

# RECENT REGIONALIZATION DISCOURSES AND PROJECTS IN ROMANIA WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE SZÉKELYLAND

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the post-communist development and evolution of the regionalization process in Romania. In the first part, we distinguish between two periods of regionalization: the preparation period for the EU accession, and the post-accession period. It turns out that the process of regionalization was oriented to EU criteria and expectations, which are in turn low in what it concerns the establishment of regional development institutions and of different territorial levels of the NUTS system. A radical change into this question was introduced very recently, at the beginning of 2013, when different regionalization projects have been launched by political parties and academics as well. Therefore, in the second part of the paper our main aim is to analyze the latest regionalization projects and scenarios, emphasizing one of the most controversial questions of this process related to the ethno-cultural diversity of the country and to the question of Székelyland.

**Keywords:** Romania, regionalization, administrative-territorial reform, regionalism, Székelyland.

## 1. Introduction

The question of regionalization has received large academic attention in very different contexts (Jones, Goodwin and Jones, 2005; Costa-Font and Rico, 2006; Zhang and Wu, 2006; Lentz *et al.*, 2007; Máté, Néda and Benedek, 2011; Hammond and Tosun, 2011; Ertugal and Dobre, 2011). There are different perceptions of the question whether the state can influence the regional development and, if yes, which are the proper strategies and instruments to do it. The most recent examples of the British and Spanish devolution are related to the general concept of state modernization and recognition of ethno-cultural and regional diversity. But in detail, the question is not viewed only as a political one, it is also related to high expectations of better tailored public policies and an improved economic governance as well (Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2005). Other authors consider that regions are a significant scale of governance for the implementation of public policy, like natural resource management (Lockwood *et al.*, 2009). In addition, with no exception the asymmetric regionalization in Europe is characteristic for countries with significant ethnic minorities (Belgium, Spain, UK, Italy, Finland), which means that the ethnic dimension plays an important role in shaping the regional structures of these countries. The process of decentralization and of the establishment of regional governments in these countries is well-documented (Keating, 1998; Baldini and Baldi, 2014; Guinjoan and Rodon, 2014), while the outcome of the asymmetric regionalization is evaluated very differently, from the so-called failed federalization (Baldini and Baldi, 2014) to successful reform of federalism (Cappelletti, Fischer and Sciarini, 2014).

In this broader framework the debates about the regionalization and the reshaping of the administrative-territorial units in Romania come into a new light. It can be seen as a part of a general decentralization process started 25 years ago, after the fall of communism. The post-communist reworking of the public administration has created stronger institutions at county level and at the level of localities, while the discussions about the role of the development regions – created in 1998, was hindered by the ethnic question raised from the autonomy projects of the Hungarian community and fears of territorial segregation. Former President of Romania, Traian Băsescu, together with the then ruling Democratic Liberal Party (PDL) initiated a regionalization project in 2011, which failed at that time, but recently, in 2013, the former government coalition USL (Social-Liberal Union, formed by the Social-Democrat Party and the National Liberal Party) has picked up the topic again. The regionalization discourses and projects developed by different actors are referring to both new administrative-territorial divisions at regional level, as well as to the decentralization of administrative competences from the state level to the regional level.

The main issue addressed by this article is the emergence and evolution of the post-communist regionalization process in Romania, focusing on the highly sensitive question of the Székelyland. We want to demonstrate that the intensity, the forms and institutional arrangements of the regionalization are strongly embedded in specific national contexts. We assume that the EU integration process, historical heritage, eth-

no-cultural diversity and the institutional framework are the main factors influencing different regionalization projects and discourses in Romania. Until very recently, just a handful of empirical researches have been undertaken on this topic. Our investigation is uncommon in the Romanian contemporary context; therefore the main empirical material is original and exploratory.

The article proceeds as follows: in the next section, we present the role of the EU integration to explain the establishment of a regional level, represented by the development regions. In the third section, we focus on the evaluation of the regional debate after the EU accession. The fourth section presents different scenarios for a new regionalization, while section five discusses the ethnic dimension of the regionalization. The final section concludes by discussing the limitations and implications of the regionalization process in Romania.

## **2. Regional policy and the 'weak' regionalization in the EU pre-accession period**

During the Romanian political, economic and social transition period the evolution of the relations between the state and sub-national territorial units in Romania followed the above presented international trends. The construction of the regional level, together with the majority of the CEE-region, stood in close relationship to the EU enlargement process of the country and to the implementation constraints of the EU pre-accession funds (Keating and Hughes, 2003). The institutional framework for the regional policy has been established in the Law no. 315/2004, which sets the goals, the institutions, and the instruments for regional development. According to it, the main goals of the regional policy in Romania are: the reduction of regional disparities; the institutional preparation for the accession to Structural Funds; the connection of sectoral economic policies to the regional level; the support of the inner-, international-, and interregional cooperation. Territorially, a regional level has been created, by grouping the 41 counties according to several criteria in eight development regions, equivalent to the EU NUTS II level. These regions lack legal status which means that they are not real administrative-territorial units. They have a framework function for the establishment, implementation and evaluation of regional development policies, as well as a technical function as basic territorial units for the collection of specific statistical data according to the EUROSTAT regulations. The new NUTS II regions were implemented by creating a new institutional network for their administration: the National Council for Regional Development (NCRD), the Regional Development Councils (RDCs) and the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs).

