

**ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONALISM IN INTERWAR ROMANIA: THE
CASE OF THE LOWER DANUBE LAND**

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Abstract

The article examines the evolution of administrative regionalism in interwar Romania, with a particular focus on the Carlist reform of 1938–1940 and on the case study of the Lower Danube Land, as an expression of the tension between modernisation and centralism. The study traces the genesis and functioning of the land system, introduced by the Law on the Administrative Organisation of Romania (14 August 1938), within the broader context of the transformation of the political regime into an authoritarian monarchy.

Building on an analysis of the normative framework, the competencies of the royal residents and the relationship between the centre and the periphery, the article poofs that the administrative reform of 1938 represented a form of formal regionalisation rather than genuine decentralisation. The Lower Danube Land, headquartered in Galați, offers a revealing example of how the modernising discourse, emphasising efficiency, inter-county coordination, and economic planning, was employed as an instrument of centralised political control.

The analysis of the documents shows that, although the royal residency introduced incipient forms of territorial planning and administrative standardisation, the lack of financial autonomy, overlapping competencies, and the reform's short lifespan ultimately hindered the achievement of its declared objectives. While the reform did contribute to the uniformisation of procedures and the partial professionalisation of the administration, it ultimately reinforced a culture of executive centralism.

Keywords: administrative regionalism, centralism, modernisation, King Carol II, Lower Danube Land, 1938 reform, interwar administration

Introduction

The interwar period is a relevant subject of analysis for understanding how the Romanian state sought to manage the processes of unification, centralisation, and modernisation simultaneously. The tension between these processes culminated between 1938 and 1940 with King Carol II's reform, which reconfigured the state's territory into ten Lands (Ținuturi). This politico-administrative experiment, short-lived yet dense in events, functioned as a laboratory of formal regionalism and functional centralism, both articulated within an authoritarian political environment.

As a result of the Great Unification, Romania's territory expanded from 137,000 km² to 295,000 km², while its population increased from 7,7 million to 15,7 million inhabitants. The economic potential of the territories united with the Romanian state was considerable (Murgescu 2010, 224). At the same time, Greater Romania, territorially consolidated through the union of historical provinces, inherited distinct legal and administrative systems. Faced with this diversity, centralisation appeared necessary for state consolidation, yet it led to excessive bureaucratisation and a growing divide between the centre and the periphery.

The uniformisation of the provinces proved to be a difficult process, formally finalised through the Administrative Unification Law of 1925. In the years that followed, several attempts were made to reform the organisation of the administrative system. The large number of administrative laws adopted, frequently replacing one another, demonstrates both the importance of the issue and the difficulty of finding viable solutions. Nevertheless, although these laws proclaimed decentralisation and local autonomy, administrative practices consistently perpetuated centralising tendencies.

In fact, the evolution of Romania's administrative-territorial organization during the interwar period was marked by two contradictory currents promoted by the political parties that succeeded one another in government: a) a centralist current, promoted by the Liberals, based on the suppression of local autonomy and the denial of historical provinces; and b) a regionalist current, supported by the Peasantists (rom. *Țărăniști*), who advocated unity in diversity through macro-regions overlapping historical provinces and endowed with broad administrative autonomy. However, neither camp succeeded in creating genuinely new administrative units, limiting themselves instead to regional reconfigurations achieved through the merging of existing counties (Săgeată 2012, 72).

King Carol II's reform was also conceived as a territorial and institutional reorganisation intended to ensure the "rationalisation of the state". The administrative reform of 1938 reflected the monarchy's tendency to consolidate its control over the political periphery and subnational administration. Through the Lands (rom. *Ținuturi*), Carol II aimed to create a new vertical axis of power, articulated directly between the centre and the periphery, bypassing the influence of political parties and county councils.

The administrative reform of 1938 was not the first attempt to adjust this structure. As early as the 1920s, Romania's intellectual elites had advocated functional regionalisation designed to align administration with economic geography. These ideas were subsequently appropriated by the political logic of the authoritarian monarchy and later materialised.

From the perspective of administrative science, regionalism entails the creation of intermediate territorial units designed to ensure effective decentralisation and to adapt national public policies to local realities. In the twentieth century, regionalism was interpreted in two ways:

- democratic regionalism, grounded in the participation of subnational territorial communities;
- non-democratic regionalism, used by states as an instrument of political control over subnational territorial communities.

The 1938 reform falls into the second category. The Lands were conceived not as autonomous administrative entities, but as regional executive organs of royal will, led by royal residents appointed by the central authority.

Centralism, characteristic of modern nation-states, implies the complete subordination of local administration to central power. In interwar Romania, centralism was regarded as a guarantee of national unity. However, during the 1930s, it evolved into a mechanism of political control, losing its rationalizing dimension. The concentration of administrative power in the hands of the monarch led to the politicization of the state apparatus and to the suspension of decentralizing tendencies.

