



“Plășile”. Administrative Subdivisions of the Counties During the Inter-war Period. Evolution and Involution. A Possible Return

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As the need to perfect the territorial-administrative organization is always present and at the same time there is a need to correlate it to the socio-economical framework which is changing continuously, it is necessary to turn back in history and analyze the territorial-administrative organization in the 20th century from a historical and geographical standpoint. Of all the territorial-administrative units, special ones will be considered, specifically ‘plășile’, which were administrative districts dividing counties without having the status of legal person.

The present research examines chronologically the role of the above-mentioned territorial-administrative units in the 20th century, their impact on the territory, the present-day status of the former plasa seats and the issue of a possible reinstatement of these kinds of districts.

Administrative sub-divisions of counties or provinces are recorded as early as the end of the 12th century. They were meant to ensure the effectiveness of the political administration of the state by facilitating the conveyance of the instructions coming from the central government towards the lower administrative levels – the communes and the villages. The function of these kinds of districts was the same even though their denomination varied. Thus, in the historical province of *Moldavia*, these administrative units were called ‘ocoale’ and they were administrative sub-divisions of the provinces, they kept this denomination in the mountains as well as in the plains. There were approximately 5 such districts in each of the province. With time, the notion of ‘ocol’ was replaced by that of ‘plasă’ – a term used in *Valahia* (*Țara Românească*). In this last mentioned province, the administrative sub-divisions of the counties were called ‘plăși’ or ‘plaiuri’ and have been first applied, as function and name, in Oltenia in the 18th century. There were 4 types of them: upper, lower, middle and border plasa, being administered by persons who bore the name of ‘ispravnicii’. From Oltenia, this type of administration at sub-county level generalized in the other part of Valahia, namely Muntenia, thus at the beginning of the 19th century, in all the historic province of Valahia there existed a sub-division of the counties called ‘plasă’ in the plains – administered by persons called ‘zapcii’ and ‘plai’ in the mountains - administered by persons called ‘vătafi’. The early sub-divisions of the counties were preserved by the *Organic Laws* (Regulamentele organice) and by *The Law for the County Councils from April 2, 1894* (Legea pentru Consiliile Judetene din 2 aprilie 1894) in the Early Romanian Kingdom (Vechiul Regat al Romaniei), also mentioned in the 1866 *Constitution* (title 1, art. 4). The plasa was created in order to supervise and control better the administration of the communes by those civil servants who were subordinates to the prefect.

Even though the plasa was not a legal person, each law modified here and there its responsibilities. Thus, the *Law for the Organization of the Rural Communes* (there was a time when the communes were also urban) and the *Administration of the Plasa from May 1, 1904* and that from *April 29, 1908* (Legi pentru organizarea comunelor rurale și administrația plășilor) both changed in some way the juridical status of these administrative sub-divisions. The Law from 1908 tried to recondition the status of the plasa. There was also a change in the responsibilities and the names of the administrators of the plasa: the vice-prefect (in the 1894 Law) became *inspector for the communes* in the 1904 Law and *plasa administration* in 1908.

Yet, these changes did not give way to more important ones for the local communities.

In 1918, the correspondent administrative sub-divisions of the counties in the other historic provinces were:

- districts called *cercuri* (administrative circles) in Transylvania;
- districts called *căpităni* ruled by a district captain in Bucovina;
- districts called *ocoale* in Basarabia.

At the beginning of the 20th century, territorial-administrative organization of the country after the Great Union aimed at administrative uniformization and cohesion, thus appeared *The Law for the Administrative Unification – March 14, 1925* (Legea pentru unificarea administrativa din 14 iulie 1925). Since the law from 1864 till this one from 1925, there have been 12 amendments which explains the continuous variation of the number of *plăși* – from 170 to 300. The Law from 1925 establishes the *plasa* as an administrative unit subordinated to the county. As it was stated before, this denomination was used for this sub-division from the 18th century and as a legislative issue it was coming from the legislation of the Early Romanian Kingdom. The law sees this kind of district as a geographical and administrative unit, a subservient and also a controlling unit meant for an administrative and political decentralization, but without being a legal person. It grouped several rural communes and was administered by a so-called '*praetor*' (*pretor*). He was under the prefect of the county subordination and sometimes the latter provided the former with minor responsibilities. This law establishes 498 sub-divisions of the counties. There were also critics to this hybrid administrative unit which sub-divided the county and many people considered in the '20s that it must be suppressed and the Romanian territory should be organized differently without including these districts. Those who sustained the conservation of these districts demonstrated that precisely the aim of the process of administrative de-centralization was what held them up – even though it appeared that this de-centralization was just in theory. It was said that the districts called *plăși* made the necessary administrative bond between the central administration of the state and the citizen, being the suitable form to implement a uniform administration to the newly united state with diverging administrative policies.

