

POLITICS

THE PUBLIC DEBATE ON REGIONALISM

Capacity building, not new forms, is what the Romanian administration badly needs

A recent event stirred public debate, due more to the sensitivity of the Romanian public opinion to the issue than to the challenge itself. A small group of intellectuals based in large Transylvanian cities, headed by a Transylvanian-born, Budapest foreign policy analyst, Gusztav Molnar, launched on December 8 a manifesto. The manifesto denounced the centralism of Romanian administrative structures, claiming that these structures had actually endured from the Ceausescu era without change, and calling for the creation of fully devolved regions, with regional Parliaments and an adjacent public awareness campaign to promote the advantages of federalism. The document was sent to the Romanian Parliament, the European parliament, the Committee for Regions, and to various political parties. Concrete demands ranged from full autonomy of public television regional stations to essential changes of the Romanian Constitution, in order to create a new level of government, the *meso-government*, in line with 'the new European Constitution'. Besides a couple of errors – such as the reliance on a still unwritten European Constitutions as a binding document calling for a specific form of government, or the verdict on the current administrative system, reshaped by successive laws of local government and especially by the 1998 fiscal decentralization act (the law on local budgets) – as being 'unchanged' from Communist times – the document reflects a growing trend amongst the Romanian provincial elites. Over the last ten years, in Transylvania and Banat especially, opinion leaders have been constantly attributing every ill of the transition to the central government and to the rest of the country, which are perceived as being less developed and benefiting more from revenue transfers via Bucharest. Consequently, emancipation from Bucharest is sought as a way to improve economic standards as well as the

self-esteem of these regions, which consider themselves unfairly patronized by the Capital. Until 2000, both Transylvania and Banat have blamed the rest of the country for being more ‘communist’ and have taken pride for having voted for the center-right coalition, the Democratic Convention of Romania, allied with the Hungarian Party (UDMR) between 1996 and 2000. However, after 2000, two events shook this pride: first, citizens from these regions voted massively for the ‘third’ option – radical extremist candidate Corneliu Vadim Tudor in the November 2000 presidential elections. Second, UDMR allied itself with the new government party, PSD, a traditional enemy, which it had often accused of nationalism, centralism and anti-Hungarian attitudes.

Similar manifestos, originating basically with the same group of people, have been launched before. However, there never was any serious discussion on the focal assumptions behind the call for a radical change of the Romanian state, such as the passage from a unitary form to a federal one. While the need for further decentralization is obvious and various programs and agencies strive to address it, the need for radically redesigning the state is less clear. The following analysis tries to assess whether the federalists’ argument can be substantiated, and it does so, by reviewing some of the doubtful pre-assumptions that the manifesto draws upon.

Doubtful assumption number one: there is a popular drive against the unitary state, creating a need for a radical reorganization of the state along federal lines.

The preference of Romanians for various forms of government was investigated several times. In a 2000 poll of SAR with CURS, the question ‘what kind of government?’ was the main focus. The answers are in line with other more recent polls, all showing a similar trend. Romanians favor the unitary state strongly, with only 2% expressing their preference for federalism or a canton-type arrangement (Fig. 1). They dislike the Parliament, which they perceive as corrupt, and favor a reduction in the number of MPs and the shift to only one Chamber of Parliament (71 % agree that ‘We should cut one Chamber in order to have fewer MPs’, versus only 14% against⁶). The general picture favors the executive and the technocrats against the representatives, which may well be a problem for the Romanian democracy unless representatives decide to improve their own image. Nobody can claim, however, that the public wants regional representative assemblies or more representatives – rather the contrary is true. Creating regional Parliaments, besides overburdening a public budget which is already under serious strain, would not improve the popularity of MPs. This poses a serious obstacle for the advocates of federalism, since any constitutional reform of the kind envisaged by them needs a qualified majority and a referendum, and it is unlikely that the public would vote for more MPs. Instead of focusing on such far-fetched, unrealistic options, the Romanian opinion leaders should

⁶ CURS, 2000.

rather seek realistic solutions to improve the legitimacy of the political class, a real and ever-increasing problem.

Fig. 1. Preferred solution for accommodating minorities

Choice	%
Proportional representation plus minority quotas	16.1
Covasna-Harghita as a canton	0.6
Federal Romania with Transylvania federal unit	1.1
Things should stay as they are	69.3
Other	2.4
No answer	10.4

Doubtful assumption number two: there is a strong, post-modern regional identity of the type seen in Northern Italy, which demands a lesser presence of the central government.

The New Democracies Barometer (NDB) revealed a weak national identification in post-communist Europe (Fig.2).

‘Even though most states are nation-states, most Central and East Europeans continue to have multiple and diverse identities. A total of 30 percent in CEE countries put their nation-state identity first and a local or regional identity second, and 21% order identities in the opposite way. But another fifth are localists or even parochial, identifying only with their town or region.’

