

Article

The Role of Territorial Cohesion and Administrative Organization in Regional Sustainability: The Case of Romania

Radu Săgeată ¹  and Remus Crețan ^{2,*} ¹ Institute of Geography, Romanian Academy, 023993 Bucharest, Romania; rsageata@gmail.com² Department of Geography, West University of Timisoara, 300223 Timisoara, Romania

* Correspondence: remus.cretan@e-uvt.ro

Abstract

Recent studies have indicated that territorial cohesion represents a fundamental variable for the viable functioning of a state. Territorial cohesion is the result of the interaction between two categories of forces: centripetal, which tends to maintain its cohesion, and centrifugal, which tends to break it up. These forces are the combined result of several categories of factors (ethnic, historical and geopolitical, demographic, and social-economic) which characterize each state and territory. The degree of accessibility is a composite indicator that accumulates the influence of natural and economic-social factors through the degree of development of the communications infrastructure on territorial cohesion. Accessibility is of crucial importance, especially in the case of relatively ethnically homogeneous states. Our study analyzes these aspects of territorial cohesion and administrative organization in the case of Romania, a state located in a European region of geopolitical interference and instability. By using a methodology on the critical analysis of data, documents, and bibliographic sources in Romania, the results of our study indicate changes in the relations between cities and subordinate human settlements that occurred in the last five decades, as well as the lack of financial viability of many administrative-territorial units. The conclusions of our research propose a broad rethinking of the administrative-territorial organization in this country, based mainly on better functionality and territorial cohesion.

Keywords: territorial cohesion; administrative organization; functionality; Romania

Academic Editors: Jianming Cai and Michael L. Lahr

Received: 3 September 2025

Revised: 20 September 2025

Accepted: 9 October 2025

Published: 11 October 2025

Citation: Săgeată, R.; Crețan, R. The Role of Territorial Cohesion and Administrative Organization in Regional Sustainability: The Case of Romania. *Sustainability* **2025**, *17*, 9006. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17209006>

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1. Introduction: Territorial Cohesion Placed In-Between Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces

Territorial cohesion is an essential element for the security and stability of a state, being the consequence of several categories of factors: natural, ethnic, historical, and economic. These determine two categories of opposing forces: centripetal forces, conferred by natural and ethnic homogeneity and by the appropriate development of economic and communication infrastructures and centrifugal forces generated by the separatist tendencies of ethnic-religious minorities in the conditions of weak control of the national territory exercised by the central authorities [1–3]. The communications infrastructure, a consequence of the arrangement of the natural framework and of the economic and social development, plays a decisive role in mitigating or, as the case may be, in aggravating centrifugal forces, especially in peripheral areas and/or with minority communities of the state territory [4].

The position of the capital city and the urban cores that structure the state territory [5], the relations between them, and their degree of subordination on hierarchical levels and

to the capital, ensure the viability of centripetal forces and, implicitly, the coherence and functionality of the state's territorial system. Where disturbances occur at the level of these relations, against the background of deficient communication systems, important minority communities, and a different level of economic and social development of a given territory, centrifugal forces exceed centripetal forces in intensity and generate secessionist tendencies that often lead to the fragmentation of the state territory.

The dissolution of the great multinational empires of antiquity and the medieval period, formed through successive territorial conquests and based on central authorities often distant from peripheral regions, was precisely due to the vulnerability of these regions in the context of difficult communication infrastructures. By contrast, the viability over the centuries of some of the great civilizations of humanity (Egyptian, Chinese, and Indian) was due to the hydrographic arteries that ensured their communication and implicit cohesion in the context of relative ethnic homogeneity [6,7].

The post-war period attracted the process of decolonization as a reflex of the European metropolises' concentration of efforts on their own recovery. The fragmentation of colonial domains in Africa and Asia amid local aspirations for sovereignty opened the way for the emergence of new states but also new foci of conflict, because most of these states are multiethnic and multi-confessional, characterized by strong internal centrifugal forces. The fragmentation of British India in 1947 on predominantly religious criteria, then of Pakistan in 1971 due to territorial discontinuity and the different degree of economic and social development between the West and the East, and, more recently, the fragmentation of Sudan in 2011 due to the two communities (Arab-Islamic in the north and Negroid-Christian/animist in the south) and the poor communications infrastructure due to the desert and marshy terrain [4], are just a few conclusive examples in this regard. The situation is similar in the case of fragmented island states, which are faced with secessionist tendencies of minority communities in peripheral areas against the background of the weakening of central authority as a result of poor communication systems.

The European continent, characterized by states with a long history, mostly constituted on national support, has not escaped such tensions either. The accentuation of centrifugal tendencies between the Flemish and Walloons in the post-war period led to the federalization of Belgium and outlined the character of the "European identity" of Brussels, the secessionist tendencies of Catalonia, the Basque Country and Ulster on identity grounds but also peripherally [8], to which, in the early 1990s, the fragmentation of the former multinational federations in the ex-communist space (the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia) was added as a result of the disappearance of political-ideological constraints, complete with the examples of territorial fragmentation on an ethnic-cultural basis.

Starting from this theoretical support, the paper aims to analyze the characteristics of the territory based on the relationship between the axes that lead to its structuring through centripetal forces and the faults that determine the contouring of large regional ensembles based on centrifugal forces, as well as the role of communication networks in managing these forces. Selecting Romania is of utmost importance and topicality in the current international and regional geopolitical circumstances, because Romania is marked by hybrid attacks on the security and sovereignty of some states, as well as by trends regarding the reconfiguration of the geopolitical areas of influence. Romania's regional importance also derives from its geostrategic position, at the extreme eastern flank of NATO, in the proximity of an active conflict (in Ukraine) and between two frozen conflict hotbeds (that of Transnistria and that of the Western Balkans). Romania appears, in this context, as an island of regional stability, a "security exporter", and the eventual destabilization of this state would have major consequences at the regional and European level.

In this research process, a determining role is played by the individualization and analysis of regional and local polarization nuclei and the relationships between them and neighboring human settlements in relation to the causes that generated and influenced them over time. The importance of communications infrastructure in weighing these relationships will also be taken into account, since time has become an essential element that tends to attenuate the importance of distances in configuring urban influence areas under the conditions of modern communication systems.

As the process of territorial regionalization of Romania is not new, the territorial divisions made over time being made in relation to different criteria and in different political–ideological contexts, it was considered useful to present them highlighting the viability of the criteria and regionalization logic in relation to regional and local particularities.

The proposal to optimize the administrative–territorial organization in this work aims to increase the degree of functionality and territorial cohesion of regional territorial units, therefore increasing their regional sustainability.

The first part of this paper details the historical and geopolitical context in which the administrative–territorial organization of Romania has evolved over the last century. It also highlights the particularities of this country and the models of good practices that can be taken over for future administrative–territorial reorganization. Next, we present the chronology of the main bibliographical references that contribute to the scientific substantiation of territorial functionality and the basic elements of the proposed administrative organization. The chapter devoted to the results and discussions starts from presenting the current economic–social context, and the configuration of the road network that ensures the basis of functionality through the mobility of human and material flows. It also presents the methodology, criteria, and territorial configuration of the proposed administrative organization, as well as the conclusions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Territorial Polarization and Cohesion

The changes in the organization of the territory that arise from the dynamics of urban spaces have been the subject of systematic research since the first half of the 20th century when transatlantic migration flows developed the first megalopolises in the United States. In this context, the studies of the Chicago school [9–11] on the expansion of American cities through the phenomena of metropolitanization and ruralization remain. Also in the same period, the first systematic studies on territorial cohesion and urban–rural relations in Romania during the interwar period appeared in Romanian geography [12–14].

