

The Emergence of the Multi-Level Governance Model in Romania

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of the multi-level governance model in Romania in the context of European integration, decentralization, and regional development reforms. The study contributes theoretically by linking the concepts of Europeanization, subsidiarity, institutional decentralization, and regional governance in a post-communist administrative system. Its originality lies in interpreting Romania's multi-level governance framework as a hybrid model, shaped by EU cohesion policy requirements but still constrained by centralized administrative traditions.

The research uses a qualitative institutional and documentary analysis, based on EU policy frameworks, national legislation, strategic government documents, regional development regulations, institutional reports, and relevant academic literature. The analysis focuses on how governance responsibilities are distributed across European, national, regional, and local levels, and how Romanian institutions have adapted to the principles of partnership, coordination, and subsidiarity.

The findings show that Romania has developed important institutional mechanisms associated with multi-level governance, particularly through the creation of development regions, regional development agencies, and structures for managing European funds. However, the results also indicate that these mechanisms remain only partially consolidated. Development regions lack legal personality and full administrative autonomy, while decision-making and financial coordination continue to be strongly influenced by central government. Consequently, the Romanian model reflects an incomplete transition from hierarchical governance toward genuine multi-level governance.

The practical implications of the study highlight the need to strengthen regional institutional capacity, clarify regional competencies, improve coordination between governance levels, simplify financial equalization mechanisms, and reinforce partnerships with civil society and local actors. These measures could increase the effectiveness of public policy implementation and support more balanced regional development in Romania.

Keywords:

Multi-level governance, decentralization, European integration, public administration reform

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1. Review of the scientific literature

Multi-level governance has become an important analytical framework for understanding the transformation of public administration and policy-making in the European Union. The model reflects the redistribution of authority among supranational, national, regional, and local actors, as well as the increasing involvement of social and non-governmental actors in the formulation and implementation of public policies.

In this context, European governance may be understood through the interaction of three partnership triangles: the relationship between European institutions, national institutions and regional agencies; the relationship between national governments, social actors and territorial actors; and the networks formed at regional and local levels between administrative-territorial units, regional development agencies and non-governmental actors.

The emergence of multi-level governance is closely linked to the evolution of European integration and to the increasing relevance of regional development policies. Starting with the Single European Act, the transfer of competences from central governments to supranational and subnational levels became a defining feature of European policy-making, while the principle of subsidiarity encouraged a more complex distribution of responsibilities among different levels of governance (Crişan & Crişan, 2008). As a result, many European states experienced a “double surrender of authority”, through which central governments transferred part of their competences both upward, to European institutions, and downward, to regional and local actors (Borzel, 2005; Pollack, 1994).

For post-communist member states, the adoption of multi-level governance has been particularly complex, because European integration required substantial institutional adaptation in administrative systems traditionally characterized by centralization. Romania represents a relevant case in this respect, as the development of regional governance has been shaped by EU conditions, cohesion policy requirements, decentralization reforms and the creation of development regions. However, despite these institutional changes, the Romanian governance system continues to combine hierarchical administrative traditions with emerging forms of multi-level coordination, which makes the consolidation of a functional regional governance model incomplete.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the emergence and development of the multi-level governance model in Romania, with particular attention to the influence of European integration, decentralization and regional development policies. The article aims to assess the extent to which Romania has incorporated the principles of subsidiarity, partnership and coordination into its institutional framework and to identify the main limitations affecting the consolidation of multi-level governance.

The specific objectives of the article are: to clarify the theoretical foundations of multi-level governance in the European context; to examine the role of EU integration and cohesion policy in shaping governance reforms in Romania; to analyze the institutional framework of decentralization and regional development; to identify the main challenges affecting coordination between national, regional and local levels; and to highlight the theoretical and practical implications of Romania’s hybrid governance model.

The originality of the study lies in its integrated interpretation of Romania’s governance transformation as a gradual and incomplete transition from centralized hierarchical governance toward multi-level governance. By linking Europeanization, decentralization and regional institutional development, the article contributes to the understanding of governance transformation in post-communist EU member states and highlights the institutional constraints that continue to affect regional policy implementation.

