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ALEXANDRU COHAL, DORIN DOBRINCUI, GEORGE ȚURCĂNAȘU (eds.).
*Regionalizarea: către un model de bună guvernare a României [Regionalization:
Towards a Good Governance Model for Romania]*. Polirom. Iași. 2023. 302 p.

This edited volume stems from the public debate initiated by the Movement for the Development of Moldova (*Mișcarea pentru dezvoltarea Moldovei*) on how the development gap affecting the eastern part of Romania can be addressed via territorial reform.² The contributors to the volume are professors and researchers at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, and at the Romanian Academy in Iași. They are joined by three other colleagues working in Bolzano, Sibiu, and Cluj-Napoca. The contributors cover a broad range of fields: legal studies, geography, sociology, political science, economics, history, ethnology, and linguistics. This provides for a variety of perspectives on regionalism and the territorial and administrative reforms designed to address it. At the same time, as will be shown later, this also creates some issues regarding the coherence of the book.

The editors have opted not to include a theoretical and methodological chapter in this volume, leaving ample space for the authors to shape their contributions. Instead, a Foreword (9-11) is included, in which a

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² For readers less familiar with the Romanian context, it must be noted that in the book and throughout this text, “Moldova” denotes the north-eastern territory of Romania (the eastern half of the medieval principality of Moldavia).

declaration of intent is made: to build arguments supporting the idea that Romania's regional development disparities are better addressed by a territorial reform involving the introduction of regional governments along the borders of the country's historical regions. Starting from this statement, there are two types of contributions in the book. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 approach the broader topic of regionalization. Chapters 1, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10 are focused on various aspects pertaining to Moldovan regionalism and Moldova's development. Chapter 6, to some extent, combines these perspectives. In what follows, the discussion will focus on the chapters considering this natural grouping, rather than the order in which they were included in the volume.

The second chapter of the volume, authored by legal scholar Marius Bălan, discusses the constitutional context in which any regionalization reform would take place in Romania. In his view, it is not unlikely that, as in the past, attempts at regionalization would be blocked by Romania's Constitutional Court based on constitutional provisions concerning the "national and unitary character of the Romanian state." By discussing in detail the failed regionalization reform of 2014, the author shows, more or less explicitly, that the way an eventual reform treats the Szeklerland (*Ținutul secuiesc*) will determine its success or failure.

The third chapter of the volume, authored by legal scholar Sergiu Constantin, discusses several cases of territorial autonomy granted in Europe in cases where there is a strong bottom-up regionalism built on ethno-cultural criteria (*e.g.*: the South Tirol, Åland, or Vojvodina). The aim is to draw lessons from these examples that may be useful when considering a regionalization reform in Romania. The author discusses the three pillars of a successful reform: (1) a participatory decision-making process (the political dimension); (2) the legal grounding of regionalization, a flexible division of tasks between the levels of government, and legal recourse (the legal dimension); and (3) governance mechanisms ensuring consultation, co-decision, and conflict resolution (the institutional dimension). What seems to be missing from the chapter is the notion that the lessons learned from these examples would be useful in a regionalization reform in dealing not with Moldova, but the Szeklerland.

The fourth chapter, authored by political scientist Dragoș Dragoman, discusses three major obstacles which need to be overcome by an eventual

regionalization reform in Romania. It points to the need to find a way to reduce the development gap between Romania's regions and links the increased gap to the withdrawal of the state and the unfettered capitalism that has filled the void. It also suggests that any regional reform must consider the ethnocultural diversity. Very importantly, it points out the fact that the history of territorial reform in Romania is one of contradiction between ethnic diversity and the centralist and homogenizing tendencies of the state. Finally, it shows that the seemingly secondary issue of the choice of capital cities for future regions hides a complex political reality in which national and local political interests must be balanced.

Taken together, these chapters provide some useful lessons for a possible regionalization reform in Romania. Other chapters provide interesting perspectives, but their potential contribution to the regionalization policy debate is uneven.

Thus, the first chapter, written by historian Dorin Dobrinu, provides a detailed and interesting description of the public debates on a hypothetical regionalization reform taking place in the Old Kingdom of Romania between 1866 and 1912. It shows that the debate on regionalization is a longstanding one in Romania. Nevertheless, it would have been interesting to see how the aspects described in this chapter are linked to later regionalization efforts during the authoritarian monarchy of Carol II, or the Communist regime.

The fifth chapter of the book, written by economist Mihai Talmaciu, is again a descriptive one. It highlights the well-known development gap between Romania's North-East and South-East development regions (covering Moldova) and other Romanian and European regions. It also describes the lesser-known development gap between the eight Moldovan counties included in these two development regions. The chapter does venture into causality and provides a general list of factors that are likely to cause this development gap. However, it does not provide a more in-depth discussion of how these factors actually operate in the case of Moldova.

The seventh chapter of the book, written by ethnologist Ioana Repciuc, discusses how centralism has found its way into Romanian cultural policies and the management of immaterial cultural patrimony. It argues that the effort to support state-building with arguments concerning the

unity and uniqueness of the Romanian people has led to the subordination of local and regional elements to a national common ideal. This ideal is problematic because it has been constructed in a centralist and non-inclusive manner. The author emphasizes that this is a question of research policy (what is studied) as much as one of cultural policy (what is/can be done to preserve and highlight local and regional elements). The arguments about what is being studied and what can be done are framed in reference to the case of Moldova.

