

HOW DO DESCENTRALIZATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM TRY TO AVOID MARGINALITY?

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Abstract

Inequalities have various causes and can result in permanent handicaps imposed by geographic remoteness or by recent social and economic changes or perhaps both. In the new UE member states part of this disability is the result legacy of former centralized planned economic systems. The issue represented by the decentralization of public services towards the local communities has been a perennial preoccupation on the agenda and within the programs of the post-communist governments, while its legislative realization and, further, the implementation of such a policy have generated remarkably diverse controversial – outcomes.

Key words: *public administration, public policies, civil society, decentralization, economic disparities, poverty*

1. Introduction

The specific activity of public administration is carried out by a complex set of institutional forms whose activity is organized on the basis of a series of principles that vary, depending on the problems that the public administration has to cope with. (Europe Direct 2008: 4). From the latest statistics made of MDRAP it results that one of six Europeans is facing poverty and this scourge is affecting nearly all socio- economic categories. Currently, there is a permanent concern of the EU for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion (MDRAP 2013: 258). Ever since the first signs of the financial and economic crisis appeared in 2008, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) has been endeavouring to

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analyse its effects on the management of local and regional authorities and it has worked alongside its members to stand up for the principle of local self-government and for the full financial capacity of European local and regional authorities. (www.ccre.org, 21. 09.2015, 22:00).

The major challenge in the medium and long term local government is the creation of the mechanisms to support Romania's EU integration to cope with both economic and cultural changes in order to manage EU funds, and in order to put into practice public policies. To avoid marginalization of certain groups or disparities, public administrations should prioritize the following actions: improving the quality of local public services, increasing revenue locally and supporting local capacity to exploit the potential (Profiroiu, Andrei, Dinca, Carp 2005: 3). Several foreign and domestic analysts share the same opinion that although Romania made a lot of efforts in order to improve the social and economic conditions of its populace, something essential must be missing since substantive democracy and prosperity are still pending (Mungiu-Pippidi 2000: 2, Profiroiu, Profiroiu, Mina, Nica 2011: 277-294).

To this respect, there is a growing consensus on what the missing ingredient good governance might be. Some authors consider that the deficit of governance in Romania spans over many aspects of the public life and gets translated into wrong institutional arrangements, lack of political will and missing implementation skills (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2003 : 3; Profiroiu, Profiroiu, Mina, Nica 2011: 277-294).

2. Marginality in EU states and Romania

Starting with 1993, public administration reform focused on changing the relationship between PA and society, meaning that PA must serve the society and not subordinate the society, as well as on the separation between the state and the civil society. It also emphasized the support for increasing the civil society's auto-regulation capacity and for local individual initiatives, a new relationship between citizens and administration, strengthening the role of local public authorities and developing a partnership with the civil society. Other drivers for increasing the pace of PA reform were the need for structural and functional PA

modernization and the EU integration process (Profiroiu, Profiroiu, Mina, Nica 2011: 282).

Several European Commission reports signaled that many of the initially set goals as well as the adopted laws were not effectively respected and implemented and the newly created entities did not manage to entirely fulfill their mission. It is for this reason that the PA reform kept the top of the pre and post EU integration agenda. Taking into account the recommendations made in the European Commission's Report in 2003, the priorities of the PA transformation process focused on the civil service, aimed at creating a professional, stable and politically neutral corps of civil servants, local public administration, by continuing the public services decentralization/deconcentration process and central public administration, by improving the public policy process (Profiroiu, Profiroiu, Mina, Nica 2011: 282).

When dealing with the influence of the political environment on people activity and coverage patterns, it is vital to distinguish between the direct effects of a change in government and the indirect effects of such a change. Direct influences are, for example, favorable statements made by the government officials concerning a particular social group resolutions for development and funding and a shifting of budget towards a particular group at the expense of others. Negative proclamations or discriminatory actions are also considered direct actions. Indirect influences of a change in government on social group coverage patterns can be a side effect of changes in the dominant values across society or of changes in work. In addition it must be kept in mind that the Government does not work alone in promoting or discrediting social groups, because other influential factors might be interest groups, political parties and organizations (Avraham 2003 : 171).

