

The Institution of the Prefecture in Romania (1864–1892): Between social relations of patronage and political networks

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Abstract: Historical research on the institution of the prefecture in Romania (United Principalities) in the 19th century, as a fundamental institution of modern state administration, involves several levels of analysis, combining institutional, political and social history. Our paper will focus on several aspects, in relation to a number of historical features specific to the Romanian case. These features stem from the implementation of a Western-origin institutional model in Romania, after the union of the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, until the end of the 19th century. During this period, a maturation of the modern administration can be observed, both legislatively and functionally.

In addition to the legislative framework of this period (the communal law of April 1864, amended in March 1872 and March 1883, the law on county councils of April 1864 and the law on the organization of administrative authorities of November 1892), other factors are also noteworthy, which made the prefect in Romania not only a government agent at the local level, but also a county administrator: the patronage relations of the Romanian elite – a legacy of the Old Regime, and the gradual consolidation of the power networks of the governing political parties, both of which had a relevant impact on the selection process of local officials and the conduct of parliamentary elections.

Key words: Institutional history, administrative reform, ispravnik, prefect

Rezumat: Cercetarea istorică a instituției prefecturii în România (Principatele Unite) în secolul al XIX-lea, ca instituție fundamentală

a administrației de stat moderne, implică mai multe niveluri de analiză, combinând istoria instituțională cu istoria politică și socială. Ne vom concentra asupra câtorva aspecte, în legătură cu unele trăsături istorice specifice cazului românesc, rezultate din aplicarea unui model instituțional de origine occidentală în România, după unirea Principatelor Moldovei și Valahiei, până la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea, când se poate observa o maturizare a administrației moderne, atât din punct de vedere legislativ, cât și funcțional.

Pe lângă cadrul legislativ al acestei perioade (legea comunală din aprilie 1864, modificată în martie 1872 și martie 1883, legea consiliilor județene din aprilie 1864 și legea de organizare a autorităților administrative din noiembrie 1892), se remarcă și alți factori care au făcut ca prefectul să fie în România nu doar un agent guvernamental la nivel local, ci și un administrator al județului: relațiile de patronaj proprii elitei românești, moștenire a Vechiului Regim și consolidarea treptată a rețelelor de putere ale partidelor politice guvernamentale, ambele având un impact relevant în procesul de selecție al funcționarilor de la nivel local și în desfășurarea alegerilor parlamentare.

Cuvinte-cheie: istorie instituțională, reformă, ispravnic, prefect

Introduction

In a famous drama written by one of the greatest Romanian authors, Ion Luca Caragiale, the central figures in the plot competing for the leading position on the Liberal Party's county electoral list are Prefect Tipătescu and the owner of the most important local newspaper, Cațavencu. Nothing spectacular or unusual so far, but the narrative thread captures the essence of the distribution of power at the local level, also in addition to the consequences of the social and political transformations that took place in Romania in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹ Tipătescu, far from being a local potentate, proves to actually be an ambitious man, elevated by the protection and the services he provides to the true power holders – prestigious families stemming from the estate owners, whose representative, Trahanache, leads the local branch of the party. In contrast to Tipătescu, the journalist Cațavencu acquired a certain notoriety among the public and voters over time. Moreover, he established solid connections with the local bourgeoisie, patronizing the company Aurora

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¹ Garabet Ibrăileanu, *Spiritul critic în cultura românească* (Iași: Editura revistei „Viața Românească”, 1909), 227–228.

Română (Romanian Aurora). Willing to enter into politics using this precious social and legitimacy capital, he personifies the new local power networks ready to compete with the old ones.² From this titanic clash, presented in touches full of humour, another character emerges victorious, Dandanache, who had been sent to the county by the party's head office, with orders to be placed first on the electoral list. This is how Caragiale masterfully ended his portrayal of the local power dynamics in the Romanian society of 1890.

Translating this narrative into historical language, it can be said that the history of the institution of the prefect in Romania, from its establishment during the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza until the end of the nineteenth century, is to a large extent the result of the interference of several essential factors: *firstly*, the legislation on administrative organization, together with one of its main consequences, namely the emergence of a new social category, the body of state officials;³ *secondly*, the power networks of families descended from the old nobility, founded on historical, social and genealogical prestige, used to patronize the appointment of county officials (*ispravnik*, then *prefect*) and to influence their conduct in public service;⁴ *thirdly*, the provincial political parties emerged after the Union of 1859 (Moldavian and Wallachian), then, after 1880, the political parties with national coverage, as agents of the government;⁵ *fourthly*, the rising local bourgeoisie, big merchants, bankers, estate tenants, who, through the power of money, tried to exert a certain influence on the activity of the prefects, and in the local political game, speculating the former boyars' need for liquid assets and the interest of the liberal and conservative parties to organize well-structured and stable county branches.⁶

Nonetheless, in the study of this topic, belonging to the history of modern state building, the case of the institution of *prefect* requires an analysis of the institutional architecture, by delving into the socio-

² Pompiliu Constantinescu, *Scrieri*, II (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1967), 131.

