

Regional development in Romania: new wine in on old bottle

Regional development in Romania is a policy introduced as a novelty during the pre-accession harmonization of the legal framework of the future member state. It had two main purposes:

1. making territorial analysis possible by means of territorial data collection using the NUTS approach,
2. making the country's institutions ready for implementing Cohesion policy.

Having in mind these two requirements, Romania started with 8 NUTS 2 regions, and decided

- not to design them using the historical regions of the country,
- not to add administrative functions or elected bodies to the newly created territorial level.

The regions created are not really contested, the only meaningful debate was initiated while planning the 2014-2020 programming period, and the result of the academic applied research and of the consultation process was that there is no arguments for changing the originally established territorial breakdown, mainly as it proved itself efficient in terms of absorption levels, and there was an overall message that the main issue of Romania is the urban-rural gap, which is present in all regions, so reshaping the NUTS 2 regions would not gain any positive outcome in this respect.

Meanwhile other structures of the state started their own regionalization process, but in most of the cases did not respect neither the borders of the NUTS 2 regions, not the 'capital' of these regions.

Another crucial issue is that the principle of additionality was merely respected, as the member state's own development policy, which is called 'amenajarea teritoriului' - a mot á mot translation of the French 'aménagement du territoire', and was also introduced in the legal framework right on the start of the accession process, was very poorly taken into account in regional policy. Actually one can be surprised by the fact, that these NUTS 2 regions have no input on how the member state support regional like projects and initiatives, and do not have any connection to the national plans regarding the settlement network and territorial development in general.

Until now the member state's territorial development policy and its regional development policy had very few in common – even if they are both supposed to follow very much connected and similar paths.

Actually, as the World Bank suggested for the 2014-2020 programming period, Romania upscaled its national support program available for local authorities and NUTS 3 regions, aiming at projects which are not in line with the priorities of the operational programs or of the regional operational program. In this respect it could serve as a complementary program, but in reality it became a pool for low quality projects with no chance for EUROPEAN UNION Funds support due to eligibility issues mainly. This national program was not created using the NUTS 2 regions' expertise or ideas, and they were neglected during selection, implementation and evaluation also. These funds were used without any relevance to national territorial development policy, because there were no specific requirements or checks designed to made applicants to at least have in mind national territorial agendas. So the complementary program added infrastructure where it was the most simple to plan and implement, but as it was spatially blind and unconscious, its territorial or regional impact was not intended, be it positive or negative.

During the first two programming periods after Romania joined the EUROPEAN UNION, in 2007-2013 and 2014, Romania had a single regional operational program, with one size fits all measures. The funds were allocated to regions, but the allocation was not based on the different levels of regional development. All regions received the same share of support for all priority axes, no matter if they were mostly mountainous, lagging behind or costal regions.

In this respect one could argue that regional development resources were merely used for spending EUROPEAN UNION Funds originated financial support in regions as the EUROPEAN UNION suggested, using NUTS 2 regions. Of course, regional governance should not be understood as a simple bucket used for spilling out financial resources.

Since 2014 the regulation of the European Unions Fund's regulation suggests to member states using different territorial approaches too, so Romania decided not to implement in all places applying for such tools, but only in a very restricted way, following once again the guidance of the World Bank experts:

- implemented the `integrated territorial development` approach in the Danube delta area,
- and added community led local development approach to fighting poverty in urban context.

Even if Romania had a vast experience in the rural predecessor of community led local development, they did not capitalized this knowledge and skills, just simply added it to the urban poverty toolkit – a very needed support nevertheless, but delayed and realized with too much red tape, without an integrated approach to fighting poverty in urban planning context.

So there are two phases until now of regional policy in Romania:

1. after establishing the regions, with low level of support, waiting for the accession and the shower of European Union Funds,
2. simplified one size fits all, spatially unconscious approach, with sufficient funding and matured governance, unfit for introducing new approaches which are supposed to be used at lower levels than NUTS 2.

The new programming period which had to start in 2021 and is in the making still in 2022, shows a turning point at the surface: the Romanian government started a really challenging change, namely they decided to give managing authority status to all NUTS 2 regions, instead of the previous system where the ministry responsible for development used to be the single managing authority for regional development, and NUTS 2 regions were intermediate bodies for the single national regional development program. The managing authority status means that NUTS 2 regions could have their own regional development program and could start negotiating with the European Commission their ideas and documents directly, without any mediation from the central government.

The plans are still in design phase, but the decisions are made in 2020 at central government level, so when I write this paper, I can assume that there are going to be regional operational programs for each NUTS 2 regions in Romania. Some questions arise here:

- Does it mean that there are going to be tailored programs for each region?
- What happens to territorial tools, which are now integrated at a higher level than before in policy objective five?

- Did the governance of the NUTS 2 go through a change in order to better fulfill the new tasks and obligations?

If one has the answer to all three questions, can decide if the present programming period represents a new, third phase of Romanian regional policy or not.

In my paper I would like to evaluate the three phases using the following dimensions:

- connections with national territorial policy (planning),
- connections to national support for public investments (planning, governance),
- structure of the NUTS 2 regional governance – if there was any change in this respect,
- regional disparities and allocations if they are reflected in the regional operational programs,
- planning and partnerships for regional development plans (operational programs and regional plans),
- relations to territorial tools (only post-2013).

Unfortunately, the regions have very similar regional operational programs for the 2021-2027 programming period, and as it was before, allocation for regions and also allocation for priority axes are nearly the same in each and every region. So one may say, that there is no real change in this respect, and even these NUTS 2 regions received new status and dedicated operational programs, it is only the surface, and the governance's quality did not change enough.

A deeper insight will be offered in the final version of my paper.