A regional example (Banat region) of the territorial-administrative organization in 1925:



Figure 1. Territorial-administrative organization - Banat region – 1925 (source: Rusu R., 2006).

Art. 285 from the *Law for the Organization of the Local Administration – August 3, 1929* (Legea pentru organizarea administratiunii locale din 3 august 1929) maintains the division of the counties in the districts called *plăși* - without being legal persons. They are still not entitled to legislate, but have only executive powers. The representative of the prefect in the territory is named '*prime-praetor*' (*primpretor*) with this law and he is the administrative police officer having also the errand to control and superintend the rural administration.

The map below considers the same regional example, now after the Law for the Organization of the Local Administration – August 3, 1929. Even though the Law preserved the sub-divisions of the counties, just a superficial

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comparison of the two maps discloses differences within the territorial administrative organization: in 1929 for the Banat region studied there were 32 plasa districts, while in 1925 there were 40. Just this fact involves changes in area, communes and villages included and changes in border lines the districts of the counties had in 1929 as compare to 1925.

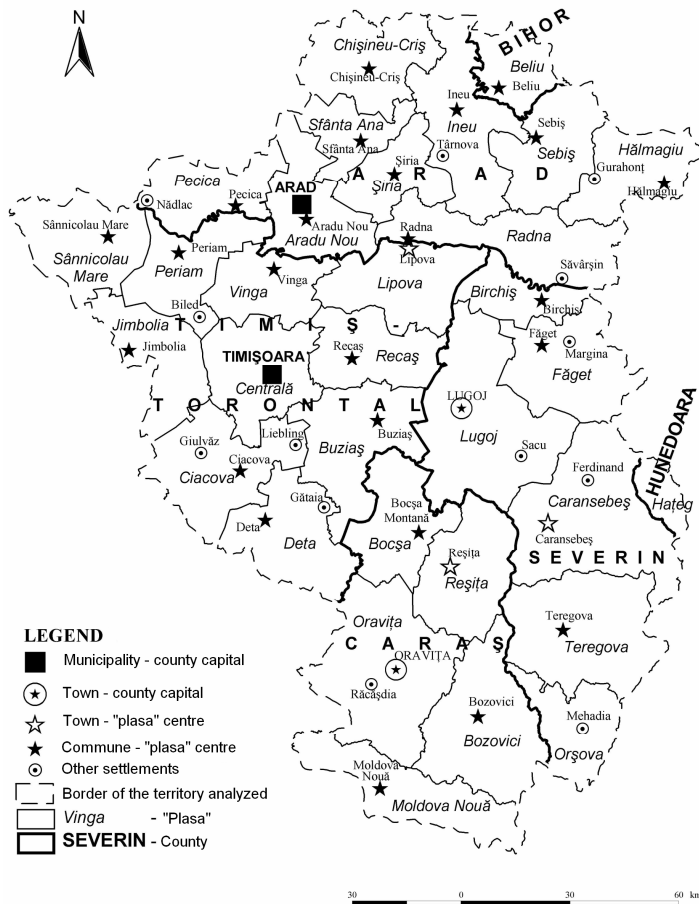


Figure 2. Territorial-administrative organization - Banat region – 1929 (source: Rusu R., 2006).

Administrative Law–March 27, 1936 (Legea administrativa din 27 martie 1936) preserves the intermediary divisions (plăși) between the counties and the communes – the latter administrative units being the only ones considered by the present law as legal persons. The districts named plăși were to control the activities of the authorities from the rural communes.

Each administrative law endowed the counties with legal status, as compared with the artificial districts called plăși – this until 1938 when *The Administrative Law – August 14, 1938 (Legea administrativa din 14 august 1938)*, brings a change of status for them. For 2 years – until 1940 when this law was recalled, the counties functioned too as units of administrative control and de-centralization. The districts once subordinated to the counties are still present, with the same non-

legal person status. What is new now is the step forward taken in the administrative education of the civil servants. The praetor is appointed by the minister – another testimony of the central bias territorial-administrative organization – representing the Government in territory, being the Police Commander. His appointment is strictly related to his studies of Law and Administration. As there was no County Council and no prefect for the districts to depend on by law, there was a more prominent orientation towards the center. The last law that conserves the districts is *Law no. 17 on the Function of County Councils – January 15, 1949 (Legea nr. 17 asupra consiliilor populare din 15 ianuarie 1949)* according to the Constitution from the previous year which divided Romanian territory in communes, districts known as plăși and counties.