Inequalities have various causes and can result in permanent handicaps imposed by geographic remoteness or by recent social and economic changes or perhaps both. In the new UE member states part of disability is the legacy of former centralized planned economic systems. The impact of these handicaps is often highlighted by social deprivation, mediocre education, high unemployment rate and inadequate infrastructure. We believe that the relationship between globalization and underdevelopment can be described by two assumptions and alternatives:

(1) underdevelopment can be a result of globalization or (2) underdevelopment can be caused by the country's lack of integration into the global economy. We may call the first hypothesis peripheralization hypothesis, while the second hypothesis could be called marginalization. Peripheralization hypothesis states that unequal economic relations between advanced countries and the least advanced ones contribute to the "development of underdevelopment". Marginalization hypothesis states that underdevelopment is in fact one of the causes of the lack of integration in the circuit of world economy avatars and that is because of the autarchy of local economies (www.socasis.ubbcluj.ro, 22.09.2015, 10: 05).

The subtle items of our society remain relatively invisible and potentially harmful to the well being, self esteem and standard of living of many marginalized groups in society. There are psychological dynamics and impact of micro aggressions on the well being of marginalized groups and will elucidate their role in creating disparities in education employment and healthcare (Derald Wing 2010: 10). In many cases hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experimental identity of target persons demean them on a personal or group level and may communicate that they are lesser human beings by suggesting they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and invalidate or relegate them to inferior status and treatments (Derald Wing 2010: 3).

The issue of the decentralization of public services towards the local communities has represented a perennial preoccupation on the agenda and within the programs of the post-communist governments, while its legislative realisation and, further, the implementation of such a policy have generated remarkably diverse - here and there, controversial - outcomes: on the one hand, observers and decision-makers praise the benefits of "local autonomy" and independent public policy at the local level, accompanied by a more meaningful citizens' participation, on the other hand, contestations are voiced through the prism of what seemed to be a gradual "impoverishment" of the small-to-medium sized municipalities, in the absence of the financial support provided by the state budget (Marin 2014: 75).

Addressing marginality is not only a matter for local and central governments but also a task for civil society organization, business and local communities themselves. Public policy assessments refer to

macroeconomical, fiscal and decentralization options to address marginality. How does one reach the extremely poor and marginal groups in countries where local politicians and local officials may have little incentive to provide for them? The instruments that might be involved include a range of options transfer or assistance from higher levels of government (donors), cash support, the provision of public services (particularly health and education, forms of employment support (Von Brown, Gatzweiler 2014 : 12).

Marginality incorporates the understanding that the subjective perceptions of poverty, values and aspiration matter and that all of these are part of calibrating the tools of poverty measurement. Apart from being inclusive and interdisciplinary, the concept of marginality offers an integrated and systemic basis for understanding the interactions between the social and the ecological system. In a world with fewer natural resources it becomes more apparent that the role of access to services and technologies is even more critical for all kinds of linkages and changing patterns between both systems (Von Brown, Gatzweiler 2014: 10).

For example, in our country, recent studies have found that most of the rural areas face acute problems caused by local economic context, but also within their organization. In this respect, we can speak of the existence of internal factors that maintain most of the villages at a low level of development. Among them, the main factors are the condition of local infrastructure and lack of attractiveness for investments of these places. Often, in these situations, one of the major elements that generate these internal factors is the administrative organization .We are talking about places with low effective population aging or isolated villages. To be economically viable and to be managed effectively, it is necessary to increase their interconnectivity within larger and more powerful economically structures and to implement micro-regional projects that go beyond the territorial limits of current existing municipalities (Mihalache, Croitoru 2014 : 68).

Most countries in Central and Eastern Europe are faced with the difficulty of establishing higher levels of self-government. Municipal level, for example, fragmented or not, does not provide adequate coverage areas for more specialized services such as secondary education, hospitals or shelters. There has been a lot of pressure on the part of the EU, particularly

on creating local representative institutions which could lay the grounds for planning economic and social development. However, in most CEE countries there are thousands of communities with municipal status with populations of less than 1,000 people, and reform programs face the inability of these communities to ensure administrative and financial skills, the existence of economies and stratified coverage areas necessary for essential services such as primary education, waste management, hiring qualified staff in the fields of law, engineering or physical planning (Davey 2004: 35-26).

