

INSTITUTIONAL MUTATIONS IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF POWER AND LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN ROMANIA IN THE SOCIALIST PERIOD (1945-1989)

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Abstract: In this paper we explore the evolutionary coordinates of the local power system in Romania during the socialist period, aiming to explain the institutional-administrative formulas that succeeded each other throughout the socialist era in relation to the determinants of their changes. For this purpose, we used the comparative-chronological analysis method, using documents issued by the party and state bodies from the analyzed period, relevant legislative acts, as well as a series of studies and specialized articles. The results of our study reveal a range of successive institutional changes in the local scaffolding of state power and administration that took place during the socialist era, changes determined mainly by the imperatives of the communist leadership to control the party and society as effectively as possible and to a lesser extent determined by socio-structural transformations in the country. Thus, following the institutional changes in question allows the penciling of different stage features of the establishment/consolidation of the socialist order, having the valences of a useful tool in the characterization of the different phases of the roadmap of Romanian communism.

Keywords: institutions of power and local administration, administrative-territorial reforms, institutional-administrative reforms, democratic centralism, the socialist period

Introduction

Along with the other sectoral changes in the social and economic sphere (waves of nationalization, education reform, etc.), the institutional transformations of the state administration came to formalize the finalization of the process of installation and then consolidation of the new socialist order after the Second World War. The installation of the new institutions and their staff at the level of the central state administration in the years 1945-1948, was followed shortly by the configuration of the new institutions of power and administration at the local level and their staffing with staff obedient to the new communist power¹. The establishment of control over the local public administration actually represented

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¹ Țărău 2020, p. 57.

the last step in the full takeover of power by the Communist Party (the Romanian Workers' Party since 1948) and marked the lasting completion of the installation of the popular democracy regime in Romania².

Against this historical background, our research question is focused on the role played by the institutional changes in the local public administration in the process of indigenous communalization. In order to find the answer to the assumed epistemic questioning, the objective of our approach aims to radiography the institutional-administrative schemes practiced at the local level throughout the socialist era (1945-1989). For this purpose, we used as sources of analysis documents from the archive of the Central Committee (CC) of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) regarding the installation of communist power at the local administration level and the hierarchical subordination of local administration bodies, documents of plenary sessions, conferences and congresses of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) / Romanian Workers' Party (PMR), articles from the press of the time, normative acts regarding local administration reforms, as well as historical studies/researches regarding the functioning of local institutions of state power. Based on the analytical and comparative-chronological processing of the materials used, we identified the context, forms and motivations of the transformation of local institutions of power and state administration in the socialist period. At the same time, the conducted investigation allowed us to build a periodization model of the socialist era based on the features of the stage generated by the institutional-administrative changes; this contribution is the added value element of our work in the field of recent and current historiography regarding the evolution of local administration institutions during the socialist period.

Completing the proletarian revolution in the territory: rethinking the local institutions of power

In addition to the measures of successive nationalizations and stateizations and the restructuring/rationalization of various other institutions, operated in the years 1945-1950, taking control of the central and local public administration proved to be essential for the success of the communalization process³. Thus, both during and after the capture of the administration at the central level, the efforts of the newly installed communist regime were focused on taking control in the depth of the territory, which is why the institutions of the local administration became the last redoubt to be conquered. In this context, under the motivation of the defascism of the state apparatus and the elimination of "reactionary elements" from the administration⁴, the Petru Groza government proceeded to the radical restructuring of the local public administration system.

In fact, since the end of 1944, acting under the guise and in the name of the National Democratic Front (FND) and under the pretext of the illegitimacy of the

² Mazilu, Caraciuc 1966, p. 3.

³ Țărău 2020, p. 56.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

government led by Nicoale Radescu, the PCR launched the maneuvers to conquer the institutions of local power. Under the motivation of the fight for the democratization of the local apparatus, in some cities the prefectures, prefects and mayors were effectively stormed, being illegally replaced by prefectures, praetors and mayors considered reactionary, with elements loyal to the PCR, and in rural areas village committees were created with the same purposes of undermining the legal local administration⁵. Thus, 52 of the 58 county prefectures had been occupied by the communists and their allies at the beginning of 1945⁶, and the leaderships of the 6 prefectures that managed to resist the communist assault until March 6, 1945 (the date of the installation of the Petru Groza government) were later replaced by the Groza government⁷: by the decision of the Ministry of the Interior of May 4, 1945, the prefects were replaced and county councils were established with increased powers dominated by the communists⁸, so that around the general elections of November 1946, the PCR controlled the local administration almost completely, ensuring an electoral advantage overwhelming "through the 6,500 mayors and most of the prefects, after more than 60,000 officials had been purged from the apparatus"⁹.