After World War II, the studies of the French geographical school on cities as a factor of territorial polarization were imposed [15–18] but also other studies that contributed to improving the theoretical–methodological framework regarding the relations between cities and areas of influence on the territorial cohesion of polarized spaces [16–24]. In the Romanian geographical school, the studies of [25], one of the first monographic syntheses on cities in Romania and their influence on the territory, and [26], regarding the organization of the peri-urban area of Bucharest, were imposed at that time. Reference [27] carried out the first regional analysis of the territory of Romania on the relations between cities and their areas of influence, freed from the ideological constraints characteristic of the states of the former Communist Bloc. The 1980s–1990s marked a shift towards quantitative approaches through the introduction of mathematical models of territorial analysis [28–32].

The second major political–ideological discordance of the 20th century, which was due to the bankruptcy of communist ideology, was reflected in a considerable increase in the range of approaches in the field of urban geography and territorial planning. Urbanization and, in particular, the dynamics of the urban–rural interface have been both

analyzed through the prisms of ex-urbanization [33,34] and peri-urbanization [35,36], urban morphology [37,38], the socio-cultural segregation of urban and peri-urban spaces [39,40], physiognomy [41,42], the degree of integration [43], and the improvement of the theoretical-methodological framework [44–49].

Studies from the Central and Eastern European space were thus leaving the paradigm of ideological approaches and increasingly joining the circuit of global epistemological concerns. In this context, the Romanian urban system began to be analyzed from a functional perspective on the dynamics of relations between cities but also between them and subordinate settlements (urban and rural) [50–52] and on the degree of connectivity [53–56], industrial dynamics and unemployment [57–63], the image and segregation of urban and peri-urban space as a result of the change in the socio-cultural context [64–68], the quality of urban life, as a factor of functionality and social cohesion [69–71], and the peripheralization of smart city projects [72].

On the other hand, there are some extensive studies on the role of human settlements and their territorial dynamics in Romania [73–75], on the structure and evolution of Romania's large regional ensembles [76,77], on the disparities and regional development at the national level [78–86], and case studies at the regional level [87,88].

2.2. Functionality, Polarization, and Territorial Cohesion in Romania

Territorial functionality represents the capacity of territorial entities to function. This implies complexity, namely, the existence of several parts that interact with each other in several ways and that ensure the whole's capacity to function. Simion Mehedinți spoke in this sense of “integral complexity”, which implies complex relationships between components and systemic functioning [89,90]. In turn, Vintilă Mihăilescu, one of the great promoters of the geographical region as an object of geographical research, laid the foundation for methodological research on the delimitation of regional complexes and the processes of dissociation and integration [91].

The geographical region, from its point of view, is the result of great complexity and of the progressive integration of geographical spheres, with a certain mass and a certain extension of geographical phenomena, including those related to anthropogenic activities with one or more polarizing nuclei [92,93].

On these epistemological bases, the concept of territorial cohesion was developed as a strategic objective for territorial development policies and which, in its current meaning, involves the harmonious development of the territory; capitalization of territorial potential elements; elaboration of economic and social development policies in relation to the characteristics of the territory, and, respectively, the orientation of public actions around three essential principles: concentration—overcoming density differences; connecting territories—overcoming the distance factor, and, respectively, cooperation—overcoming the division factor [94].

Territorial cohesion promotes a balanced and harmonious territorial development between and within countries, regions, cities, and municipalities and ensures a future for all places and people in Europe based on the diversity of places and subsidiarity [95].

The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [96] is defined in art. 174 as an objective of the EU “to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion, for harmonious overall development”. Territorial cohesion aims, in particular, to reduce development disparities between the different European regions, with a focus on the least developed regions, ensuring the harmonious development of all European regions. The economic and social importance of a territory in a globalized world firstly derives from the relational capacity of its components, then from the physical and geographical support that ensures the production of goods [97].

The Green Carta on Territorial Cohesion [98] highlights, on the one hand, the importance of competitiveness and integration of the different European regions into the world economy, and on the other hand, it considers the flows of technology, ideas, information, goods, services, and capital as factors that guarantee the long-term sustainable growth of the EU. From this point of view, prosperity depends directly proportionally on territorial competitiveness and cooperation and, respectively, on the capacity of endogenous people and companies to use territorial assets as efficiently as possible and, respectively, on the capacity to generate links with other territories, so that territorial assets are used in the most rational, coordinated, and sustainable manner [99].

Subsequent reports and studies on territorial cohesion in the EU increasingly emphasize the importance of harmonious and sustainable polycentric development as an essential element for good territorial cohesion. From this perspective, territorial cohesion is defined as a policy that aims to ensure that people should not feel disadvantaged wherever they live or work in the EU [100]; it reinforces the importance of access to services, sustainable development, “functional geographies”, and territorial analysis, aiming at a more balanced development by reducing existing territorial disparities [98] and by promoting all territories on the basis of their identities and resources [101].

Territoriality—conceived as an interdisciplinary construction (historical, political, geographical, social, cultural, and economic) with institutional recognition that manages and controls defined physical spaces—is therefore the key notion of the set of thematic elements included in the conceptual area of “territorial cohesion” [101,102]. In this sense, since the mid-20th century, in line with the views expressed by [92,103,104] emphasized the biunivocal interdependence between territory and society (territorial functionality) by the fact that territory projects the control of a social group over a portion of space, generating a series of economic–productive, social, institutional, and cultural relations and interactions (of languages, values, and identities).

Synthesizing from the multitude of definitions, [105] attributes the following characteristics to the concept of territorial cohesion: (1) redistribution: solidarity + aid + incentives for disadvantaged regions; (2) territorial competitiveness; (3) polycentrism: harmonious/balanced development, social factors, and living conditions; (4) territoriality: connectivity, access to services of general economic interest, sustainable development, and vulnerable areas (mountainous regions, islands, peripheral/border areas, sparsely populated regions, rural areas, etc.); (5) institutional aspects: multi-level governance, multi-level institutions, public support policies, intangible aspects (innovation, research and development, European identity, multilingualism, and e-government), respectively; and (6) relational aspects: territorial cooperation (cross-border + transnational), multi-level institutional cooperation, and European integration + regional aspects (trans-EU networks).

Cohesion also implies territorial contiguity. Territorial structures formed by territorial units located at great distances from each other, or even lacking a neighborhood, cannot be cohesive. The historical experience of fragmented state formations, formed either on cultural–religious criteria (East Pakistan, 1955–1971) or ethnic (South African Bantustans, 1976–1990) that have disintegrated or secessionist tendencies in the marginal areas of fragmented island states (Indonesia, Philippines, and Solomon Islands) where communication is difficult, demonstrate the lack of viability of such territorial formations.

Sustainable development, closely linked to the concept of territoriality, is an organizing principle that seeks to achieve human development goals while allowing natural ecosystems to provide human communities with the natural resources and services they need [106].

The Brundtland Report [107], which laid the foundations for this concept, defined it as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Definitions of this concept, although they have varied over time, are based on the idea that sustainability represents the long-term viability of a community and a set of social institutions or social practices [108]. Sustainability represents an alternative to short-term, wasteful, and selfish behaviors, an alternative that can serve as a standard by which existing institutions should be judged and as a goal towards which human communities should move [109].