Economic development, in general, is a complex process with different implications from one sector to another or from one region to another, which can be influenced by a number of factors. As far as the regional development is concerned, it might be affected by a number of factors, which will be presented in a synthetic form below. An important factor that may influence the development of regions is the degree of regional specialization.

However, there are opinions that regional specialization contributes to a lesser extent to the occurrence and the emphasizing of economic disparities and, in particular, to those existing per capita income which are determined by differences in productivity and not necessarily by specialization (Antonescu: 9 cited in <http://www.studii-economice.ro>). Another factor contributing to the emergence of regional development disparities between the regions is the nature and type of the analyzed region. In areas where consuming industries are prevalent, it will be seen a decline in income and employment levels as a result of the goals of the national policy.

In Romania, the socialist regime had a contradictory effect on the concept of social solidarity and its value. On the one hand, by the very option to politics, socialism have the objective of strengthening social solidarity. On the other hand, experience degradation social was likely to generate a negative attitude toward mechanical solidarity artificially imposed politically and ideologically. The indiscriminate equalisation policy, in the sense of impoverishing the population without rewarding individual effort and the quality of work, limited the development of the value of solidarity. It rather generated an aspiration towards a

differentiated performance reward system, which consequently led to increased inequalities between social classes. (Zamfir 2012: 127).

Unequal opportunities offered by the transition responded in a way to these expectations. On the one hand, the transition in Romania has led not only to a very good chance for what turned out to be a small minority, but a sharp depletion of an important part of the community. On the other hand, community expect a special social protection to compensate at least partially for the negative effects of transition in recent years; the Romanian government tends to withdraw more and more of social protection functions. The perception of an increase in individualism and feeling of abandonment experienced by those in difficulty characterized more strongly the collective mood (Zamfir 2012: 127).

3. EU policies regarding decentralization and avoiding marginalization

In the current crisis and austerity measures on the background of concerns EU in the protection and welfare go, more than ever, to a comparative analysis of the risk of poverty or social exclusion of countries that are EU States members for proposals for realistic solutions in order to prevent poverty causes. It should be noted that, in recent years, the EU has refined the methodology concerning the calculation of risk of poverty and social exclusion, launching new social indicators able to measure the living conditions of the population which is vulnerable or marginalized from the social point of view (Zamfir 2012: 132).

On the one hand, admittedly, the general trend manifested both nationally and internationally in the period between 1992 -2010 in the evolution of the structure of the active population by economic sector was the decrease in the share of employed population in industry and agriculture, in parallel with the increase of people involved in the services sector, which largely explains the marginal status of agricultural rural poor population. Anyhow, following the developments in the period 1992-2010 of the population structure, the analysis at regional level of the national economy in 2010 identifies the same regions of eastern and south Romania and those in the west and center of the country according to the share of

employment in the economic value of three main activities, respectively in activities such as agriculture, manufacturing and commerce (MDRAP 2013: 23).

On the other hand, in Romanian cities social problems are caused by poverty, unemployment, lack of utilities, accessibility issues that encourage the raising of socio-spatial segregation. Creating inclusive societies that ensure the participation of all sections of the population in the economic, social and cultural development is one of the key priorities envisaged by the EU for the next decade. An indicator of social cohesion is the degree of residential segregation at the neighborhood level in cities, namely the inequality between the average characteristics of the population of the districts. However, people associate depending on the economic, social and cultural background, ethnicity, income, unemployment, lifestyle, and so the evolution of segregation leads to the creation of homogeneous areas in the districts in terms of these characteristics (MDRAP 2013: 231).

