Comparative evaluation of the concepts of administrative-territorial reform in Moldova

Mihai Roscovan[1], Andrei Russu[2]
[1]Conf., PhD ec., Business Consulting Institute, Chisinau, ORCID: 0000-0002-1468-0620, mihai.roscovan@bci.md
[2]PhD Student, Moldova State University, Chisinau, onorislegis@gmail.com

Abstract

Administrative-territorial reform is one of the essential conditions for the modernization of local public administration in the Republic of Moldova. Territorial fragmentation reduced administrative and fiscal capacity of numerous administrative-territorial units, unequal access to public services and demographic decline require the identification of a reorganization model adapted to national realities and the objective of European integration. The article makes a comparative assessment of four contemporary reform concepts: the model promoted by the Government of the Republic of Moldova, the Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova model, the Integrated Functional Administrative Reform and the model proposed by the think-thank Europe 2028 initiative. The research combines the literature review with a multi-criteria evaluation based on administrative, financial-budgetary, socio-economic and governance criteria. The article concludes that a sustainable reform must be based on a synthesis scenario, combining territorial consolidation, fiscal decentralization, democratic representation, phased implementation and continuous evaluation of results.

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Introduction

Administrative-territorial reform is one of the most complex and persistent issues on the agenda of modernization of public administration in the Republic of Moldova. In the last two decades, numerous studies, strategies and public policy proposals have highlighted the need to reduce territorial fragmentation, strengthen the administrative capacity of local public authorities and improve the quality of public services provided to citizens.

The acceleration of the debates in the last two years has led to the outlining of distinct reform concepts. The concept promoted by the Government emphasizes the amalgamation of administrative-territorial units and the reorganization of the second level of local public administration [2]. The Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova (CALM) concept favors asymmetric decentralization and inter-community cooperation [5]. The Integrated

Functional Administrative Reform (RAFI) model proposes a multidimensional and gradual approach [6], and the Europe 2028 (UE28) initiative promotes a single-level model inspired by the experience of the Baltic States [7].

The purpose of the article is to comparative the main concepts of administrative-territorial reform promoted in the Republic of Moldova, by examining their conceptual foundations, proposed institutional mechanisms and their capacity to respond to the challenges of local public administration. The analysis uses criteria on administrative viability, functional efficiency, fiscal sustainability, democratic representativeness, territorial development and compatibility with the objectives of European integration.

The contribution of the paper consists in the application of a unitary analytical framework to the four concepts, as well as in the formulation of a synthesis scenario that capitalizes on their complementary elements. The article is not aimed at the mechanical designation of a single superior model, but at the identification of institutional compromises and the necessary conditions for sustainable reform.

The literature and concept review

The literature highlights the existence of persistent structural deficiencies of the administrative-territorial system: excessive fragmentation of administrative-territorial units, reduced administrative capacity, fiscal imbalances and difficulties in uniform provision of public services. The responses formulated in public policies are mainly based on amalgamation, inter-community cooperation, asymmetric decentralization and the reorganization of the second level of local public administration. The 2012 National Decentralization Strategy [1] enshrined the reduction of fragmentation and the strengthening of administrative capacity as strategic objectives, promoting a gradual approach, oriented towards local autonomy and the efficiency of services.

The Joint Program for Integrated Local Development [3] linked administrative-territorial fragmentation with economic inefficiency, reduced fiscal capacity and difficulties in providing public services, especially in rural areas. In this framework, three instruments were promoted: administrative-territorial amalgamation, inter-community cooperation and asymmetrical decentralization. At the same time, the reorganization of the second level into regional structures capable of supporting economic development and access to European funding was discussed. Subsequent studies, including the spatial optimization model developed with the support of GIZ, introduced quantifiable criteria such as population, fiscal capacity and road distance from the administrative center [4].

The Public Administration Reform Strategy 2023-2030 promotes voluntary

amalgamation as a tool for administrative consolidation, using financial incentives and monitoring mechanisms [2]. However, the contemporary debate goes beyond the simple opposition between amalgamation and maintaining the existing structure, including options on the distribution of competences, financial autonomy, the system of representation and the organization of regional functions.

The methodology

The research uses a qualitative and multi-criteria approach to assess the main concepts of administrative-territorial reform promoted in the Republic of Moldova. In the first stage, the documentary analysis of the relevant academic studies and public policy documents, including national strategies, under UNDP and GIZ studies, as well as the concept documents associated with the Government's models, CALM, RAFI and UE28, was carried out.