The thesis promoted by the PCR at the time was the replacement of the old bourgeois-type local administration institutions with new local bodies specific to the socialist state, an action popularized by the new regime as a process of modernization of the ankylosed administrative system inherited from the bourgeois-landlord regime. Thus, immediately after the proclamation of the Romanian People's Republic (RPR) on December 30, 1947 and after the adoption of the Constitution of April 13, 1948, the total redesign of the local administration began. According to all three constitutions from the socialist era (from 1948, 1952 and 1965), the institutional-administrative system at the local level was composed of local organs of state power (People's Advisory Bodies/ Popular Councils subordinate to the Great National Assembly - MAN and the MAN Presidium) and local bodies of state administration (Executive Committees of People's Advisory Bodies/ People's Councils subordinate to the Council of Ministers).

The fundamental reform of local administration was announced at the 6th Congress of the PCR (1st Congress of the PMR) in February 1948 when the notion of popular councils as new local organs of local state power was launched for the first time¹⁰, a paradigm then formalized through the People's Councils Law (Law no. 17/1949) adopted by MAN on January 13, 1949. What is striking about the drafting of this law is the fact that the bill was drawn up at the Ministry of the

⁵ Mazilu, Caraciuc 1966, pp. 5-6.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁸ Hitchins 2013, p. 586.

⁹ Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale (ANIC), Fond CC al PCR - Cancelaria, dosar 11/1946, pp. 212-218.

¹⁰ *Rezoluții și hotărâri ale C.C. al P.M.R. 1948-1950*, Editura pentru literatură politică, București, 1952, pp. 6-7.

Interior led by Teohari Georgescu and not at MAN - the only institution competent to legislate; the said law abolished the old "bourgeois" institutions of the mayor, prefect, sub-prefect, praetor and notary and was drawn up in the spirit of Soviet concepts with an emphasis on de-bureaucratization, structural changes, proletarianization and political control¹¹ – specific keywords from the professional vocabulary of the administrative apparatus Soviet. At the same time, the restructuring of the local administrative apparatus also aimed at actively supporting the collectivization process¹², meaning that local administration institutions were assigned a large part of the responsibility for the socialist transformation of agriculture and the increase in agricultural production.

Between April 10 and July 16, 1949, provisional county and local councils were installed that replaced prefectures and town halls¹³; until the first local elections organized by the communist regime on December 3, 1950¹⁴ the supervisory councils that functioned as transitional bodies from the old form of organization of local administration to the new bodies, during which the last civil servants from the old guard of the town halls were eliminated and the prefects¹⁵. In order to accelerate the transition to the socialist-type institutional-administrative model, in June 1950 the CC of the PMR decided to expand the powers of the provisional committees by electing from among them executive committees, permanent committees and citizens' committees, which anticipated the future structures of the future people's advisory bodies¹⁶. With this metamorphosis, the local public administration became the sustainable promoter of the socialist principles of state functioning, ensuring the symbiosis of the Party-State binomial: the principle of subordination of the local apparatus to the county party committees¹⁷; the principle of double institutional subordination¹⁸; the principle of democratic centralism, enunciated by Lenin since 1902, although not specified in the Communist Constitutions, established the monopoly of the party leadership over the administrative apparatus, in the form of a unitary and centralized leadership with a strict hierarchy of organs from top to bottom¹⁹.

Immediately after the implementation of the new formula of local administration in 1949, followed the territorial-administrative reform of 1950 (through Law No. 5 of September 7, 1950) which legislated the territorial

¹¹ Sora 2012a, pp. 397-398.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 405.

¹³ Mazilu, Caraciuc 1966, p. 13.

¹⁴ Ceterchi 1976, p. 11.

¹⁵ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR - Cancelaria, dosar 577/1948, ff. 175, 329, dosar 576/1948, ff. 23, 48, 69; *Scînteia*, 1948.

¹⁶ Mazilu, Caraciuc 1966, p. 13.

¹⁷ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR - Cancelaria, dosar 577/1948, f. 179.

