

MICROREGION – A REGIONAL TAXON INTERPOSED BETWEEN COMMUNE AND COUNTY

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ABSTRACT – Unlike other countries belonging to the European Community, where the territorial grid was arranged in the matrix provided by the territorial units for statistics (NUTS) on five distinct hierarchical levels: macro-regions, regions, departments (districts), intercommunity associations (microregions) and communes, in Romania, we currently operate only with taxa 1, 3 and 5; regions and microregions are non-existent from the legal point of view. If regions are now put into question at various levels, microregions are still left at the will of ad-hoc initiatives. Hence, numerous confusions and distortions occur in the absence of their clearly defined status. The present paper reviews a series of situations in which the subject has been debated and the scientific framework in which it should be addressed.

Keywords: taxon, microregion, intercommunity association, commune, territorial system

INTRODUCTION

Good territorial governance involves a set of norms, rules and values that have positive effects on the dynamics of the geographical space in its entire complexity. Starting from its physical structure, whose elements are exploited rationally, but also protected and preserved at critical moments, and continuing with the human community attached to the place, whose interests represent catalyst vectors for all actions and interactions within the adjacent regional system.

It cannot be imagined but in the context of an ordered, systemically structured space, whose functioning follows closely the coordinates of some principles such as comparative advantage, territorial equilibrium, ecological, permanent resilience, sustainable development. From this point of view, the rigorous outline of the intervention levels, the relations between different components of the territorial organism, the share and importance of each structural element represents a *sine qua non* condition of an approach that can have a fruitful finality; or, on the contrary.

As a result, the four-five levels of systemic aggregation can be distinguished starting from the holarctic structure of the territory (Cocean, 2010, p. 31), from simple to complex, from particular to general. It can be observed that the basic cell of the territory, seen in the light of the administrative attributes, is the *commune*, a taxon entitled with decisional prerogatives meant to solve and meet most of its individuals' and community's needs. Regarding this spatial entity, in Romania, but also in other countries, there is a clear paradox lying in the fact that the most optimal structure of the taxon in question appears in the particular case of comprising only one village (Gura Râului in Sibiu County; Căpâlnița in Harghita County; Coșbuc in Bistrița-Năsăud County, etc.). When there is only one political-administrative unit to manage, all resources will be concentrated to meet its needs and not dispersed to solve those of the other units (which can get to dozens of villages as in the case of the communes in the Apuseni Mountain region, the example of the commune of Bistra with no less than 38 dispersed villages is illustrative in this regard).

Thus, we infer that the basic territorial taxon, the most appropriate to good management and with the most numerous organisational perspectives is the *village* and not the commune. The fact was

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noticed by the regionalists of other countries and accepted as a more or less explicit solution to territorial organisation, by setting as many communes consisting of a single village (the example of France is illustrative, with no less than 36,565 communes according to Miossec, 2008, p. 439).

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Spatial aggregation often receives some of the most original coordinates and connotations that can be apprehended either through a long historical evolution, based on the relations and interrelations established between the various structural elements, either by detecting the vectors of direct and indirect influence over the dynamics of the respective entity. Obviously, the political-administrative impulse, manifested by decisions to group and associate various habitat units, can have a great importance. Despite its definite persuasive power, it cannot fully substitute to the existing “natural” interdependence without the risk of some dysfunctions permanently felt as inhibitors, whose overcoming requires efforts, including financial, that could be used more effectively in other fields.

Thus, the establishment of communes composed of several villages is the first step towards agglutination, which must prove its organic efficiency at the level of territorial governance. Nevertheless, it is often observed that this operation is not easy at all, that the benefits of grouping as many settlements into a single administrative entity significantly reduce the costs of bureaucracy, but multiply them when it comes to the social spending dissipated at the level of each individual. This leads to a frequent reshaping of the territorial grid, following the natural tendency to optimize its functions. However, the low spatial scale, the limited complexity of economic and social phenomena and processes that must be managed, and the direct knowledge of realities are factors that, at commune level, enable the implementation of some development policies in which hazard and unpredictability do not find a notable consistency.

The regionalization of the Romanian territory in 1968 made counties and communes fundamental administrative entities, substituting the previous regions and the Soviet-inspired districts (the so-called *raioane*), resulted from the political-administrative organisation in 1950. By applying a sustained development policy, based mainly on the principle of territorial equilibrium, of eliminating striking disparities, the initiative proved to be fruitful for several decades, so that certain counties located on less-developed territories such as Sălaj, Vaslui, Botoşani, Ialomiţa, Mehedinţi, Tulcea, etc. recorded evident rates of economic affirmation.