Administrative modernization represents the process through which the state adopts structures, procedures, and values aimed at increasing efficiency and predictability of public administration. In interwar Romania, modernization focused on achieving the following objectives: a) institutional uniformity; b) professionalization of civil servants; c) infrastructure development. Nonetheless, modernization could not be dissociated from the ideology of political control. The Lands, as an expression of this authoritarian modernization, were organized according to declared efficiency criteria, yet subordinated to a system of monarchical representation that limited their decision-making and functional autonomy.

The topic of the present study is situated at the intersection of the ideology of administrative modernization and the practices of political authoritarianism, analyzed through the case of the Lower Danube Land (rom. *Ținutul Dunărea de Jos*). This unit was selected as a case study because it represented one of the most complex entities created by the reform, both in terms of its administrative diversity and its strategic position at the confluence of the Danube River and the Black Sea. Its capital, the city of Galați, was an industrial, maritime and commercial center located at the crossroads of domestic economic flows and naval exports.

The analysis of the Lower Danube Land allows for a concrete understanding of how authoritarian administrative regionalism functioned in practice: a structure that appeared rational yet was centrally controlled. By examining the modalities of its establishment and operation, it becomes possible to identify the mechanisms of royal residency, the relationships between center and periphery, and the tensions between institutional innovation and the political logic of the period. Furthermore, the study seeks to assess whether the 1938 reform produced genuine effects of institutional decentralization or whether it merely consolidated central political control within a context of formal modernization.

Research Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, a qualitative methodological approach was employed, appropriate for the historical and institutional analysis of administrative reforms. The primary method of data collection consisted of an in-depth qualitative analysis of legislation adopted during the period under study, including constitutional provisions, administrative laws, royal decrees, and implementing regulations that shaped the organization and functioning of the Land (Ținut) administrative system.

This legal analysis was complemented by the examination of archival documents produced by Romanian administrative authorities at both central and regional levels, with particular emphasis on materials generated by royal residencies, prefectures, and ministerial departments. These sources provided insight into the practical implementation of the reform, the interaction between central and subnational authorities, and the administrative challenges encountered in daily governance.

In addition, the study made systematic use of statistical data reflecting the socio-economic and demographic realities of the examined period, drawn from official publications of the Central Institute of Statistics and relevant ministerial reports. These quantitative materials were employed not for statistical modeling, but as contextual evidence to support qualitative interpretations regarding territorial structure, population distribution, and administrative capacity.

The analysis was further supported by a critical review of specialized literature, including contemporary interwar works by legal scholars and public administration specialists, as well as modern historiography and administrative science studies. This dual bibliographic perspective allowed for the triangulation of sources and facilitated a balanced assessment of both the normative intentions of the reform and its concrete institutional effects.

Methodologically, the research combined elements of historical institutionalism and administrative analysis, enabling the identification of continuities, ruptures, and structural constraints within the interwar Romanian administrative system. Particular attention was paid to the case-study method, with the Lower Danube Land serving as an empirical framework for examining the broader dynamics of authoritarian regionalism, centralization, and administrative modernization.

Results and discussion

1. The Political and Institutional Context of the 1938 Administrative Reform

The administrative reform of 1938 must be understood in direct connection with the realities of political life in interwar Romania and with the constitutional paradigm shift undertaken by King Carol II in February 1938.

Political life during the interwar period was marked by pronounced instability. Between 1918 and 1940, eleven parliamentary elections were held, the country was governed by thirty-three ministerial cabinets. Of these, only two enjoyed a longer duration, both led by the National Liberal Party (PNL), during the periods 1922–1926 and 1934–1937, while fourteen governments functioned for only a few days or weeks (Preda 2022, 23–24).

The monarchy, through the abusive use of the right to dissolve Parliament, contributed decisively to the degradation of Romania's democratic regime. According to constitutional provisions, Parliament was elected for a four-year term; in practice, however, only two legislative bodies (those elected in 1922 and 1933) completed a full legislature. Between 1919 and 1937, the average duration of parliamentary activity was two years, with instances in which Parliament was dissolved after only four months (in 1920) or one year (in 1927). During the interwar period, no fewer than ten legislative bodies succeeded one another on the Romanian political scene, most of them lacking the time necessary for coherent and effective activity.

In the decade preceding the palace coup of 10 February 1938, a gradual dissolution of the parliamentary regime and the erosion of political parties occurred, in the context of the transformation of the monarchical institution from a democratic to an authoritarian dynastic regime (Gherghe 2007, 84).

On 27 February 1938, during a ceremony held at the Royal Palace in the presence of all members of the government, a new Constitution was promulgated (Scurtu and Otu 2003, 391-392). This constitution abolished the liberal parliamentary regime established in 1923 and instituted an authoritarian model of governance, concentrating both executive and

legislative power in the hands of the monarch. Within this framework, public administration became the primary instrument of political control.