¹⁸ The People's Advisory Bodies/ People's Councils were subordinated to the MAN and the Presidium of the MAN (Law no. 17/ 1949, art. 70), and the Executive Committees of the People's Advisory Bodies/ People's Councils were subordinated to the Council of Ministers (Law no. 17/ 1949, art. 66).

¹⁹ Sora 2012a, pp. 401-402.

reorganization in the form of 28 regions with 177 districts instead of the former 58 counties²⁰, based on the principle of homogeneity of territorial potential (physical-geographical and economic)²¹ of regions and districts. At the same time, the redraw of the administrative-territorial space from 1950 also required the readjustment of the organization of the local administration for the new administrative-territorial units through the effect of Decree no. 259 of December 28, 1950. Later, in the period 1950-1968, 15 more territorial changes took place: the reduction of the number of regions from 28 to 18 regions in 1952, to 16 regions in 1956, toponymic changes and territorial redistributions in 1960²². These repeated changes reflect the shortcomings of this administrative format generated against the backdrop of the incompetence of the new communist rulers who lacked the thorough legal and administrative training of their purged or imprisoned predecessors²³.

But beyond their functional inefficiency, the territorial-administrative and institutional-administrative changes at the local level in the 50s were correlated to a reduced extent with the socio-structural transformations in society, they predominantly served an obscure pragmatic purpose of the communist regime, namely the resizing center-periphery relations in a way that facilitates a more rigorous control not only over the territory and society, but also over the party apparatus, through a clearer subordination of the structures in the periphery to the central organs of power²⁴. Practically, it is about the operationalization of multiple and overlapping flows of hierarchical control: the local party bodies own the local administration in the territory, and the upper echelon of the party controls both the society and the local party bodies through the format given to the local public administration.

The metamorphoses of power and local administration in the years of the triumph of revolutionary workers' democracy

The development of the national current in the practice of autochthonous communism after 1964-1965 brought with it a series of new mutations in the institutional system of local power. In Ronald Helin's opinion, since 1960, the administrative-territorial changes carried out at that time announced "Romania's gradual transition from a uniform Stalinism to a national communism, from ignoring the past due to the bourgeois heritage, to recognizing the past in order to amplify national connotations"²⁵, even if in reality it was about a partial and selective recovery of historical memory elements suitable for forging the new national-ideological dimension, without disturbing the dogmatic canon of state and totalitarian socialism. Therefore, starting from the 60s we can talk about the

²⁰ Săgeată 2006, p. 222.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 222-223.

²² Loșonți (Mitran) 2007, p. 190.

²³ Sora 2012b, p. 176.

²⁴ Bottoni 2009, p. 261.

²⁵ Helin 1967, p. 500.

practice of a "selectivam restitutio" in which the recovery of historical and identity memory proved to be a sequential and controlled process, used in the last years of the regime of Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej and then by the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu both for self-legitimization and for expanding control over one's own local nomenclature.

However, the basic principles of the communist institutional-administrative organization were maintained unaltered. The principle of democratic centralism emphasized the subordination and dependence on an increasingly inflexible Center and ossified center-periphery relations, and the central organizational model was replicated almost ad-literally at the local level: Regional Party Committees (since 1968 County Party Committees) they were the miniature copy of the Central Committee (CC) of the Party with its organizational chart (Secretariat, Political Bureau and Sections), and the General Secretary of the Party had a correspondent in the territory in the person of the first secretary of the county party committee, to whom the institutions of the party apparatus were subordinated state, people's advisory body, Security/ Intelligence Services, Militia, penitentiaries, etc.²⁶

The cumulation after 1967 of the position of first secretary of the PCR County Committee with that of the president of the Executive Committee of the County People's Council ironed out the cumulation at the top of the party and the state and allowed the accumulation of a greater amount of power at the local level, counterbalanced by the inter-county rotation method of the first secretaries and by reducing the spatial hinterlands of their influence together with the administrative-territorial reform of 1968 which decreased the size of the administrative-territorial entities. The reform of 1968, legislated by Law no. 2 of February 16, 1968, recomposed the administrative map in 39 counties much smaller than the former 16 regions²⁷, according to a regionalization principle opposite to that practiced in the 1950 reform, namely on the principle of complementarity of territorial potential (natural, economic, etc.) which replaced the principle of homogeneity of territorial potential on which the regionalization of 1950 was based²⁸. Also, similarly to the situation of the 1950 reform, the administrative-territorial and institutional restructuring of 1968 was poorly correlated with the socio-structural transformations in the country, mainly consolidating the power of the new political party from the Center and emphasizing the control over the party network in the territory.

