

**TOWARDS A “EUROPE OF REGIONS”. THE REGIONALIZATION
SYSTEMS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: ITALY, POLAND AND ROMANIA.
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS***

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Abstract: *”Sine quo dubium”, over time, Romania, a member state of the EU since January 1st, 2007, has developed strong connections in the field of international relations with Poland, a member state of the EU since May 1st, 2004, but especially with Italy, a member state of the EU since January 1st, 1958, the official Romanian-Italian bilateral relations dating, according to the historical documents, from the second half of the XIXth century, from that decades in which Romania struggled to acquire its national unity. The Romanian-Italian bilateral relations were sealed in 1873, with the creation of the first Romanian diplomatic agency in Rome, which later became the diplomatic representation of Romania in the Kingdom of Italy, in 1879. Also in 1879, Italy recognized Romania's independence. Since then, Romanian-Italian relations have continued to develop at political and economic level. The Romanian-Polish bilateral relations were established, at the level of provisional representation, in 1919 and in 1938, the diplomatic missions were raised at the level of embassy. In 2013, Romanian-Polish relations became very close, Poland offering unlimited support to Romania on its regionalization project, which unfortunately failed. At the moment, Europe is facing a new paradigm, that of "Europe of Regions", which comes to strengthen the role and importance of the regions and the regional level in the supranational architecture of the EU. In the context in which Italy and Poland are recognized in the EU as two states with strong and efficient regional systems that have played an important role in turning them into "spearheads of the European funds absorption" on the multi-annual financial exercise 2007-2013, the present study aims to make a comparative analysis of the regionalization systems of Italy and Poland and extract examples of good practices that can be applied in the case of Romania in order to create the framework of the Romanian regionalization plan that could lead to a better*

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efficiency of European funds absorption, and also to the alignment of Romania at the European standards and to the new paradigms of the EU.

Keywords: Romania, Italy, Poland, bilateral relations, "Europe of Regions", regionalization, examples of good practices.

Introduction

Apart the Latin heritage that Romania and Italy share since ancient times, in modern history, between the two states existed close relations of collaboration that materialized at the diplomatic level 147 years ago¹. Despite the difference in political systems, Romanian-Italian relations have withstood even the most turbulent periods of history, and now, after Romania's accession to NATO and the EU, these Romanian-Italian relations have experienced a revival in terms of political dialogue and economic collaboration, Italy remaining one of the most important partners of Romania and the country that hosts one of the largest communities of Romanians.

As for the Romanian-Polish bilateral relations established 101 years ago, they are based, apart from geographical proximity, on the communist past that the two states shared and that led to the existence of a similar economic situation in the two states. Also, after joining the EU, Poland became for Romania the most important partner of the former communist bloc, this aspect being highlighted by the support that Poland offered to Romania in its attempt to implement an efficient regionalization system in 2013.

As EU Member States, both Italy as well as Poland and Romania face a new paradigm that has emerged throughout Europe, namely the "Europe of the Regions", which focuses on increasing the role and importance of regions at EU level, developed, autonomous and strong regions representing a plus factor in the development process of the states of which they are part. In this regard, Italy and Poland are part of the new European paradigm, as they have two different but equally effective regionalization systems that have allowed the development of autonomous and powerful regions in both cases. At the opposite pole is Romania, which at the moment has failed to implement a system of regionalization in the true sense of the word, the seven existing regions having only a formal (statistical) role, without enjoying regional autonomy, Romania representing a typical case of "centralized power" that no longer coincides with the new realities and directions of the European project.

Taking into account the above, the present study aims: to identify the representative aspects of Romania's relations with Italy and Poland (1), to analyze the

¹ Romanian Embassy in the Italian Republic, *Relații bilaterale. Scurt istoric (Bilateral Relations. Short history)*. Available at: <https://roma.mae.ro/node/221>, accessed on 08.09.2020.

concept of "Europe of the Regions" and its impact at European level (2), and to analyze the types of regionalization in Italy and Poland in order to identify some examples of good practices for Romania (3).