Therefore, ineluctably appears the problem of the degree of decentralization propitious to a democratic construct and to an efficient administration, considering undoubtedly different factors (e.g. the traditions and the history, the area and the population of the state, the dispersion degree of the inhabitants, the economic conditions and the political context, etc.); equally dilemmatic remains also the convenient operationalization of the concept of “decentralization”, (Frège 1991: 38, Apostol Tofan 2008: 255). Adverting to the major discrepancies between “administrative decentralization” and “political decentralization” (that is, federalism, “the most profound form of decentralization”, a “major constitutional option, often associated to some exceptional historical circumstances” -from a legal perspective (Marin 2014: 75-76).

In ensuring the decentralization of power and local autonomy the starting point is the prerequisite that local authorities are best placed to answer the needs of communities as they know their problems best and, therefore, can find and identify the most appropriate solutions to solve them. In the same order of ideas, we cannot ignore the fact that local autonomy is expressed in the elective system that allows members of the collectivities in the administrative-territorial units to self-manage through their own bodies, thus having the opportunity to solve the issues that concern them directly. In local public administration, good management

problems and promotion of their interests are the responsibility of local authorities who are meant to provide local public services to meet the needs of the people in the administrative-territorial unit (Zaharia 2011: 288).

Classical theories of democracy belonging to A. de Tocqueville outline these features of decentralization and opportunities that will result from the principle of solving at least some of the economic issues like disparities or marginalization of various social groups (Iancu 2010: 45).

As a result, the real possibilities brought about by social and economic decentralisation are the following: a) a better way to coordinate public actions. This is mainly because the central government helps in reducing misunderstandings/disparities caused by the deliberate distance created between the rulers and the ruled by delegating power locally; b. a mechanism for increasing the accountability of government decision makers to determine an effective fight against corruption at local level, in favour of improving the quality of public services; c. finding/discovering a way to preserve equity and reduce poverty; d. implementing a political stability factor, a prerequisite for social development (Maddick 1963: 3).

Although we previously listed the advantages of decentralization, it should not create a false impression because we cannot state that decentralization is actually a panacea to the legitimate problems appearing in a democratic state, especially because democracy is neither the direct result of decentralization nor it appeared immediately after the birth of the concept of democracy. (Baudin - Culliere 1995 cited in Iancu, 2010: 45).

Decentralization appears to be synonymous to the local interests, territorial reinforcement. For functional bureaucracy it represents the ideal solution to combat social and political economic difficulties of the moment. This process was achieved through redeployment and development tasks typical modern providence status. While redistribution which is made nationwide consists of policies aiming to ensure equal opportunities between different social groups and different geographical regions is exercised through, development activities aimed at supporting and stimulating material progress through an effective orientation (Benz 1987: 555 cited in Apostol Tofan 2006: 117).

In the last two decades, Romania has known a massive increase in the gap development of different areas of the country. By reporting the

indicator gross of domestic product (GDP) per capita of each county, respectively of Bucharest - the value the GDP per capita nationwide obtain an index which allows quantify the relative position of the general level of economic development each territorial administrative units (ATU) - 41 counties and the municipality Bucharest - compared to overall level of economic development of the country (Mărginean 2013: 61, Stănescu 2014 : 172).

From a global perspective it can be ascertained that the process of decentralization contributes to changing the relationships between the state and the local authorities, mainly in terms of operating rules and clarifying the division of powers. In essence, the French doctrine classifies the whole issue of the evolution of decentralization in three main phenomena: the complexity of the links between territorial units of different sizes and levels, the ambiguity of the financial balance of accounts, as well as the activation of the inequality generated, inevitably, by the reduced autonomy of spaces and decision centres (Frege 1991: 38 cited in Apostol Tofan 2006: 117).

There are, also, specialists who support the idea that, in fact, decentralization is an accelerator factor of unequal development of territorial-administrative units of Romania. The cause of this phenomenon depends on the mechanism for the formation of local budgets, reminiscent of the biblical principle "one that hath shall be given, and one that does not, I will take and what he owns". Budgetary allocations *per capita* - level of local budgets - including county councils and local councils - is strongly correlated with GDP *per capita* notwithstanding the need for development of communities and economic inequality (Stănescu 2014: 188).