According to Andrei Florin Sora, the administrative-territorial and institutional reform of 1968 was not adopted to remove the old political and administrative officials, who in the vast majority were anyway loyal and indebted to the new head of the Party as a result of their appointment by Nicolae Ceaușescu in his previous capacity as head of the organizational section of the CC of the PMR, rather it had a preventive purpose²⁹. Indeed, the administrative-territorial

²⁶ Verzea 2013, pp. 4, 143.

²⁷ Stănică 2010, p. 133; Ureche 2006, p. 212.

²⁸ Săgeată 2006, pp. 222-223.

²⁹ Sora 2013, p. 121.

restructuring of 1968 limited the geographical area of influence and consolidation of the power of some virtual counter-candidates of Nicolae Ceaușescu for the leadership of the party or their supporters³⁰.

The administrative-territorial reconfiguration of 1968 ended with the (re)formatting of the Regional People's Advisory Bodies into County People's Councils through the effect of Law no. 57 of December 26, 1968³¹ (with a gap of 10 months compared to the administrative-territorial transformation of February 16, 1968!), which sought to reduce parallelism, intermediate links and limit the overlap of decision-making power³² and proclaimed the emergence of collective leadership, as well as the autonomy of counties, cities and municipalities in solving their local problems³³. Actually, in the following period, the centralization of management at the level of local bodies was emphasized by regulating some additional accumulations of functions. Thus, the county secretaries for economic issues and those with propaganda automatically became vice-presidents of the county popular councils in charge of coordinating the socio-economic field, and the secretaries with organizational problems received the position of secretaries of the County Councils of the Front of Democracy and Socialist Unity (FDUS)³⁴.

Later, the administrative-territorial organization made in 1968 underwent several small resettlements during the 80s, which, however, did not have any major impact in the institutional-administrative plan. Thus, in 1981 the territorial change was carried out through which Giurgiu, Călărași and the Ilfov Agricultural Sector were established (Decree no. 15 of January 23, 1981) by reorganizing the old Ilfov, Ialomița and partially Dâmbovița counties, the objective being the improvement of the agricultural supply supply of the capital³⁵, under the conditions of the beginning of the economic and supply crisis of the 80s and the deficient supply of Bucharest in the grid of the 1968 model with a single polarization area around the Capital configured on the structure of a single oversized county - Ilfov.

Following the founding of the new counties, local institutions of state power (County People's Councils) and state administration (Executive Committees of County People's Councils) were created by Decree no. 16 of January 27, 1981, within the scope of the same institutional-administrative centralism established by the administrative-territorial organization of 1968³⁶. In this aspect, the administrative adjustments of 1981 did not bring any relevant change from an institutional point of view from the general rule of administrative hypercentralism; thus, the redesign of the spatial-administrative organizational format in the south of

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

³¹ Ceterchi 1976, p. 12.

³² Fischer 1989, p. 113; Zaharia, Tudor 1989, p. 98.

³³ *Conferința Națională a P.C.R., 19-21 iulie 1972*, p. 43.

³⁴ *Hotărârea Plenarei CC al PCR din 20-21 noiembrie 1972*, Buletinul Oficial al RSR, Partea I, No. 133, 1972, p. 1080.

³⁵ Săgeată 2006, p. 222.

³⁶ Antonescu 2018, p. 31.

the country was not accompanied by the flexibility or decentralization of the institutional system.

The maintenance of an excessive centralization constituted one of the basic ideological ingredients of the model of socialist-revolutionary socialist democracy. The cliché of revolutionary worker democracy represents an ideational singularity of Romanian socialism, being an innovative doctrinal concept developed and proclaimed by the apologetic apparatus of the Ceaușescu regime during the 8th and 9th decades of the 20th century, which affirms a wide participation of citizens in governance. Despite the definition of revolutionary worker democracy as a combination of representative and participatory democracy³⁷ and the iterations regarding the decentralization of decisions through self-management at the local scale up to the central and enterprise level³⁸, in fact, under the argument of the principle of democratic centralism, the hypercentralization of the state has been accentuated, but also of the party. The institutionalization of bodies adjacent to the local public administration in the 70s and 80s, such as the Legislative Chamber of People's Councils or the Congresses of People's Councils' Deputies³⁹ and the Conference of Presidents of People's Councils⁴⁰, did not bring any real functional autonomy as was officially proclaimed⁴¹, but rather pursued legitimizing the pattern of revolutionary socialist worker democracy as a hybrid model with claims of originality. The legitimizing mechanism of this administrative-institutional formula repeatedly emphasized the proximity of local administration institutions to citizens ("popular councils elected by citizens for citizens and together with citizens")⁴², in order to be able to claim a similarity with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in Western democracies.

