Chapter 8

Mapping Local Democracy in Romania

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ABSTRACT

In East European settings, during transition, local democracy experienced great difficulties in turning from a theoretical model into a functional mechanism. As basis for citizens’ political involvement, local democracy can be mapped in various ways. The authors intend to draw a map of local democracy in Romania by focusing on the function and scope of local government (second tier government), the relationship between local and central government, and the outcomes of the recent reform process. The authors intend to evaluate the quality of local democracy by the interactions between elected councilors and citizens. How elected councilors imagine their functions and responsibilities and how citizens support candidates, especially independent candidates and minor parties’ lists is at the core of our investigation. From this perspective, local and regional parties are to be seen as valuable assets for local democracy, as they help promoting local interests and local elites and fuel national wide parties with political ideas and personnel.

INTRODUCTION

Local democracy in Romania largely depends on structural factors. The unfinished regionalization and the uncertainty regarding the new regional design do not help consolidate local democratic institutions. Despite these shortcomings, local democracy is taking roots in counties, the current regional units acknowledged by the Constitution. First, the chapter intends to map local democracy in Romania, by taking into account the political activity of elected county-councilors and by focusing on the performance of local and regional parties. Second, the chapter wants to unravel the importance of the regional design for the consolidation of local democracy and to discuss the implications of the future regionalization for the local and regional parties. Those parties are seen as an expression of localism, meaning by this the emergence of alternative politics, deeply embedded on local grounds and using local resources.
BACKGROUND

The regionalization in Romania is a very slow process. It began in 1997, when the *Green Paper for Regional Policy in Romania*, the document issued by the Romanian government with the support of the European Commission, designed new regions for boosting regional development and complying with the European Union (EU) statistical requirements, but had no real willingness to empower the new regional units it created (Dragoman, 2011). Since then, the regions in Romania are not legal persons, but merely statistical regrouping of existing counties (*județe*), the largest regional unit acknowledged by the constitution.

The incipient regionalization made in 1997, continued by the Law 151/1998 regarding the regional development, was not conceived as a process of decentralization, with the perspective of full autonomy of the new regions. It was rather a development tool, used by the government as preparation for the future EU’s financial structural aid and as a compliance with the European territorial statistical system (NUTS). This represents a clear government strategy of creating functional regional structures for administrative and statistical purposes, without devolving real competences to the newly created regional entities (Dobre, 2005). According to the Law 315/2004, which upgraded the previous law on regional development, the development regions are run by regional development councils and agencies, under the general coordination of a National Council for Regional Development and of a specialized ministry for regional development and European integration. A Regional Development Fund finances the agencies and the subsequent regional policies they coordinate at the regional level, fueled mainly by the national budget and the EU financial contribution. The agencies are not legal persons, but non-profit and non-governmental organizations that project, implement and overview development policies at the regional level.

*Figure 1. Counties in Romania*
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