The administrative pattern adopted in the 1950 conforming to the one existing in the Soviet Union ruled out the districts that sub-divided the counties and they were not considered by the administrative laws that followed after the '50s. Along with *Law no. 5 – September 8, 1950* the districts - intermediary between the counties and the communes, not functioning as a legal person, executing and not legislating, theoretically des-centralizing, but practically having most of the times a hybrid, artificial existence were cut out. Their importance, their advantages and disadvantages, the reasons for their existence started debates with each law that maintain them. In all the laws considered so far, the districts called plăși were defined as territorial-administrative units subordinated to the counties, functioning as administrative de-centralization units and grouping several rural communes. These districts have been organized from the beginning as an instrument and not an actor in itself, as they ensured the dependence on the center of the administrative units of inferior ranks. In this way, there was a minimization of the

independence to focus on the local needs. Until 1950, there was a certain similarity among the regulations that established the function and the role of these districts in the territory and even their preservation was an analogy. The purpose of these districts was always the same: decentralization of the administrative organization. Yet, the administrative form that was implemented or maintained from the previous administrative law, the district, was never a legal person so it had not had proper power to decide, it was core-oriented and represented a parallelism of attributions and capacities. As long as these districts have been preserved, their motivation and reason to be established, their maintenance was most of the times done at random and some authors (Oroveanu, 1986, p. 210) enumerate purposes like the annihilation of any rebellion of the working men, as well as the establishment of the electoral constituencies of the political parties. Some critics strove to demonstrate that these kinds of districts were useless and, yet, with central bias government (promoted by the Liberals) as well as those with more regional ambitions (promoted by the Agrarian Party) chose to sub-divide the counties in districts called *plăși*. Despite all the critical approaches to the preservation of these districts of the counties from one law to the other, the *plasa seats* proved to be serviceable and demonstrated their importance as repeaters. They took over some of the functions of the county centres and distributed them in the territory, so they represented local polarization centres.

Therefore, we can also find advantages of the conservation of these districts: the central position that the *plasa seats* played in the territory, as they concentrated important endowments thus generating a complex development of the towns that were *plasa seats*, which became polarization centres for the surrounding area. An analysis of the present-day status of the former *plasa seats* proves effective in order to observe evolution of the seats and their position within the contemporary socio-economic framework. Such a complex analysis was carried out by Mr. Radu Săgeată (Săgeată, 2001, pp. 463-469) by considering the polarization potential of the former *plasa seats*, their dimension and demographic evolution, their potential derived from position and the degree of population concentration in the administrative territory. The starting point for the above-mentioned analysis was the fact that in 1930, out of the 322 *plasa seats* only 200 were on the first positions in the hierarchies of the settlements systems from those districts. With time, the development of the *plasa seats* had different directions, their evolution or involution being dependent on the administrative function they had – function (while they had it) which enabled them to be important and developed, administratively speaking. The analysis done by Radu Săgeată concluded with a hierarchy of the former *plasa seats* which are grouped in several categories depending on their present-day position in the Romanian settlement system. The variables considered were the current degree of polarization of the population and the socio-economic activities.

Table 1. Hierarchy (source: adapted from Radu Săgeată (Săgeată, R., 2001, pp. 463-469).

No.	Typology and examples	Characteristics
1.	Cities - regional polarization Braşov, Constanţa, Craiova, Galaţi, Iaşi, Timişoara	High economic and demographic potential Wide and diverse range of services They exert a pull on settlements and population outside their county borders.
2.	Cities - county polarization Brăila, Baia Mare, Oradea, Satu Mare	Some of them were very developed during the communist period, yet nowadays have serious socio-economic problems.
3.	Towns – inside county polarization Lugoj, Roman, Turnu Măgurele, Turda	Some of them have been county seats until the '50s and lost this administrative position in 1968, which generated socio-economic retrogression.
4.	Small towns – local polarization Negreşti Oaş, Titu	They have been proclaimed towns in 1968 or 1989, they are economical mono-specialized. Their demographic evolution is similar to that of a large village.
5.	Large rural settlements - local polarization Apahida (Cluj county)	They are formed out of large villages with an ascending demographic evolution, having a good position within the settlement system and an important degree of population concentration.
6.	Medium-size and small villages – polarized Sasca Montana (Caraş Severin county)	Former <i>plasa seats</i> – polarized. They have potential to polarize themselves. Their demographic evolution is descending, but their position is a favorable one.
7.	Small villages – polarized Ocna Şugatag (Maramureş county)	They are former <i>plasa seats</i> , which are now polarized.