At the same time, in order to emphasize the legitimacy of local governance, the propaganda system of the Ceaușescu regime innovated an ideological feature specific to the Romanian revolutionary workers' democracy, namely, it assigned to the working class, in addition to the status of the dominant class as affirmed by Marxist ideology, and that of "national class"⁴³ by virtue of which the proletariat would be interested not only in the emancipation of its class interests, but also of the interests of the nation and the local communities in which it lives.

The national communist regime in Bucharest used the local administration component on a large scale to argue the legitimacy of the socialist worker-revolutionary democracy and justify its superiority as a political-economic order⁴⁴. In this sense, he permanently invoked the increased role of local administration institutions in the development of the local economy, the broad representation of

³⁷ *Era Socialistă*, 1988, pp. 21-22.

³⁸ *Idem*, 1982, p. 42.

³⁹ Ceterchi 1976, p. 17.

⁴⁰ *Era Socialistă*, 1988, p. 23.

⁴¹ Ceterchi 1976, pp. 12-13.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 12; *Scinteia*, 1988, p. 3.

⁴³ Mazilu, Caraciuc 1966, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *România Liberă*, 1988; Ceaușescu 1976, p. 52.

minorities in county and local councils and the participation of women in weight of over 30% within these structures⁴⁵.

Conclusions, discussions and interpretations

In this study we examined, with the help of a set of primary and secondary sources, the dynamics of the system of power and local administration in Romania during the socialist period, in which sense we explored the administrative and ideological functionality of local administration institutions in relation to the determinants that conditioned the changes. Our findings reveal a very active roadmap of post-war institutional-administrative changes, which makes this parameter a useful indicator in evaluating the post-war trajectory of Romanian socialism. The period 1945-1989 meant a successive transition from the apparatus of the "bourgeois-landlord bureaucracy" (1945-1950) to the administration of the "people's democracy" (the 1950s - 1960s) and to the institutions of the "socialist worker-revolutionary democracy" (the end of the 1970s - the 80's). From one stage to another the changes in local administration were abrupt and robust and were mainly determined by the imperatives of the communist leadership to control the party and society as effectively as possible and to a lesser extent were determined by the socio-structural transformations in the country. The seizure of power in local government in the years 1945-1950 represented the last step in the complete conquest of political power by the communists, and then until 1989 the local government system was constantly used by the communist regime to try to demonstrate the justice of the practiced political-economic order.

The changes in the administrative-territorial framework since 1950 were also accompanied by radical transformations of the local administrative-institutional framework (the establishment of people's advisory bodies as new forms of local administration and the election of new local public authorities). Mutations in the area of local public administration represent a solid temporal landmark that marks the end of the old organizational chart of the rule of law and the beginning of the new administrative-institutional architecture of the socialist era. Similarly, the changes of 1968 (the reorganization of the territory and of the people's advisory bodies/popular councils) constitute a much more relevant historical-administrative threshold in the delimitation of the adjacent stages than even the moment of the change of the Party leader in 1965. Because taking control in the depth of the territory proved much more difficult than at the Center (the capital), we suggest that the transformations of the local administration constitute a much more feasible evaluation barometer than the mutations in the central apparatus.

In this context, depending on the indicated milestones, we appreciate that the socialist era can be periodized, according to the criterion of the dynamics of the institutional-administrative apparatus (local and central), in three distinct stages:

⁴⁵ Ceterchi 1976, p. 13, 15.

- the 1945–1950 stage, centered on the liquidation of the interwar administration and its replacement with the administrative institutions of proletarian democracy;
- the 1950–1968 stage sought to consolidate the institutional and administrative-territorial management specific to socialism over the territory, society and the party;
- the 1968–1989 stage brought the emphasis of the hierarchical institutional control over the local party nomenclature by the center, as well as the experimentation/proclamation of an allegedly original administrative system, called revolutionary worker democracy, in which the local administration institutions had the task of mimicking the approach to the citizen to legitimize an alleged sui generis multi-level governance.