Romania's bilateral relations with Italy and Poland. Representative data

From West to East, in the last two centuries Romania has developed bilateral relations with important actors on the international relations stage, which today are part of the EU. Next, we will turn our attention to two such partnerships that are a proof of Romania's concern for cultivating bilateral relations with strategic partners in Western and Central Europe, respectively Italy and Poland, states with which Romania has shared multiple common values over time.

The official Romanian-Italian relations, according to the Romanian Embassy in the Italian Republic, are dating back to the latter half of the XIXth century². More precisely, on April 21 / May 3, 1873, the first Romanian Diplomatic Agency was opened in Rome, which later became the diplomatic mission of Romania in the Kingdom of Italy by the Law from February 2/14, 1879³. Also, an important event in consolidating the Romanian-Italian relations took place on November 24 / December 6, 1879, when Italy recognized Romania's independence and appointed Count Giuseppe Torielli-Brusati di Vergan as Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister to Bucharest⁴. In response, 11 years later, on February 3/15, 1890, Romania appointed Nicolae Kretzulescu as Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister to Rome⁵.

Romanian-Italian political and diplomatic relations during the XXth century experienced different dynamics. After the Second World War, and during the Cold War, despite differences in political systems and membership in two different alliances, Romania and Italy managed to "find common ground, thanks to mutual awareness of ineffaceable historical and cultural ties"⁶. Romanian-Italian relations continued to develop and the governments of Romania and Italy took the decision to elevate their diplomatic missions to the rank of Embassy on March 9, 1964⁷. After the fall of the communist regime, Romania and Italy used this opportunity to relaunch their relations, the event being marked by a new *Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation*,

² *Ibidem.*

³ *Ibidem.*

⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ *Ibidem.*

signed in Bucharest on July 23, 1991 and the "excellent bilateral relations were consecrated in the *Joint Declaration of Strategic Partnership Agreement* signed in Rome on April 17, 1997"⁸. In the last twenty years, as a result of Romania's accession to NATO and the EU, the Romanian-Italian relations have intensified, an aspect consecrated in the *Declaration of Consolidated Strategic Partnership*, signed on January 9, 2008, in Bucharest⁹. The partnership favoured a series of political contacts, such as visits to Italy by the President of Romania (2008, 2011, 2015) and visits to Romania by the President of Italy (2011, 2016)¹⁰. Also, another event that marked this partnership was the visit of the President of Romania to Italy, from October 14-17, 2018¹¹.

At the level of economic cooperation, Italy remains one of Romania's main economic partners: Italy ranks 2nd in the top of Romania's trading partners (after Germany), 6th in the top of foreign investors in terms of invested capital and 1st in the top of foreign investors in terms of the number of companies present on the market¹².

The cultural-scientific cooperation between the two countries takes place within the framework of the *Agreement for scientific and cultural cooperation* signed in Bucharest on October 21, 2003, the Romanian institutional cultural presence being represented in Italy by the Romanian Academy (Rome) and the Romanian Institute of Culture and Humanistic Research (Venice), while Italian Institute of Culture (Bucharest) operates in Romania¹³.

Last but not least, a strong bond of Romanian-Italian relations is represented by the Romanian community in Italy, the largest foreign community in Italy (1.207.919 Romanian citizens residing in Italy in 2020, the preferred regions being Lombardy, Piedmont and Veneto)¹⁴. According to the 2011 census, in Romania live about 3000 Italians¹⁵.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Relații bilaterale. Republica Italiană (Bilateral Relations. The Italian Republic)*, Available at: <https://www.mae.ro/bilateral-relations/1710>, accessed on 09.09.2020.

¹¹ Embassy of Romania in the Italian Republic, *op. cit.*

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *op. cit.*

¹³ Embassy of Romania in the Italian Republic, *Comunitatea românească. Prezențe culturale românești (Romanian Community. Romanian cultural presences)*, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Idem*, *Harta comunității românești din Italia (Map of the Romanian community in Italy)*.

¹⁵ Mirela Baciu, *Când România era țara făgăduinței pentru italieni*. Available at: <http://www.blog2fete.com/cand-romania-era-tara-fagaduintei-pentru-italieni/>, accessed on 15.09.2020.