Two basic problems are emerging from the implementation of this law (Benedek and Horváth, 2008). At first, the criteria for area designation are heterogeneous and not consequently applied. This problem is not related specifically to Romania, it is linked to the weak regulations at the EU level. Compared to the EU average, the Romanian development regions are too large in terms of their total population and surface. One of the regions is culturally very heterogeneous (Southeast) and in sev-

eral cases the county representatives demand the reassignment of their county due to economic interdependence with counties assigned to other regions. In addition, in two counties where the Hungarians are the majority of the population (Harghita and Covasna) there is a growing claim for territorial autonomy, the political representatives of the Hungarian minority proposing a distinct development region for these two counties (Csutak, 2007). EU countries comparable in size with Romania but with stronger decentralization have a greater number of both NUTS II and NUTS III regions, according to their internal constitutional arrangements (Spain has 18 NUTS II units and 52 NUTS III units, while Italy has 20 NUTS II regions and 103 NUTS III areas). The 1993 Structural Fund Regulation provided for greater flexibility in area designation, enabling NUTS units to be subdivided, an opportunity not used in Romania. Also, the implementation of EU competition policy enables Member States to target assistance at specified labor market areas, another possibility not being taken into consideration in Romania.

The second main problem is related to the fact that the development regions in Romania do not have financial and legislative competencies. They fulfill two main functions: a statistical function and an implementation function for the EU cohesion policy. It means that they have no executive or legislative powers, and are subordinated to the governmental level which distributes the financial resources to them. The regionalization was top-bottom oriented and it is the result of consulting a very limited number of actors.

### **3. The regional debate after the EU accession from 2007**

The territorial reorganization of the state was put back on the political agenda by former state president Traian Băsescu and the then ruling party (PDL), in early 2011. This time, however, in contrast to the debate of the early 1990s, the main catalyzing forces behind the initiative were more pragmatic. On the one side, stood Romania's brief experience as an EU member state, with the lowest absorption rate of EU funds during 2007–2013, while, on the other hand, there were the inefficiencies of an oversized and highly centralized public administration, the 'Fat Man' as called by the President himself (Zachmann, 2013). These inefficiencies, especially during the austerity measures implemented as a result of the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis, became untenable. In these circumstances, a thorough administrative-territorial reform was proposed, with the transformation of the eight development regions into administrative-territorial entities, although without the drafting of a concrete policy proposal. At a certain point, however, the political debate lost these initial objectives and considerations and began to shift toward ethnical aspects of the regionalization, especially in the case of Székelyland. As a consequence of a heated debate, and without a clear support from the coalition partner DAHR (Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania), there is no surprise that the reform proposal disappeared as vehemently from the public space, as it became to dominate it. At the same time, we have to mention that the PDL's strong support for the proposal was also coming from internal, politi-

cal considerations. Due to the heavy austerity measures, the party was quickly losing political ground to its main opponents, therefore, with the implementation of a thorough administrative-territorial reform, it tried to shake up territorial politics and maintain key, influential positions in the new regional level administrations.