³ Manuel Guțan, *Istoria administrației publice românești*, 2nd ed. (Bucharest: Editura Hamangiu, 2006), 152–154; Andrei Florin Sora, *Servir l'état roumain, Le corps préfectoral, 1866-1940* (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, 2011), 101–105, 130–133.

⁴ About the numerous figures from the boyar families of Iași, Bucharest and from counties that held the office of prefect, see Rudolf Suțu, *Iașii de odinioară*, II, (Iași: Viața Românească, 1928); M. Theodorian-Carada, *Efimeridele: Însemnări și amintiri*, I (Bucharest: Tipografia "Capitalei", 1930); Dim R. Rosetti, *Dicționarul contemporanilor*, 1st ed. (Bucharest: Editura "Populară", 1897).

⁵ Andrei Florin Sora, "La politisation de la fonction de préfet dans la Roumanie moderne (1866-1916)," in *Penser le XIX^e siècle: Nouveaux chantiers de recherche*, Silvia Marton, Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu (eds.) (Iași: Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", 2013), 203–218.

⁶ Sorin Alexandrescu, *Privind înapoi, modernitatea* (Bucharest: Univers, 1999), 95–98.

political context, the administrative tradition, and the ideological influences.⁷ In the Romanian case, the historical investigation focused mainly on the issue of foreign influences (Franco-Belgian), and on the solutions promoted by the political parties, reflected in the legislation adopted over time. Less attention has been paid to the legacy of the Old Regime, embodied in the *ispravnik* institution, which aligns with a distinct political and institutional model (*Politzestaat, Regulatory state*), and the patronage relations specific to the Romanian elite.

Legal framework, administrative models and practices

The model of government proper to the political regime established by the Organic Regulations (1831), inherited by the modern Romanian state at its foundation through the union of Moldavia and Wallachia (1859), placed the institution of the *ispravnik* at the centre of the administrative system, as the main organ of the Ministry of Internal Affairs at the local level: “the entire administration of the interior shall henceforth be entrusted to The Department of Internal Affairs,” a new institution created by the Organic Regulations, and “the *ispravniks* shall be under its immediate command.” The three sections or offices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs – the first (municipal councils, urban and rural police, state food depots, prevention of epidemics, market trading); the second (supervision of agricultural activities and of compliance with the organic law on the labour relations between village owners and peasants, maintenance of the roads and bridges); the third (statistics of inhabitants and resources, tax censuses, forestry fund management) – carried out the Minister’s orders through the *ispravniks*, who were responsible for their implementation.⁸ The provisions of the other ministries (finance, army, justice; cults and public instruction) were to be forwarded to the *ispravniks* only through the State Secretariat – a ministry inspired, in structure and functions, by the Russian Ministry of Control⁹ –, which determined

⁷ Martin Painter, Guy B. Peters, *Tradition and Public Administration*, (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3–17; Gildas Tanguy, Jean-Michel Eymeri-Douzans, “Variations on the Prefectoral Figure in Europe: Some Research Questions and an Ideal-Type for a Comparison”, in *Prefects, Governors and Commissioners Territorial Representatives of the State in Europe*, Gildas Tanguy and Jean-Michel Eymeri-Douzans (eds.) (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 5.

⁸ “Reglement organicesc a Moldovei cuprins în noi capite, 1831,” in *Regulamentul organic al Moldovei*, Dumitru Vitcu and Gabriel Bădărău (eds.) (Iași: Junimea, 2004), 254–255.

⁹ Ivan Golovine, *Histoire d'Alexandre 1^{er} empereur de Russie* (Leipzig, Paris: s.n., 1859), 23; Eduard Thaden, *Russia's Western Borderlands, 1710-1870* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 117–118.

whether the tasks in question were to be carried out by the *ispravniks* or by other local institutions, in accordance with the Organic Regulation.¹⁰

Another important task of the *ispravniks* was organizing the elections for the Public Assembly in the counties¹¹ and for the “villages’ watchmen,” a type of sub-prefects, who, once elected by the inhabitants who owned villages or parts of villages, operated under the authority of the *ispravnik*, the latter becoming their direct superior.¹² Established by the Phanariot prince Constantin Mavrocordat in the mid-eighteenth century, the office of *ispravnik*, with extensive but imprecise administrative, fiscal and judicial powers,¹³ has been so profoundly transformed by the organic law that all that remains of its traditional nature was the name.

Unlike the old *ispravniks*, whose authority depended more on the social and personal prestige of the holder rather than on the nature of the function, which was inconsistent and changeable, the *ispravniks* of the regulatory regime had only administrative tasks. These tasks, however, were defined clearly by the law. They were agents of the governmental power and local administrators, in accordance with the rules of a well-organized state (*Politzestaat*, *Regulatory state*) present in the constitutional charters of the first half of the nineteenth century. The general features of the *Politzestaat* – uniformity of the legislation, extensive and precise regulation of the powers and functioning of institutions, a large bureaucratic apparatus organized according to the principle of hierarchical subordination, separation of the administration from the judiciary, a general code of civil and criminal law, a ministerial-type executive body, grouping together state officials heading specialized departments, discursive and repressive control of the public space – can be found in this constitutional charter.¹⁴ During the same period, in Prussia, and in the Austrian and Russian Empires, the governors or commissars of counties or districts no longer had judicial powers. Instead, they received extensive

¹⁰ “Reglement organicesc a Moldovei,” 257.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹² *Ibid.*, 331–332.