The eighth chapter of the book, authored by sociologist Barbu Mateescu, looks at value change in Moldova using data collected as part of the World Values Survey. The chapter is deliberately descriptive, as the author intends it for a wider audience. It highlights significant value change between 2005 and 2027 and argues that Moldova seems to be in a swift and rather abrupt process of modernization. The most interesting findings concern change on the obedience-independence axis and civic engagement indicators, and the suggestion that return migration also plays a part in this value change. It would have been interesting for the intended broader audience if the findings on Moldova had been briefly contrasted with the findings on overall value change in Romania.

The ninth chapter, by linguist Alexandru Cohal, highlights another side of the centralist policies of the Romanian state, initiated after the establishment of the state in 1859 and continued through to this day. The focus is on the process to standardize the Romanian language, which was based on the variant spoken in the southern province of Romania (Muntenia), ignoring other regional variations. The chapter also shows the ramifications of this in research policy (the limited studies into regional variants), cultural policy (the treatment of works written in regional variants of the language), and education policy (the teaching of strictly standard Romanian language). These ramifications are mostly discussed in relation to Moldova and the Moldovan variety of the Romanian language.

The tenth chapter is authored by historian Mihai Chiper, who discusses how centralism has manifested within Romania's defense doctrine, ever since the creation of the Romanian state. The particular focus is on successive defense policy decisions concerning the so-called Gate of Focșani (Poarta Focșanilor). The subtext behind these policy decisions is

that the Moldovan territory is expendable in case of conventional armed conflict with an Eastern neighbor in order to defend Southern Romania (or, more recently, Transylvania). The chapter argues that defense strategies centered on the Gate of Focșani are still being considered even after Romania's accession to NATO, even though it did not serve its purpose in either World War. There is, however, one brief mention made by the author that could have been detailed and elaborated, as it is particularly relevant in the context of the debates on Moldova's economic development. Citing a military history book from 1934, the author mentions that this defense doctrine has led to Moldova being denied investment in civilian infrastructure. Given the recent public debate initiated by the *Moldova Wants a Highway* social movement (*Moldova vrea autostradă*), it would have been interesting to see whether defense strategies have continued to influence civilian infrastructure policies.

Taken together, these chapters argue that the centralization tendency of the Romanian state, since its creation in 1859, goes well beyond the usual place where one would look for it, namely in the territorial and administrative organization. A second argument common to most of these chapters is that centralist policies have been more damaging to Moldova than to other parts of the territory. Modern nation-state building goes hand in hand with centralist policies, and Romania is no exception. However, we do expect consolidated states to forego at least some of the earlier centralist policies. Thus, a key question before the one addressed in this book is whether the relatively young Romanian state has reached this point.

Finally, the sixth chapter of the volume, authored by George Țurcănașu, takes us closer to the proposed model of good governance. The chapter starts from the premise that it is high time for the Romanian state to undergo significant decentralization and proposes a model for territorial reform. The chapter is the longest in the book (ninety pages), and it starts with an exposé based on the geographical literature on territoriality and centrality, which concludes that territorial identity should be the main driver of a territorial reform. The second, empirical part of the chapter makes two different proposals for territorial reform in Romania. The first one concerns the creation of an intermediary level between the existing municipalities and counties. Based on spatial

analysis, a map is generated. The proposal is built on the premise that existing (rural and some urban) municipalities are too small to generate enough revenue to support service delivery. This is very much the idea that is currently present in the public discourse on territorial reform. However, it ignores the fact that most of the financial dependency of first-tier municipalities on transfers is down to the central government's preference for fiscal centralization.³ The chapter proposes that the newly created tier take over all the tasks of the existing municipalities. Nevertheless, it also suggests that the existing municipalities be kept, with rural municipalities functioning as "branches of the hierarchical upper level," whose key role would be to "elect and promote councilors to defend the interests of the citizens at the upper level" (154). Without ignoring the merits of the spatial analysis conducted in the chapter, it must be said that it makes little sense to maintain an administrative level devoid of tasks. The proposal can easily be reworked as an amalgamation proposal in which resulting municipalities would be compelled to keep multiple offices across their territory, combined with a change to the electoral system employed at the local level.

The second proposal also involves the use of spatial analysis to comparatively examine three regionalization scenarios. This part of the analysis points out a few interesting aspects: existing geographical flows are still reminiscent of the past territorial organization; Romanian cities, with the exception of Bucharest, are much smaller than other cities in the region, hence less able to act as regional centers; and the urban system is still significantly fragmented, due to the slow development of infrastructure connecting cities across the Carpathians. Of the regionalization scenarios examined: (1) small regions formed of two or three of the current counties, (2) regions considering existing polarization patterns, and (3) historical regions, which would also retain the current counties, the third approach is considered the most effective. However, this effectiveness depends to some extent on the data chosen to assess the scenarios. This version of regionalization would involve high disparities in terms of size, at least one region without an obvious center (Crișana-Sătmar-Maramureș), and

³ See the broader discussion on this in Andreas Ladner et al., *Patterns of Local Autonomy in Europe* (Springer, 2019).

would leave unresolved the issue of the Galați-Brăila urban agglomeration. Therefore, this regionalization variant based on spatial analysis also needs to be examined from a politico-administrative perspective. It should be noted that the chapter sees Moldova as “the grand winner of this variant” of regionalization (185).