Mainly from the above mentioned considerations, during the 2012 legislative elections the need to reorganize the state structure based on the principles of subsidiarity and decentralization was promoted by the majority of the political spectrum. In this respect we have to mention that there was a clear contrast between the proposals elaborated by the representatives of the Hungarian community, who plead in favor of an autonomous region for Székelyland (432/2009 Draft Bill, 2009; HCP, 2009; DAHR, 2012; HPPT, 2012), and those representing the Romanian majority who clearly denied any initiative to organize the new administrative-territorial structure based on ethnical principles. From the electoral race – mainly as a result of the post-crisis discontent wave – the USL came out with two-thirds majority and initiated a very controversial process towards the administrative-territorial reorganization of the state. From the very beginning, the reform was highly questionable, especially if we take into consideration that Romania was in the middle of a negotiation and accreditation process for the next MFF (2014–2020) of the EU, and the coalition wanted to push through the reform process in one year, during 2013. At the same time, both the Permanent Representation of Romania to the EU, as well as the National Institute of Statistics (INSSE) informed the Commission in February 2013 that, in the framework of the NUTS 2013 revision process, Romania will not propose any changes to the current NUTS system (NUTS 2010) (European Commission, 2013). Therefore it is not a surprise that the government discretely supported a very similar approach to the one proposed by the PDL, to transform the current development regions into administrative bodies with judicial personality, because they were the ones that had the experience and the infrastructure to manage future EU challenges and expectations. In these circumstances, the government initiated a series of public consultations in almost every major city of Romania. However, the process dubbed by the press ironically as the ‘Regionalization Caravan’ (Agerpress, 2013) in the absence of a clear, scientifically grounded policy proposal was more a campaign to promote the Government’s concepts and legitimize the reform process itself. Given the political frictions and internal tensions within the ruling coalition, adding to this the superficiality and hasty preparation of the reform process, not to mention the lack of public support for a constitutional revision that was necessary, there is no surprise that the initiative of the coalition ended up in failure. As a movement of last resort, the coalition tried to materialize some aspects of the reform proposal through a decentralization draft bill, according to which several central governmental functions would have been decentralized, better to say deconcentrated to county level institutions, however, without transferring their funding from central authorities. The initiative can be regarded as a compromise between the center and local, county level ruling elites who feared that the government-initiated regionalization process could lead to the diminishing

of their rights and influence. However, the hastily adopted superficial bill by governmental responsibility was immediately attacked by the PDL at the Constitutional Court (CCR). The CCR decided unanimously, backed by a 106 page motivation that the government's decentralization bill clearly violated the Constitution, mainly with regard to the principle of local autonomy and the constitutional regime of the property (CCR, 2014).

In addition to the political debate on the topic of how to regroup the counties into a different regional model, proposals also came from other stakeholders such as academics, representatives of local authorities and the civic society (Săgeată, 2006; Benedek, 2008; Academia Advocacy, 2013; Otiman, 2013; Szabó, 2014). But no coherent paper was delivered in order to reorganize the administrative divisions of the country. The question is highly sensitive. The existing system was established in 1968, and in the meantime at the level of the counties different kind of public institutions became strongly embedded in the territorial framework, and the sub-national political representations and interests have been shaped on this level.

Despite the existence of strong regional identities in different historical regions of Romania, a low intensity of political regionalism has evolved (Benedek, 2008). As a consequence, there is little pressure from inside on devolution and decentralization. Two factors had a huge contribution to this situation. First, the law of political parties makes the registration of a regional party very difficult, and second, until the end of 2012 the programs of the main political parties did not reflected questions related to regionalization. Among the parliamentary parties, only the DAHR had a larger chapter regarding the issue of regions (DAHR, 2011). The program of this party speaks about the need to change the present NUTS II regions, because certain economic, historical and geographical aspects have not been taken into consideration when they were set up. Therefore, in 2007 the issue of reorganizing the NUTS II regions came back on the political agenda, as it was included in the debates of the electoral campaign for the European Parliament. DAHR presented a proposal for the reorganization of the NUTS II regions, but the political dialogue was hindered by the widespread stereotypes related to the fear that more regional power will lead to separatism and active regionalism (Jordan, 1998; Benedek, 2008).

#### **4. Scenarios for the administrative and territorial reform**

The general attitude towards the administrative-territorial reorganization can be regarded as a positive one, being supported not just by the ruling coalition, but also by the majority of the population. According to a recent nation-wide representative survey (IRES, 2013), 50.9% of the Romanian population has a good or very good opinion about the process of regionalization and decentralization, 1.8% has ambiguous feelings, and 40.4% has a bad or very bad opinion. On the personal side, 47.9% of the respondents think that the process of regionalization would be beneficial for them, 35.7% stating that the process would have a negative impact, while 14.2% are undecided.

Therefore we can conclude that the recent administrative-territorial reform initiated by the former ruling coalition (USL) had a somewhat solid base of support. This is hardly surprising given the fact that during the last parliamentary elections the major players of the political spectrum from the left to the right included the reform into their political programs. At the same time, the current debate about the necessity of a thorough administrative-territorial reform emerged long before, mainly after Romania's accession to the EU. In this respect, the emergence of the necessity was strongly correlated with the existence of an inefficient, oversized and highly centralized administrative system (Popescu, 2005). This recognition was only reinforced by the incapacity of the state to successfully manage non-refundable EU resources and the spillover effects of the 2007–2008 global recession.

In this general context and on the basis of the existing institutional framework and regionalization projects developed by political parties or academic institutions we have identified the following future scenarios of the territorial reorganizations:

**a. The preservation of the existing situation** (status quo scenario) is promoted by the Romanian Government (RG), which has recently initiated a draft project for decentralization, after failing in the reorganization of the development regions into administrative-territorial units (RG, 2013). It is highly possible because of the low costs, the relatively low conflict risks, the absence of a serious inner pressure for further regionalization, excepting the Hungarian minority, and because the high level of the commitment of the Government for what we call 'a decentralized status quo'. It means that the state will remain organized into two administrative-territorial levels (counties, communes/cities), according to the Constitution, but with some measures for decentralization.

