

# **A RESEARCH DESIGN FOR STUDYING THE EFFICIENCY OF REGIONAL POLICIES IN THE NORTH-VEST REGION, ROMANIA**

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*The paper endeavors to build a possible research design format for studying the efficiency of regional policies in the North-Vest region, Romania. In the first two sections the paper sets forth a series of research objectives and highlights the epistemological framework used in building the research hypothesis. In the last sections the author discusses methodological issues such as the proposed research methods and instruments, validity and fidelity, and sampling.*

## **Research's objectives**

This paper endeavors to assess the efficiency of regional policies implemented in Romania by means of identifying and evaluating their coherence and continuity in time, the role played by various social actors involved in this process, and their outcomes. The final goal of the proposed research is to identify which type of an intermediary administrative level can support the best the efficient implementation of regional policies in Romania.

## **Social relevance of the proposed research topic**

Regional policies represent a rather new concept/approach in the realm of political and administrative studies. Scholars as well as practitioners have started to be interested in this field starting with the early 1950s. This interest was stirred by the adoption of the treaty that lay the foundation of the European Economic Community. Chapter four states that the national administrations from the member states are to use regional policies in order to identify and implement administrative measures meant to alleviate the gaps in development among the member states and the economic discrepancies among the regions from within the member states.

It has to be mentioned from the very beginning that regional policies have been adopted by the member states because of their integrative role. The founders of the European Economic Community have strongly believed that the establishment of such a Union – in

fact an economic and political entity – is not going to last unless the gaps in development among both the member states and the regions within them are alleviated or at least mitigated.

Based on these observations, regional policies can be defined as mechanisms and political-administrative actions used by public institutions as well as by European institutions in partnership with other relevant social actors in order to alleviate cleavages among regions, to support the social integration of minority and disadvantaged groups, and to contribute toward the development of proper infrastructure in rural and/or isolated areas.

This broad definition highlights the fact that regional policies work at two main levels – at the European level the member states themselves are regarded as regions; at the national level there are different types of regions each of them experiencing problems that could be addressed by means of the tools and mechanisms employed by regional policies. From the perspective of the member states the regional policies concern themselves with administrative regions as the unit for the implementation of different measures and policy tools.

At the European level it is easy to identify various regions since they are equated with the member states. This task is however more daunting when taking into consideration the member states. The main obstacle is represented by the fact that there is no agreement regarding what an administrative region is and which are the criteria a region must meet in order to be defined as such by the public administration. An analysis of the European administrative systems, from the perspective of their vertical structure, does not lead the researcher toward a definitive conclusion. This is due to the individual processes through which regions were historically created in each of the member states. The factors that influenced the establishment of an intermediary administrative levels stem from the tradition within each political-administrative system and the legitimacy enjoyed by administrative institutions from the citizens. There are administrative regions that overlay on top of the already existing historical regions – Italy and Spain -, regions that were created by means of decentralizing or devolving responsibilities and power from the central level – France and Great Britain -, or administrative regions created by means of solidarity among the local communities in order to implement common economic development policies – Greece, Portugal, and Sweden.

Before addressing the topic of regional policies in Romania, there is another issue that needs to be properly understood – mainly why have regional policies emerged as a priority on the governmental agenda of national public administrations? The answer to this question is closely intertwined with the evolutions that have been taking place at the global level starting with the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These factors include – economic globalization, technical and information progresses, and a shift in the balance of power starting with the end of the Cold War in 1989. All these evolutions have determined a change in the paradigm of the so-called welfare state which is no longer able to provide competitive services to all of its citizens and it needs to redefine its role and to identify social partners for a better provision of public services to all citizens.

This change in the paradigm of the welfare state has forced the national governments to identify new means for reaching social and economic stability, enhancing the welfare and wellbeing of their citizens, and integrating disadvantaged groups. In the quest for solutions regional policies have proved to be a viable solution at least at the European level.

