment, not limiting on the political actors as such. Their local success seriously impacts on the nationalization of party-systems, on the one hand, and brings forward the peculiar local context, on the other hand. Especially in the case of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania – DAHR), their local roots, discourse and performance raise the question of regional contexts in large processes ongoing in Romania, namely de-concentration, decentralization and, at a larger extent, regionalization.

With the alternative offered by grassroot, small, independent local parties and the fragmentation of the political system on local grounds, the salient issue of local democracy came on the forefront of the research activity. This perspective on local politics includes actors, as well as the public administration. On the one hand, small local parties supported by wide majorities on local grounds offer alternatives to the mainstream parties, altering the nationalization of the party system. As local actors, these small parties increase the propensity for alternative solutions and a robust adaptation to local conditions. They may foster a sense of local identity and community, maintaining voting and commitment towards the local parties as an important form of political participation.

On the other hand, local democracy is also defined by the capacity of the political system to respond to citizens' preferences and needs. The issue is important when one takes into account the rather centralized political system in Romania, despite changes in local autonomy, de-concentration and decentralization. The financing and the range of competences devolved to local authorities should be in strong connection. That is why the issue of institutional performance is essential whenever it comes to discuss about local autonomy and local democracy. The input offered by citizens taken alone, or regrouped into voluntary associations including parties, has to be addressed with corresponding outputs by local public authorities. In this vein, the performance of local authorities, namely of county-councils, has been measured through a statistical analysis. The analysis aimed at correlating the institutional capacity (according to the OUG 57/2019 regarding the Administrative Code of Romania, the overall institutional, material and human resources at the disposal of the territorial units, alongside their actions at fulfilling their mission) with the more general state of local economy and society, namely local development. It has been tested in other contexts, in other countries as Italy, how institutional capacity is affected by local resources, making a difference between richer, developed and poorer, undeveloped territorial units.

Since Romania has no effective regional units, but only developing regions designed mainly for statistical reporting (NUTS 2 units), the larger effective units taken into account have been the existing counties. In fact, counties have been endowed with responsibilities during the de-decentralization process, several competences devolving from the central to the local level. Therefore, three key domains have been taken into account when measuring the institutional performance of the counties: child protection, county roads and bridges, finally, county public libraries. The expectation is that their performance would be influenced by their level of development, including here economic items as GDP/capita and the county mean salary, or social and human development indices as school attendance, unemployment, aging populations.

The findings show that the institutional performance of the counties, at least in the case of the selected competence domains, does not significantly correlate with the wealth of the counties. In some sectors, as road and bridge management or the public libraries, the correlation is significant, yet it is negative. Statistically speaking, poorer counties perform even better than richer ones in managing public sectors, which raises the question of external support. The performance is not due to the lack of specific county resources, but to the afflux of other compensatory resources, redirected by the central government. In fact, many local governments at county, town and village level, are supported by the central government with central funding.

In the context of political discussions regarding re-organization at local level, the financial aspect is essential when speaking about amalgamation of basic local units (village and small towns). This amalgamation issue will be addressed in a separate paper to be submitted to an international journal.

However, the issue of balancing territorial inequalities through central government levers opened a new research field, which is pursued more recently. This was in line with the new concern for regional development and even regionalization in Romania. Although regionalization is not an effective outcome of the Romanian political process, some decisions related to territorial statistical units, decentralizing some public services and devolving central government competences towards lower administrative layers could be seen as baby steps towards increased regionalization. During this long-term process, however, several obstacles have been identified. In a range of scholarly articles I addressed three of those obstacles. Those are economic, cultural-territorial and political dilemmas that largely affect regionalization.

The first issue is balancing regional inequalities by a central-based mechanism of compensation of the market-driven forces that shape economy and society. The economic transition and consolidation of a free market economy only increased territorial disparities, by concentrating more capital where capital previously prevailed. Left alone, market forces will only increase discrepancies, adding supplementary value to the economy of more developed counties and depriving the poorer ones of material and human resources. Therefore, a coherent and effective mechanism of compensation is needed in order to equalize territorial development.

The second obstacle is due to the cultural peculiarities of political geography that impacts the new territorial design. In a culturally unified country, designing territorial units would encounter less resistance than in a less homogeneous one. Regrouping counties (NUTS 3 units) into larger units (NUTS 2 units) is a difficult task, when one notices that some counties are largely inhabited by culturally different people, with a different background in terms of language, local history and traditions. The revival of medieval forms of territorial autonomy as „seats” and „lands”, inherited from a pre-modern tradition that lasts since the 12th century (Szeklerland or the former „seats” of the Szeklers in Transylvania), is in contrast with the homogenizing logic of the 1968 territorial re-organization undertaken by the Communist regime. Moreover, regrouping existing counties into new, larger and autonomous units as historical provinces would trigger a new historical dispute between neighboring states, as Romania and Hungary. Fears, desires and difficult compromises from both sides could easily undermine the regionalization process.

Finally, reshaping regional design would bring forward a dispute abandoned in 1968, when new counties were designed and new capital-cities were designated to host the central county institutions. Long-lasting rivalries between much similar counties (Sibiu and Braşov, Bihor and Cluj, Argeş and Prahova, Iaşi and Galaţi and so forth) have been visible recently, when the issue of regrouping counties into larger territorial units has been put forward. A similar obstacle would raise again in the newly projected amalgamation of smaller territorial units (small towns and villages), with a serious debate to make for deciding the scale and composition of this amalgamation. In fact, the issue of amalgamation in order to rescale public administration and to increase efficiency is the topic of the next scholarly article that will be prepared for publication. The career perspective encompasses the issues addressed here, with a new accent put on rescaling territorial administration, increasing competences of the regional and local authorities, and professionalizing the political and administrative body.

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