**b. The radical change of the administrative-territorial structure** of the state. Theoretically, such a change can be achieved in two ways: by modifying the number of the counties, more exactly by increasing the number of the existing counties (Jordan, 2003); and by transforming the development regions into administrative-territorial units (Cocean, 2013). Both modalities imply exactly the opposite of the threats mentioned by the first scenario: high costs and high conflict risks which would be unavoidably generated by such reorganization. In addition, it necessitates the change of the Constitution. But the existing Constitution limits the possibilities of its revision, as according to article 152 'the provisions of the present Constitution concerning the national, independent, unitary and indivisible character of the Romanian state, the Republican form of government, the integrity of the territory, the independence of justice, political pluralism and the official language cannot form the object of a revision.' The inner territorial units are not sovereign and there is only one group of institutions at the highest level of the centralized state.

This scenario implies the change of the functioning mechanisms of the existing institutions, by the decentralization of certain state functions and resources. Transforming the existing development regions into administrative units needs a new set of laws

regulating the distribution of functions and resources between different territorial levels. It would enable a compromise which is necessary for the application of the principle of subsidiarity – which tends to increase the number of territorial units in order to bring decision closer to the citizens – and the principle of efficiency, which tends to create larger units in order to increase the economic efficiency of public services.

**c. The change of the territorial structure of the development regions**, increasing the number of the existing NUTS II units (Săgeată, 2013; Csutak, 2007; Covăsnianu, 2011; Otiman, 2013; Benedek, Török and Máthé, 2013). It can be a kind of ‘third-way’ alternative, because it implies lower levels of costs and risks than the second scenario. In addition, there are two more relevant factors for this scenario: an EU regulation which sets a maximal population threshold for the NUTS II regions, the development regions North-East and South-West having more inhabitants than this threshold; and the high GDP per capita growth rate of Bucharest, which is situated well above the 75% eligibility threshold for qualifying for the objective no. 1 concerning the funding from the Structural Funds.

The NUTS Regulation has served as a guideline during the negotiations of Romania for the EU accession. The fundamental approach of the EU is to keep the regional classification as stable as possible in order to avoid breaks in statistical time series. Therefore, in accordance to the Regulation, the frequency for updating the classification is limited to every three years. An exception to this limit is permitted in the case of a complete administrative-territorial reorganization. Since June 2003 no reorganization has taken place in the Member States. In the case of Romania, the Commission preferred to maintain the regional classification to ensure comparable regional statistics for the pre- and post-accession periods. The Report from the Commission on the implementation of the NUTS Regulation from 4.06.2007 reinforces that the primary purpose of the NUTS Regulation is to serve as a framework for regional statistics. The intention to ensure the stability of this system is still prevailing, the Commission taking a restrictive approach.

**d. The establishment of a Székelyland autonomous region based on the principle of asymmetric regionalisation.** As mentioned earlier in this paper, we can find several European examples where the co-option of ethnical minorities into shaping regional structures did not lead to the fragmentation of state structures, but on the contrary to the peaceful consolidation of majority – minority relations. Therefore, there is the theoretical possibility of the establishment of a regionalized state administration based on the principle of asymmetric autonomy and consociationalism similarly to models adopted by Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom or Belgium. At the same time, there are also several functional models that have evolved under unitary state structures, for example the case of the Swedish speaking communities’ autonomy in Finland (Weller and Nobbs, 2012).

Considering the issue of Székelyland from the 1990s onwards, more than 15 draft proposals appeared on the establishment of an autonomous region for Székelyland



(Bognár, 2006). Although there is a wide consensus among the representatives of the Hungarian community that Székelyland should constitute a separate administrative-territorial unit with a high degree of autonomy, yet regarding the details and the approach to the issue there are several differences. In this respect, the DAHR generally has a more articulated opinion being largely open to compromises by promoting a step by step approach. According to their proposals (432/2009 Draft Bill, 2009), the Székelyland region should be based on the current county structure, composed of Harghita, Covasna and Mureş counties. On the other side, the smaller Hungarian parties, namely the HCP (2009), but especially the HPPT (2012) have a more radical approach by proposing the reorganization of the current county structure and the establishment of regional units based on bottom-up initiatives and regional identities.

In the near future, however, any possibility towards the establishment of a territorial autonomy for Székelyland is highly improbable, since the representatives of the Romanian majority exclude the ethnic dimension from the regional discourse. The official approach towards regions is a more pragmatic one, strongly connected to the modernization of state administration, the establishment of multi-level governance where functional regions are the key players of the EU cohesion policy.