The same organization is maintained today, but its inadequacies and dysfunctions multiply. The need to introduce taxa equivalent to NUTS 2, namely region (Cocean, 2013), and to NUTS 4, namely microregion, is increasingly acute. Due to its functions, the latter can be synonymous to some traditional spatial entities such as the former *ocoale*, *plăși* or *plaiuri* - territorial sub-divisions of counties (*județe*) in Moldova and Wallachia, in the 18th century (*Istoria Românilor*, VI, 2002, pp. 318-319).

It appears that the spatial micro-system of a commune cannot evolve in an autarchic manner, no matter how acute the tendency of local autonomy and subsidiarity is, that it is organically interrelated with the neighbouring micro-systems, of the other communes. Thus, a varied range of similar interests emerges, which can be solved by association and direct cooperation. Out of them, infrastructure facilities frequently prevail (road or rail routes, water, gas and electric power networks, telecommunication systems), as well as those in the public services field, which cannot be supported by the potential of a single commune (banking services, hospitals, tourism, etc.).

In this respect, a number of 2,572 intercommunity associations (EPCI) were created in France, which group about 14 communes on average and interpose hierarchically between the 100 departments (belonging to 26 regions) and the 36,565 communes (Miossec, 2008, p. 443).

For Romania, the voluntary association of communes represents an emerging process. It was initiated with the pre-accession of Romania to the European Union and has increased in recent years. A good example is represented by Tășnad Microregion in Satu Mare County (Fig. 1), established in 2003 as result of the voluntary association between the homonymous town and the neighbouring communes (Săuca, Santău, Săcășeni, Cehal, and Pir).

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Nowadays, there is a tendency to assimilate this microregional taxon with *Local Action Groups* (LAG), with broad opportunities to access European funds for their own development, but with numerous flaws and inconsistencies regarding their names and their delimitation as functional spatial systems.

Thus, a reversal of the dialectic relation between theory and practice is noticed, the acute need for solutions to territorial development and the opportunities arisen due to the EU funding programmes generating various regionalist initiatives coming from political, economic and social stakeholders, many of them lacking the basic qualifications in the field. Naturally, these qualifications do not come by itself, but rely on a rigorous theoretical and scientific foundation, on the long decanted experience of professionals in the field. Therefore, it is no wonder that certain LAGs appear composed of communes where the territorial force lines are divergent and not convergent, with diffluent flows and visible interrelation dysfunctions; where the names are totally inadequate from the geographical, historical and cultural viewpoint, some of them improperly borrowing the name of some lands (*țări*) or districts (*ținuturi*) and thus generating regrettable confusions; where the natural growth poles (consisting of small urban centres) are deliberately omitted by the regulation for the establishment of LAGs; where territorial entities under different jurisdictions are brought together (the association of communes from neighbouring counties is considered an advantage that brings higher scores in the selection phase), etc.