The fundamental law expressly stipulated in Article 33 that “the King is the Head of State, concentrating all powers in his person”. From this formulation derives the entire architecture of the administrative reform: the Lands, as intermediate units between the government and the counties, were intended to represent the executive component of the monarchy in the territory. Carol II sought to replace partisan political prefects with royal residents – officials loyal to the Crown, recruited from among senior military officers, magistrates, or career civil servants.

Thus, the constitutional reform did not have merely a technical character, but also a clear ideological content, aiming to substitute democratic representativeness with a corporatist, vertical system inspired by the authoritarian and fascist models of the era.

Following the coup d'état of 10 February 1938, a regime of monarchical authority was established, introducing the state of siege and censorship; political parties were banned, and numerous politicians were arrested. King Carol II announced that he had formed a government composed of individuals “unshackled” from party activity, which would “depoliticise the administrative and economic life of the state and carry out constitutional changes corresponding to the country’s new needs” (Scurtu and Otu 2003, 392).

The constitutional reform of 1938 demonstrated that, after decades of attempts and experiments, the national elite's intention to endow Romanian political life with democratic values grounded in modern constitutionalism had failed (Guțan 2008, 90).

The establishment of the royal dictatorship disoriented the political parties. Having been responsible, through their fraudulent practices, for the weakening of democracy, they were unable to defend it; consequently, no adequate reaction emerged from the political formations (Constantiniu 1997, 359). By contrast, Carol II established a new party, the National Renaissance Front, open to all citizens. All state officials were required to be members of this party to retain their positions. This was the first mass party in the history of Romania (Pop and Bolovan 2007, 603).

2. The Basic Principles of the 1938 Administrative Reform

With the aim of consolidating the monarch’s power and his discretionary control over the state’s administrative system, a new administrative law was adopted, instituting a new administrative entity in Romania – the Land (rom. *Ținutul*).

According to Professor C.G. Rarincescu of the Faculty of Law in Bucharest, the implementation of the 1938 administrative reform was dictated by two essential necessities: first, “the need to bring administrative institutions... into conformity with the new Constitution of 27 February 1938, which, as is well known, confers a more developed character of authority upon the Executive Power”; and second, “the necessity of achieving greater unity, order, and economy in public... administration” (Rarincescu 1939, 3).

Following an intensive media campaign, King Carol II and his supporters, led by Minister of the Interior Armand Călinescu, implemented a new territorial-administrative delimitation (Scurtu, 2011). Minister Călinescu explained the failure of previous administrative reforms by pointing to two major flaws: the instability of local public administration resulting from the manner in which local councils were constituted, and its politicisation. The guiding principles of the new administrative reform were as follows: a) sound local governance and the accountability of local public authorities for their activities, b) the creation of a new

territorial-administrative unit – the Land and c) the deconcentration of state services (Călinescu 1938, 11–15).

The new administrative law was approved by Royal Decree no. 2919 of 13 August 1938 and published in the Official Gazette of Romania no. 187 of 14 August 1938. Under the new administrative law, Romania's counties were grouped into 10 Lands. Each Land included between five and nine counties, organised around an urban centre with administrative and economic functions.

The Lands were regional territorial districts endowed with legal personality and vested with economic, cultural, and social responsibilities. Article 55 of the law stipulated that “the land shall attend to its own needs and shall execute measures of general interest ordered by the central authorities” (Carol II, 1938, 3779). The Land was an administrative-territorial district with a dual function:

a) one aimed at “satisfying the general interests of the state, by bringing together all external services of the central authorities, thereby establishing principles of cooperation and coordination among these services”;

b) the other representing the local interests of the territorial district, “having the task of addressing needs which, although felt simultaneously in several localities, are not identical, varying in existence, in intensity, or in quality.” These local interests were organised as politico-territorial legal entities. In order to fulfil the entrusted responsibilities, the State delegated to the Land, within the limits established by law, a portion of public authority, which the Land was required to exercise under State supervision (P.F. Miron et al. 1938, 3822).

The ten Lands were as follows: Olt, with its capital at Craiova, comprising six counties; Bucegi, with its capital at Bucharest, comprising ten counties; Mării, with its capital at Constanța, comprising four counties; Dunărea de Jos (Lower Danube), with its capital at Galați, comprising ten counties; Nistru, with its capital at Chișinău, comprising four counties; Prut, with its capital at Iași, comprising nine counties; Suceava, with its capital at Cernăuți, comprising seven counties; Mureș, with its capital at Alba Iulia, comprising nine counties; Someș, with its capital at Cluj, comprising seven counties; and Timiș, with its capital at Timișoara, comprising five counties (Carol II 1938, 3778-3779). Some of the Lands overlapped historical provinces: Timiș with Banat, Olt with Oltenia, and Suceava with Bukovina (Cocean 2010, 6).