Romania has been confronted with similar evolutions and preoccupations. The change in paradigm is evident in the case of our country as well – the main focus of the reform process is the restructuring of the political, administrative, and economic systems. This reform from the standpoint of regional policies means a reallocation of the central government's responsibilities toward the local and the regional levels – decentralization -, and the training of the existing bureaucracy for the provision of competitive public services to a public who is becoming more and more demanding and requests a different attitude from the public administration.

From this perspective it is critical to identify the administrative level where regional policies can be drafted and implemented in a coherent and efficient manner and which is able to meet the best the aforementioned development needs.

The process of developing regional policies has started in Romania in 1998 when the law for regional development was adopted. It has to be said however that the process is far from been completed. There isn't currently a formalized administrative level in charge with regional policies and development. This issue is partially under the supervision of the central government who coordinates the Agencies for Regional Development and of the County Councils from the development regions established by the law.

### **Research hypotheses or questions**

The main question the research tries to answer is: How efficient is the regional administrative level in the design, implementation, and evaluation of regional policies?

This question meets the two relevant requirements/criteria set forth by King, Keohane and Verba<sup>1</sup> with regard to any research project:

1. The research theme has a great impact upon the political, social, and economical life of various communities (all the aforementioned fields are impacted by decisions made in the realm of regional policies).
2. The proposed research contributes to the development of regional policies as an academic field because it approaches the subject from a new perspective.

The region will be regarded as an administrative institution, thus avoiding the ongoing debate in the media and political speeches with regard to how regionalism and regional movements represent a first step on the path toward federalism or a way to increase disputes between the center and the periphery of an administrative system.

It is difficult nonetheless to label our research question. Based on the typology offered by Smith<sup>2</sup>, our research questions can be regarded as non-causal and evaluative; in other words, the research question is used in order to determine what make things to be good or bad. However, the causal element is important as the research tries to determine up to what extent the institutional level influences the quality of the implementation process of regional policies. From this perspective, our research question fits best under a modified typology called causal-evaluative.

Based on the central research question, several other research foci have been identified regarding both the process of regional policies and the results/the impact of projects developed within the framework of regional policies. These questions include:

1. Who were the promoters of the regional project? Who was against it?
2. Which were the main objectives to be accomplished by regional policies?
3. How were the decisions made with regard to the final state of the projects?
4. What problems occurred during the implementation stage?
5. Up to what extent was the proposed measure successful? Which were the main outcomes?
6. Which were the main causes of the success/failure of these projects?

Unfortunately, the proposed research questions may have limitations mainly due to validity. From the standpoint of internal validity, there is a set of variables that can determine the efficiency of regional policies. These variables such as cultural factors (the politicians', public servants', and population's mentalities), factors related to the evolution of local, regional, or national economies (economic development can be impacted by an unlimited number of factors and it can propagate from one region to

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<sup>1</sup> Gary King, Robert Keohane, Sideney Verba, *Fundamentele cercetării sociale*, Polirom, 2000, p. 28

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Miles, M.B., Hubermann, M.A., *Qualitative Data Analysis*, Sage Publications, p. 24

the other), and political factors (the outcome of elections, the domestic or international political situation) were not included in the analysis. It can be said that these factors have a larger impact on the outcomes of regional policies rather than on the adoption, implementation, and evaluation processes.

From the standpoint of external validity the proposed research is faced with a clear limitation. The results will be hard to be extrapolated to the national level because of the specificities of the process by which regional policies are designed, implemented, and evaluated in different regions of Romania. The research is still valuable even with this limitation. Follow up studies could replicate the same questions at the level of other regions within Romania and then by means of using the comparative method try to identify laws that are not depending on the regional and cultural context but are rather similar for the entire country.