(Rose and Haerpfer 1998: 227)

Fig. 2. The multiple identities of Romanian citizens (first choice; then first and second cumulated)

	Romania		NDB regional mean Eastern Europe	
Close to country	27	56	39	64
Close to neighborhood (town, region)	42, 14	62,44	32,8	57,28
Close to Europe	8	18	8	19

New Democracies Barometer, 1998

At a first glance very few Romanians (27%) declare their national identity as their first option, that is to say, less than the CEE average, and about half of the Western European average, according to the NDB. However, when trying to find out whether ‘close to neighborhood’ is actually a regional identification, one discovers that the local identity overrides the regional identity, as well as the national identity (Fig.3). Only 11% of the Romanians have what can be considered a ‘regional identity’.

⁷ New Democracies Barometer Y, Glasgow: Center for Policy Studies

Fig. 3. Local versus national identity⁸

	1st choice %	2nd choice %
Close to town or village	64.0	15.4
Close to region	11.5	21.7
Close to country	21.1	47.7
Close to Europe	1.2	7.1
Other	1.1	1.0
No answer	1.1	7.2

Fig. 4. Last month household income by identity

	Average revenue per household (ROL) ⁹
Close to town or village	3,316,935
Close to region	3,885,545
Close to country	4,287,355
Close to Europe	4,666,666
No answer	2,369,000
Another place.	4,920,000

This local identity, however, is not similar to the one of Northern Italy. Contrary to what we would expect in such a situation, the 'localists' are the poorest, and the 'nationalists' the richer. The 'regionalists' fall in between, however closer to the well off part of the scale. National identity is only a form of modernity, being correlated with better education and superior status. In explanatory models of nationalism, it does not even turn out as a predictor, nationalism drawing to similar extents on people who identify with the region, the town or the country¹⁰.

Doubtful assumption number three: Transylvania and Banat are richer than the rest of the country and their development is crippled by redistribution to poorer regions of Romania.

While Transylvania and Banat are historically more developed, in accordance to the overall regional pattern of former Habsburg provinces versus Ottoman-dominated ones, one cannot safely identify a pattern of redistribution from Transylvania towards the rest of the country, based on current statistical data. The most developed counties are those including large cities, which act as engines of development, Cluj and Iasi being similar in this respect, and doing worse than, say, Bucharest or Ploiesti. The pattern of redistribution is seemingly erratic, shaped by local needs regardless the

⁸ CURS poll, October 2001

⁹ 30 000 ROL make one US\$, i.e. revenues vary around 100 USD. However, even if small in dollars, differences are significant among categories.

¹⁰ see Mungiu-Pippidi, A. "Lungul drum spre identitatea europeana", Sfera Politicii, no 99, Bucuresti.

geography, but in no way does a pattern emerge with Transylvania being disfavored compared to other regions.

Fig 5. Regional gross domestic product (ROL)

	Regional GDP/capita	Regional GDP ¹¹	Regional subsidies/product	Taxes / product ¹²
North-East	12,563,993	47,766	322.3	4,244
South-East	16,555,113	48,751	243.7	4,322
South	14,199,851	49,516	243.0	4,392
South-West	14,803,014	35,742	174.8	3,170
West	17,294,919	35,471	247.6	3,153
North-West	15,630,360	44,664	260.2	3,965
Center	17,768,983	47,173	281.1	4,189
Bucharest	26,896,839	61,672	333.2	5,473

Fig. 6. Revenues of selected counties in 1999

Selected counties	1999 Revenues – total ¹³
Botoşani	394,547
Iasi	814,733
Vaslui	313,550
Giurgiu	162,609
Teleorman	277,414
Mehedinti	214,400
Cluj	823,045
Brasov	697,780
Covasna	206,453
Harghita	291,711
Bucharest	4,993,843

Source: INSSE

Doubtful assumption number four: federal states are better suited for multi-ethnic societies than unitary states, preventing violence and ethnic conflict.

According to a reliable estimate, 8,000 miles of new state borders have been created in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989. The sudden – be it peaceful (Czechoslovakia) or not (Yugoslavia) – redrawing of frontiers within Eastern Europe frightened the Western world: but it was a mere revenge on a

¹¹ 1998, billion ROL current prices.

¹² Including VAT.