The analytical framework comprises five conceptual dimensions: diagnosis of structural problems; instruments of administrative-territorial consolidation; organization of the second level of local public administration; relationship between voluntary and normative mechanisms; correlation of reform with decentralization and European integration.

The multi-criteria assessment includes fifteen criteria grouped into four areas. The administrative area examines the reduction of fragmentation, administrative capacity, access to services and the efficiency of the decision-making process. The financial-budgetary area includes implementation costs, administrative savings, own revenue generation capacity and dependence on transfers from the state budget. The socio-economic area covers the population's access to services, territorial equity, local economic development and employment. The governance area examines democratic representativeness, local autonomy, transparency and institutional accountability.

The evaluation was carried out with the participation of eleven national and international experts with experience in public administration, decentralization, local public finances and territorial development. Each expert evaluated the scenarios on a scale from 1 to 5, where a value of 1 indicates a very unfavorable impact, and a value of 5 indicates a very favorable impact. For each criterion, the arithmetic average of the scores awarded by the experts was calculated, and the results were aggregated at the level of the four evaluation areas.

To avoid overestimating the potential benefits, the aggregate score was adjusted by applying a risk coefficient, reflecting political, administrative, financial and social feasibility. The formula used is:

Adjusted score = Aggregate score × (1 - Risk coefficient).

The risk assessment takes into account political acceptance, support for local authorities

and the population, complexity of institutional changes, costs, administrative capacity, risk of litigation or bottlenecks and experience of comparable reforms. Depending on the result, the scenarios were classified into three categories: low risk, between 0% and 15%; moderate risk, between 16% and 25%; high risk, above 25%. RAFI is analyzed qualitatively, as the data available in the evaluation exercise did not allow the calculation of a comparable quantitative score. This limitation must be taken into account when interpreting the results).

Benchmarking of reform concepts

The results of evaluation of territorial reform concepts is presented in the following figures:

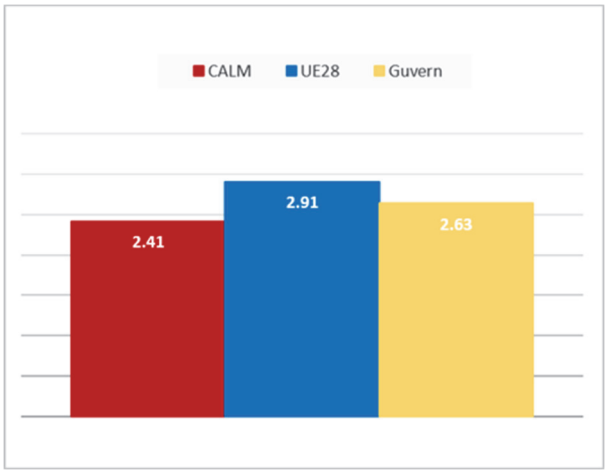


Figure 1. Adjusted Scores for the Evaluation of Territorial Reform Concepts

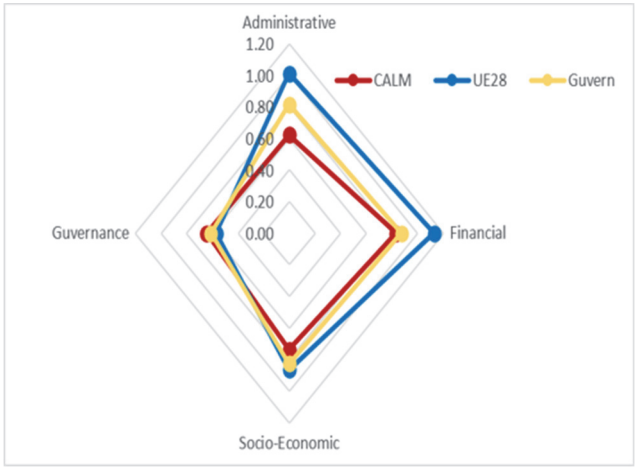


Figure 2. Scores by criteria category

Government concept: gradual consolidation and implementation capacity

The concept promoted by the Government of the Republic of Moldova is based on the

premise that excessive fragmentation at the first administrative level is one of the main causes of limited institutional capacity. The proposed solution involves consolidating administrative-territorial units through amalgamation and reorganizing the second administrative level by re-establishing counties. The model's principal advantage is its operational character. It is supported by a legislative framework, implementation mechanisms, and dedicated financial resources. Financial incentives for amalgamation, together with experience gained through pilot initiatives, increase the prospects for achieving tangible institutional change.