Currently, George Gabriel Bologan holds the position of Ambassador of Romania in Italy and Marco Giungi holds the position of Ambassador of the Italian Republic in Romania¹⁶.

At the end of the section dedicated to Romanian-Italian relations, making a brief foray into history, we can conclude that Romania's ties with Italy had a special significance for Romanians, due to the identity component through which "Italy and especially the Eternal City were seen as a place of the origin of the Romanian people and of the Romanian language", as it appears from the old records of the chronicler Grigore Ureche according to which we, the Romanians, "de la Râm ne tragem" (we originate in Râm)¹⁷.

The Romanian-Polish diplomatic relations were established at the level of provisional representation, on February 9, 1919, following that on May 31, 1919, the relations were elevated to the level of legation and then on May 31, 1938, the diplomatic missions were elevated to the rank of Embassy¹⁸. On October 28, 1940, diplomatic relations were suspended and resumed in 1945¹⁹.

At present, the Romanian-Polish bilateral relations are characterized by dynamism and excellent cooperation, including within the EU and NATO, based on common interests in security and defense policy and towards the EU's eastern neighbourhood²⁰. Romania and the Republic of Poland are strategic partners, an aspect confirmed by the signing of the *Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership*, on October 7, 2009, a partnership that is implemented through the *Joint Action Plan for the period 2016-2020*²¹.

At the diplomatic level, Ovidiu Dranga represents the Romanian Embassy in Warsaw and Marcin Wilczek represents the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Bucharest.

At the level of economic cooperation, the two states are on an ascending trend, Poland establishing a Romanian-Polish Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2016,

¹⁶ Embassy of Romania in the Italian Republic, *Relații internaționale. Scurt istoric (International Relations. Short history)*.

¹⁷ Ion Cârja, *Considerații introductive*, in the vol. *În căutarea țărâmului promis. Italienii din România (In search of the promised land. The Italians in Romania)*, coord. Bokor Zsuzsa, Cluj-Napoca, Edit. Institutului pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2017, p. 8.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Relații bilaterale, Republica Polonă (Bilateral Relations, The Republic of Poland)*. Available at: <https://www.mae.ro/bilateral-relations/1730>, accessed on 09.09.2020.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

the result being 1000 Polish companies operating in Romania, with a total share capital of approx. 430 million euros (18th place according to the value of the share capital)²².

At the level of scientific and cultural cooperation it is represented by two large cultural institutes, namely the Cultural Institute of Romania in the Republic of Poland (Warsaw) and the Cultural Institute of the Republic of Poland in Romania (Bucharest) and in terms of Romanian communities in Poland, respectively of Poles in Romania, according to official statistics in Poland live 3060 Romanians (Warsaw, Krakow) and in Romania live 2543 Poles (Suceava, Bucharest)²³.

At the end of the section dedicated to Romanian-Polish relations it is necessary to mention the fact that although the two states do not share any common identity component, they still managed to create strong partnerships due to geographical location, communist past and socio-cultural, economic, political similarities and to the territorial administrative organization that were identical in the two states, until the implementation of the Regionalization Plan of Poland (1999), this aspect will be further discussed in the following sections.

The "Europe of Regions". Increasing the importance of regions at European level

One of the most important objectives of the EU stipulated in the European treaties is to strengthen the economic and social cohesion of the member countries, a significant role in this process being given to the regions, these administrative-territorial units close to the citizens.

According to the Council of Europe, the region is "the administrative-territorial unit located immediately below the level of the state that has an elected authority and financial means of support"²⁴.

The term regionalization means the creation of a new level in the territorial organization of a state. In this regard, the newly established institutions may vary in terms of bodies, responsibilities and authorities, but they have only one purpose, namely the development of the region²⁵. Regionalization is a concept that arose as a result of the historical realities established at European level, aiming to resolve conflicts due to excessive centralization, by fighting bureaucracy and corruption²⁶. Thus, regionalization is "the result of the evolution trend of territorial organization in

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Mihaela Pacesila, *Regionalizarea în statele Uniunii Europene (Regionalization in the states of the European Union)*, Administration and Public Management Course, p. 104, available at: http://ramp.ase.ro/_data/files/articole/3_15.pdf, accessed on 10.09.2020.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

today's European states"²⁷. Therefore, the experience of the European project takes us in different directions, so that from a "Europe of Nations", the EU has transformed after the accession of the Central-Eastern states into a "Europe of Contrasts" so that today we can talk about a "Europe of Regions", in which the regions represent "the public community that responds to the need to territorialize the community policies"²⁸.