### **Epistemological approaches to be used**

After identifying the research questions, the researcher needs to identify what type of an epistemological approach to use. Delbert Miller identifies three main types of research studies:<sup>3</sup>

- **Fundamental:** their main role is to contribute to the accumulation of new knowledge and the development of the theoretical framework. Other possible names for these research studies include academic or theoretical research.
- **Applied:** their main role is to analyze social problems and to identify solutions, thus contributing to the decision-making process.
- **Evaluative:** focused on determining the impact of different social programs.

Michael Quinn Patton argues that there are two distinct types of evaluative studies: summative evaluation – it determines the effectiveness of a program, and formative evaluation – used in order to improve a certain program.

The proposed research can be label as evaluative. Summative evaluation does not fit the profile of our research because it is usually conducted at the end of a program or a cycle and it is focused exclusively on outcomes.

Formative evaluation is usually conducted during the implementation stage – it is in other words an intermediary evaluation whose aim is to analyze the situation and to improve the program. Process evaluation fits this description as it focuses on the way in which the program was implemented and on the processes and procedures through which the program functions. In this light our research can be best described as a formative evaluation.

From the standpoint of the main theoretical approach used it seems at a first glance that a positivist approach fits best in this case<sup>4</sup>: the research implies the existence of a reality that can be studied (or at least it can be approximated, which will lead us to post-positivism); also, a variety of methods will be used in order to capture this reality. However, positivism implies a high focus on validity – both internal and external, and quantitative, statistical analysis of gathered data. These two aspects do not fit very well with the proposed research design. The stated research questions can be best answered by means of qualitative research – interview and document analysis.

Michael Quinn Patton argues in favor of a different typology that seem to be more fit to the field of public administration, namely *pragmatism*. This paradigm implies an applied use of qualitative methods. This means that thee researcher asks open questions and observes what she/he is interested in, in real word situations,, in order to solve problems, improve programs, or develop policies<sup>5</sup>.

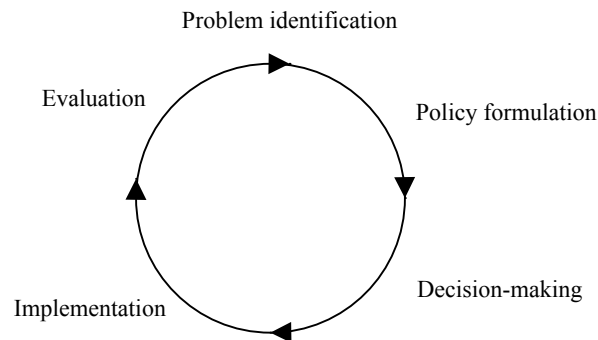
<sup>3</sup> Delbert Miller, *Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement*, Sage Publications, 1991, quoted by Ioan Mărginean, *Proiectarea Cercetării Sociologice*, Polirom, 2000, p. 59

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion by Norman K Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln (ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications, 1994, p. 25-27

<sup>5</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *op cit*, p. 90

## Conceptual framework

In order to build our conceptual framework, we will use/borrow the model called “public policy cycle” which implies several successive stages<sup>6</sup>:



- Problem identification – how a certain issues ends up on the government’s agenda.
- Policy formulation – during this stage several alternatives for a public policy are formulated
- Decision-making – a certain course of action is adopted from among the given alternatives
- Implementation – policies are put into practice
- Evaluation – a stage during which public administration and other actors involved in the process monitor outcomes with the explicit goal of policy reformulation.

The evaluation of the process through which regional policies are implemented is meant to lead us toward the understanding of the internal dynamic of various projects, and of whether or not these projects operate according to the set objectives. This evaluation also aims to identify those aspects that need to be improved.

The proposed research strives to assess the efficiency of regional policies during each stage of the policy cycle with a focus on the interaction among the participating actors – European and national public institutions, regional and local public administration, NGOs, other types of associative organizations for community development.