The newly created Lands sought, as far as possible, to bring together counties belonging to different provinces. The Dunărea de Jos Land comprised ten counties of interwar Romania: eight counties from the Old Kingdom (Brăila, Covurlui, Fălciu, Putna, Râmnicu Sărat, Tecuci, Tulcea, and Tutova) and two from Bessarabia (Cahul and Ismail). The administrative center of the Land was Galați, which also housed the headquarters of the Royal Resident of the Land. The ten counties included forty-five districts (plăși), two municipalities, eight county-seat urban communes, fourteen non-seat urban communes, ten suburban communes, and 699 rural communes (SJAN Galați, F. 47; f. 88/1940, 14).

According to Article 194 of the new administrative law, within two months of promulgation, prefects, assisted by prefects, were required to analyse the revenue situation of rural communes and, after consulting village communities, to carry out a new administrative delimitation of communes. To ensure compliance with the provisions of Article 194 within the established timeframe, the Ministry of the Interior drafted instructions and regulations, which were transmitted to the royal residents of the Lands through ministerial address no.

32914 of 1 September 1938 (SJAN Iași, F. Royal Residency of the Prut Land, d. 45/85, 1938, 19–20). The deadline for completing the operation of reallocating communes in accordance with the new administrative law expired on 14 October 1938 (SJAN Iași, F. Royal Residency of the Prut Land, d. 45/85, 1938, 206). The territorial-administrative delimitation of rural communes in Romania's counties was completed in February 1939 (Tașcă 2011, 480).

At the time of the creation of the Lands, Bessarabia was administratively divided into nine counties and covered an area of 44 422 km², representing 15% of Romania's total area of 295 049 km² (Central Institute of Statistics 1940, 3).

According to the administrative law scholar Erast Diti Tarangul, the creation of the Land through the 1938 Administrative Law represented an attempt at regional organization within the framework of administrative decentralization: "the legislator of 1938 organizes the Land, comprising several counties, as a decentralized administrative unit, recognizing its legal personality, providing it with its own organs, assigning it a patrimony, and reserving for it a certain degree of administrative autonomy." At the same time, the legislator "also, by dividing the realm in Lands, sought to achieve administrative deconcentration, by installing the external services of the ministries within it and granting their heads, as well as the royal resident, independent decision-making powers" (Tarangul 1944, 180).

In his view, from a legal standpoint, the issue of the administrative region could be situated both within the framework of administrative decentralisation and that of administrative centralisation. Within the framework of decentralisation, the question arose whether, alongside the commune and the county – each endowed with decentralised administrative authorities—another decentralised administrative unit could be created to overlap them. In this case, the region could constitute a large territorial district comprising several counties, endowed with legal personality, its own patrimony, and its own authorities, enjoying administrative autonomy. Thus, the region would be interposed between the state and the counties. At the same time, the issue of the region could also be situated within the framework of administrative centralisation, in the context of administrative deconcentration. For this purpose, the state territory would need to be divided into large territorial entities within which the ministries' external services would operate, and the heads of these services would acquire independent decision-making powers. In administrative practice, this distinction between decentralised regions and deconcentrated regions is often not made. However, these represent two distinct issues that must be clearly separated, as each presents specific aspects; for this reason, misunderstandings and controversies have arisen. In discussing the issue of the region, some have referred to the decentralised region with its problems and aspects, while others have referred to the deconcentrated region with its own problems and aspects (Tarangul 1944, 177).

Whereas the administrative laws of 14 June 1925, 3 August 1929, and 27 March 1936 expressly established and regulated the legal personality of the county, under the new Administrative Law of 14 August 1938, the county became merely a district of control and deconcentration of general administration, losing the legal personality it had possessed since and before 1864. In this context, it should be noted that later, in September 1940, the county regained its legal personality. This was, in modern Romanian history, the only attempt to establish Lands as politico-administrative units, and it survived for only two years (Cocșan 2010, 6; Cornea 2013, 98).

3. The Royal Resident – the Pivot of the Land Administrative Hierarchy

The Lands were regional territorial districts endowed with legal personality and administered by Royal Residents, appointed by royal decree, who were vested with extensive competences in the administrative, economic, social, and cultural fields. Each ministry operated an external service attached to the Royal Resident, with the exception of justice, the army, foreign affairs, autonomous public utilities, higher education institutions, and commercial administrations (SJAN Galați, Fund 47, d. 1/1938, 2-61).

The Royal Resident was appointed by Royal Decree for a term of six years. Appointment to the position of Royal Resident was open to individuals who met the following conditions:

a) compliance with the requirements of Article 67 of the Romanian Constitution, which stipulated that only persons who were Romanian citizens for at least three generations could hold the office of minister, with the exception of those who had occupied such positions prior to the adoption of the new Constitution (The Constitution of 1938, promulgated by High Royal Decree No. 901 of 20 February 1938, was published in the Official Gazette, Part I, No. 48, of 27 February 1938);

b) professional status as a diplomat, university professor, or military officer holding the rank of general;

c) to be at least 35 years of age (Carol II 1938, art. 57).

