

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS AND THE REGIONAL POLICY. A CASE STUDY: ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The European Union is an integration structure focused on reducing disparities between countries/regions. The fulfilment of this objective needs a specific objective policy (included in the Regional Policy) and an institutional system adapted to these needs. One of the most important institutions involved in this policy is the Committee of Regions (CoR). Its representatives, coming from regional and local level, are connected to the main Union's institution, creating the premises to adapt the decisional system to the subsidiarity principle. This article describes the main role of CoR. and it focuses on its implication in Romania's administrative reform.*

Key words: *regional disparities, economic and social cohesion, Committee of Regions, NUTS.*

1. Introduction

The Committee of the Regions (CoR) is a European institution created by The Treaty of Maastricht (1992). It represents the local and regional point of view in the decisional system of the European Union.

The local authorities influenced the decisions at the over-national level in different domains, such as: employment, environment, education. It has to be specified that its role has constantly increased, its field of action has grown over time, showing the importance of the local level opinion in the decisional system.

CoR's main role – to issue the so-called “opinions” on the Commission proposals – makes it one of the most important elements in connecting the over-national level of European decisions to the regional and local level.

2. Objectives

The role of each institution in the decisional system of the European Union has been established since the beginning of its activity but, as the Union evolved, the system showed that some improvements are necessary.

The Committee of Regions is not an institution created from the very beginning of the Community. It was created only by the Maastricht Treaty, along with the establishment of the Single Market Programme (1992).

This article focuses on determining the main attributes and role of CoR and it tries to make a study on the regional specific aspects in which the CoR is actively involved.

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As a consequence, the article aims to answer questions such as:

1. Is the CoR an important institution to EU or should it be considered an auxiliary one?
2. Are the roles of CoR well defined or should they be rearranged?
3. Is the CoR significantly involved in the European Regional Policy?
4. What is the role of the CoR in the administrative re-organisation of the Romanian territory?

By answering these questions, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate how important the CoR has become since the European Union approached regional aspects.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. General considerations about the regional problem in the European Union

In the world economy there are some major differences as regards the level of development on the North-South axis. In addition, the European Union exhibits some differences on the East-West direction, especially because of the Eastern European countries accepted in the Community over the last years.

The preoccupation for reducing the disparities between regions is not so usual to an integration structure at the global level. The European Union is a model for other non-EU countries. For instance, one can mention the cooperation with Brazil in this country's attempt to implement a regional policy (starting from 2007). In this context, between 2007 and 2012, there took place [1]:

- 1 20 conferences regarding the multilevel governance, strategic planning, innovation and monitoring at regional level (with the participation of 150 delegates from Brazil);
- 2 an exchanging programme between 14 "mezo-regions" from Brazil and 14 regions from EU with the objectives of creating a scheme of development for the regions from Brazil; six visiting studies in EU;
- 3 a study made by OSCE with the EU collaboration - "Territorial evaluation of Brazil"- with the purpose of delivering assistance to the authorities from Brazil.

3.2. The Committee of Regions – general issues

The CoR was created, as mentioned before, in 1992, by The Treaty of Maastricht.

Its creation was requested by the new orientations in the European integration process.

At the beginning, the CoR (for EU with 15 members) had 222 members:

- 1 France, Germany, Italy and Great Britain – 24 members
- 2 Spain – 21 members
- 3 Austria, Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden– 12 members
- 4 Denmark, Finland and Ireland – 9 members
- 5 Luxemburg - 6 members

When the Community decided to enlarge eastwards, the institutional structure of CoR changed. The Treaty of Nice (2000) was responsible for this.