Based on these theoretical considerations, we believe that any territorial division must be based on the concepts of functionality, through internal cohesion and interdependence with neighboring territorial units, and sustainability, by ensuring the conditions for viable development based on the principles of sustainability.

3. Methodology

The methodological approach of this study is based on the analysis of the historical and geopolitical context of the evolution of the administrative–territorial organization of Romania, the one-to-one relationships between territorial structures, and the dynamics of regional human settlement systems as a result of urbanization and industrialization. Both bibliographical resources and official statistical data on urban dynamics and changes in the number and status of territorial units in Romania were used.

The territorial modeling in order to achieve a new administrative–territorial division based on the relationships between urban nuclei and subordinate settlements was carried out and computerized, based on the degree of road accessibility. The demographic and socio-economic potential of the potential centers capable of being invested in administrative function, their historical antecedents, and the development potential were also taken into account.

The methodology of the proposed regional division is based on the analysis of three categories of elements: demographic, economic–social, and position. Based on the demographic and economic–social background, but also on historical antecedents, potential administrative centers were identified on hierarchical levels of territorial structuring (regional, county, and local). On the other hand, based on the position of the road communication infrastructure, their polarization areas were identified, respectively, and the configuration of the proposed territorial administrative units on the administrative hierarchy levels were determined. Subordination relations between human settlements determine administrative integration relations within the same territorial unit, and relations of competition and indifference determine administrative fragmentation and delimitation of territorial units due to polarization by subordination relations.

4. Administrative–Territorial Regionalization of Romania in the Geopolitical Context of the Last Century (1925–2025)

Romania became a unitary national state as a result of the geopolitical situation at the end of World War I, marked by the dissolution of the multinational empires in Europe (Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman) and the establishment of national states. Under these conditions, in 1918, the union of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania with the Kingdom of Romania (which itself had been formed in 1859 by the unification of Wallachia and Oltenia with Moldova) took place. In 1877, amid the Russo-Turkish War, the Kingdom of Romania officially proclaimed its independence from the Ottoman Empire and united with Dobrogea (a union ratified by the Treaty of Berlin—1878), losing in return to Russia three counties in southern Bessarabia (Cahul, Bolgrad, and Ismail), currently located in the territories of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Under these conditions, the unification of 1918 associated four administrative regimes which evolved under the imperative of different political and economic systems and circumstances: the administrative regime of the Old Kingdom of Romania (which included Moldova, Dobrogea, Muntenia, and Oltenia), whose territorial base was the counties; the

administrative regime of Bessarabia, which inherited the old Russian governorates; the administrative regime of Bukovina, which perpetuated the former districts of Austrian Bukovina, transformed into counties much smaller in area and population; and the administrative regime of Transylvania, which inherited the old counties established by the Hungarian administrations. These divisions induced pronounced imbalances throughout the territory, both in terms of territorial and demographic size, as well as in terms of the shape, position of the residences within the county, or the degree of accessibility. Thus arose the need for the standardization of territorial-administrative structures throughout the national territory, which became effective through the Law for Administrative Unification of 1925 (entered into force on 1 January 1926).

The Commission for the Administrative–Territorial Regionalization of Romania that worked on the drafting of this law was led by academician Simion Mehedinți, the founder of modern Romanian geography; this commission also included geographers Vintilă Mihăilescu and Vasile Meruțiu. The proposal for the first administrative–territorial division of United Romania (1920), which was the basis of the administrative reform of 1925, aimed at organizing this country into 48 counties merged into nine regions, whose boundaries largely overlapped the Carpathian orogen, the old border of Transylvania, and the Danube line was intended to become, from a border, a polarizing element of human activities. The delimitation of the regions combined, for the first time in the administrative–territorial history of Romania, the physical–geographical criterion with the historical and functional one, which was a regionalization criteria that would be developed later by the successors of the geographical school created by S. Mehedinți. Thus, “Țara de Sus” and “Țara de Jos” had antecedents in the medieval organization of Moldova, while the regions that bore the names of hydrographic arteries (Siret, Someș—Tisa, Mureș—Oltul Superior, Oltul Inferior, Timiș, Dâmbovița, or Danube de Jos) based their functionality on the axes of circulation and the polarization of human flows (Figure 1).

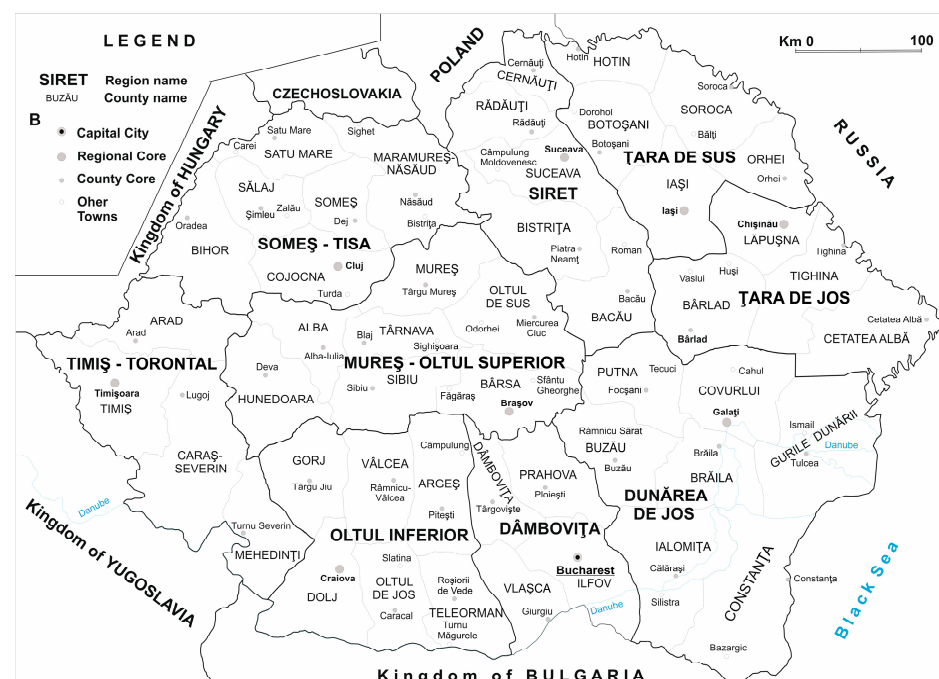


Figure 1. The first administrative division of Romania proposed by the commission coordinated by Simion Mehedinti (1920) (Source: [110]).

Given the configuration of the political scene in Romania during the interwar period, dominated by the struggle for governance of two major parties (National Peasant, which

supported “unity in diversity” by creating regional-level units, and National Liberal, which considered that these would harm national unity and interests), the region as a territorial-administrative structure only had an ephemeral presence between 1929 and 1931 (in the form of seven ministerial directorates) and between 1938 and 1940 (in the form of 10 counties) (Figure 2a,b).