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The importance of these settlements – former plasa seats - proves out as there is a suggestion to give them back their former function, to be some kind of administrative seats.

There was this idea, after the '90s, to adopt an administrative model similar to the one from the inter-war period. The issue put under question the viability of the inter-war administrative model within the present framework of territorial-administrative organization.

Analyzing this possibility, Radu Săgeată (Săgeată, 2001, pp. 463-469) concluded that out of the categories of settlements presented in the table above, only the 4th and 5th categories of settlements – which constitute a bondage between the rural and the urban space – have the necessary potential in order to be reinvested as plasa seats. So, at a national level, a partial taking up of the inter-war administrative model would be possible and advisable by reinvesting the small towns and the large rural settlement - 4th and 5th categories of settlements in the table – with administrative functions. Some of them are former county seats and they are now polarizing peripheral rural areas, situated very far from the present-day county seats.

The decision whether to take up the inter-war administrative model or not is a tough and complex one and it is founded on the identification of regional and local polarization centers capable of being invested with administrative function, within a hierarchy, depending on their polarizing potential (demographical, economical, of position). The analysis examines the polarization areas for the selected settlements, investigates the types of relationships existing between the settlements that are to be reinvested and the current county seat. If there is subordination (present-day county seat subordinates the other settlement) this means that category of settlement is not up to sustain a county seat function as it is polarized, but it can polarize at its turn on a lower level. In this case, a district similar to the inter-war plasa can be introduced. On the other hand, there can be also competition between the settlements that are to be reinvested and the current county seat which can give way to fragmentation – formation of a new county and the creation of new county seats. This way of employing the potential (position, demographic, economical, polarization) existing in some categories of settlements by investing them with different administrative functions is essential for their future development and that of their surrounding areas. The success of the reinvestment of the categories of settlements mentioned will also depend on the investments that will be provided to these newly established administrative seats — whether a county seat or a sub-division of it similar to the inter-war plasa (Săgeată et al, 2004, p. 29).

The complexity of such an analysis demonstrates that the preservation of the districts (plăşi) before the '50s or their introduction now must not be founded only on historical reasoning. In order to introduce the inter-war administrative organization nowadays, the social, economical, political, demographical, polarization changes must be first consider. There is another problem when considering the taking up of the inter-war administrative model: the fact that with each law, even though the sub-divisions of the counties were preserved as such, there were a lot of internal changes from one law to the other - some districts were dissolved, others were set up. These changes are shown in a table below.

Table 2. Counties – evolution of their sub-divisions (plăşi) between 1925 and 1937 (source: Adapted after R. Săgeată, 2003, pp. 165-166).

No.	County	Plăşi 1925	Plăşi 1937	Disolved districts (1930-1937)	Set-up districts (1930-1937)
1	ALBA	7	8	Ighiu	Alba Iulia, Zlatna
2	ARAD	10	10	-	Târnova
3	ARGEŞ	10	6	Uda	Cuca, Piteşti
4	BACĂU	8	7	-	Răcăciuni, Traian
5	BAIA	-	4	Moldova	Boroaia, Mălini
6	BIHOR	14	12	-	-
7	BOTOŞANI	6	4	Botoşani, Jijia, Siret	Bucecea, Răchiţi, Sulita, Ştefăneşti
8	BRAŞOV	4	3	-	-
9	BRĂILA	4	5	Călmaţui	I.I.C. Brătianu, Vădeni
10	BUZĂU	9	7	Câmpu	Câlnau, Câmpeni, Oraşul, Pârscov
11	CARAŞ	6	6	-	-
12	CÂMPULUNG	4	3	-	-
13	CIUC	4	5	-	Tulgheş
14	CLUJ	-	9	-	Aghireşu, Călata