The Royal Resident carried out his duties within the general norms established by the government and executed the instructions issued by ministers in matters pertaining to their respective departments. Conventionally, the competences and responsibilities of the Royal Resident may be divided into two distinct categories, determined by the dual nature of his position within the system of subnational public authorities: a) representative of the government in the Land; b) administrator of the Land.

The Royal Resident was the hierarchical superior of all external officials of the ministries, except those belonging to justice, the army, foreign affairs, higher education institutions, autonomous public utilities, and commercial administrations. In his capacity as representative of the Government, the Royal Resident exercised the following powers:

- supervised the activity of civil servants;
- monitored the activity of services;
- exercised disciplinary authority, being entitled to impose reprimands and salary deductions for a period of up to fifteen days; for more severe penalties, the Royal Resident was required to submit proposals to the competent ministry;
- granted leave to civil servants;
- resolved all complaints submitted by private individuals dissatisfied with decisions taken by services under his supervision; no complaint concerning the manner in which requests were resolved by the heads of external services could be addressed directly to the line ministries;
- handled all matters falling within the competence of the line ministries, within the limits of the delegation granted by decision of the Council of Ministers; ministers could suspend or revoke decisions of the Royal Resident only in the following cases: violation of the law, abuse of power, breach of instructions and norms established by ministries, or in the interest of State finances and public order;
- issued ordinances within the limits of laws and regulations, in accordance with the provisions of Article 16 of the Administrative Law of 14 August 1938;

- supervised the activity of autonomous public utilities and commercial administrations, informing the competent ministries of his findings;
- guided and supervised the implementation of the provisions of the Law on the Organization of the Nation and Territory for War of 27 April 1933 and, for this purpose, cooperated with the relevant military authorities, in accordance with the orders and instructions of the Ministry of the Interior;
- supervised and directed the entire public, administrative, economic, and social activity of the Land;
- convened the prefects of the Land on a quarterly basis in order to establish a unified plan of activity and possessed the authority to order prefects to take measures required by circumstances with regard to public order and security;
- in his capacity as representative of the Ministry of the Interior, adopted measures for the prevention of offences and ensured the maintenance of public order and security;
- supervised cultural, charitable, and social assistance institutions that are under the authority of the State, the Land, or the commune;
- could attend meetings of communal councils whenever he deemed it appropriate, his opinions being recorded in the minutes of the respective meetings (Carol II, 1938, arts. 62-67).

In his capacity as head of the Land administration and president of the council, the Royal Resident exercised the following responsibilities:

- administered the interests of the Land in accordance with norms established by laws and regulations;
- executed the decisions of the council;
- represented the Land, personally or through an authorised representative, before courts of law;
- signed acts concluded in the name of the Land and performed all acts necessary for the preservation of rights;
- ordered the authorisation of payments required for the administration of the Land;
- supervised and controlled the entire local administration within the Land, as well as associations, forest commons, and all public and public-utility establishments within the Land, being entitled to attend and preside over meetings of the respective councils;
- exercised tutelage over the local administration within the Land in cases specified by law;
- performed any other duties assigned to him by laws and regulations (Carol II 1938, art. 69).

The Royal Resident was assisted in the exercise of his duties by a Secretary General, who held the rank and salary of a ministerial secretary general and was appointed by royal decree. The Secretary General held the status of a career civil servant and formed part of the state's administrative hierarchy (Carol II 1938, art. 60).

The Royal Resident could delegate part of his competencies to the Secretary General and to prefects. Such delegation was made in writing, by decision, and communicated by posting or publication (Carol II 1938, art. 61).

4. The Lower Danube Land (1938–1940)

4.1. Territorial Delimitation and Strategic Significance

In terms of size, the Lower Danube Land was the second largest in Romania, with a total area of 37 958 km², representing 12, 86% of the country's area (Central Institute of Statistics 1940, 3), and the fourth by population according to the 1930 census (Ministry of Labor, Health, and Social Welfare 1931, 38-41).

The Lower Danube Land comprised 10 counties in Romania, belonging to different historical provinces. This situation is reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. Historical provinces to which the counties included in the Lower Danube *Ținut* belonged

| Province | County |
|------------|---|
| Bessarabia | Cahul, Ismail |
| Dobruja | Tulcea |
| Moldavia | Covurlui, Fălciu, Putna, Tecuci, Tutova |
| Muntenia | Brăila, Râmnicu Sărat |

Source: Central Institute of Statistics, 1940, p. 3

The administrative centre of the Land was the city of Galați, where the headquarters of the Land's Royal Resident was also located. The ten counties included districts 45 (rom. *plăși*), 2 municipalities, 8 county-seat urban communes, 14 non-seat urban communes, 10 suburban communes, and 699 rural communes (SJAN Galați, Fond 47, d. 88/1940, 14). The counties and urban communes included in the Lower Danube Land are presented in Table 2:

Table 2. Counties and urban communes included in the Lower Danube *Ținut*

| County | Urban communes |
|---------------|---|
| Brăila | <i>Brăila</i> |
| Cahul | <i>Cahul</i> , Leova |
| Covurlui | <i>Galați</i> |
| Fălciu | <i>Huși</i> , Fălciu |
| Ismail | <i>Ismail</i> , Bolgrad, Chilia Nouă, Reni, Vâlcov |
| Putna | <i>Focșani</i> , Adjud, Mărășești, Odobești, Panciu |
| Râmnicu Sărat | <i>Râmnicu Sărat</i> |
| Tecuci | <i>Tecuci</i> |
| Tulcea | <i>Tulcea</i> , Babadag, Isaccea, Măcin, Sulina |
| Tutova | <i>Bârlad</i> |

Note: City names printed in italics are county capitals.
Source: Central Institute of Statistics, 1940, p. 14.

By virtue of its position between the Danube and the Black Sea, the Lower Danube Land served as an important hub for foreign trade, river transport, grain exports, and connections to the Mediterranean Sea. The reorganisation aimed to enable an integrated administration of port and railway infrastructure to modernise the regional economy.

4.2. The Royal Residency of the Lower Danube Land

The administration of the Land was entrusted to the Royal Resident and to the Land Council.

The Land Council was composed of elected members and ex officio members. There were two categories of elected members: a) members elected by the communal councils within the Land; b) members elected by the Chambers of Agriculture, Commerce, Industry, and Labour within the Land.

Members elected by the communal councils were chosen as follows: the elected members of the communal councils from each county, assembled in a single electoral college at the county seat, elected two members to the Land council from among themselves. The elected members of the councils of the Chambers of Agriculture, Commerce and Industry, and Labour within the Land, forming separate colleges, each electing one member from among themselves (Carol II 1938, arts. 71-74).

The ex officio members of the Land council were: a) the Rector of the university, or the most senior director of the highest-level or secondary school in the Land; b) the State Engineer, the highest-ranking and most senior in the Land; c) the State Physician, the highest-ranking and most senior in the Land; in Lands where there were medical faculties, the professor of hygiene was also included; d) the State Veterinary Physician, the highest-ranking and most senior in the Land; e) the State Agronomist Engineer, the highest-ranking and most senior in the Land; f) the State Forestry Engineer, the highest-ranking and most senior in the Land; g) the president of the oldest and most important social assistance society in the Land; h) the highest-ranking representative of the Cultural Home (Căminul cultural) charged with the mandatory social service; i) the Land inspector of the "Straja Țării" (The Sentinel of the Motherland – a youth organization in the Kingdom of Romania, created in 1935 by King Carol II to counter the growing influence of the Iron Guard).

The designation of ex officio members was made by the Minister of the Interior, based on the proposal of the Royal Resident.

The term of office of the elected members of the Land Council was six years, while the mandate of ex officio members expired upon the termination of their respective functions (Carol II 1938, arts. 75-76).

The Land Council had initiative and could decide on matters of local interest, exercising two categories of competences: deliberative and consultative. The Land Council had the right to decide in the following cases:

- a) the creation of revenues of any kind and the levying of taxes, fees, and contributions, within the limits set by law;
- b) voting on the Land's revenue and expenditure budget and approving the annual management accounts;
- c) contracting loans for the Land, alienations, encumbrances of real estate, purchases, exchanges, concessions, acceptance of donations and bequests, settlements, waivers, and acknowledgements of rights, when their value exceeded one twentieth of the ordinary revenue budget.

The Land Council issued opinions to the Royal Resident in cases where it was consulted. Likewise, the Council could submit any proposal of public interest concerning the Land (Carol II 1938, arts. 80-83).

The reorganisation of public services represented one of the major stakes of the reform. The Lower Danube Land had a complex economic profile, and the royal residency in Galați had to coordinate multiple services simultaneously. Within the Land, in accordance with Article 123 of the 1938 Administrative Law, the following mandatory services operated:

administrative, financial, technical, agricultural, zootechnical and veterinary, social assistance and social hygiene, education, administrative litigation, mobilisation, and the organisation of the nation and territory for war. The Land could also create additional services by regulation. The Land services could function either at their seat or at the county seats, as necessary (Carol II 1938, art. 123).

The coordination of these structures proved difficult. Each service continued to receive technical instructions directly from the competent line ministry, which generated a dual system of authority – the royal residency versus the ministry. In some cases, instructions were contradictory and local officials oscillated between obedience to the centre and obedience to the Land's royal residency.

4.3. Profile of the Royal Residents

During the two years of application of the 1938 Administrative Law (14 August 1938 – 21 September 1940), the Lower Danube Land was led by three Royal Residents.