¹³ N. Grigoraș, *Dregătorii târgurilor moldovenesti și atribuțiunile lor până la Regulamentul Organic* (Iași: Tipografia “Avântul”, 1942), 95–102.

¹⁴ Hubert C. Johnson, “The Concept of Bureaucracy in Cameralism,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 79, no. 3 (1964): 390–391; Brian Chapman, *The Profession of Government: The Public Service in Europe* (London: Unwin University Books, 1971); Mark Raeff, “The Well-Ordered Police State and the Development of Modernity,” *American Historical Review*, 80, no. 5 (1975): 1226–1228; W. H. G. Armytage, *The Rise of the Technocrats: A Social History*, (London, New York: Routledge, 2007); John Deak, *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 22–24.

and precisely regulated responsibilities in the administration of institutions, concerning economic resources and public order.¹⁵

In the Romanian Principalities, according to their established original purpose, the role of the *ispravniks* at the local level was to “supervise with the greatest strictness the conduct of officials, to cultivate in them a contempt for existing disorder” and to enforce their compliance with the organic law.¹⁶ The memoirs of the first decade of the regulatory period unanimously emphasise the particular importance of “the new institution of *ispravnik*” in the modernization of the administration, in the application of the most diverse laws and provisions necessary for internal development and to overcome the state of chaos and lawlessness typical of the Old Regime.¹⁷ Subsequently, in the years prior to the 1848 Revolution and in the decade that followed, the *ispravnik* became, in the public perception, associated with the abuse and oppression of a despotic political regime, given that they “had the authority to enter homes, and demonstrated a lack of regard for individuals, conducting thorough and sometimes brutal inquiries.”¹⁸

The fundamental difference between the role of the *ispravnik*, according to the *Regulatory state* model specific to the institutional organization of Moldavia and Wallachia between 1831 and 1856, and the role of the prefects, after 1859, was *in principle* that the *ispravniks* were *responsible* for the application of legislation at the local level and for the

¹⁵ Walter Pintner, “The Social Characteristics of the Early Nineteenth Century Russian Bureaucracy,” in *Slavic Review*, 29, no. 3 (1970): 441–443; Mark Raeff, “Bureaucratic Phenomena of Imperial Russia 1700–1905,” *The American Historical Review*, 84, no. 2 (1979): 409; Marion W. Gray, *Prussia in Transition: Society and Politics under the Stein Reform Ministry of 1808* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1986), 150–157; Gianmaria Ajani, “The Rise and Fall of the Law-Based State in the Experience of Russian Legal Scholarship: Foreign Scholarship and Domestic Style,” in *Toward the «Rule of Law in Russia»? Political and Legal Reform in the Transition Period*, Edited by Donald D. Barry, (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), 4–5.

¹⁶ A. F. Mirkovich, M. F. Mirkovich, *Fedor Iakovlevich Mirkovich: Ego zhizneopisanie sostavlennoe po ostavlennym ego zapiskam, vospominaniiam blizkikh liudei, i podlinnym dokumentam*, II (St. Petersburg: Voennaia tipografiia, 1889), 42.

¹⁷ Nicolae Kretzulescu, *Amintiri istorice* (Bucharest: Editura ziarului “Universul”, 1940), 14–31; N. Iorga, *Un cugetător politic moldovean de la jumătatea veacului al XIX-lea: Ștefan Scarlat Dăscălescu* (Bucharest: Imprimeria Națională, 1932), 15; *Memoriile Principelui Nicolae Suțu, mare logofăt al Moldovei 1798–1871*, translation from French, introduction and commentaries by Georgeta Penelea-Filitti (Bucharest: Fundația Culturală Română, 1997), 97–98; Gh. Adamescu, “Epoca regulamentară din punct de vedere politic și cultural,” *Literatură și artă română*, 2, no. 5 (1899): 299.

¹⁸ “... au puterea să calce casa și, nerespectând persoanele, să caute pretutindeni și cu cea mai brută cercetare” (“Correspondență în privire gazetelor în Moldova,” in *Anul 1848 în Principatele Române. Acte și documente*, V, 1848 octombrie 4 – 1848 decembrie 31 (Bucharest: Institutul de Arte Grafice Carol Göbl, 1904), 304).

proper functioning of all institutions, while the prefects would have a different type of duties, only to *oversee* the correct and efficient application of legislation by the institutions mandated by law at local level. It remains to be seen whether the powers conferred by law, the attitude of the political parties and the social elite with influence at the local level truly allowed the prefect's institution to function in accordance with this model, or whether historical circumstances concurred to the prefect's authority also including additional features of effective administration of the county entrusted to him.