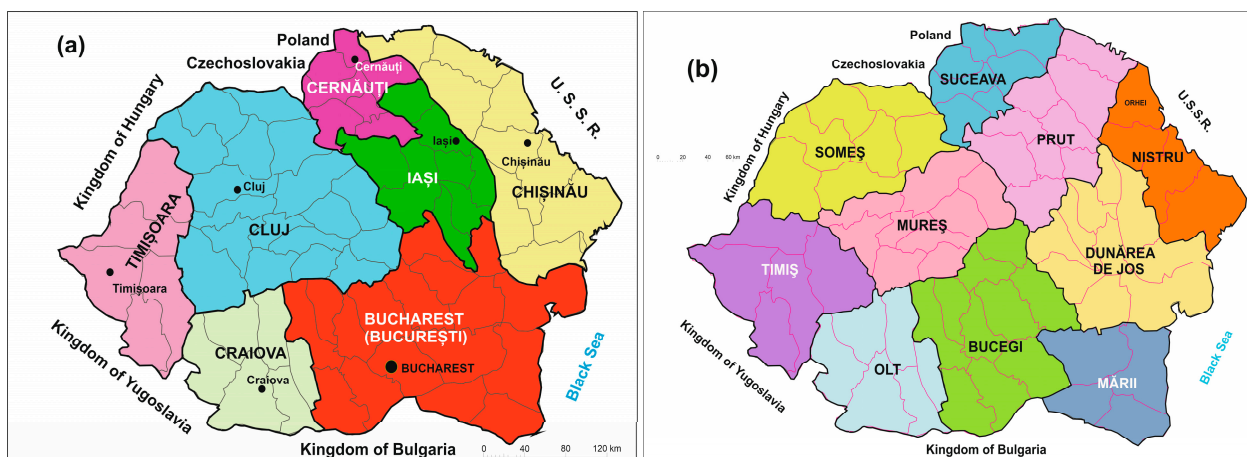


Figure 2. (a,b) Composition of ministerial directorates (a) and regions [ținuturi] (b).

Ministerial directorates, which operated during the period of the governments led by the National Peasant Party, supported their configuration both on historical regions, structured over time as mental spaces and identity reporting, and on traditional relations established at the level of regional urban systems. However, the rationale for mitigating the centrifugal forces generated by ethnic minorities in the conditions of a recently formed state at that time imposed a modification of the configuration of historical regions so that the ethnic structure of each directorate would be predominantly Romanian. For example, the association of Bukovina, in which the share of Romanians was only 44.5% of the total population, with the counties of Dorohoi and Baia in Moldova led to a territorial structure with a large Romanian majority; the same is for the case of Dobrogea through its merger with the counties of Muntenia and two counties in southern Moldova (Covurlui and Putna) (Figure 2a).

The delimitation of the regions, which functioned at the end of the reign of King Carol II (1930–1940), started from the premise that they had to constitute well defined geographical and economic entities intended to bring together the twinned inhabitants of the new Romania according to their real needs, according to their natural geographical location, according to the communication routes, and according to the common nature of economic life and the resources they have [111]. However, the boundaries of some regions were questionable even in the economic and social conditions of the time, overlapping areas of maximum demographic concentration and disrupting systems of human settlements established over time in response to objective, environmental factors (for example, the border between the Mureș and Someș counties, the border between the Prut and Lower Danube, Prut and Nistru counties, or the border dividing Dobrogea, and between the Tulcea and Constanța counties) (Figure 2b). The declared goals of the establishment of the counties referred to the better management of local communities and the decentralization of state services by taking over some responsibilities by local governors. The counties were abolished as a result of the territorial losses suffered by Romania in 1940 in the geopolitical context of the Second World War. The political-ideological discontinuity that began with Romania’s entry into the orbit of Soviet influence at the end of the Second World War would only materialize at the level of administrative-territorial structures in 1950 through

an organization completely different from the previous one, which copied the Soviet regional model.

Romania was thus organized into 28 regions delimited according to the criterion of socio-economic complexity and not according to the traditional one of geographical and historical specificity, as in 1929 [112]. The creation of regions similar to the Soviet oblasts, with areas double that of the abolished counties, was based on the rationale of subordinating agricultural regions to large urban centers through the creation of integrated agro-industrial complexes with the aim of strengthening the influence of the proletariat on the peasantry, who were perceived as being more reluctant to the “reforms” imposed by the communist political class. This regionalization, which copied a model foreign to the traditions and particularities of the Romanian space, soon proved to be unviable and underwent repeated modifications (in 1952, 1956, and 1960), the number of regions being successively reduced, first to 18 then to 16 (Figure 3a–c).

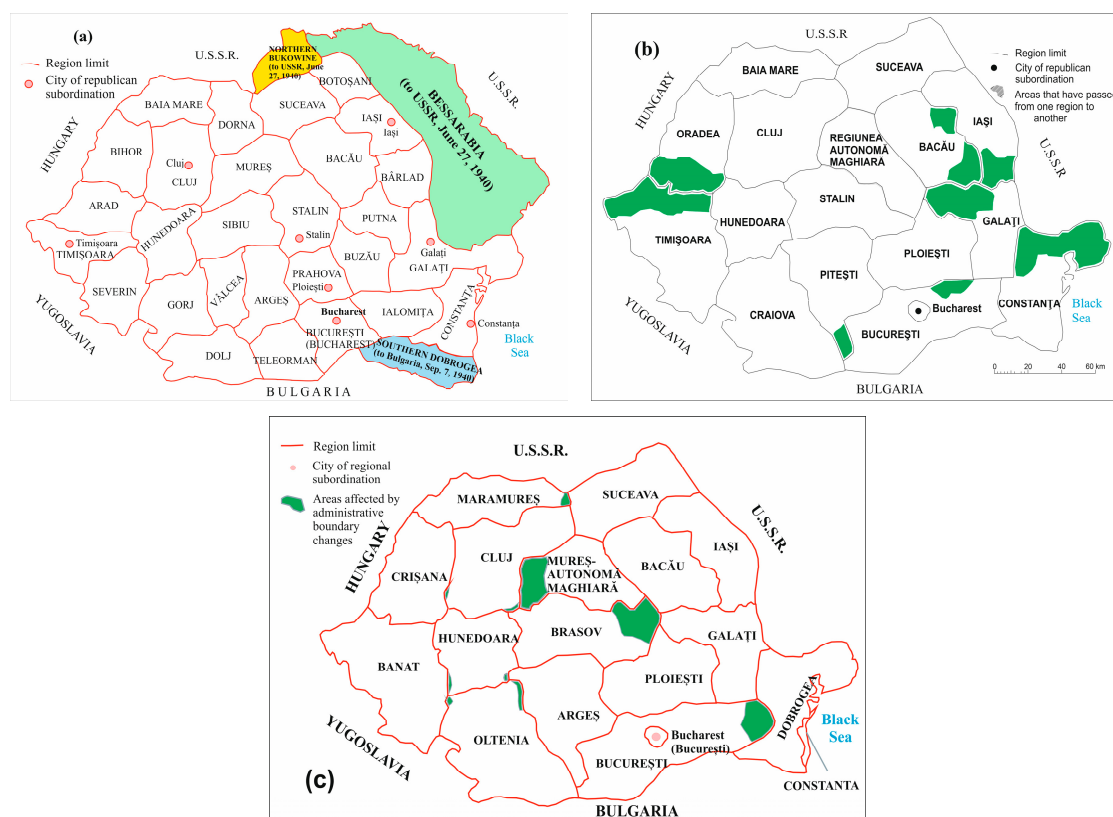


Figure 3. (a–c). Evolution of Soviet-inspired administrative regions (1950–1968). (a). From 1950 to 1952 (territorial losses from 1940 are highlighted). (b). From 1952 to 1960 (territorial changes from 1956 are highlighted). (c). From 1960 to 1968 (territorial changes from 1960 are highlighted).