The model's limitations arise from its predominant reliance on demographic criteria and the insufficient consideration of functional, geographical, and socioeconomic factors. Moreover, a transition from voluntary to mandatory amalgamation could generate political and social resistance. The model achieves a final adjusted score of 2.63, with a risk coefficient of 16%. Contributions across the four evaluation areas are relatively balanced: financial-budgetary (0.87), socioeconomic (0.82), administrative (0.81), and governance (0.64), without revealing a clearly dominant strength. Its main weaknesses concern territorial equity and its overall efficiency compared with the other scenarios. Consequently, the government model represents an intermediate, although comparatively less competitive, reform option.

CALM concept: local autonomy and subsidiarity

The CALM model is grounded in the principles of subsidiarity and local autonomy. It advocates the abolition of districts, the strengthening of municipalities, the expansion of inter-municipal cooperation, and the application of asymmetric decentralization.

The model's primary strength lies in its emphasis on democratic representativeness, financial autonomy, and decision-making that is closer to citizens. In the multi-criteria assessment, it performs particularly well in the socio-economic and governance dimensions, reflecting its focus on territorial equity, local participation, and democratic legitimacy.

Its main weakness is the preservation of a large number of small local authorities. While inter-municipal cooperation can improve service delivery, it cannot fully substitute for the institutional capacity of larger and more consolidated administrative units. Furthermore, the model's strong reliance on voluntary mechanisms may slow the pace of territorial restructuring and limit the reduction of administrative fragmentation.

The model achieves a final adjusted score of 2.41, with a risk coefficient of 15%. Its strongest contributions come from the socio-economic (0.84) and governance (0.79) dimensions, where it performs particularly well in terms of territorial equity and democratic

representation. The financial dimension (0.82) delivers moderate results, while the administrative dimension (0.52) remains its weakest area, constrained by persistent fragmentation and limited administrative capacity. Overall, the CALM model prioritizes social cohesion, democratic governance, and local autonomy, but does so at the expense of administrative efficiency and structural consolidation.

RAFI: functional, integrated and differentiated approach

The Integrated Functional Administrative Reform goes beyond the perspective of border reorganization and deals with administrative capacity as a result of the interaction between territorial, institutional, functional, financial and human dimensions.

The model combines the normative reorganization of very small localities, the stimulation of voluntary amalgamation, inter-community cooperation and the reorganization of the second level into functional counties. Its advantage is adaptability to territorial heterogeneity and the possibility of adjusting policies through ex-post monitoring and evaluation.

Complexity is the main limitation. The application of a differentiated system requires significant administrative and coordination capacities. RAFI was not included in the quantitative assessment, so its positioning in relation to the other scenarios remains a qualitative one.

Europe 2028: radical consolidation and structural efficiency

The UE28 scenario proposes the organization of local public administration on a single administrative level, replacing the existing municipalities and districts with approximately 40 large municipal administrations. Administrative proximity would be preserved through the establishment of local prefectural representatives (praetors) operating within component communities. The model achieves the highest adjusted final score of 2.91, with a risk coefficient of 19%. This result reflects its strong potential to reduce territorial fragmentation, strengthen fiscal consolidation, and enhance the capacity to manage public services, infrastructure, and development projects. Its performance is driven primarily by the financial (1.13) and administrative (1.01) dimensions, indicating a high level of efficiency, institutional capacity, and long-term sustainability. The socio-economic contribution (0.87) is also substantial, reflecting improved access to services and development opportunities.

Governance, however, records the lowest contribution (0.57), highlighting concerns regarding local representation and democratic proximity. Overall, the Europe 2028 scenario emerges as the most balanced and highest-performing option among the reform concepts evaluated. However,

the model also entails significant political and social costs. The dismantling of existing local government structures requires broad political consensus, considerable transitional capacity, and effective safeguards to ensure the representation of smaller communities. Furthermore, the successful operation of a single-tier administrative system would require the development of new institutional arrangements for coordinating regional functions and maintaining accountability. Consequently, while Europe 2028 offers the greatest potential for administrative efficiency and fiscal sustainability, its implementation would depend on strong political commitment, careful transition management, and sustained public support.