## **5. The ethnic dimension of the regionalization: the ‘Székelyland’ question**

One of the main driving forces behind the ‘regional debate’ in Romania is the Hungarian minorities’ project for decentralization and ethnic-based territorial autonomy (Kocsis, 2013). In this context, the aim of the following case study is to present the Székelyland question in the perspective of a possible ‘regional reform’. It is the only region in Romania where Hungarians form the majority of the population, and therefore it is the target region of territorial autonomy projects.

### ***5.1. Székelyland and Székely people***

A diverse cultural and historical heritage, a strong regional identity and the experience of almost six centuries of self-governance gives to the area nowadays known as Székelyland an obvious specificity in the territorial structure of Romania. It encompasses a historical region of 12,500 km<sup>2</sup> located in Eastern Transylvania, mainly in the mountainous regions of the Eastern Carpathians. From an administrative-territorial standpoint, the majority of the region belongs to Harghita, Covasna and Mureş counties, where the majority of the population declare themselves as ethnic Hungarians. According to the 2011 Romanian census from 1,237,746 ethnic Hungarians living in Romania 611,391 are concentrated in the above mentioned three counties. 84.8% of the population of Harghita county, 73.6% of Covasna and 37.8% of Mureş county declare themselves as ethnic Hungarian (Székelys) (Kiss and Barna, 2012).

While the origin of the Székelys is still subject of the scientific debate (László, 1999; Egyed, 2006), there is a wide acceptance among the historians that their settlement to the eastern frontiers of Transylvania, into the area today known as Székelyland, begins with the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their military commitment in return to the privi-

leges and collective freedom guaranteed by the Hungarian King leaves an imprint not only on the characteristics of their society, but also on the specificities of the geographical space, from an administrative-territorial standpoint being organized into specific administrative-territorial units called 'seats', similarly to the Transylvanian Saxons (Germans). The Székelys, under the various political circumstances, managed to maintain until 1876 their specific self-organization and territorial structure, when they are finally integrated after almost six centuries into the newly established Hungarian administrative system of counties ('vármegyék'). The First World War ended with important consequences for the Székelys, which found themselves in the position of an ethnic minority. The new government's attitude towards the acquired territories was not of historical reconciliation and understanding, but rather one of cultural homogenization (Livezeanu, 1995). Later, after the Second World War, even the Stalin's imposed Hungarian Autonomous Province and soviet ethnic policy principles between 1952 and 1968 were not anything else than a showcase of an 'exemplary' treatment of the minority (Bottoni, 2008).

## *5.2. Opinions and attitudes on the territorial reform in Székelyland*

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the question of regionalization and administrative-territorial reform has become one of the most controversial and debated issues of the socio-political discourse in the last years. A central element of this debate is related to the ethno-cultural diversity of the country, with a large Hungarian minority, which forms the majority of the population in the Székelyland region. We concluded that in order to argue for the administrative-territorial reform generally in Romania, and particularly in Székelyland, questioning the attitude of the Hungarian population in relation to the topic can be of significant importance.

## **6. Methodology**

In the autumn of 2011, during a transversal investigation, we carried out an exploratory survey research in order to get an insight into the opinions and attitudes of the Hungarian students about the question of administrative-territorial reorganization and regional identity. We have chosen the Hungarian student population not only for practical reasons but also for the fact that some authors found out a strong association between the distribution of knowledge about one's nation and the educational level. The fact that more respondents are able to name national symbols is an indication of a more efficient national socialization (Csepeli, 1997; Veres, 2015). With other words, we have chosen a sub-population which is able to articulate the discourse about a very complex and technical question such as regionalization and regional identity, and which was easy to access. Taking into consideration these aspects, and the shortness of the available resources, we chose the method of computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI). In order to get an insight into the opinions and attitudes about the regionalization and administrative-territorial reform, we took a sample of the Hungarian student community from the cities of Cluj-Napoca, Gheorgheni, Miercurea Ciuc,

Oradea and Târgu Mureş through the mailing lists of various educational institutions, namely the Babeş-Bolyai University, the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, the Partium Christian University, and the Hungarian Students Union of Cluj Napoca and Oradea. Considering the chosen method, it is obvious that in the case of our research we cannot speak of statistical representativity, neither in the case of the Hungarian university students of Transylvania, nor in the case of the population of Székelyland. However, considering the opportunities available at our disposal and the absence of an in-depth analysis of the issue, the research can be interpreted as an exploratory investigation and, in this context, the results brought by it can take to a new level the debate of administrative-territorial reform.