The death of I.V. Stalin (5 March 1953), followed by the “secret speech” of N. Khrushchev (at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 25 February 1956), his successor at the helm of the CPSU, which denounced the Stalinist purges and opened a period of weakening of the repressive system in the former USSR, was also reflected in an instability of the political systems in the former Communist Bloc. The socio-political crisis in the former German Democratic Republic (June 1953) followed by the “Hungarian Revolution” in the fall of 1956 were the main events that marked this period. In this context, the withdrawal of the Red Army troops from Romania took place in 1958, an event followed by a relative distancing of Bucharest’s policy from Moscow and its reorientation towards national values.

At the level of administrative–territorial structures, this policy was first reflected (1960) by replacing Soviet-inspired names or those that copied the name of the city of residence with names of historical Romanian regions (Figure 3a,b) and later (in 1968) by a new administrative–territorial division in which the Soviet-inspired regions were replaced with 39 counties as traditional, Romanian administrative structures. In 1981, a readjustment of the administrative–territorial structures took place in the peri-urban area of Bucharest, with the number of counties increasing to 40, and by transforming the Ilfov Agricultural Sector into a county (in 1997), their number reached 41.

In delimiting the counties, the criterion of territorial functionality given by economic potential was applied, incorporating different relief units with varied potential which generate economic complementarity [113].

The second major political–ideological discontinuity, determined by the removal of the communist system (1989), caught Romania in this administrative–territorial division, in which the relations between cities changed considerably against the background of oversized, but often differentiated, industrialization and urbanization. Thus, investments in industry were directed mainly towards the county capital cities, especially towards the smaller cities (Vaslui, Slatina, Zalău, Miercurea Ciuc, Târgoviște, Alexandria, Slobozia, Călărași, etc.), in order to justify their status as administrative capitals. This type of industrialization determined strong migratory flows from the countryside and a rapid development of the built stock, which led to dysfunctions at the infrastructure level. This is the main reason why the destructuring of inter-industrial relations that accompanied the transition from a centralized economy to one based on free competition affected this category of cities the most.

5. Results and Discussions

5.1. Background

The process of the deindustrialization of Romania, which began in 1990, affected the relations between cities and, implicitly, the functionality of the territorial structures at the county and municipal level (NUTS-3 and NUTS-5). That is why the issue of their readjustment was raised. The first attempts were based on the re-establishment of the counties that functioned in the interwar period and were no longer found on the administrative map of 1968 and were considered “abusively abolished” by the communist political regime [114,115]. This would have had the effect of increasing the degree of administrative fragmentation by multiplying the number of counties, contrary to the trend of regional integration manifested at European level [8].

Romania’s application for membership in the European Union in 1995 changed this ideological trend by requiring the implementation of a regional level corresponding to NUTS-2 in Romania, which became effective through the establishment of eight development regions [116], legislated in 1998 [117]. The issue of regional-level territorial structures returned to the attention of the Romanian political class in 2012–2013 due to the need for better decentralization of administrative services and a more efficient use of European funds allocated to regional development.

In this context, several regional divisions have been developed based on territorial cohesion based either on historical regions [118–121], on reasons of economic complementarity [122], or on the transformation of development regions into counties (proposal of the Liberal Democratic Party) [123].

In this context, since 2000, we have launched, as an alternative to these models, a proposal to optimize the administrative–territorial organization of Romania based on the functional relationships established within the regional systems of human settlements, which was

subsequently developed and periodically updated, depending on the changes in polarization flows, as a result of the development of the communications infrastructure [124–127].

The changes that have occurred in the last decade due to deindustrialization [128], depopulation [129,130], and the development of road communication infrastructures make it necessary to update this model for optimizing the administrative–territorial division of Romania, a country that has perpetuated the current counties since 1968, with these being created in a political and economic–social context completely different from the current one.

The territorial polarization nuclei and the relations between them represent, in our opinion, the main factors that particularize territorial functionality. Industrialization and urbanization, as a result of political–ideological decisions, and after 1990, deindustrialization and depopulation, have continuously influenced the dynamics of the territorial convergence nuclei and, consequently, the relations between them.

Therefore, a deep analysis of the mutations that have occurred at the level of relations between human settlements, established on hierarchical levels which determine the functionality of the territory and the viability of any administrative–territorial division, is required.

To all these aspects, the natural configuration of the territory that determines the configuration of communication routes and the position of the capital, which, in the context of deficient communications, can individualize peripheral areas in which the control of the central authorities is blurred and centrifugal tendencies appear, is added. The exacerbation of ethnic minority claims against the background of historical antecedents contributes to the intensification of centrifugal forces in these areas. From this point of view, the eccentric position of the Romanian capital in the southeast of the country and the delay in the completion of high-speed road and rail communication arteries to the north and west would require an increase in the polarization potential of regional metropolises located in the central, western, and eastern parts of the national territory. Cluj-Napoca (286,598 inhabitants), Iași (271,692 inhabitants), Constanța (263,707 inhabitants), and Timișoara (250,849 inhabitants) [131] are, due to their geographical position, the most suitable cities from this point of view. These are also the first four cities in terms of demographic size in Romania, excluding the capital. The polarization nuclei outside the territory of Romania with a demographic potential comparable to the capital of Romania (1.83 million inhabitants) are Budapest (1.75 million inhabitants), Belgrade (1.37 million inhabitants), and Sofia (1.23 million inhabitants), but Bucharest’s eccentricity also maximizes Budapest’s geostrategic importance from this point of view.

The road distance of some cities in western Romania, such as Oradea, is double from Bucharest compared to Budapest, and the quality of the transport infrastructure reduces the time traveled to the Hungarian capital by three times. Cluj-Napoca, as a secondary polarization core, is almost four times closer to Oradea than to Bucharest (Table 1).

Table 1. Road distance of some cities in western Romania from the regional polarization nuclei.

City	Polarization Core	Road Distance	The Elapsed Time	Road Category
Oradea	Budapest	312 km	3 h25'	Motorway
	Bucharest	602.6 km	8 h39'	European/National Highway
	Cluj-Napoca	157.5 km	2 h54'	European/National Highway
Baia Mare	Budapest	387.3 km	4 h56'	Motorway
	Bucharest	600.6 km	8 h35'	European/National Highway
	Cluj-Napoca	133.2 km	2 h38'	County Road

Table 1. Cont.

City	Polarization Core	Road Distance	The Elapsed Time	Road Category
Satu Mare	Budapest	327.4 km	4 h01'	Motorway
	Bucharest	634.6 km	8 h55'	European/National Highway
	Cluj-Napoca	183.2 km	3 h08'	European/National Highway
Cluj-Napoca	Budapest	462.4 km	6 h03'	Motorway /European Highway
	Bucharest	456.2 km	6 h43'	European/National Highway
Timișoara	Budapest	316 km	3 h33'	Motorway
	Bucharest	555.3 km	7 h20'	Motorway /European Highway

Source: [132].