According to this Treaty, the CoR had the following number of members, including the situation of the next enlargement: (Tabel 1)

The Committee of Regions – Members (Treaty of Nice)

Table 1

STATE	MEMBERS AFTER ENLARGEMENT
Member states	
Belgium	12
Denmark	9
Germany	24
Greece	12
Spain	21
France	24
Ireland	9
Italy	24
Luxemburg	6
the Netherlands	12
Austria	12
Portugal	12
Finland	9
Sweden	12
Great Britain	24
TOTAL	222
Candidates	
Bulgaria	12
Cyprus	6
Czech Republic	12
Estonia	7
Hungary	12
Latvia	7
Lithuania	9
Malta	5
Poland	21
Romania	15
Slovakia	9
Slovenia	7
TOTAL	122

Today, the CoR has 385 members (regional presidents, mayors or elected representatives of regions and cities) representing the 28 member states. They are elected or they represent the local administration. Their mandate is valid for 5 years. They have regular meetings, 6 times per year (plenary sessions).

The CoR structure consists of 6 commissions:

- 1 Territorial cohesion
- 2 Economic and social policy
- 3 Education, youth and culture
- 4 Environment, climate changes and energy

5 Citizenship and governance

6 Natural resources

The Lisbon Treaty (2009) specifies that the CoR has to be consulted before the initiative and it is deeply involved in this phase.

After the proposal, the Commission has to consult again the CoR if the initiative is considered to affect the local or regional level.

According to the European Union, CoR provides “more than 50 opinions a year on EU legislation, more than 40 stakeholders’ consultations each year and more than 300 events a year” [2]

Three fundamental principles underlie CoR works: subsidiarity (the decisions must be taken as close as possible to the citizens), proximity (the decision making process has to be transparent and to ensure citizens participation in the democratic process) and partnership (the different levels of governance have to cooperate as in a partnership).

The future objectives of the European Union Regional Policy are subscribed to the Europe 2020 goals [3]:

1. Employment – 75% of the 20-64 year-olds to be employed;
2. R&D / innovation – 3% of the EU GDP (public and private combined) to be invested in R&D/innovation;
3. Climate change / energy – greenhouse gas emissions 20% (or even 30%, if the conditions are right) lower than 1990; 20% of energy from renewables; 20% increase in energy efficiency;
4. Education – Reducing school drop-out rates below 10%; at least 40% of 30-34 year-olds completing third level education;
5. Poverty / social exclusion – at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The CoR subscribes its actions to the “White Book of the Committee of Regions regarding the Multilevel Governance” – Building Europe in partnership (June 2009). According to this, CoR is involved in the multilevel governance by the following [4]:

1 coordinating the actions of the European Union, member states, local and regional authorities on the basis of a partnership;

2 recommending that each major strategic reform should be sustained by a territorial activity plan, with the implications of the Commission (through negotiations between the Commission and CoR);

- 3 the partnership
- vertical partnership (local and regional authorities – national governments – the European Union);
 - horizontal partnership (local and regional authorities – civil society).

3.3. The Regional Policy in Romania

After joining the European Union, Romania adopted the policy of the Community and, also, the institutional system.

Firstly, there can be mentioned the importance of the Treaty of the European Union which set new objectives regarding the economic and social cohesion for the first time. (articles 174-178 of the Treaty).

The economic and social cohesion had also been objectives for Romania before. During the 2000-2006 Financial Perspective, the Romanian objectives were adapted to the European ones, modified in the 2007-2013 Financial Perspective, as it can be seen in Table 2 [5]

Regional policy – objectives and funds Table 2

2000 – 2006	
Objective/Initiative	Structural Funds
Ob 1 BACKWARD REGIONS IN DEVELOPMENT	ERDF _a , ESF _c , EAGF _f , FIFG _l
Ob 2 REGIONS IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RECONVERSION	ERDF, ESF
Ob 3 SYSTEMS OF INITIATING AND PROMOTING THE EMPLOYMENT OF POPULATION	ESF
Interreg III	ERDF