Summary of results

The analysis highlights two major orientations. The first prioritizes administrative efficiency and institutional strengthening, being represented by Europe 2028 and, in a gradual form, by the governmental concept. The second emphasizes democratic legitimacy, local autonomy and subsidiarity, being represented by CALM. RAFI occupies an integrative position, combining territorial, functional and institutional instruments.

No single model provides complete answers. The government concept has implementation tools but faces difficulties of local acceptance. CALM protects autonomy and representation but insufficiently reduces fragmentation. Europe 2028 maximizes structural efficiency but generates transition costs and political risks. RAFI provides a coherent conceptual synthesis but requires a high institutional capacity. The differences between models reflect real tensions between efficiency and democracy, speed and legitimacy, uniformity and territorial adaptation. Therefore, the choice should not be formulated strictly between voluntarism and normativism, but in terms of a proportionate and predictable combination of instruments.

The results support the development of a synthesis scenario that combines the objective of reducing territorial fragmentation and strengthening fiscal consolidation advanced by the Europe 2028 model, the emphasis on local autonomy and democratic representation promoted by CALM, the implementation capacity of the Government concept, and the functional, gradual, and differentiated approach proposed by RAFI.

The synthesis scenario would be based on the following principles:

- ***Phasing and predictability:*** adoption of a stable public implementation calendar aligned with budgetary and administrative cycles.
- ***Multidimensional criteria:*** use of population size, fiscal capacity, accessibility, geographical conditions, infrastructure, and functional territorial linkages as key determinants of territorial organization.

- ***Combination of incentives and normative instruments:*** gradual and proportionate application of state intervention, following the exhaustion of voluntary measures and an objective assessment of local administrative capacity.
- ***Proximity and representation***: maintenance of local service delivery points and the establishment of representative mechanisms for constituent communities within larger administrative units.
- ***Fiscal decentralization:*** alignment of transferred competences with adequate, predictable revenue sources and transparent fiscal equalization mechanisms.
- ***Monitoring and evaluation:*** continuous assessment of implementation costs, service quality, financial autonomy, territorial equity, and citizen satisfaction.

This scenario seeks to reconcile the objectives of administrative efficiency, fiscal sustainability, democratic legitimacy, and territorial cohesion. Rather than treating the competing reform concepts as mutually exclusive alternatives, it integrates their complementary strengths into a coherent framework capable of addressing the structural challenges of local public administration in the Republic of Moldova].

Conclusions and recommendations

The comparative assessment demonstrates a broad consensus regarding the need to reduce territorial fragmentation and strengthen administrative capacity. At the same time, it highlights significant differences among the reform concepts in terms of institutional design, implementation mechanisms, and the pace of transformation.

The evaluation confirms that no single model achieves optimal results across all dimensions. The Europe 2028 scenario offers the greatest potential for administrative efficiency and fiscal sustainability, but it requires a profound restructuring of the existing system of local government. The CALM model provides stronger safeguards for local autonomy, democratic representation, and citizen participation, yet it does not sufficiently address the challenges associated with territorial fragmentation. The Government's concept is pragmatic and operationally feasible, supported by existing implementation instruments, but it would benefit from a broader set of territorial criteria and stronger guarantees of democratic legitimacy. RAFI presents the most comprehensive and flexible conceptual framework, integrating territorial, functional, and institutional perspectives; however, its successful implementation would require substantial administrative capacity and coordination.

The findings suggest that the most viable reform option is a synthesis scenario that combines territorial consolidation, fiscal decentralization, democratic representation, phased implementation, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. Administrative-

territorial reform should be understood not merely as a process of redrawing boundaries, but as a broader transformation of local public governance aimed at improving institutional performance, service delivery, and territorial development.

Ultimately, the success of the reform will depend not only on the quality of its technical design, but also on the ability to build and maintain broad political and social consensus. In the context of European integration, demographic decline, and increasing fiscal pressures, the Republic of Moldova can neither preserve the status quo nor pursue a radical transformation without adequate public support. Dialogue, predictability, transparency, and a balanced combination of policy instruments are therefore essential prerequisites for the modernization of local public administration and the sustainable development of the country's territories.

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