2. Research methodology

This study adopts a predominantly qualitative research design, based on institutional, documentary and policy analysis. The research does not aim to test statistical hypotheses through primary quantitative data, but to examine how the multi-level governance model has emerged and developed in Romania under the influence of European integration, decentralization reforms and regional development policies. Therefore, the methodological approach is interpretative and analytical, focusing on the evolution of formal institutions, policy frameworks and intergovernmental relations.

The research design is justified by the nature of the topic, as multi-level governance is primarily an institutional and administrative phenomenon that requires the analysis of legal frameworks, policy documents, governance structures and relationships between different levels of public authority. The study uses Romania as a case study, considering its post-communist administrative transformation, its accession to the European Union and the institutional reforms generated by cohesion policy and structural funds management.

The objectives of the research are directly connected to the methodological approach. In order to identify the institutional factors that facilitated the emergence of multi-level governance, the study analyses legislative reforms, the creation of development regions and the role of regional development agencies. In order to assess the influence of European Union policies on national and subnational governance arrangements, the research examines EU cohesion policy frameworks, pre-accession conditions and strategic documents related to regional development. In order to evaluate the interaction between central, regional and local

authorities, the study focuses on the distribution of competences, coordination mechanisms, partnership structures and administrative capacity.

The main analytical dimensions used in the study are: Europeanization, decentralization, subsidiarity, institutional capacity, regional autonomy, intergovernmental coordination, partnership and civil society involvement.

These dimension function as qualitative analytical variables, allowing the research to assess whether Romania's governance system reflects the principles of multi-level governance or remains closer to a centralized and hierarchical administrative model.

Data collection is based on secondary documentary sources. The analysed materials include European policy frameworks, cohesion policy regulations, national legislation on decentralization and public administration reform, government strategies, regional development documents, institutional reports issued by European and Romanian public authorities, and relevant academic literature. Where necessary, secondary statistical information from Eurostat, the National Institute of Statistics and European Commission reports is used only as contextual support for the institutional interpretation, not as the basis for a quantitative empirical model.

The analysis methods include institutional analysis, policy analysis, comparative temporal analysis and qualitative content analysis. Institutional analysis is used to examine the formal structure of governance and the role of public authorities at different administrative levels. Policy analysis is applied to understand how European and national policies influenced regional development and decentralization. Comparative temporal analysis allows the study to observe changes from the post-communist transition period to the post-accession stage. Qualitative content analysis is used to identify recurring themes in documents, such as coordination, partnership, subsidiarity, regional autonomy and administrative capacity.

The documentary data support the conclusions by showing how Romania has formally adopted several elements of multi-level governance, while also revealing the institutional limits of this process. The analysis of legislation, policy documents and institutional reports makes it possible to identify the gap between formal governance structures and their practical functionality. This methodological approach therefore allows the study to conclude that Romania's model remains hybrid, combining elements of European multi-level governance with persistent features of centralized administration.

The validity of the research is ensured through source triangulation, by comparing European documents, national legislation, institutional reports and academic literature. The reliability of the interpretation is supported by the transparent selection of sources and by the consistent use of the analytical dimensions throughout the study. The main limitations of the methodology are related to the reliance on secondary data and documentary sources, which may not fully capture informal governance practices, political negotiations or the perceptions of local and regional actors. Ethical considerations are respected through the exclusive use of publicly available sources, proper acknowledgement of references and objective interpretation of institutional developments (Buzoianu et al., 2024).

3. Results and discussion

European governance can be described in the form of three partnership triangles (Agh, 2008): the first triangle is formed by transnational European institutions–national institutions–regional agencies and other subnational institutions, in which national states act as intermediaries between European institutions and subnational actors, transmitting the effects of Europeanization from top to bottom and regional/local interests from bottom to top; the second triangle is found at the level of the nation-state, between the nation-state, social actors (horizontal) and territorial actors (vertical); the third triangle is found at the level of regional and local territorial actors, both horizontally and vertically, being formed by a multitude of distinct networks in which administrative-territorial units and regional development agencies actively cooperate economically and socially with local and non-governmental actors (Rădulescu et al., 2025).