In this context, although the motorway and expressway network in Romania has registered a constant development in recent years, its average density per 1000 km² (3.9 km for motorways and 35.8 km for roads) places it in the penultimate place in the EU, well below the average. Thus, to reach the EU-27 average, Romania would need to have 4220 km of motorways (which means an increase of 3290 km) and 241,260 km of modern roads (an increase of 156,000 km) [133]. If, in the 1990s, the length of the motorway network slightly exceeded 100 km on the Bucharest-Pitești section (of A1) and partially Bucharest-Constanța (of A2), in 2024, it reached 1329.7 km open to traffic, to which 724 km are added in execution and 683 km in bidding [134] (Table 2).

Table 2. List of motorway and expressway projects in Romania.

Motorway/Expressway		Route	Length (km)				Connections
			Total	Open	In Execution	Planned	
A0	Centura București [Bucharest Belt]	All around Bucharest	110.7	72.5	28.2	0	-
A1	Bucharest-Nădlac	Bucharest-Pitești-Sibiu-Deva-Timișoara-Arad-Nădlac	578.5	486.4	92.1	0	Hungary
A2	Autostrada Soarelui [The Sun Motorway]	Bucharest-Constanța	202.8	202.8	0	0	-
A3	Autostrada Transilvania [The Transylvania Motorway]	Bucharest-Ploiești-Brașov-Târgu Mureș-Oradea-Borș	442.0	203.4	138.2	100.4	Hungary
A4	By-Pass Constanța	Ovidiu-23 August	52.0	21.8	0	30.2	-
A6	Autostrada Sud [The South Motorway]	Lugoj-Craiova/Calafat-Bucharest	300.0	10.5	0	289.9	Bulgaria
A7	Ploiești-Siret	Ploiești-Buzău-Focșani-Bacău-Pașcani-Suceava-Siret	453.0	119.7	215.5	117.8	Ukraine
A8	Autostrada Unirii [The Union Motorway]	Târgu Mureș-Târgu Neamț-Pașcani-Iași-Ungheni	305.0	0	136.0	169.0	Republic of Moldova
A9	Timișoara-Moravița	Timișoara-Moravița	72.93	0	0	72.93	Serbia
A10	Sebeș-Turda	Sebeș-Turda	70.0	70.0	0	0	A1-A3
A13	Sibiu-Bacău	Sibiu-Brașov-Bacău	300.0	0	68.0	232.0	

Table 2. *Cont.*

Motorway/Expressway		Route	Length (km)				Connections
			Total	Open	In Execution	Planned	
A14	Autostrada Nordului [The North Motorway]	Oar-Satu Mare-Baia Mare-Dej-Bistrița-Vatra Dornei-Suceava	335.0	0	0	335.0	Hungary
DEx4	Turda-Dej	Turda-Dej	70.0	5.0	0	65.0	
DEx 5A	Bacău-Piatra Neamț	Bacău-Piatra Neamț	51.0	0	0	51.0	
DEx6	Focșani-Brăila-Galați	Focșani-Brăila-Galați	85.81	0	12.3	73.51	Brăila Bridge
DEx12	Craiova-Pitești	Craiova-Slatina-Pitești	121.18	121.18	0	0	
DEx16	Arad-Oradea	Arad-Oradea-A3	136.97	16.5	33.7	86.77	A1–A3

Source: [134].

Based on the degree of accessibility as a fundamental element that conditions territorial dynamics, we proposed a regionalization model based on polarization nuclei hierarchically categorized (regional, departmental/county, and sub-departmental) and on the relationships established between them and subordinate (urban and rural) settlements.

5.2. Proposed Regionalization Methodology

The first step in establishing cohesive and functional territorial structures was the individualization of the convergence nuclei towards which subordinate human settlements gravitate. For the regional level, the 16 former regional capitals (which operated between 1956 and 1968) (Figure 3b,c) and the 0th and 1st rank municipalities provided for as such by law (12 cities) [135].

On this basis, 17 cities with macro-territorial functions were selected for analysis: Bacău, Brașov, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Craiova, Constanța, Galați, Iași, Oradea, Ploiești, Timișoara (which simultaneously meet both conditions), Baia Mare, Deva, Suceava, Târgu Mureș, and Brăila, respectively. The polarization potential of the Romanian capital eliminates the cities of Ploiești and Pitești, located near it, from the analysis; that of the municipality of Cluj-Napoca eliminates the regional convergence nuclei subordinated to it (Deva, Târgu Mureș, and Oradea), and that of the municipality of Iași excludes Bacău. To these Brăila is added, which, together with Galați, forms a bipolar conurbation, with both cities acting in the territory as a unitary polarization nucleus. Therefore, 10 cities with macro-territorial polarization functions (regional metropolises) remain: Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Constanța, Craiova, Brașov, Iași, Galați, Baia Mare, and Suceava, on the basis of which territorial structures at the regional level (NUTS-2) can be established.

Relations of hierarchical subordination and cooperation determine territorial structures of an integrative type, while those of indirect competition and indifference induce the fragmentation of territorial structures of the same rank. To these, relations of direct competition, which are often transformed at the macro-territorial level into relations of cooperation due to the peripheral position of some nuclei of polarization (the case of the municipality of Iași, which amplifies the importance of Bacău, and of the municipalities of Satu Mare, Botoșani, Arad, Oradea, Sibiu, or Brăila) (Figure 4), are added. At the micro-territorial level, direct competition generates faults and the delimitation of territorial structures of a lower level and of a departmental (county) type.

The local level is represented by sub-departmental territorial structures (NUTS-4) generally centered on rank III cities, some former county seats in the interwar period

(Figure 2), and on communal-level territorial structures (NUTS-5), which correspond to urban and rural administrative territories.