Income introduces an important divide in education, even though public education is tax free. The costs associated with education (transportation, clothing, meals, textbooks etc) introduce a divide between low income families and the rest of the population in regard to access to school. Income becomes important also when looking at the quality of education. Private tutoring, a widespread model in Romania, supplements low quality education in some schools or disciplines, prepares the children for evaluations and admissions etc. Consequently, those who cannot afford private tutoring and rely on the public education system are disadvantaged in comparison to the others (Precupetu 2012: 251).

Another important divide is the omnipresent rural/urban disparity. While schools in urban areas generally have a better infrastructure, higher qualified staff and provide better opportunities for their students, those in rural areas tend to illustrate the opposite. Participation in education is significantly higher in urban than in rural areas and is especially deep for higher levels of education: upper secondary and tertiary. Participation rates in higher education are more than double in urban (56.3%) than in rural areas (27.2%). Rural residence seems to provide lower educational opportunities to children all along their educational path (Precupetu 2013: 251).

Some authors assume that governance, focused mainly on strategic steering of policy processes committed to empowering a variety of stakeholders and to involving directly the beneficiaries of public policies, would rather compose a policy mix based on more sophisticated tools and involve less the local authorities in the decision making process in favour of direct involvement of the beneficiaries of public policies (Ciolan, Stîngu, Marin 2014: 50).

Such an approach would entail an explicit commitment to participatory democracy and the principle of subsidiarity by empowering local communities and actors by trusting their willingness and competence to co-design and co-act in their own benefit or a reasonable capacity of the central governance in the field of policy-making and strategic steering of policy processes (policy-making, in this case, has a strong degree of professionalization, moving away from the area of improvised and unilateral, top-down decision-making systems)(Ciolan, Stîngu, Marin 2014: 50-51).

So, persons and communities should be trained not only to have capacity for policy implementation, but also for policy formulation, in a movement from consultation to cooperation, as stated in the paragraph below: 'Communities and citizens are more vocal about their belief that government should not decide unilaterally when to consult, on what, with whom, and by what means. Both policy makers and communities have started the work of shifting the policy-making process from traditional consultations to one of citizen engagement – a process characterized by mutual trust and a sharing of power. This shift toward a more collaborative, horizontal approach to policy making encourages all parties

to reflect and learn. It promotes a focus on common ground and recognizes that citizens and communities have important knowledge and experience to add to the debate (Dodd, D.J. and H.M Boyd 2000: 4).

Conclusions

Given all economic and social theories listed above we can conclude that only strong public policies - distributive and redistributive- can change the unequal distribution of opportunities and income that are normal attributes of the functioning of markets, any weakening of these public authorities renders more problematic games in economic and social justice. A quasi Darwinian ideology of survival of the fittest has invaded not only the private business sector but also the public realm. Related to this development is the weakening of the notion of service -to the citizens in general and to the poor in particular - as the ultimate rationale for seeking and exercising political power (Baudot 2000: 33).

The European Union countries, including Romania, must follow a balanced model of economic and social development each being given equal priority at conceptual policy and implementation levels. Whilst regional inequality in Europe is significant, social inequality is also important and it deserves the same level of attention from the policy makers. Such model of development, relying on addressing only the regional inequalities and considering the labour market as the solution to poverty, will fail to address the full nature, scope and extent of social exclusion. The new European social agenda, addressing the issues of poverty and social exclusion, requires that the European Commission be well equipped with instruments for developing the knowledge base, the development policy, partnership, testing innovation and the promotion of effective methods. Ways must be found to test new responses to poverty, be that through the Progress Programme of UE or a new anti poverty programme (Harvey and O' Kelly 2008: 16).

The consolidation of public policy systems, specific to the younger democracies in Central and South-Eastern Europe and beyond, is still an ongoing process. One key indicator of professionalization of policymaking, but also of placing the whole process under the rules of democracy, is the

way central governances use, misuse and sometimes abuse the policy tools at their disposal. The choice and combination of policy tools is influenced by many factors, from policy capacity of the central governance to cultural and social presuppositions, but the first condition for their effective use is to be aware of the diversity of these tools, and of the main functions, advantages and risks they have correlated with the conditions of policy implementation (Ciolan, Stîngu, Marin 2014 : 59).

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Galati University Press, ISSN 2065 -1759

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