Following the features of the transition from *ispavnik* to prefect, ideologically and constitutionally, the prefect institution in Romania was inspired by the French model. However, the question is: *which model?* Is the ideal model the prefect as an agent of central government and mediator between centre and periphery, or the prefect as departmental administrator?¹⁹ In addition to the ideological and constitutional legacy of the Great French Revolution, the role of the prefect institution in the governance of the modern unitary state was precisely defined by the regime of Napoleon I, "when the state apparatus was based on a centralized, efficient, and hierarchical bureaucracy ranging from prefects to mayors."²⁰ According to the Napoleonic model, the prefects had not only the task to administrate the department entrusted to them on the basis of the laws and of ministerial provisions, but also to act as mediators between the institutional hierarchy of the state and the social and power hierarchies at the local level.²¹ While in the first half of the nineteenth century, after the collapse of the Napoleonic regime, the great landowners played an important role in the management of departmental governance, with the establishment of the Second French Empire, the *conseils généraux* "were never able to obtain extensive power, and the state-appointed prefect was the more or less omnipotent authority at the local level."²² Napoleon III's regime was *the height of the prefect's power*, followed by genuine attempts of administrative decentralization during

¹⁹ Gildas Tanguy, Jean-Michel Eymeri-Douzans, "Variations on the Prefectoral Figure in Europe: Some Research Questions and an Ideal-Type for a Comparison," in *Prefects, Governors and Commissioners Territorial Representatives of the State in Europe*, Gildas Tanguy and Jean-Michel Eymeri-Douzans (eds.) (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 6–7.

²⁰ Alexander Grab, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 58.

²¹ Pierre Karila-Cohen, "For a European History of Prefects and Governors: Administrative Action and State-Building in the Nineteenth Century," in *Prefects and Governors in Nineteenth Century Europe: Towards a Comparative History of Provincial Senior Officials*, Pierre Karila-Cohen (ed.) (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 3.

²² David Spring, *European Landed Elites in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 2020), 145.

the Third Republic.²³ For this reason, in assessing the impact of the French model on the institution of the prefect in the early years of the existence of the Romanian state, it is necessary to take into account the prefect's role as administrator of the department, with increased powers, in the France of the Second Empire. On the one hand, the "myth of the omnipotence of the prefect," as an expression of an authoritarian regime in Napoleon III's France has been subjected to a critical historical analysis: from the decree of 25 March 1852, which gave the prefect effective authority over the departmental and communal councils, towards the end of the Empire, there was an erosion of their power through the increasing influence of the deputies elected in the department and the parties that supported them.²⁴ On the other hand, during this period (1852–1870), the prefects retained the power to dismiss the mayors of municipalities and communes, in accordance with the law, to preside over the proceedings of the departmental councils and to approve the work of departmental and municipal councils in all matters.²⁵ These prefects' prerogatives in relation to the institutions of local "power" were to be found in the United Principalities during the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, as well as over the decades that followed, proving that the main source of inspiration for the Romanian governmental elite was the regime of Napoleon III.

It should also be said that the Belgian model (the other ideological and constitutional reference preferred in the Romanian scientific literature), exhibited several distinctive features. These features render it incompatible with the French administrative model of the Second Empire and, by extension, limited its influence on defining the relations between the local organ of central power (the prefect) and the departmental or communal councils in the Romanian case. Article 108 of the Belgian Constitution provided that "provincial and communal institutions shall be determined by law,"²⁶ an act adopted on 30 April 1836, which established the *provincial councils* of the nine provinces of the Kingdom of Belgium, with wide-ranging powers that gave them significant autonomy: the councils proposed candidates for the members of the courts of appeal of the provinces, as well as for the presidents and vice-

²³ Alistair Cole, "Prefects in Search of a Role in a Europeanised France," *Journal of Public Policy*, 31, no. 3 (2011): 387.

²⁴ Bernard Le Clère, Vincent Wright, *Les préfets du Second Empire* (Paris: Sarmand Colin, 1973), 36–42, 158–160.

²⁵ Sudkir Hazareesingh, *From Subject to Citizen: The Second Empire and the Emergence of Modern French Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 40–41.

²⁶ "Constitution de la Belgique, décrétée le 7 février 1831," in M. E. Laferrrière, *Les Constitutions d'Europe et d'Amérique* (Paris: Librairie du Conseil d'État, 1869), 78.

presidents of the ordinary courts; had their own budget and had the right to elaborate their own administrative and public order regulations, within the limits of the law, etc.²⁷

In Moldavia and Wallachia, the debates during the decade preceding the adoption of the *Law on rural and urban communes* (April 2/14, 1864) focused on the introduction of the prefect institution and, along with other similar issues, marked a departure from the regulatory regime associated with the Russian protectorate and it represented a move towards closer alignment with the institutional models of civilized Europe.²⁸ From the first days following the double election of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Moldavia announced that the word *ispravnik* was to be removed from the administrative vocabulary and replaced by administrator. The institution would thus receive a new mission, namely “to apply with impartiality, with severity the law for all equally,” to combat the abuses and corruption, to give priority to the citizens' complaints,²⁹ even though, according to Article 47 of the Paris Convention, “the legislation now in force in the Principalities shall be maintained in respect of those provisions which are not contrary to the stipulations of this Convention.”³⁰

The responsibility and, by extension, the power of the *ispravniks* at the local level left a strong imprint on local governance practices in the second half of the nineteenth century. After 1864, the legislation governing the organization of public administration encountered substantial resistance in displacing the traditional authority of the local “governor” or “administrator” on the basis of *the new modern role of prefect's institution*. The political parties tolerated this ambiguous situation because the prefect had a major role as the electoral agent of the ruling party³¹ and “can be no more than an expression of the political principles

²⁷ Ibid., 79–79, n. 1.