URBAN II	ERDF
EQUAL	ESF
LEADER+	FEOGA – O
Cohesion Fund	CF [‡]
TOTAL 4 Objective, 4 Initiatives, the Cohesion Fund, 6 Instruments	
2007 – 2013	
Objective: CONVERGENCE (Former Objective 1 + Cohesion Fund)	ERDF, ESF, EF
Objective : REGIONAL COMPETITIVITY AND LABOUR EMPLOYMENT (Former Ob 2 +Ob 3)	ERDF, ESF
Objective: TERRITORIAL EUROPEAN COOPERATION (Former Interreg III, URBAN II and EQUAL)	ERDF
TOTAL 3 Objectives, 3 Instruments	

[‡] European Regional Developing Fund
[‡] European Social Fund

[‡] European Agricultural Guarantee Fund
[‡] Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance

As it can be seen, the objectives were simplified and the directions were clearly defined in compliance with Europe 2020 strategy.

Regarding the Regional Policy,

The European Union estimated for Romania a total of 19 668 million euros expenditure from 2007 to 2013, divided as follows (Table 3):

Funds for Romania 2007-2013

Table 3

Objectives	Financing (millions of EURO)
	12 661 (Convergence)
	6 552 (Cohesion Fund)
Competitiveness	-
Cooperation	455
TOTAL	19 668

Even if at present there is a common regional orientation there are different types of territorial and administrative structures in each country. In addition, there are some

member states in which the decentralization process has not taken place so far, as it can be seen in Table 4[5]:

Structure of regional and local collectivities – EU members

Table 4

Country	Type of administrative national organization	Administrative structures
Austria	Federal	9 Lander, 80 Districts, 15 Statutarsdaste (local level and district level) 2 354 Gemeinder (local level)
Belgium	Federal	3 Regions
Bulgaria	Centralized	28 Districts, 264 Municipalities

Croatia	Unitary state	Counties (regional level), Municipalities and Towns (local level)
Cyprus	Presidential republic	Six Districts, Municipalities and Communes
Finland	Unitary state organized on a decentralized basis	19 Regions (autonomous), 336 Municipalities
Latvia	Unitary state	110 Municipalities, 9 Cities, Districts – administrative reform (2009)
Czech Republic	Unitary state	14 Regions (Region and Municipality), 6249 Municipalities
Denmark	Unitary state organized on a decentralized basis	5 regions, 98 Municipalities, 2 autonomous regions (Greenland and Faroe Islands)
Estonia	Unitary republican state	No regional level of governance
France	Unitary state organized on a decentralized basis	27 Regions (22 metropolitan regions, including Corsica and 5 overseas regions), 101 Departments (5 - overseas), 37 000 Municipalities
Germany	Federal	15 Lander, 295 Kreise (intermediary level), 11 192 Gemeinden (local level)
Greece	Unitary state organized on a decentralized basis	7 Decentralized Administrations, 13 Regions, 325 Municipalities
Hungary	Unitary state organized on a decentralized basis	19 Counties, 3 175 Communities (2 863 Municipalities, 265 Towns, 23 Towns with County Rank and Budapest)
Ireland	Unitary state	80 Municipalities, 29 County Councils, 5 City Councils, 8 regional authorities, 2 Regional Assemblies
Italy	Unitary parliamentary republic	20 Regions (5 – with autonomous status), 110 Provinces, 8 100 Municipalities, 15 Metropolitan areas – not yet operational
Lithuania	Decentralized unitary state	10 regions, 60 Municipalities
Luxembourg	Unitary state with a municipal level of decentralization	3 districts, 12 Cantons, 106 Municipalities
Malta	Decentralized unitary state	5 regions, 68 Elected Councils
Netherlands	Decentralized unitary state	Provinces, Municipalities and 6 overseas entities
Poland	Decentralized unitary state	16 regions, 379 Counties, 2 479 Municipalities
Portugal	Asymmetrical regionalized state	Autonomous Regions (regional), Municipalities and Sections of Municipalities (local level)
Romania	Sovereign, independent, unitary, indivisible national state	2853 Communes, 217 Towns, 103 Municipalities
Slovakia	Unitary state	8 Regions, 79 Districts, 2 891 Municipalities