Our survey was entitled '*Székelyland as a region*' and a multivariable online questionnaire composed of 25 questions was set up using an online, free survey and questionnaire service called KwikSurveys. The main advantage of the chosen method was that the data acquisition was really fast and easy, in just a matter of a few weeks we got around 500 respondents, from which, after careful analysis of their status of completion and integrity, we managed to extract 437 valid, usable questionnaires, which in comparison to the target group of our research was quite high. In this context, our research is a compass in the ever widening '*regional, territorial debate*' in Romania from the perspective of the Hungarian student population of Romania. In the following lines we will synthesize the most important aspects of our results.

## **7. Results**

Taking into consideration the target group of our survey, it was obvious that the ethnic composition of our sample will be quite homogenous, where 96.4% declared themselves as ethnic Hungarians, 3.1% as Romanian and 0.5% of different nationality. The average age of our respondents was 24.17, while the origin of our respondents reflects very well the spatial distribution of the Hungarians in Romania, because the counties Harghita, Covasna and Mureş contribute with 60.5% to the Hungarian students in our sample, while on the second place is Cluj with 16.9%, and on the third Satu Mare with 6.3%.

With regard to the administrative-territorial dimension of our research we used several indicators to measure the opinions and attitudes of our respondents about the current administrative-territorial structure of Romania and the so called '*regional or territorial debate*'. Our initial hypothesis was that given the fact that a profound administrative-territorial reorganization has far more outreaching consequences than just a simple change in Romania's political map, therefore the public should be widely interested in the topic. Our assumption has been proven right to some extent, because as the results from Table 1 show, 26.6% of our respondents stated that they are very interested, while 49.4% of them being somewhat interested in the topic.

Regarding the opinion about the current administrative-territorial structure of Romania the results show a differentiated picture. Only a minority of the respondents – 5.6% had a definitely positive opinion, 35.6% having a somewhat positive opinion,

while 30.5% of them stated to have a definitely negative attitude. Apart from this, it is much more interesting to emphasize the significant, 19.2% rate of the 'Don't know' responses to our question, which is very probably due to the fact that although the topic is a very widely debated one in our society, an important amount of the subjects in the lack of information is not ready to take a position, or judge the situation (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Interests and opinions about the current administrative-territorial structure of Romania and about a potential administrative-territorial reform of the state (N=437)

Interest in the 'regional/territorial debate'		Opinion about the current administrative-territorial structure of Romania	
Very interested	26.6%	Definitely positive	5.6%
Somewhat interested	49.4%	Somewhat positive	35.6%
Not very interested	15.5%	Somewhat negative	30.5%
Not at all interested	2.9%	Definitely negative	9.1%
No response / Don't know	5.6%	No response / Don't know	19.2%
Total	100%	Total	100%

To get a more detailed view about the perception of the administrative-territorial debate in our sample, we used a list of preliminarily defined statements and we asked our respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each of them on a four-point Likert-type scale. From the results synthesized in Table 2, we can conclude that 79.7% of our respondents are not satisfied with the current administrative-territorial structure of Romania, and definitely feel the need for change. Nearly half of the respondents think that Romania's current administrative-territorial structure doesn't correspond to the needs of a sustainable regional policy (Table 2, N2), and the actual number of counties makes it difficult to implement cross county projects and nationwide collaborations (Table 2, N1). In light of these results, it is striking that the majority of our respondents, 69% of them, still supports the current county system, without any further change (Table 2, N5), while only 33.3% agree on the necessity of a profound administrative-territorial reform and the reorganization of the current county system (Table 2, N3). It is also interesting that 64.4% of our respondents agree with the

**Table 2:** Frequency and average values of some of the statements concerning the question of administrative-territorial reorganization in Romania (N=437)

N	Statement	1. Strongly agree %	2. Agree %	Average
1	There are too many counties, therefore it is difficult to implement cross county collaborations and nationwide development projects.	14.2	34.9	2.52
2	The current administrative-territorial structure of Romania doesn't correspond to a sustainable regional development policy.	21.6	37.1	2.31
3	The current county system should be eliminated and larger administrative-territorial units or regions should be established.	9.4	23.9	2.31
4	The current development regions have very restricted roles.	22	42.7	2.24
5	Counties shouldn't be eliminated, instead we have to reorganize the current development regions above the county level.	24.4	44.6	2.19
6	Profound administrative-territorial reorganization would reduce bureaucracy and result in a more efficient administrative system.	13.8	37.2	2.54
7	The current administrative-territorial system should not be changed	3.7	16.6	3.20
8	A Romania divided into larger administrative-territorial units, namely regions, would generate better economic conditions for local communities.	18.2	46.2	2.30

statement that a Romania divided into larger administrative-territorial units than the counties would create better economic conditions for local communities (Table 2, N8).