²⁸ Dimitrie Bolintineanu, *Cuza-Vodă și oamenii săi: memoriu istoric*, fourth edition revised and added (Bucharest: G. Ioanide, 1870), 195–196; Nicolae Iorga, “Un proiect comunal al lui Ion Ghica,” *Revista istorică*, 20, no. 7–9 (1934): 209–217.

²⁹ *Acte și documente relative la istoria renascerei României*, IX, 1857–1859, published by Dimitrie A. Sturdza and J. J. Skupiewski (Bucharest: Institutul de Arte Grafice Carol Göbl, 1901), 567 (February 9/21, 1859, *Circular of the Moldavian Minister of Interior Vasile Sturdza*).

³⁰ “... la législation actuellement en vigueur dans les Principautés est maintenue dans les dispositions qui ne sont pas contraires aux stipulations de la présente Convention” (Ibid., VII, 1858–1859, (1892), 313–314; August 7/19, 1858, *Convention for the definitive organisation of the Romanian Principalities*).

³¹ Constantin Bacalbașa, *Bucureștii de altădată*, I, 1871–1884, second edition, (Bucharest: Editura ziarului “Universul”), 187.

[and interests] of the government.”³² We believe this to be the main reason why for the period 1859–1892 there is no law explicitly dedicated to the duties of the prefect and sub-prefect,³³ apart from some circulars of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which however, had a temporary and circumstantial role.³⁴ Instead, a certain institutional modernization was attempted, by employing a mechanism that included the prefect in a set of institutions created by law at county level: *the prefecture chancellery*, through the *Regulation on the directors of prefectures*, a function similar to the secretary general of the prefecture in France,³⁵ and the *County councils*, created by the *Law on rural and urban communes* and the *Law on county councils* (March 31/ April 12, 1864).³⁶ In the case of the first law, Article 11 seems to us essential: “The director of the prefecture countersigns all papers submitted to the prefect and is responsible” for their application,³⁷ meaning that he carries some of the legal responsibility, acting as a factor that limits all potential abusive practices. The *County councils*, composed of members elected by census vote, had a deliberative role, but the decisions taken were implemented by a *Permanent council*, chaired by the prefect, who had the final word in the implementation of the public policies at local level (Art. 3, 106).³⁸

Despite minor legislative adjustments, until 1883 the prefect remained both an *agent of governmental power* and *the head of local administration*. In our opinion, the reasons for this duality are not to be found at the *conceptual level*, due to a supposedly poor understanding by the Romanian political elite of the civilized mechanisms of government proper to the modern state model. The draft projects of legislation on the Ministry of Internal Affairs (1866–1883), inventoried by Andrei Sora and never adopted for various reasons,³⁹ fully proves this point. We can also add to this argument the words of Titu Maiorescu, which show his deep understanding of the concept of decentralization and why it could not be

³² “... un prefect nu poate să fie decât expresiunea principiilor politice ale guvernului” (Ion C. Brătianu: *Acte și cuvântări*, IV, (1 mai 1878 – 10 aprilie 1879), published by N. Georgescu-Tistu (Bucharest, “Cartea Românească”, 1932), 226).

³³ Sora, *Servir l'état roumain*, 223.

³⁴ Guțan, *Istoria administrației publice*, 98–99.

³⁵ Le Clère, Wright, *Les préfets du Second Empire*, 47–51.

³⁶ “Lege pentru comunele urbane și rurale,” in Ioan M. Bujoreanu, *Collecțiune de legiurile României vechi și noi care s-au promulgat până la finele anului 1870* (Bucharest: Noua Typographie Laboratorilor Români, 1973), 877–887; “Lege pentru înființarea consiliilor județene,” in Bujoreanu, *Collecțiune de legiurile României*, 866–876.

³⁷ “Regulament relativ la directorii de prefecturi (decret nr. 697 din 1861),” in Bujoreanu, *Collecțiune de legiurile României*, 803.

³⁸ “Lege pentru înființarea consiliilor județene,” 867, 875.

³⁹ Sora, *Servir l'état roumain*, 227–229.

applied in Romania: “What is decentralization? Decentralization means leaving in the hands of the local authority a part of the attributes of public power. Not the ministry, not the prefect to interfere in the work of the commune, but the commune itself to exercise some essential powers”⁴⁰ in the fields of education, churches, health and public order. However, according to Maiorescu, this change was not possible, primarily for financial reasons, because the tax system would have to be restructured so that the county and municipal councils would have the necessary financial resources. Nonetheless, this change would run counter to the provisions of the Constitution of 1866 and would undermine the government's ability to secure the resources needed to administer and develop the country.⁴¹ The fact that until the *Law on county councils* from 1 March 1883, the communal institutions (County and Communal Councils) remained “forms without substance”, without their own real power and financial resources, turning *the idea of administrative decentralization into a meaningless expression*, is explained by power-related causes, referring to the political interests of the ruling parties and to the social interests of the Romanian elite.