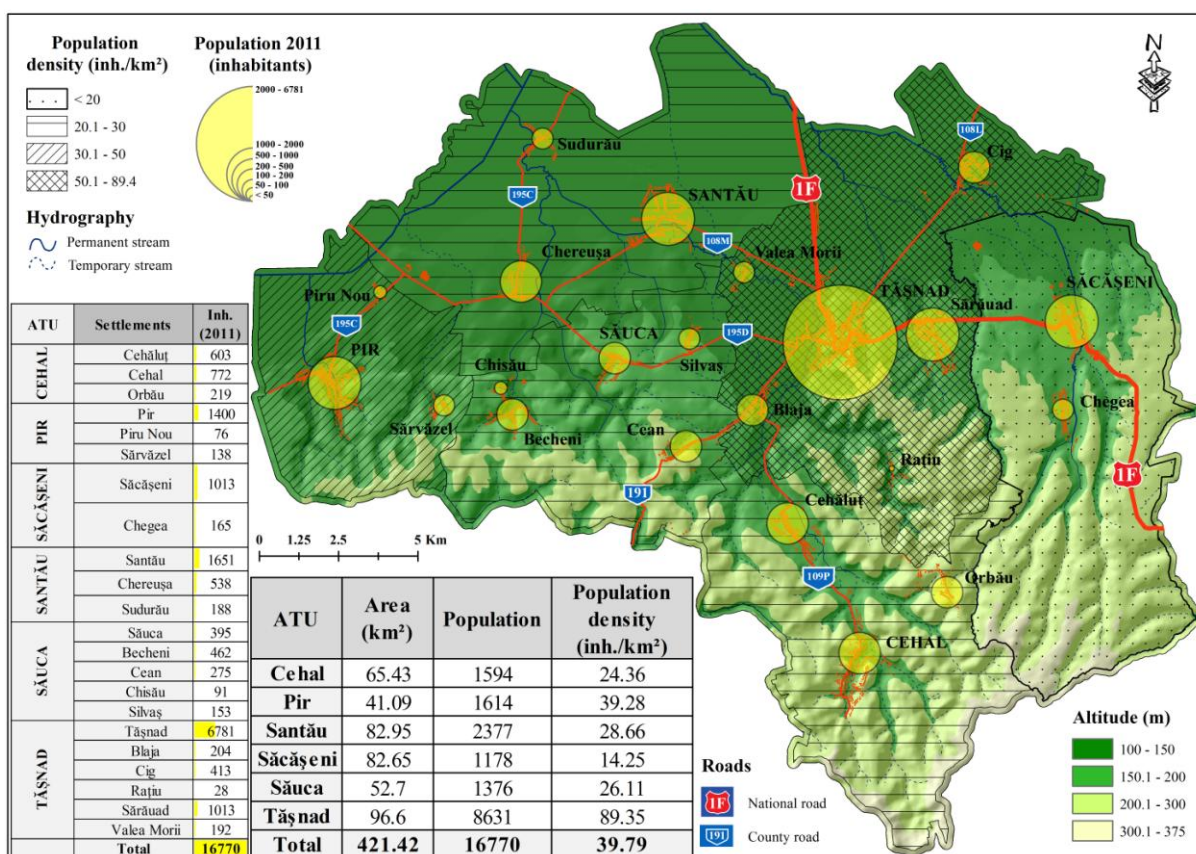


Figure 1. Tășnad Microregion – demographic potential
Cartography by Gheorghe Hognogi, 2014

As far as their names are concerned, the same shortcomings appear, generated by the tendency to give them names with a historical, geographical or cultural resonance meant to push them quickly into the public consciousness. From this point up to the mystification of reality is but a step. This is the

case of *Țara Secașelor Local Action Group* that brings together communes from the counties of Sibiu and Alba. Thorough studies on the “lands” of Romania (*țări*) (Cocean, 1997, 2011), developed in the last two decades, do not confirm the existence of such territorial structures. Similarly, *Țara Zarandului LAG* reduces the significance of a historical-geographical name attributed to a well-known “land” to one of its sectors, namely Brad Depression, generating inevitable confusions, etc.

In order to clarify the structure, functions and attributions of a *microregion*, as intermediary spatial taxon, we must appeal to the theory of territorial systems, to the vertical and horizontal organic interrelations between their components, to the attractive and dissipative forces that govern their development (Ianoș, 2000). Consequently, the delimitation of a microregion cannot ignore the following framework elements:

- the presence of an attraction centre for the entire ascribed territory to gravitate towards it without major obstacles. In most cases, this role can be assigned to a small town or a commune centre emerged economically and socially in relation to the others;

- the above-mentioned local growth pole must have diversified infrastructures and daily required community services;

- the territory ascribed to microregion will belong to the same mental space (Cocean, 2011) since social cohesion has proven to be far superior in such a context;

- the names of microregions will be inspired by the history, geography and culture emerged in their own territory, any extrapolation or inappropriate borrowings have proven to be unproductive;

- among the traditional forms of territorial organisation and cooperation, conditioned by the development of most human habitats in the river floodplains, microregions can apply the millennial continuity and take the anisotropic form of “valley knezdoms” (*Istoria românilor*, III, 2001, p. 378); they can also be assimilated with the numerous districts (*ținut* – an autochthonous territorial taxon described by Dimitrie Cantemir in the well-known *Descriptio Moldaviae* three centuries ago), present as early forms of spatial organization in all historical-geographical provinces of Romania (Codru, Ciceu, Mărginimea Sibiului, Hârtibaci, Bârgău, Ținutul Pădurenilor, Gorj, Vâlcea, Troțuș, Neamț, etc.). We do not recommend, but, on the contrary, we are strongly against the idea of making the Romanian “lands” (*țări*) equivalent to microregions because they are recognized as typical *regions* of Romania and, therefore, they are higher-level forms of territorial aggregation and functioning (Cocean, 1997).

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