In order to verify the perception about future administrative-territorial reorganization, through the use of a control question, we asked our respondents again to state their opinion on the issue. As we can see from the results presented in Table 3, the majority of our respondents, namely two-thirds of them, feel the necessity for change, meaning maintaining the current county system, while reorganizing the existing development regions. Even though the results from the overall outlook on the issue of administrative-territorial reform in Romania were quite surprising, the question of Székelyland in the context of a possible administrative-territorial reorganization was even more intriguing. Our preliminary assumption was that the Hungarians have a strong desire for a separate Székelyland administrative-territorial unit.

**Table 3:** Frequencies of certain methods of administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania (N=437)

N	Method	%
1	I would keep the current administrative-territorial structure of the state with the existing development regions without any interference or change.	7
2	I would abolish the current county system and I would establish larger administrative-territorial units.	22.7
3	I wouldn't abolish the current county system, but I would reorganize the existing development regions.	70.3

The results presented in Table 4 exceeded even our preliminary expectations, 83.4% of our respondents stated that given the specific historical, cultural and nonetheless ethnical situation of the region, Székelyland should constitute a separate administrative-territorial unit (e.g. region) in a future administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania (Table 4, N1). 81.4% of our respondents stated that the starting point for the establishment of such unit should be the ethnical homogeneity, the Hungarian/ Székely majority (Table 4, N2). At the same time, 78.4% of our sample thought that a distinctive Székelyland administrative-territorial unit (e.g. region) would indeed bring

**Table 4:** Frequency and average values of some of the statements concerning the issue of Székelyland during a possible administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania (N=437)

N	Statement	1. Strongly agree %	2. Agree %	Average
1	Based on the specific cultural, historical, and ethnical heritage Székelyland should definitely constitute a separate administrative-territorial unit (e.g. region) in a probable administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania.	48.8	34.6	1.72
2	At the establishment of the Székelyland administrative-territorial unit the determining criteria should be the ethnical composition, the Hungarian/ Székely majority.	36.9	44.5	1.90
3	Székelyland as administrative-territorial unit (e.g. region) would bring the decisions and initiatives to the local level, thus laying down the foundations of a prosperous region.	33.2	45.2	1.98
4	Székelyland as administrative-territorial unit (e.g. region) with stronger administrative powers would determine the overall, long-term survival of the Hungarian/Székely culture.	35.9	41.9	1.96
5	At the establishment of a Székelyland administrative-territorial unit (e.g. region) we shouldn't be frightened to constitute a common unit with a county with Romanian majority, but strong economic background.	13.6	24.6	2.81
6	None of the above mentioned concepts solve the problems of Székelyland, the only solution is ethnic territorial autonomy.	10	13	3.13

the decisions and initiatives closer to the local level, therefore laying down the foundations of a prosperous region (Table 4, N3), while 77.8% of them thinks that this status could be the foundation for the long-term survival of the Hungarian/Székely culture (Table 4, N4). Only 38.2% of our respondents would put aside the fundamental principle of ethnic homogeneity in the name of the economic prosperity of Székelyland (Table 4, N5). This isolation is probably due to past, not always harmonic experiences, and the fear from further impairments in the rights of the minorities. The most reassuring result of our research is that only a small fraction of our respondents think that apart from ethnic territorial autonomy, there is no other solution to the question of Székelyland (Table 4, N6). This picture is in opposition with some Romanian mainstream media, which compares the autonomy movement of Székelyland to the secession process of Kosovo or to the case of Basque Country in Spain (Giurescu, 2010). Without any historical precedents, or any radicalization from the Székelys, the aforementioned comparisons are nothing else than just pure speculations over a recently heated debate in our society.

To analyze the regional identity, the characteristics and spatial extent of Székelyland, we asked our respondents to outline and define the region. First of all, we enumerated a set of preliminarily defined characteristics and we asked our respondents to rate each one of them on a Likert scale from 1 to 10 based on how much it represents Székelyland for them.

The results are showing that Székelyland appears as a cultural, nonetheless ethnical region, defined mainly by its Hungarian speaking Székely community, strong regional identity and specific cultural and historical heritage. More interesting is the shape of the future Székelyland as imagined by the respondents in case of an eventual administrative-territorial reorganization of Romania. For more than 90% of our respondents the Székelyland administrative-territorial unit would be formed from the core of the historical Székelyland, from current Harghita, Covasna and Mureş counties, where they built an ethnic majority.

Considering the scenarios outlined in section 4, as well as the results of the survey, we can conclude that the most desired outcome of the regionalization process would be the establishment of the administrative-territorial Székelyland autonomy (scenario b, radical change of the administrative-territorial structure), or at least the preservation of the current situation, without any further losses in the rights of the minorities (scenario a, status quo scenario).