Social legitimacies, patronage relations and political networks

The Romanian world in the early years of Alexandru Ioan Cuza's reign was socially still dominated by an elite, the descendants of the boyar families of the first half of the nineteenth century, whose power was still based on the number of estates owned and on their extremely important genealogical prestige.⁴² The descendants of the great boyar families of the two Principalities controlled ramified networks of power centred around family ties and the administration of the villages they owned, even though they had lost their social and fiscal privileges as a result of the *Convention of Paris* (1858).⁴³ The old forms of social legitimacy were still

⁴⁰ “Ce este descentralizarea? Descentralizarea voințe lăsarea în mâna autorității locale a unei părți din atributele puterii publice. Nu ministerul, nu prefectul să se amestece în treburile comunei, ci ea însăși să exercite câteva puteri esențiale”. Titu Maiorescu, *Discursuri parlamentare cu priviri asupra dezvoltării politice a României sub domnia lui Carol I, II, (1870-1881)* (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei Socec, 1897), 149.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 150–155.

⁴² Paul Körnbach, “Studii despre limba și literatura franceză și daco-romană,” in *Călători străini despre Țările Române în secolul al XIX-lea, V, (1847-1851)*, volume coordinator Daniela Bușă (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2009), 550–551; Bacalbașa, *Bucureștii de altădată*, 84–85.

⁴³ George Sion, *Suvenire contimpurane* (Bucharest: Tipografia Academiei Române, 1888), 52–53; Radu Rosetti, *Amintiri* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2017), 360; 379; Mihail Polihroniade, *Alexandru-Christian Tell, Domnia lui Carol I, I, 1866–1877* (Bucharest: Vremea, 1937), 88–91.

strong, preserved by new strategies of social distinction: the aristocratic way of life, luxury, kinship with foreign aristocratic families, blazons, the often unjustified claims of a noble bloodline based on historical continuity, encyclopaedic education and cultural philanthropy. Adapting rather quickly to the new state realities, this social elite of the Old Regime wanted to preserve and justify its political superiority: "as some who had previously [1859] occupied the highest offices of the state, they understood this mechanism [of government] better than the newcomers", and "an active aristocracy, subject to the common law, dedicated to public interests" would be "an incalculable good for the country."⁴⁴

Perhaps, that is why certain administrative organization projects advocated by political leaders, who were committed to preserving the role of the aristocracy as ruling elite and stabilising factor in a constitutional regime endorsed a type of "regionalization." This approach proposed granting significant administrative authority *four general prefects* (administrators of four provinces in which the country was to be divided, proposal made by Barbu Catargiu, in 1862).⁴⁵ These proposals aimed to elevate these regional administrators to a status befitting the influential figures of the country's most prominent families, akin to "magnates". We must suspect here a basic mistrust in the county prefects, fully loyal to the Minister of the Internal Affairs in the early years of Alexandru Ioan Cuza's reign, especially from an electoral point of view, and also the fact that such position was deemed less suitable for politicians from families whose ancestors were great dignitaries in the princely *Divan* before 1856.⁴⁶ Vehemently criticizing the conduct of the prefects with a language similar to that used by Barbu Catargiu, Petre P. Carp did not aim to abolish the institution itself, but to limit the number of districts and, implicitly, of prefects: "in proportion to France, we should only have 10 prefectures, while we have 30."⁴⁷ A synthesis of these ideas was contained in a project for a law on administrative circumscriptions and organization, drafted by Petre P. Carp together with the Minister of the Internal Affairs, Theodor Rosetti (1888). It provided for the establishment

⁴⁴ "... ca unii ce ocupaseră până atunci cele mai înalte slujbe ale statului, înțelegeau acest mecanism mai bine decât noii veniți" și "o aristocrație activă și supusă dreptului comun, devotată intereselor publice, este un bine necalculabil pentru țară". Barbu Katargiu, *Discursuri parlamentare (1859 – 1862 iunie 8)*, published with a preface by Petre V. Haneș (Bucharest: Minerva, 1914), 47.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 316–317.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 336–337.

⁴⁷ C. Gane, *P. P. Carp și locul său în istoria politică a țării*, I (Bucharest: Editura ziarului "Universul", 1936), 229.

of eleven captaincies, grouping 2-4 counties, headed by a kind of governor, *appointed by royal decree and revoked by the monarch*, with wide powers and full authority over the county prefects.⁴⁸ The Romanian political context of around 1890 and the constitutional provisions on the organization of the Romanian state show a unitary national state, in which the political elite wanted to avoid any “provincialization” measures that risked being interpreted as acts of “separatism”. Thus, it is quite clear that the intention of this project was not a genuine regionalization, in the absence of any provision for financial autonomy from the government. The purpose was rather to weaken the authority of the prefects as county administrators and the main electoral agents of the ruling parties, to the advantage of “governors” that the conservatives hoped King Charles I would prefer to select from the country's prestigious aristocracy.