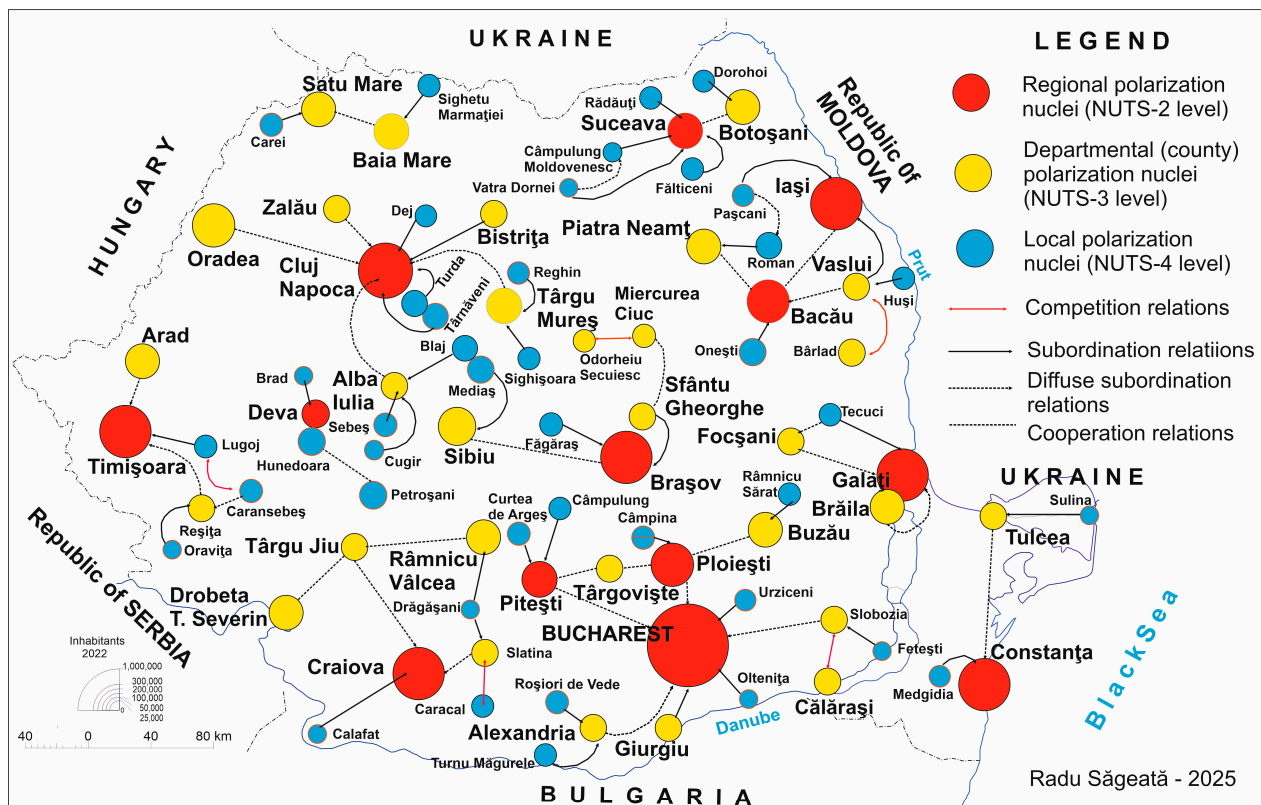


Figure 4. Polarization nuclei and relationships in the Romanian urban system.

The integration and fragmentation of the local level resulted from the calculation of road distances from local convergence centers to the city invested with administrative status to which they are subordinated. For example, if municipal residence A is located n km from a polarizing nucleus X and $n + 1$ km from another polarizing nucleus Y, it will be integrated into the administrative structure S1 polarized by the nucleus X, unlike another municipal residence B, located $n + 1$ km from the nucleus X and n km from the nucleus Y, which will be integrated into the administrative structure S2 polarized by the nucleus Y. Based on this logic, 10 territorial structures at the regional level (NUTS-2) were individualized, organized in turn into 42 structures at the departmental level (counties) (NUTS-3), 85 at the sub-departmental level (NUTS-4), and 3281 structures at the communal level (NUTS-5) (cities and communes) (Figure 5).

5.3. Regional Analysis of Cores and Flows

The 10 territorial structures at the regional level, delimited based on the polarization areas of the regional convergence nuclei and the flows between them, were named in relation to the specificity of the historical provinces in which they are integrated, as follows:

I. Banat: The region exceeds the space of Banat proper, being polarized by Timișoara as the main nucleus and by Arad as a secondary nucleus, subordinate to Timișoara. The Deva-Hunedoara interurban area, as well as the space of the mountain Banat polarized by Reșița, gravitates, through its economic specificity (mining and metallurgy), also towards Timișoara. The emphasis on competition between Reșița, with a declining industry, and Caransebeș, with a much more favorable position potential (railway and air hub), generates the fragmentation of this space into territorial units at the sub-departmental level.



Figure 5. Proposed regional division.

II. Bucovina (Northern Moldavia): It also goes beyond the historical Bucovina area, being focused on the Suceava-Botoșani cooperation axis. The potential of its position (centrality, location on the Siret road, and railway axis and customs connections with Ukraine and the airport) imposes Suceava as the main nucleus of polarization. The former county residences (Câmpulung Moldovenesc, Fălticeni, Rădăuți, and Dorohoi), located on a hierarchical level subordinate to the current administrative centers, determine the fragmentation of this space into sub-departmental territorial structures.

III. Dobrogea: It is polarized by Constanța and to the north by Tulcea, a city located on a hierarchically subordinate level. The polarization area of the Tulcea municipality overlaps the Măcin Mountains, the Babadag and Casimca plateaus, and the Tulcea Hills, while the deltaic space was individualized due to its distinct natural and socio-economic particularities as a sub-departmental unit. The south of the region is clearly polarized by Constanța either directly or through centers subordinated to it (Mangalia, Medgidia, and Năvodari).

IV. Lower Danube: The individualization of this regional structure was based on the bipolar conurbation Galați-Brăila and the subordination to it of the municipality of Focșani (polarizing center for the Vrancean space). This region includes southern Moldova and the Brăila Plain, being centered on the triple hydrographic convergence axis Danube-Siret-Prut and on the cross-border connections with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (Giurgiulești-Reni).

V. Maramureș: Located in the northwest of the country, the region exceeds the space of historical Maramureș (Depr. Maramureș), being focused on the cooperation between Baia Mare and Satu Mare. The centrality of the city of Baia Mare imposes it as the main polarizing nucleus, and the competition between the two cities determines the fragmentation of the entire space into two county-level structures, fragmented in turn into historical Maramureș polarized by Sighetu Marmăției and the southwestern, peripheral space polarized by Carei.

VI. Moldavia: Corresponds to the central-Moldovan space, polarized by Iași as the main nucleus and by Bacău as the secondary nucleus. The cities of Roman, Piatra Neamț, Vaslui, and Bârlad are located on a lower hierarchical level polarized by Iași, followed by

a third level of polarization, centered on Pașcani, Huși, and Onești. All of this induces fragmentation at the lower hierarchical levels, with the entire regional structure being made up of six departmental and nine sub-departmental units.

VII. Muntenia: Large-scale regional structure corresponding to the area of diffuse polarization of the capital. Bucharest is the main polarization nucleus, strongly hypertrophied, to which current administrative centers located on a lower rank are subordinated: Pitești, Târgoviște, Ploiești, Buzău, Slobozia, and Alexandria. On a third hierarchical level are Câmpulung, Curtea de Argeș, Câmpina, Râmnicu Sărat, Călărași, and Turnu Măgurele and Roșiori de Vede, cities that induce fragmentation at the departmental level. Within it, the Bucharest Metropolitan Area is detached, which corresponds to the area of direct influence of the Capital.

VIII. Oltenia: It is among the most homogeneous and cohesive regional structures. It is polarized by Craiova, the other county capitals (Târgu Jiu, Râmnicu Vâlcea, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, and Slatina), being located on a lower hierarchical level subordinate to Craiova. Within it, two sub-departmental polarization centers have been individualized: Caracal and Drăgășani.

IX. Transylvania: It is the second large-scale regional structure, polarized by Cluj-Napoca, a city with a particularly favorable position potential (territorial centrality, road, rail, and air hub). The eccentric position of Oradea, but also the dynamism of this urban center, transforms it into a secondary polarization nucleus. The axes on which the functionality of this potential regional structure is supported are given by the subordination to Cluj-Napoca of the current county capitals: Oradea, Târgu Mureș, Alba Iulia, Zalău, and Bistrița. The polarization areas of these cities induce territorial structures at the departmental level and those subordinate to them (Sighișoara, Reghin, Târnăveni, Sebeș, Cugir, Dej, and Gherla), with polarizing functions at the local level generating sub-departmental level structures.

X. Southern Transylvania: Polarized by Brașov and Sibiu, respectively, as a secondary polarization core, this regional structure bases its functionality on two axes converging in Brașov: Brașov–Sibiu and Brașov–Sfântu Gheorghe–Miercurea Ciuc, respectively. The first overlaps the depressional area Bârsa–Făgăraș and the second the depressional groove Bârsa–Ciuc–Giurgeu, along which road and railway axes are inscribed. Odorheiu Secuiesc and Făgăraș are local polarization cores that generate sub-departmental territorial structures. Ethnic diversity through the presence of communities with old traditions (Hungarians in the Giurgeu-Ciuc Depression, Germans in the Sibiu-Cisnădie-Medias-Agnita area, and Roma in the Făgăraș and Sibiu Depressions) is a characteristic of this region [136] (Table 3).