The first Royal Resident of the Lower Danube Land was the Cluj-based university professor Victor G. Cădere. At the time of his appointment, Victor G. Cădere held the position of Romania's Minister Plenipotentiary in Belgrade. He exercised the duties of Royal Resident until January 1939, after which he returned to Belgrade as ambassador (Tuluş 2011, 178-179). Victor G. Cădere introduced the method of working visits to the counties, accelerating the fulfilment of objectives, strengthening the capacity of local decision-making by executive actors, and fostering dialogue between the Land and county citizens, which proved decisive. He paid particular attention to patriotic events, the reconstruction of bridges, and the proper functioning of the State's deconcentrated institutions operating within the territorial range of the Land (Iliescu 2011, 269).

The second Royal Resident of the Lower Danube Land was the university professor Constantin C. Giurescu, appointed on 1 February 1939. During eight months of activity, C.C. Giurescu made efforts to relaunch the Land's predominantly agricultural economy by implementing drought-combat measures, encouraging the cultivation of industrial crops suited to soil and climatic conditions, and developing and expanding irrigation systems, as well as afforesting certain lands. A total of 444 km of county and communal roads were rebuilt, 2,299 km of roadway were repaired, and over 1,000 bridges were built or repaired. C.C. Giurescu also demonstrated interest in the development of education, the health system, culture, and the needs of religious denominations within the Land, providing financial support for the construction and rehabilitation of schools, of dispensaries, of public baths, of a hospital, and of the places of worship (Tuluş 2011, 179-180). His daily program consistently included inspections, which he considered particularly important for fulfilling the tasks of his mandate (Iliescu 2011, 269).

The third and final Royal Resident of the Lower Danube Land was Paul D. Goma, who was promoted from the position of Secretary General of the Bucegi Land. P. Goma sought to continue the activities initiated by his predecessor, but the outbreak of war and lack of funds prevented him from achieving the same results (Iliescu 2011, 270).

The Lower Danube Land also had two Secretaries General. The first was Mihail Miloteanu, who successfully exercised the duties of his office between 14 August 1938 and 21 June 1940. After being transferred to the Ministry of the Interior, he was replaced by Alexandru Pretorian, former Secretary General of the Olt Land (Tuluş 2011, 180-181).

5. Administrative Dysfunctions of the Land Administrative System

At the political level, the Land administrative system consolidated the power of the monarchy, but it compromised the idea of local autonomy.

The 1938 Administrative Law abolished the prefects' autonomy in decision-making. They became "delegates of the Royal Resident in the county," executing orders issued from Galați. Prefects were no longer permitted to communicate directly with ministries, except through the royal residency.

This subordination produced a complete verticalization of administrative authority: from King Carol II, through the Royal Resident, to the prefect and finally to the mayor. In practical terms, this arrangement complicated decision-making flows and weakened local accountability.

In communes, mayors were appointed by the prefect with the royal residency's endorsement. They were required to be "politically neutral" and "devoted to the monarchy." In reality, these appointments aimed to remove politicised cadres and install individuals whose loyalty was considered guaranteed.

Despite an appearance of coherence, the Land administrative system faced major implementation difficulties, such as: a) inconsistency of competences: many domains (education, health, finance) were managed simultaneously by ministries and by Land directorates; b) an insufficient supply of qualified administrative personnel; c) delays in the allocation of budgetary funds; d) overlap of responsibilities with prefectures, which continued to function formally.

These problems led to excessive bureaucratisation and to a loss of administrative efficiency. Rather than streamlining decision-making, the Land level added an additional layer of control and reporting.

The problems affecting the functionality of the Land administrative system were also signalled in the confidential report (no. 595 of 24 August 1939) of the Secretary General of the Lower Danube Land, Mihail Miloteanu, addressed to the Prime Minister concerning the administrative dysfunctions existing in the activity of Land administration.

One year after the implementation of the 1938 Administrative Law, Mihail Miloteanu observed that only six ministries (National Education, Interior, Agriculture and Domains; Finance; National Economy; and Public Works and Communications) had delegated competences to the Royal Residents through ministerial decisions or decisions of the Council of Ministers, thereby enabling them to fulfil their mission.

There were, however, ministries that had not delegated any competences to the Royal Residents – Public Health and Social Assistance, Labour, and Religious Denominations – or that had delegated entirely insignificant competences, as in the case of the Ministry of the National Economy.

Starting from the premise that the Lower Danube Land had launched its own campaign in the field of public health, especially regarding the construction of dispensaries, public baths, wells, and similar facilities, and given that deviations requiring sanctioning or acts meriting encouragement were identified among medical personnel, M. Miloteanu considered "that it is imperatively necessary for this Ministry, as well as, to grant the Land a significant delegation of competences, all the more so since the Land also hosts a general sanitary inspector, who could be a valuable collaborator" (SJAN Galați, F. 47, f. 9/1939, 59). The same situation applied to the Ministry of Labour, where various problems arose because,

within the Lower Danube Land, there were important factories, ports, workers' schools, and a labour inspectorate.