The same tendency of the conservatives in this respect can also be seen in the everyday political life and the ministers of Internal Affairs, until 1880, continued to rely on family ties and social patronage networks in the appointment of prefects. The Barbu Catargiu cabinet (January–July 1862), the first common government of the United Principalities, and the Lascăr Catargiu cabinet (1871–1876), the first one to complete the four-year term in office, both conservative governments, excelled in this respect. Among the prefects appointed by these prime ministers, the descendants of some provincial branches of the great aristocratic families, with a certain wealth and political importance have been a component of government: Gheorghe Rosetti Roznovanu, (son of the great hetman Alexandru Roset Roznovanu, Russophile, good administrator, colonel, prefect of Neamt several times),⁴⁹ Alexandru C. Catargiu (son of the great boyar Costin Catargiu, former officer, prefect of Iași during the Barbu Catargiu cabinet, brother-in-law of Alexandru Catargiu, minister of finance in the same cabinet, later prefect of Ilfov during the Lascăr Catargiu cabinet),⁵⁰ Grigore Cantacuzino (son of the great logothete Constantin Cantacuzino, law graduate in Paris, prefect during the Barbu Catargiu cabinet, then magistrate and conservative

⁴⁸ Ibid., 390-391.

⁴⁹ Gh. Ungureanu, *Familia Sion. Studiu și documente* (Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice “N. V. Ștefăniu”, 1936), 60; Gen. R. Rosetti, “Călărașii din Valea Siretului la războiul de neatarnare”, *Analele Academiei Române. Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice*, third series, no. 21 (Bucharest: Imprimeria Națională, 1939): 36–37; Maiorescu, *Discursuri parlamentare*, 41; Suțu, *Iașii de odinioară*, 417.

⁵⁰ Gen. R. Rosetti, “Din corespondența inedită a Principelui Milan al Serbiei cu colonelul Gheorghe Catargi în timpul războiului din 1877-1878”, *Analele Academiei Române. Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice*, third series, no. 17 (Bucharest: Imprimeria Națională, 1935–1936): 38, n. 1; Rosetti, *Dicționarul contimporanilor*, 50.

deputy),⁵¹ Ion Al. Cantacuzino “Zizin” (son of the vornik Alexandru Cantacuzino Pașcanu, educated in Switzerland, prefect of Covurlui during the Barbu Catargiu cabinet),⁵² Leon Negruzzi (son of the writer Costache Negruzzi, prominent junimist, prefect of Iasi during the Lascăr Catargiu cabinet),⁵³ etc.

Instead, liberal governments, such as the Mihail Kogălniceanu cabinet (1863–1865), Ștefan Golescu cabinet (1867–1868) and Ion C. Brătianu cabinet (1876–1880), preferred prefects with military training or former magistrates, but still from prominent provincial families or characters with local intellectual prestige: Theodor Rosetti Solescu (brother of Princess Elena Cuza, founder of the Junimea Society, former judge, prefect of Vaslui during the Kogălniceanu cabinet),⁵⁴ Nicolae Catargiu (son of Dinu Catargiu, a boyar with no political ambitions, brother of the future Prime Minister Lascăr Catargiu, Nicolae was prefect of Iași, on May 1864 and received from the Prime Minister, M. Kogălniceanu, the delicate task to investigate Panait Balș, who was “plotting against the Union, against the prince”),⁵⁵ Ilariu Isvoranu (descended of an old boyar family from Little Wallachia, former magistrate, prefect of Mehedinți in 1877–1878 during Ion C. Brătianu cabinet, then liberal deputy, later passed to the conservatives),⁵⁶ Ștefan Sihleanu (a relative of Petru Grădișteanu, a radical liberal politician, Sihleanu belonged to an influential boyar family from Focșani, and was brought to Iasi as prefect of the police in order to calm the separatist spirits, then promoted in 1867 as prefect during the Ștefan Golescu cabinet),⁵⁷ Pantazi Ghica (son of the logothet Dimitrie Ghica and brother of Ion Ghica, he was a member of the radical liberal party, a former prosecutor, prefect of Argeș during the government of Ștefan Golescu),⁵⁸ General Mihai Radu (descended from a family of small Moldavian boyars, resigned from the army in 1869, prefect of Brăila during the cabinet of Ion

⁵¹ *Dicționarul literaturii române de la origini până la 1900* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1979), 147.

⁵² Mihai Dim. Sturdza, *Un filosof francmason: Ioan Al. Cantacuzino “Zizin” (1828-1899)*, in *Familii boierești din Moldova și Țara Românească: Enciclopedie istorică, genealogică și biografică*, III, coordinator and co-author Mihai Dim. Sturdza (Bucharest: Simetria, 2014), 560.

⁵³ G. Panu, *Amintiri de la Junimea din Iași* (Iasi: Editura “Remus Cioflec”, 1942), 213.

⁵⁴ Iacob Negruzzi, *Amintiri din Junimea*, edited edition and preface by Ioana Părvulescu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011), 42.