The most common MLG decision-making model is based on a strict institutional framework, known as type 1 (Hooghe and Marks, 2002), where public authorities are the main actors, this system being also called institutional MLG; type 2 of the MLG model involves a reduced participation of public institutions, including other actors. The institutional MLG model can be seen as an extension of the vertical subsidiarity relationship (Bagarani, 2007) between the different levels of jurisdictions in the EU, characterized by the fact that jurisdictions can pursue multiple public objectives and administer various public policy instruments, each jurisdiction is clearly delimited, there are few jurisdictions with a limited number of governance

levels, and the institutional framework is strictly established, with a hierarchy that implies an inelastic distribution of competences. The institutional MLG model has led to the increase of local authority power and has a strong correlation with the classical theory of fiscal federalism, and the attributes of the political prerogatives of the different levels of government must be consistent with the territorial dimension of the externalities of public goods, so that a privilege or prerogative is allocated to a level of government to exercise a certain policy or to be endowed with a certain public good.

The relationships within the MLG model are top-down in terms of coordination and governance rules and bottom-up in terms of achieving objectives (figure no. 1), the structure of the logic model of the institutional framework being the result of the analysis of the decision-making framework of the Structural Funds Reform, which aimed in particular at increasing the autonomy of the regions, especially in the project implementation phase.

For the model to be successful, several institutional conditions must be met: a good capacity for coordination between different institutional levels; flexibility and collaboration in choosing a particular policy at all jurisdictional levels; managerial capacity in coordinating and implementing program alternatives at all levels of governance; the ability to adapt to the needs of various levels and to allow for modifications depending on the changes that occur; as well as the ability to implement modifications in accordance with the phases and procedures agreed upon by all institutional actors at different levels.

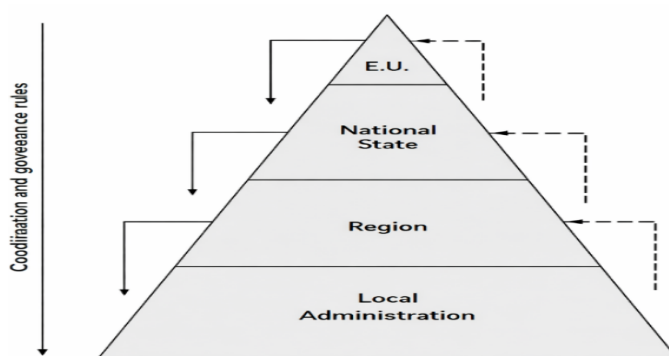


Figure no. 1. Simplified diagram of relationships within the MLG system

Source: Baragani, 2007

Pre-accession programmes played a considerable role in creating a regional institutional landscape and were essential for populating it with actors capable of participating in regional development policies and their implementation according to the rules of the structural funds.

Despite some notable experiences regarding the development of regional governance in the 1990s (Bruszt, 2005), many of the future member states did not have, at the time of the pre-accession programmes, explicit regional policies or institutions with clear responsibilities; regional economic and social problems were solved through centrally established programmes or sectoral policies, and in many of these countries regions did not exist, and the subnational level and non-governmental actors were weak and disorganized. As regional development options for the new EU member states, there are four “ideal models”, resulting from the combination of two dimensions: the rules regarding the decision-making process, which imply variations in the distribution of authority, and the decentralization of the decision-making process; The first two types represent variants of hierarchical governance, in which central government agencies hold the monopoly on defining regional policy objectives and the means of achieving them, and the distribution of authority is the common feature of the other types of governance (Nica et al., 2023).

From the perspective of the central state, the MLG model implies a considerable departure from the hierarchical and centralized structure of the classical governance model, increasing the responsibilities of government agencies for policy decisions at the regional level, both upwards, to the level of the European Commission (responsible for establishing the principles and rules for the allocation of funds), and downwards, to the lower levels of local authority and to various types of non-governmental actors. Such a distribution of authority, combined with the process of decentralization, can lead to the interdependence of actors, forcing them, at different levels and representing diverse interests, to produce public policies adapted to the heterogeneous needs of the level they serve. In the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, the hierarchical governance model predominates, combined with elements of other types of governance; the evolution of regional governance in these countries is quite far from the MLG ideal, based on distributed authority, each representing hybrid models of MLG governance (Sarbu et al., 2021).