With regard to the Ministry of Religious Denominations, a delegation of competences to the Royal Residents was likewise necessary because a series of conflictual cases had been identified between administrative authorities and priests, and between teachers and priests. The Royal Resident could not settle such conflicts because he had no means of action with regard to priests.

At the same time, part of the competences granted by the Council of Ministers and ministerial decisions were withdrawn either by subsequent decisions or by laws. Thus, the Ministry of Agriculture and Domains decided that all matters concerning the planting of fruit trees, wherever such plantations were undertaken, fell within the competence of agronomist engineers, through the Directorate of Viticulture and Horticulture. Since the Lower Danube Land had initiated a campaign to plant communal orchards, this decision affected the proper conduct of the works. The ministerial decision contradicted the Council of Ministers' decision no. 2895/11.11.1938, which in Article 2 delegated to the Royal Residents the supervision of vine and fruit-tree nurseries, the control of their trade, and the organisation of viticultural and pomological products – thereby implicitly including the supervision of vine and fruit-tree planting.

The same ministry, through a decision of 30 May 1939 (no. 153800), withdrew from Royal Residents the right to grant leave to agricultural officials, thereby failing to comply with a prior decision of the Council of Ministers.

According to the provisions of the new primary education law, the Royal Resident could no longer impose any sanction on members of the teaching staff of any level, thereby removing an explicit competence previously approved for him by the Council of Ministers' decision of 5 October 1938.

Based on his own experience and following numerous inspections, M. Miloteanu noted: "It is absolutely necessary for the Royal Resident to supervise the proper functioning of primary education. Our schools suffer especially because oversight is carried out rarely and not always effectively. By removing through this law the Royal Resident's right to sanction, it means that, implicitly, the most effective control is obstructed" (SJAN Galați, F. 47, f. 9/1939, 59–60).

In general, M. Miloteanu observed, cooperation between ministries and the Land was cumbersome, especially because the general inspectors seconded to the Lands were accountable to two authorities whose conceptions were often antagonistic. He considered that it was "absolutely necessary that the general inspectors who provide the link between the Lands and the departments be regarded as organs dependent on the Land in the first place, thereby avoiding the current uncertainties inherent to all beginnings" (SJAN Galați, F. 47, f. 9/1939, 60). Consequently, in the view of the Secretary General of the Lower Danube Land, it was "necessary to broaden the competences granted to Royal Residents, to extend delegations of competences to all ministries (except National Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Justice), and to remove excessively rigid bureaucratic ties between ministries and the Land, so as not to paralyze the latter's creative activity and locally adapted initiative, as envisaged in the Administrative Law..." (SJAN Galați, F. 47, f. 9/1939, 61).

Conclusions

Between 1938 and 1940, Romania experienced a unique episode of formal administrative regionalism in which the idea of modernisation was appropriated by authoritarianism. The Lands constituted an experiment in centralised decentralisation – a contradiction in terms, yet illustrative of the forced modernisation of the interwar state.

The analysis of available data indicates that the 1938 reform was structurally incoherent and contradictory in its objectives: a) it pursued modernisation yet produced the rigidification of the subnational administrative system; b) it proclaimed decentralisation yet generated excessive centralisation; c) it created modern institutions, yet deprived them of autonomy.

The effects of the reform were limited by the following factors: a) the financial dependence of subnational authorities on central authorities; b) the lack of legal clarity regarding the competences assigned to subnational public authorities; c) the short duration of the application of the Land administrative system – only two years.

Although Carlist regionalism functioned as an ideological instrument rather than a policy of territorial development, the analysis of the establishment and functioning of the Lower Danube Land shows that the modernising discourse was not purely formal. There were genuine attempts at planning and professionalisation, but these were subordinated to political control. The Lower Danube Land exemplifies these limitations: a region with considerable economic potential, constrained by bureaucracy and a lack of resources. Initiated projects remained unrealised, and civil servants were insufficiently prepared for regional administration. At the same time, although the reform failed to create efficient regional administration, it contributed substantially to the standardisation of administrative procedures.

From the perspective of administrative science, the Lands represented an experiment in “controlled administrative regionalism,” lacking real autonomy but noteworthy for its attempt at the functional integration of deconcentrated services. The 1938–1940 experiment demonstrates that administrative modernisation without democratisation generates institutional imbalances. The Lower Danube Land, although created in the name of efficiency, became a symbol of centralism disguised as regionalism.

The administrative reform of 1938 and the experience of the Lower Danube Land remain instructive for public policy: regionalisation imposed from above can produce only the appearance of modernisation. The absence of local participation, autonomous resources, and a democratic ethos transforms any administrative system into a mechanism of control.

Even under an authoritarian regime, the regional idea endured, confirming the structural need for balance between the centre and the territory. In the long term, the 1938 administrative reform introduced into Romanian administrative culture the concept of the region as a planning unit – a lasting conceptual legacy.

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