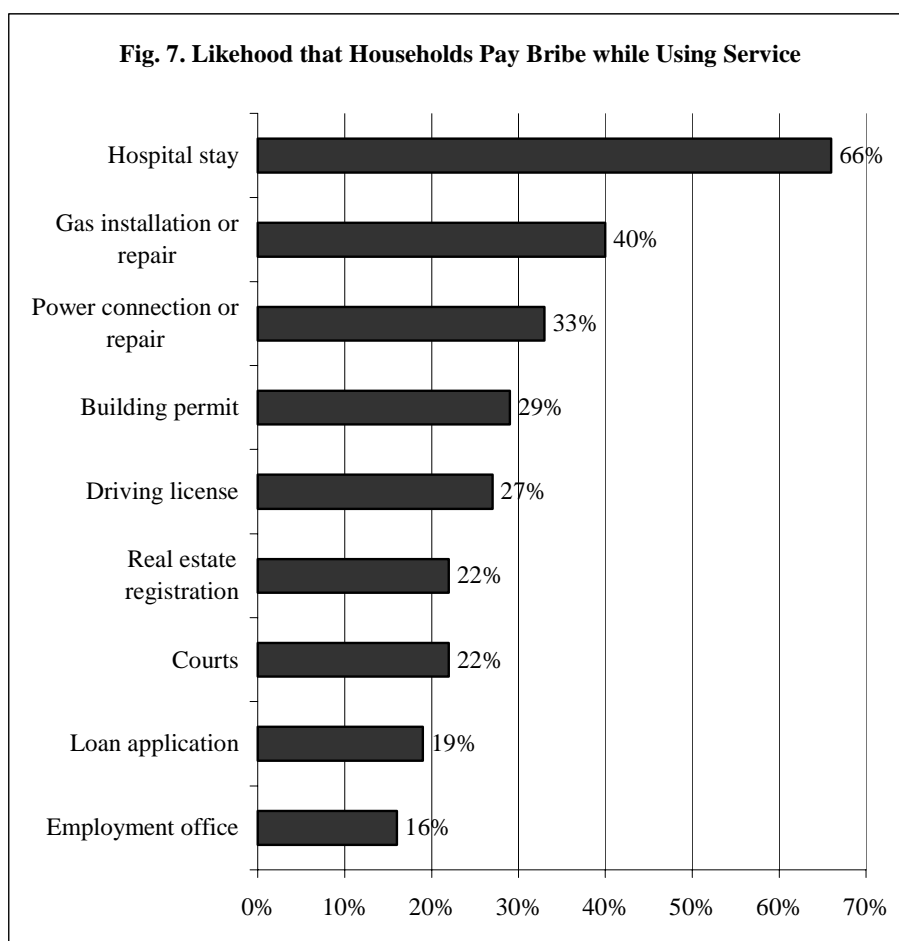
¹³ 1999, million ROL

century of frustration over the inability to find the 'right' borders, hence the expression of 'unfinished national revolutions'¹³. Explanatory models using the influence of the state structure (federal or unitary) in post-communist Europe as the main explanatory variable led to the conclusion that **federalism increases the likelihood of both constitutional conflict and ethnic violence**¹⁴. Such analyses only confirm the common observation that all the federations in post-Communist Europe have vanished during the past decade, regardless of whether they were created by the Communist régime, or by pre-Communist ones. While protecting minorities is a must, one has to be extremely careful not to create new problems when trying to solve the old ones.

Doubtful assumption number five: corruption is determined by centralism; the more you descend in the hierarchical structure, the less corruption you encounter.

This assumption is equally wrong. Repeated studies show that corruption correlates with freedom and accountability, but these are not dependent on the structure of the state (i.e. unitary or federal). A provincial local government can restrict freedom of business, therefore fostering bribing and corruption at least as effectively as a central government (actually most of the corruption in Romania is to be found in decentralized local governments or autonomous government agencies). A rapid glance at the frequency of bribing shows in the top the local governments (mainly in relation to building permits). A similar assessment of business corruption in a World Bank Romania Survey shows the customs office on top. Most of the permits that a businessman or an ordinary citizen need depend on local, not national authorities. Accountability mechanisms at both central and local level need considerable improvement, but this is a different matter altogether.

¹⁴ Philip Roeder, 'Unfinished National Revolutions?', *Slavic Review*, 1999 (Vol. 58, No. 4).



Conclusion

The theme of regionalism will remain on the public agenda to the detriment of substantive issues such as fiscal decentralization, the need for capacity building of local governments, as well as the shameful politicization and opportunistic practices of the local administration. Whenever local elites will feel that they need a greater share of power and prestige, they will push the button of 'regionalism' as a solve-all solution. Were Transylvania to have already a regional federal Parliament in 2000, it would be now shared mostly between *Greater Romania Party* and the Hungarian alliance. In Cluj, the capital of Transylvania, Gheorghe Funar, a radical nationalist, has managed so far to win three successive elections. There is no evidence that Transylvania on its own would be a more tolerant political society, but rather the contrary. While decentralization must progress further, accompanied by the development of reliable accountability mechanisms, both the government and the civil society should do more to publicize the steps already taken and the need for citizens' participation, so that more devolution does not imply more corruption.