In all new member states, governance is a compromise between the central government and regional actors, generating the so-called “stratification” or “continuous change” (Bruszt, 2007), whereby marginal changes in the transformation of rules occur within unchanged institutions, questioning the depth of changes in the mode of governance. A comparative situation of the emergence of the characteristics of the MLG model in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland can be observed in Table no. 1.

Table no. 1. Dynamics of MLG model factors in a few member states

Factors	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland
State capacity issues	Overly centralized policies that weaken the absorption capacity of the European MLG state	Overly centralized policies that weaken the absorption capacity of the European MLG state	Overly centralized policies that weaken the absorption capacity of the European MLG state
Pre-existing institutional framework	The existence of elected regions gives regional actors great negotiating power, capable of forcing decentralization.	Absence of regions implies low bargaining power, slow decentralization process	The existence of elected regions gives regional actors great bargaining power, capable of forcing decentralization
Regional level agreements between regional actors	Poor	Alliances emerge at regional level between various regional actors who have a power to influence decentralization	Powerful regional alliances that have the power to force decentralization

Source: Bruszt, 2007

3.1. Multi-Level Governance in Romania

In Romania, the MLG model has been a constant concern for both the central government and public authorities at different levels, taking into account the conditionalities imposed by the pre-accession funds, subsequently by the structural funds and their implementation method. Regional decentralization was achieved starting from the existing structure of local administrative authorities, by creating eight development regions, which were established by extending local competences, but without having legal personality. The region has been defined differently by the European institutions: the Council of Europe considers it “a medium-sized territory, geographically determined and considered homogeneous, while the EU defines it administratively as the echelon immediately below the national state; according to NUTS there is the local-ity/department or county level and the regional level (Cugleşan, 2006).

The Assembly of European Regions defines regions as “political entities below the state level, with competences exercised by a government accountable to a democratically elected assembly”. From this point of view, there is a paradoxical situation in Romania: the county corresponds to the definition of the Assembly of European Regions, having a County Council and a directly elected president, but according to the EU definition, the county represents a smaller territorial unit, comparable to NUTS 3. The eight existing development regions do not meet the criteria for a region according to the Council of Europe. At the level of each region there are two institutions involved: the Regional Development Agency (executive authority) and the Regional Development Council (deliberative authority), and regional development policy is managed at the national level by the National Regional Development Council, with a deliberative role, and by the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Housing (figure no. 2).

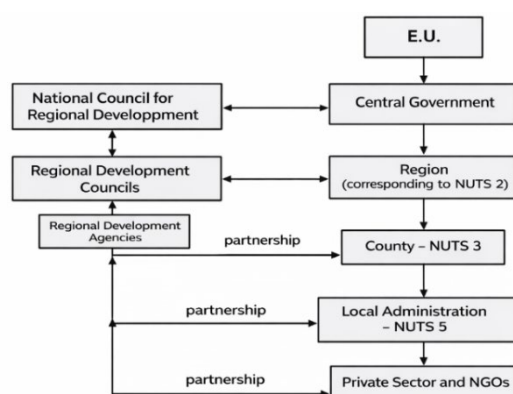


Figure no. 2. The structure of Romania's decentralization process

Source: Moraru & Ghinea, 2004

Decentralization, in a broad sense, means the transfer of powers from the central level to the regional or local level, achieved either by direct transfer to administrative units, or by the detachment of public services from the central or local authority and granting legal personality to carry out the powers; as a method of administrative organization, in a decentralized system the state does not assume the task of administration alone, but shares it, in certain proportions, with other categories of legal entities, and the presence of legal entities of public law, with autonomous organization and elected bodies, constitutes another characteristic of decentralization. The system of decentralization replaces the hierarchical power, specific to centralization, with distributed power.

In Romania, the implementation of the MLG model requires strengthening the role of regional institutions, and the regulation of regional interests is imperative, because counties have interests that are far too dispersed and, in the case of problems that go beyond their borders, coordinated cooperation from a higher level of government is required.