⁵⁵ Vasile Kogălniceanu, *Acte relative la 2 mai 1864*, second edition (Bucharest: Tipografia Thoma Basilescu, 1894), 29.

⁵⁶ Rosetti, *Dicționarul contemporanilor*, 105.

⁵⁷ N. A. Bogdan, *Regele Carol I și a doua sa capitală: Relații istorico-politice scrise din inițiativa primarului Iașului G. G. Mârzescu* (Bucharest: Institutul de Arte Grafice “C. Sfetea”, 1916), 105–106.

⁵⁸ Viorica Diaconescu, *Pantazi Ghica: Studiu monografic* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1987), 30.

C. Brătianu),⁵⁹ Teodor Boian (son of the boyar Iordache Boian, former magistrate, prominent writer in Botoșani, prefect during Stefan Golescu's cabinet, then liberal mayor),⁶⁰ Vasile Gheorghian (law graduate, appreciated poet, brother of Metropolitan Iosif, prefect of Iași during the Ion C. Brătianu cabinet).⁶¹

The compilation of lists of prefects from 1862–1892 is necessary for the progress of research on our subject, followed by prosopographical studies. However, we can make a few observations based on the data we have: the network of prefects proves to be essential not only for the sake of administrative efficiency but also for the political stability of the cabinet, since, until 1871, most governments faced great problems in terms of parliamentary support. The parliamentary coalitions were heterogeneous, composed of parties with local branches only in Moldavia or only in Wallachia. No political party had the organizational strength to submit lists of candidates across the country. For example, one of the main conditions raised by the conservative Petre P. Carp to accept the position of the plenipotentiary minister in Vienna on behalf of the Ion C. Brătianu government was to “be given” by the government the position of prefect of Iași for one of his relatives, “as a security for the future elections.”⁶² Under these circumstances, the network of prefects proved to be a vital political tool, not only in elections, but also as a pressure factor on deputies if they wanted to be supported in future polls.⁶³ The network of relatives in the county, grouping together aristocratic families and “men of the boyar’s house” (administrators, lawyers, land tenants), continued to play a significant role in the elections, especially since in the first and second electoral colleges the electoral propaganda was done “man to man”, the number of voters being relatively small.⁶⁴ Within the third college (towns), the prefect’s status as county administrator gave him the possibility to suspend undesirable mayors during elections and to effectively exert pressure on voters who paid patents on commerce or

⁵⁹ Mihai Sorin Rădulescu, *Elita liberală românească, 1866-1900* (Bucharest: All, 1998), 89.

⁶⁰ *Dicționarul literaturii române*, 110.

⁶¹ Ion Dafin, *Iașul cultural și social: Amintiri și însemnări* (Iași: Viața Românească, 1928), 49-51; *Dicționarul literaturii române*, 393.

⁶² Titu Maiorescu, *Însemnări zilnice, II (1881–1886)*, I. Rădulescu-Pogoneanu (ed.) (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei Socec), 128.

⁶³ Regarding the climate in which parliamentary elections were held in the sixties and seventies and the involvement of prefects, see “Scrisoarea a unsprezecea – După luptă,” in Gheorghie Bibescu, *Culegere: Politică – religiune duel* (Bucharest: Tipografia Curții Regale, 1888), 197–224; Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea, *Guvern, prefecti și deputați: analiză electorală* (Bucharest: Tipografia „Voința Națională”, 1890).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 7, 20.

industry. Moreover, in both Liberal and Conservative parties, there was a tendency to promote loyal and competent prefects to eligible seats in the Senate and in the House, or to the leadership of central institutions after 1870, showing the parties' organizational effort and the formation of genuine Liberal and Conservative elites as party men.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ George D. Nicolescu, Albert Hermely, *Deputații noștri: Biografii și portrete* (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei Carol Müller, 1896), 92-308.

Conclusions

The *Law on county councils* from March 1/13, 1883, illustrates in addition to other aspects, the end of the first stage, the “adolescence” of the Romanian constitutional monarchy’s political regime. At the level of party life, a new organizational culture is taking shape, focusing not only on the prestige and influence of individuals, but also on coherent and stable structures in the long run. The provisions of this law, which make the prefect what he should have been from the start, an agent of governmental power who oversees the respect of the law and the proper functioning of local institutions, reflect a *new political reality*, especially since the law comes from a Liberal cabinet. The reconfiguration of the county council, whose president assumes from the prefect the powers to implement the council’s decisions, does not show, in my opinion, a maturity of local government institutions, especially since its provisions will be overturned by the conservative laws of 1892, which restore the prefect’s previous authority. In fact, in the decades that followed, the local institutions, including the prefecture, will prove their incapacity, confronted with the great problems of the “glory era” of the tenant trusts, generating an exploitation of peasants that is hard to imagine. Furthermore, I believe it reflects *the decline in the political importance of the prefect*, at least for the Liberals. The party structures created in the 1880s had to respond to new challenges, related to the emergence of public opinion and the advance of participatory democracy. The era of the prefect as county “governor” and local party leader was beginning to fade towards the end of the nineteenth century.