At EU level, there are five types of regionalization: administrative (1), through local authorities (2), regional decentralization (3), political, (4) and through federal authorities (5)²⁹. Regionalization is an "element of integration", which aims to correct regional imbalances, this process being considered a factor of democratization and capitalization of "cultural specificities"³⁰. In conclusion, any Member State must integrate into the "European spirit and realities, must develop a coherent and active regional policy, while preparing its territory to meet EU requirements"³¹. Next, we will analyze the regionalization systems in Italy, Poland and Romania.

Regionalization in Italy, Poland and Romania. Comparative analysis

In 2011, Italy, but especially Poland, surprised Europe with their positive results in the field of absorption of European funds. In that year, Italy and Poland managed to exhaust all European funds allocated to sustainable projects and were the only countries to receive a bonus of 10% of the amount allocated in 2007 from the European Commission³². The success of Italy and Poland was largely due to the regionalization systems adopted, which facilitated the absorption and efficient allocation of funds at regional level.

Italy has adopted, of the five types of regionalization, the model of political regionalization (also known as regional autonomy or institutional regionalism)³³. Political regionalization is characterized by investing the legislative power in a Regional

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Gerard Marcou, *La regionalization en Europe*, Parlement Européen, L-2929, Luxembourg, p. 17. Available at: <http://www.pantheonsorbonne.fr/fileadmin/GRALE/PEregional1.pdf>, accessed on 10.09.2020.

³⁰ Mihaela Pacesila, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Cătălina Tuluca, *Exemple de bune practici în politica regională a Europei Centrale și de Est. Cazul Poloniei*, in vol. *Politica de coeziune a Uniunii Europene. Determinanți, mecanisme, instrumente (Examples of good practices in the Regional Policy of Central and Eastern Europe. The case of Poland)*, in the vol. *Cohesion Policy of the European Union. Determinants, mechanisms, tools*, coord. Gabriela Drăgan, Leonard Orban, și Gabriela Carmen Pascariu, București, Edit. Universitară, 2013, p. 231).

Assembly that has broad powers guaranteed by the Constitution³⁴. Therefore, in Italy, the regions are based on the 1948 Constitution, which specifies them in Article 131 and identifies them in Article 114: "a Region is a component of the Republic, together with the State and other territorial entities. The Regions and the State share legislative powers and all territorial entities have autonomy in finances and expenditures"³⁵.

The 20 regions of Italy are divided into 15 regions with ordinary legislature, governed by an ordinary law (Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto, Liguria, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria, Marche, Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata and Calabria) and 5 regions with special legislature, governed by a constitutional law that gives these regions additional political and cultural autonomy (Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Sardinia and Sicily)³⁶. Each region has an elected Council and a *Giunta Regionale* (Executive Committee) chaired by a President, these institutions being located in the regional capitals. The Italian regions enjoy administrative autonomy and the right to issue normative acts, but all regulations made by the regional administrations are, as is natural, in accordance with the laws of the Italian state³⁷.

Poland, as a regionalization system, opted for the model of regional decentralization, which was adopted before becoming a member state, following the implementation of the 1992-1998 Regionalization Reform³⁸.

Regional decentralization refers to "the establishment of a new territorial unit at a higher level than the existing territorial communities, that being considered a region through which economic development is pursued"³⁹. Although this type of regionalization changes the territorial organization, it is part of the "constitutional order of the unitary state"⁴⁰.

Champion of the absorption of European funds, this country which had, before 1998, 49 administrative units (similar to the counties in Romania), implemented a

³³ Victor Romeo Ionescu, *Experiența europeană în materie de federalizare și regionalizare (European Experience in Federalization and Regionalization)*, p. 1, available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308657171_EXPERIENTA_EUROPEANA_IN_MATERIE_DE_FEDERALIZARE_SI_DE_REGIONALIZARE, accessed on 10.09.2020.