At the same time, it was found that regional institutions do not yet form a unified voice of the represented counties, and the impact of the financed projects is more local than regional. In the construction of the budget balancing system, the application of the solidarity principle has accentuated interregional imbalances, discouraging some poor regions from intensifying their efforts to supplement their income and accentuating the dissatisfaction of other development regions regarding the ratio between contributions and benefits; the financial balancing system needs to be simplified by reducing the number of actors involved, and the existence of distinct regional budgets for coordinating and stimulating economic development would encourage the development of complementary, rather than competing, local development strategies.

Given the dynamic pace of decentralization in Romania, a major problem is the limited management capacities of decentralized competencies, with human resource management systems being poorly developed, professional training limited, and human resource turnover high, requiring considerable efforts to improve financial management and to compensate for the lack of an integrated information system.

The institutional capacity of public authorities in Romania to establish functional links with the European MLG model can be assessed according to the development of the internal institutional framework, the increase in the role of regulatory government agencies, the optimization of the decision-making process and its increased transparency, the rational allocation of resources, the improvement of cooperation with civil society and the need for the Europeanization of the administration; an essential aspect is the maximization of the functional capacity to integrate the different dimensions of European policies at each level of government, and the success of the model's implementation is conditioned by the allocation of responsibilities in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and the ability to build efficient and credible partnerships with all social and economic partners.

Conclusions

This study has analyzed the emergence of the multi-level governance model in Romania by examining the interaction between European integration, decentralization reforms and regional institutional development. The main contribution of the article is that it shows that Romania has not fully transitioned from a centralized administrative model to a consolidated multi-level governance system. Instead, the Romanian case reflects a hybrid governance arrangement, in which formal elements of European multi-level governance coexist with persistent hierarchical and centralized decision-making practices.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature on multi-level governance by highlighting the specific difficulties encountered by post-communist EU member states in adapting European governance principles to domestic administrative structures. The Romanian case confirms that the formal creation of regional institutions does not automatically generate effective regional governance. Multi-level governance requires not only institutional design, but also functional autonomy, administrative capacity, clear competencies and stable coordination mechanisms between European, national, regional and local actors.

The institutional analysis indicates that EU conditions pre-accession programs and cohesion policy requirements played a decisive role in shaping Romania's regional governance framework. The creation of development regions and regional development agencies represented an important step toward the institutionalization of multi-level governance. However, the absence of legal personality for development regions, the limited autonomy of regional institutions and the continued dominance of central government have restricted the practical effectiveness of this model. As a result, regional governance in Romania remains fragmented, and the impact of regional development policies is often more local than genuinely regional. The institutional implications of the study are therefore significant.

Strengthening multi-level governance in Romania requires clearer regional competencies, improved coordination between central, regional and local authorities, stronger administrative and financial capacity at regional level, and a more coherent framework for partnership with civil society and non-governmental actors. Simplifying financial equalization mechanisms and developing distinct regional development instruments could also contribute to more balanced territorial development and to a better alignment between public policy objectives and regional needs.

The practical relevance of the study lies in its emphasis on the need to move beyond formal institutional reforms toward functional governance capacity. For Romania, the consolidation of multi-level governance depends on the ability of public authorities to transform development regions from mainly administrative and planning structures into effective coordination platforms for regional policy implementation. This requires professionalized administration, transparent decision-making, stable interinstitutional cooperation and stronger involvement of local and regional stakeholders.

The study also has several limitations. Since the research is based mainly on documentary and institutional analysis, it does not fully capture informal political practices, negotiation mechanisms or the perceptions of actors involved in regional governance. Future research could therefore complement this approach through interviews with public officials, representatives of regional development agencies, local authorities and civil society organizations. Comparative studies with other Central and Eastern European countries could also provide a broader understanding of the conditions under which multi-level governance becomes more effective in post-communist administrative systems.

Overall, the article demonstrates that the emergence of multi-level governance in Romania is an ongoing and incomplete process. While European integration has created the institutional premises for a more decentralized and participatory governance model, the consolidation of this model depends on deeper institutional reforms, stronger regional capacity and a clearer distribution of responsibilities across governance levels.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) usage statement:

ChatGPT (version 5.0) was responsibly used for language improvement. After this process, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the present article.

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