### ***7.1. Opinions and attitudes of the Romanian population about the regionalization and territorial autonomy of the Székelyland***

While the Hungarian minority, mainly in Székelyland, demanded territorial self-organization, more precisely administrative-territorial autonomy, the majority of the Romanians opposed any form of self-determination. Officially, the government concluded the question of Székelyland by adopting a 'functional' approach to the establishment of the new administrative-territorial units, opposing any proposal that tried to establish homogeneous regions based on historical-cultural or ethnical crite-

ria. Thus, the government has a contradictory position because, on the one side, it accepts the principle of subsidiarity, yet on the other side, refuses any type of bottom-up oriented approaches to the question of Székelyland. On a societal level, the Romanian society is opposed to the administrative-territorial autonomy of Székelyland. In a recent nationwide representative poll, 48.9% of the respondents considered that the ethnical separation of the Hungarian minority could constitute a risk to the overall regionalization process in Romania.

Other concerns are related to the situation of the Romanian population living in the Székelyland, which represents 15.6% (95,376 persons) of the total population. It constitutes a minority in two counties (Harghita and Covasna), but has a slight and growing majority in Mureş county (Kiss and Barna, 2012). On the basis of the public statements and press releases of the well organized Romanian community, through its representative associates and stakeholders we could get the overall sense and opinion about the administrative-territorial reform in Székelyland. Generally, as reflected by the press communicates of the Civic Forum of the Romanians from Covasna, Harghita and Mureş (FCR-CHM, 2008), the Romanian minority has a somewhat ambiguous, yet strong negative attitude towards the territorial autonomy and the establishment of a 'Székely' development region. This is mainly triggered by the fear of ethnic discrimination of the Romanians in the Székely counties. The majority of the local Romanian elite thinks that, given the fact that the Hungarian minority constitutes only 6,5% of Romania's population, it has achieved quite a lot in terms of minority rights. In their opinion, the 'so called Székelyland's autonomy *de facto* exists, only *de jure* we are speaking of separate counties' (Communicate of the FCR-CHM, 2008). However, even if it is often downplayed by the Hungarian stakeholders, the attitude of the Romanians living in the analyzed region will play a central role in the debates about the future of the Székelyland.

The EU will not assume any active role in this process, because it does not have any binding legislation on the status of ethnic minorities for the member states. As it is stated on the website of the European Commission, 'the Commission has no general power as regards minorities, in particular it has no power over issues relating to: the recognition of the status of the minorities; their self-determination and autonomy; the regime governing the use of regional or minority languages. In this respect EU countries retain general powers to take decisions about minorities'. However, there are several European recommendations and principles on the rights of the minorities, adopted by the majority of the member states of the European Union, as well as by Romania. In this respect we would like to highlight the Recommendation no. 1201/1993, which is again, not binding for the national legislation.

## **8. Conclusions and discussion issues**

The rapid transition to democracy and market economy, the EU integration process and, after 2007, the EU membership have created a good opportunity for Romania in order to establish the institutional framework for regional development. The worldwide economic crisis in 2008 had put in new light the relation between state

and economy, on the one hand, and between the state and the sub-national territorial levels, on the other hand. It is expected that the global trend towards state decentralization and devolution will be followed by a period marked by state interventionism and the centralization of the administration and resources.

In 2013 many competing scenarios for regionalization and territorial-administrative reform have been launched. Our study has revealed the fact that the regionalization project of the Hungarian minority, aiming at maintaining the existing county system and creating a Székelyland development region, has blocked and ethnicized the discussion about the reorganization of the sub-national administration. Although ethnic diversity does not necessarily conduct to radical or extremist views, Romanian political parties have a tendency towards populism, looking to enhance their political capital by getting involved in debates about controversial issues (IPP, 2003). Under these circumstances, the fundamental issue is how will the political stakeholders negotiate the regionalization process in order to maintain their voting basis?

It is also worth to be mentioned that the territorial reorganization of the state is not simply a technical question. It may have substantial influence on the forms and intensity of regionalism. The area designation for the purposes of the regional policy (development regions) had instrumentalized existing economic disparities. Therefore an important question for the future is: will the instrumentalization of economic disparities have any consequences on regionalism? As expected, there is a growing importance of the regional agendas in Romania as well, but we are skeptical in what concerns the change of the existing governance structures.

The exciting fundamental question is, therefore, how the Romanian society will continue to develop its regional shape, which regionalization type will be applied and in what way, and which internal and external constraints will be decisive for the direction adopted in the long run. Many further questions are related to this, namely that of democracy (formal or substantial) and that of the structure and role of the state (centralized, or different forms of the decentralized modern state). It is a basic question if the state will enforce the regional level or not, and the problem becomes a dilemma if we think that the Romanian state had never experienced decentralized political systems and more regional power is feared to lead to separatism and active regionalism (Jordan, 1998), juxtaposed on the claims of the most active regionalist group constituted by the Hungarian community from Romania.

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