Table 3. Structure of proposed regions.

Region NUTS-2	Counties NUTS-3	Plasa NUTS-4	Municipalities NUTS-5
Banat	Arad	Arad	67
	Caras-Severin	Reșița, Caransebeș, Caras	70
	Hunedoara	Deva, Brad, Hunedoara, Jiu	74
	Timiș	Timișoara, Severin	82
Bucovina (Northern Moldavia)	Botoșani	Botoșani, Dorohoi	74
	Câmpulung	Câmpulung Moldovenesc, Dorna	26
	Suceava	Suceava, Fălticeni, Rădăuți	78
Dobrogea	Constanța	Litoral, Medgidia	62
	Tulcea	Tulcea, Delta	33

Table 3. Cont.

Region NUTS-2	Counties NUTS-3	Plasa NUTS-4	Municipalities NUTS-5
Lower Danube	Brăila	Brăila	39
	Covurlui	Galați, Tecuci	57
	Putna (Vrancea)	Putna (Vrancea)	48
Maramureș	Maramureș	Maramureș, Chioar	69
	Satu Mare	Satu Mare, Carei	20
Moldavia	Bacău	Bacău, Onești	83
	Iași	Iași	47
	Neamț	Piatra Neamț	43
	Roman	Roman, Pașcani	63
	Tutova	Tutova	39
	Vaslui	Vaslui, Fălciu	53
	Argeș	Pitești, Curtea de Argeș, Muscel	100
Muntenia (Wallahia)	Buzău	Buzău, Râmnicu Sărat	113
	Dâmbovița	Dâmbovița	67
	Ialomița	Slobozia, Călărași, Fetești	69
	Ilfov	București, Oltenița, Urziceni, Vlașca	149
	Prahova	Ploiești, Câmpina	95
	Teleorman	Alexandria, Roșiori, Turnu	101
	Dolj	Craiova, Calafat	114
Oltenia	Gorj	Târgu Jiu	67
	Mehedinți	Drobeta—Turnu Severin	65
	Olt	Slatina, Drăgășani, Romanați	100
	Vâlcea	Râmnicu Vâlcea	61
	Alba	Alba Iulia, Cugir, Sebeș, Târnava Mică	73
Transylvania	Bistrița-Năsăud	Bistrița	41
	Cluj	Cluj-Napoca, Someș, Turda	113
	Mureș	Târgu Mureș, Reghin, Târnăveni, Târnava Mare	120
	Sălaj	Zalău	60
	Bihor	Bihor	89
	Brașov	Brașov, Făgăraș	57
Southern Transylvania (Brașov-Sibiu)	Harghita	Ciuc, Odorhei	48
	Sibiu	Sibiu, Mediaș	52
	Trei Scaunea	Trei Scaune (Covasna)	37

Although the territorial and demographic differentiations are consistent, superior to those in the current administrative–territorial structure of Romania, the territorial units thus delimited are characterized by a high degree of homogeneity and cohesion around the polarizing urban nuclei. Also, the number of local level units shows large variations between regions fragmented into several counties (Ilfov, Mureș, and Dolj), which present relays of redistribution in the territory of the polarizing function of the residence and other small counties (Satu Mare, Câmpulung, Tutova, and Trei Scaune) in which the peripheral position or the high degree of fragmentation of relief prevents the establishment of large-scale cohesive territorial structures. These territorial and demographic discrepancies can,

however, be corrected by appropriate dimensioning of the administrative apparatus in each territorial unit.

6. Conclusions

The paper is based on the analysis of territorial functionality determined by the degree of road accessibility in a country where the current basic administrative–territorial structures (counties) were created 57 years ago. This analysis aims to propose an updated administrative–territorial regionalization of Romania in relation to the changes in territorial dynamics in this country as a result of some characteristic economic–social phenomena (deindustrialization, followed by reindustrialization and depopulation) and the development of road transport infrastructure, which enhances the direction and intensity of material and human flows [137,138].

The subject of the study is all the more current and of interest, as the Romanian political class has raised the issue of a broad reform of local administration with the aim of reducing budget spending, given the large budget deficit that characterizes the economy of this country.

The economic decline in the 1990s amid corruption in society and failed privatizations generated a process of administrative fragmentation, materialized by granting commune status to over 1000 villages [139], which led to an increase in spending in local public administration. Thus, more than half of the local administrative–territorial units (NUTS-5), especially in poor areas [85,140], could not ensure their functioning from their own revenues, thus depended on government subsidies. On the other hand, in Romania, public administration salaries are the highest in the EU-27, being about 50% higher than the European average.

Based on these premises, a survey conducted by INSCOP Research requested by the News.ro Press Agency between 20 and 25 May 2024 [141] highlighted the fact that more than half of Romanian citizens believed that an administrative–territorial reform that would include the merger of some localities would improve the quality of public services.

The establishment of an intermediate administrative level NUTS-4 between the county and the commune would take over the duties of the lower level for each new post created, being abolished n posts (n = number of NUTS-5 units assigned to a NUTS-4 unit), thus contributing to the substantial reduction in administrative expenses. Moreover, depopulation, a phenomenon that especially affects the rural environment, has made the demographic size of a large number of local level units (NUTS-5) not justify the number of posts in the administration.

Theoretically, we advance the issue of regional-level territorial structures in Romania. Due to the need for better decentralization of administrative services and a more efficient use of European funds allocated to regional development, recent studies have mentioned that territorial cohesion could be based either on historical regions, on issues of economic complementarity, or even on the transformation of development regions into counties. We complement these studies by presenting details of the sustainability of regional structures.

On practical grounds, the functionality of the proposed regional units is based both on the degree of road accessibility and also on the historical antecedents (historical regions) that have become mental and identity reporting spaces over time), which ensures a higher degree of viability. Therefore, the results of our study could be used by policy decision makers in the reconfiguration of regional development in Romania.

Future research can be conducted on investigating other specific aspects of sustainability at the regional level in Romania. For instance, other socio-economic indices could be taken into consideration for territorial cohesion.

There are some limitations of our study. First, our study is based mainly on the distance and polarization of major cities and the historical background in each region. A deeper analysis of urban polarization by performing interviews with stakeholders could be relevant. Second, a larger sociological survey on the regional restructuring of Romania could add other specific details on opinions regarding territorial cohesion and territorial administrative management.

On the other hand, the analysis proposed in this study is limited to the territorial, with geographical support for the implementation of regional development policies in Romania constituting an alternative to the local public administration reform under discussion at the governmental level. This analysis would be completed by qualified specialists and with the assessment of the economic and financial costs and the operational measures that its implementation implies, including the necessary legal framework.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.S. and R.C.; methodology, R.S.; validation, R.S.; formal analysis, R.S.; investigation, R.S.; data curation, R.S.; writing—original draft preparation, R.S. and R.C.; writing—review and editing, R.C. and R.S.; visualization, R.S.; supervision, R.S. and R.C. All authors have equally contributed to this work and to the writing of this article. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: All necessary data is included in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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