Slovenia	Decentralized unitary state	Regions, Devolved state administration units, Municipalities
Spain	Regionalized state	17 Autonomous communities, 50 Provinces, 8 111 Municipalities, 2 Autonomous Cities, 1 Outermost region (Canary Islands)
Sweden	Unitary decentralized state	20 Counties, 4 Regions, 290 Municipalities
United Kingdom	Asymmetrically decentralized unitary state	55 Unitary authorities (England), 22 Unitary authorities (Wales), 32 directly elected unitary Councils (Scotland), 11 local Councils (Northern Ireland)

Some conclusions may be drawn:

1. in some European Union countries, the decentralization process is not even begun;
2. the administrative structure in European countries is not always organized according to the same principle (even if they are represented by different structures according to different levels, just a few are organized in the NUTS system);
3. the level of autonomy is also different from one country to another.

3.5. The CoR Activity in Romania

The situation of the administrative structure is in compliance with the NUTS level:

NUTS I – Romania – 1 Unit

NUTS II – Regions – 8 Units

NUTS III – Counties and Bucuresti Municipality – 42

All the regions have less than 75% of the GDP average in the Community, so all the regions are eligible for financing.

It is interesting to mention the European citizens' opinion, as well as the Romanian citizens' opinion about this matter. In the Euro barometer of 2013, the answers to the Question QA12.6 “Do you trust/not trust the regional or local public authorities?” the answers were:

	Trust (%)	Not trust (%)	Neither/Nor (%)
EU 27	43	51	6
Luxembourg	68	28	6
Germany	65	29	6
Romania	37	54	9
Slovenia	24	73	3
Italy	15	78	7

Fig. 1. *Question A12.6*

(http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb79/eb79_anx_en.pdf)

Consequently, the Romanian population, as European citizens, is sceptical regarding the activity of the local and regional public authorities. The case is not singular. Also,

other countries are sceptical (Italy and Slovenia the most).

The 15 Romanian members of CoR come from the 8 regions as follows:

1. Centre – 1

2. North West - 0
3. North East - 3
4. South East - 2
5. South Muntenia - 5
6. South West Oltenia - 1
7. West - 2
8. Bucuresti Ilfov - 1

As it can be seen, almost all the regions are represented in the CoR. The Romanian representatives of CoR support, together with all the CoR members, the decentralization and regionalization process, according to the subsidiarity principle.

4. Conclusions

The regional problem is specific to the European Union. The European Union tries to approach the local and regional level in the decisional system.

In this process, several institutions are involved: The European Parliament (Committee for regional development), the Council of EU (the General Council), the European Commission, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of Regions and the European Investment Bank.

The appearance of the Committee of Regions was a consequence of the economic and social cohesion. According to this one, the disparities between countries and regions must decrease. The CoR is the voice of the local and regional authorities on both the vertical and horizontal axis.

Its importance has grown during the years following the Treaty of Lisbon (2009). Now, it must be consulted before the initializing phase and, as well as after the Commission has initiated its proposal.

Its activity in Romania can be evaluated in three main areas:

1 The region capitals – CoR agrees with the EU principles in granting significant

importance to the development of these municipalities;

2 The urban development – regarding the fact that this medium is specific to 2/3 of the Romanian population. CoR proposed a European model of towns by promoting innovation, competition and sustainable growth and by reducing the emissions of CO₂ by 20%;

3 The development regions – created as instruments of sustainable development and facilitating the access to resources and special development programs.

CoR in collaboration with the Minister of Regional Development proposed a territorial - administrative structure. It consists of 7 regions with similar index (surface, proportion of services, and with some disproportions in the agricultural sector – because of the agricultural potential) and the Ilfov- Bucuresti Region (the most developed area in Romania).

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