³⁴ Mihaela Pacesila, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

³⁵ Assembly of European Regions, *Regionalisation in Italy: "components of the republic"*, 2017, available at: <https://aer.eu/regionalisation-italy-components-republic/>, accessed on 10.09.2020.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Victor Romeo Ionescu, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁸ Cătălina Tuluca, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

³⁹ Mihaela Pacesila, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

comprehensive reform that reorganized Poland into 16 regions (voivodeships), with their own competences, assigned by law⁴¹.

The Polish regions comprise an Administrative Council (Small Parliament), elected by direct vote, and an Executive Council, headed by a "Marshal" appointed by the Prime Minister, each region having a regional capital. The regions enjoy autonomy and decision-making power, having competences mainly in the field of water, roads, health, social services, education, culture and economic development (the regions collect part of the taxes, both from individuals as well as from corporations)⁴². Although the Polish regions have not yet reached an equal level of development, being noticed gaps between the western and eastern regions (i.e., those in the vicinity of Austria and Germany and those in the vicinity of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine), but it is, however, noted that regionalization in Poland has played a crucial role in streamlining the process of absorbing European funds and in its success⁴³. Also, although the two states have embraced different models of regionalization, depending on their own national context, in terms of the degree of autonomy, the Polish regions can be compared to the Italian regions⁴⁴.

Romania, unfortunately, until now, has not opted for any of the 5 regionalization systems existing at EU level, although it has been a member of this alliance for over 13 years. Compared to Italy and Poland which have launched sustained actions in order to implement efficient regional systems that meet their development needs as well as to meet the EU objectives on economic and social cohesion, in Romania the development regions have been created only formally, in the context of accession to the EU and perpetuated up to the present day. Thus, the 8 regions established by Law no. 151/1998 on regional development: Bucharest-Ilfov, North-West, West, South-West Oltenia, South Muntenia, South-East, North-East Region and Central Region, are not administrative-territorial units, have no legal personality, being the result of a free agreement between county and local councils, for coordinating zonal development, source of statistical data for Eurostat, etc.

In the current context of "Europe of Regions" and the principle of decentralization, a process sustained by the EU, but also in the context of the forthcoming 2020-2027 budget year, Romania's regionalization project must become a

⁴¹ Dănuț Radu Săgeată, *Modele de regionalizare politico-administrativă. Regionalizarea într-o Europă a Contrastelor (Models of political-administrative regionalization. Regionalization in a Europe of Contrasts)*, "Balcanii și Europa", *Revistă de consemnări și atitudini*, 205-206, 2013, available at: <https://balcanii.ro/2013/03/regionalizarea-intr-o-europa-a-contrastelor/>, accessed on 10.09.2020.

⁴² Cătălina Tuluca, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁴³ Dănuț Radu Săgeată, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ Cătălina Tuluca, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

priority and taking into account the similarities in territorial organization between Poland and Romania, as well as the common historical and economic past of the two states and, last but not least, their geographical position, it can be concluded that, strictly based on these criteria, the most appropriate model of regionalization for Romania would be that of regional decentralization which has also worked successfully in the case of Poland.

Conclusions

Due to the identity component, Romania has developed solid partnership relations with Italy, which are maintained up to the present day, these relations going beyond the diplomatic sphere and approaching a friendly relationship between the two states.

Due to its geographical position and the common communist past, Romania has also developed strong relations with Poland, which is currently on an upward trend, especially in terms of economic cooperation.

In recent years, at EU level, the concept of "Europe of Regions" has become increasingly important. Unfortunately, if Italy and Poland are prepared for this new reality, with strong and autonomous regions, Romania is at the opposite pole, the decision-making power being centralized in Bucharest.

In the current context in which we find ourselves, Romania can no longer afford to ignore the issue of regionalization, which is why the implementation of an efficient regionalization system must be the number 1 priority at national level, especially since Romania has at hand the compatible model of the Polish state, and will certainly have all the necessary support in starting this sinuous but absolutely necessary step, from its strategic partners who have gone through this process and obtained remarkable results: Italy and Poland.