Based on the stages of the policy cycle the research question was broken into the following components:

1. Who were the forerunners and the supporters of a regional project in Romania? Who opposed it?
2. Which were the objectives set forth in the initial stage? What about later?
3. How did the decision-making process with regard to the final form of the project take place?
4. What type of problems occurred during the implementation stage?
5. Was the proposed measure successful with respect to the set objectives? Which were the main outcomes?
6. Which were the main causes for the success/failure of a given policy/project?

In order to evaluate regional policies and their outcomes a selection of different fields impacted by them needs to be made. The proposed research will take into consideration four main components of regional policies namely human resources, education, infrastructure, and culture. These fields were selected because there have been several regional policies addressing problems and needs in each of the aforementioned field and therefore it is easier to identify observable outcomes.

The measurable indicators to be considered for each of these dimensions include – the mobility of the population within the selected region, human capital, change in the initial professional qualification,

<sup>6</sup> Michael Howlett, M. Ramesh, *Studying Public Policy. Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems*, Oxford University Press, p. 11

facilities for the young labor force and the employees over 40 years old (human resources); financing of education, facilities, salaries, quality monitoring and measurement (education); the extent of the road communication, and public utilities networks (infrastructure), measures aimed toward the protection of local cultures, traditions and the support of minority groups (culture).

Issues related to validity have already been addressed in one of the previous sections of the paper.

### **The population and the sample to be considered during research**

Taking into consideration the existing situation in Romania with regard to regionalism, there are two possibilities for the researcher. The first option is to consider the historical regions while the second option is to consider the economic development regions established in the late 1990s. The first option has the advantage that citizens perceive the historical regions as having more legitimacy while the second option has the advantage that it allows the researcher to identify and assess various regional policies implemented by these regions since their establishment. It has to be said that the economic development regions were created as a form of cooperation among neighboring counties from the same region. Therefore, this type of regions also incorporate at least some of the legitimacy historic regions enjoy. Therefore, the population to be studied by the researcher is represented by the economic development regions. For the proposed study we will focus on one economic development region – the North West region comprising the following counties Cluj, Bihor, Sălaj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Maramureș and Satu-Mare. The study is limited to one region due to financial, access, and time-related constraints.

By choosing this region the impact of regional policies can be measured and it also allows us to build a potential future administrative level provided changes in the current legislative framework are operated.

In the previous section four dimensions of regional policies were identified. They were selected because they represent administrative responsibilities that overlay explicit goals of the European regional policies – alleviating inter and intra regional disparities, social integration, promotion of local values and cultures, infrastructure development, etc.

The research will assess the opinion of the relevant actors involved. In the first stage local and regional public institutions and NGOs are taken into consideration. Since the exact nature and characteristics of the studied population are not known, random sampling is not possible. Most likely, the sample won't be representative. For the time being the researcher's concerns are more along the lines of identifying all the categories of relevant actors and establishing contacts with them. Issues related to the lack of a representative sample will be addressed under the limitations of this study section.

There is another type of sampling that could be used in order to reach the study's objective namely *purposeful sampling*<sup>7</sup>. This means that the researcher will select the cases that are able to offer him/her the most important and valuable information needed. In this context the question that can be raised refers to how the most purposeful cases are going to be selected. The sampling will imply two stages: first, we will select the projects to be considered and then the actors involved in the cycle of regional policies. Taking into consideration that the process of regional policies implementation is rather a typical one, the extreme cases will be selected - *extreme or deviant case sampling* – the best and the worst projects based on the input from key actors involved in the regional policy cycle. Within each project another sampling strategy will be used - *typical case sampling* - the most important representatives of the actors involved will be therefore identified.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *op cit*, p. 169

Possible threats with regard to validity stem from the selection of projects based on inaccurate information from key actors – it is possible that the actors won't identify the most relevant projects. With regard to the selection of actors it is possible that the formal actors not the informal ones will be identified as relevant.

Fidelity is not an issue considering that a semi-structured interview guide will be used.

Access to the needed information and to the relevant actors is not a concern in this stage.

### **References**

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