15	CONSTANȚA	8	7	Ovidiu	Cernavodă, Ferdinand I, Medgidia, Negru Vodă
16	COVURLUI	4	5	-	I.G. Duca, Prutul de Sus
17	DÂMBOVIȚA	9	8	Finta	Bilciurești, Bogați, Ghergani
18	DOLJ	13	8	Barca, Calafat, Gângiova	Bechet, Brabova, Calafat, Filiași, Segarcea
19	DOROHOI	6	5	-	Centrală, Lascăr
20	FĂGĂRAȘ	4	3	-	-
21	FĂLCIU	6	3	-	Răducaneni
22	GORJ	7	6	-	Amaradia, Ocolul
23	HUNEDOARA	13	12	-	Dobra, Sarmisegetusa
24	IALOMIȚA	8	8	-	Căzănești, Dragoș Vodă
25	IAȘI	5	5	Bahlui-Cârligătura	Bahlui, Cârligătura, Copou, Ungheni
26	ILFOV	10	10	-	Bolintin, Buftea, Pantelimon
27	MARAMUREȘ	4	4	-	Șugatag
28	MEHEDINȚI	9	8	Câmpu	Băcleș, Broșteni, Cujmiru, Devesel, Vânju Mare
29	MUREȘ	11	10	Mureș, Reghin	Mureș de Jos, Mureș de Sus, Reghin de Jos, Reghin de Sus
30	MUSCEL	6	3	-	Râul Doamnei
31	NĂSĂUD	6	6	-	Centrală, Lechința
32	NEAMȚ	6	5	Pl. de Mijloc, Neamț	I.G. Duca, Războieni, Cetatea, Neamț
33	ODORHEI	6	5	Cristur	I.G. Duca, Sângeorgiu de Pădure
34	OLT	4	4	-	Mijlocu
35	PRAHOVA	10	10	-	Câmpu, Potgoria, Vârbilău
36	PUTNA	8	6	-	Biliești, Gârlele, Zăbala
37	RĂDĂUȚI	4	3	-	-
38	RÂMNICU SĂRAT	7	5	Câmpul, Dealul, Muntele	Boldu, Dumitrești, I.G. Duca, Orașul, Plăinești
39	ROMAN	4	3	Miron Costin	I.G. Duca, Moldova
40	ROMANAȚI	6	5	-	Campu, Oltețu
41	SALAJ	10	10	-	Bucium, Supuru de Jos
42	SATU MARE	9	8	-	-
43	SEVERIN	9	8	-	Balint, Sacul
44	SIBIU	6	6	-	Avrig, Nocrich
45	SOMEȘ	8	7	-	Chiochiș
46	SUCEAVA	4	3	Dragomirna	Bosancea
47	TÂRNAVA MARE	6	5	-	Șeica Mare
48	TÂRNAVA MICA	6	5	-	Valea Lungă
49	TECUCI	5	5	Homocea	Brăhășești, Găiceana, Tecuci
50	TELEORMAN	7	8	-	Călmațui, Slăvești, Vârtoapele
51	TIMIȘ-TORONTAL	12	13	-	Comloș, Gătaia, Giulvăz
52	TREI-SCAUNE	5	5	-	Ozun
53	TULCEA	8	4	-	-
54	TURDA	6	7	-	Unirea
55	TUTOVA	7	4	-	I.G. Duca
56	VASLUI	4	3	-	Peneș-Curcanul
57	VÂLCEA	9	6	Zătreni	Bălcești, Oltețu
58	VLAȘCA	7	7	-	Ghimpați, Siliștea
59	BĂLȚI	7	6	Slobozia-Bălți	Bălți, Cornești, Glodeni, Sângerei
60	CAHUL	5	5	-	Mihai Viteazul
61	CALIA CRA	6	4	-	Stejarul
62	CERNĂUȚI	5	4	-	-
63	CETATEA ALBĂ	8	8	Taşalac, Tatar-Bunar	Arciz, Ivăneștii Noi, Liman, Sărata
64	DUROSTOR	7	5	Silistra	Doimușlar, Ostrov
65	HOTIN	7	6	Briceni, Hotin	Chelmenți, Clișcăuți, I.G. Duca, Sulita
66	ISMAIL	6	4	-	-
67	LĂPUȘNA	6	5	-	Vorniceni
68	ORHEI	8	5	Ciocâlteni, Mascauti	Chiperceni, Criuleni, Orhei, Telenești
69	SOROCA	7	8	Climăuți	Nădușița, Otaci, Sofoca, Târnova
70	STOROJINET	4	3	-	-
71	TIGHINA	7	4	-	-

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There were fluctuations so there is no clear inter-war model to be taken as such and implemented now. Each administrative law within the inter-war period brought some changes as it concerned the administrative sub-divisions of the counties, yet, on the whole the results of the changes were not satisfactory – a fact showing that the legislative strife is not enough without a proper consideration of the socio-economical conditions and without favorability offered by geographic and socio-economic conditions.

Sub-divisions of the counties- districts called plăși in Romanian - characteristic for the inter-war period, but having deep roots back in history, oscillating during this period with every new administrative law (dissolved units, set up units), every new party and every new government, intended to realize an administrative de-centralization – which was most of the times just in theory – criticized and upheld, these administrative structures justify themselves as an important step forward in the search for administrative perfection. A return to such districts depends on their capacity to maintain the link between the county and the rural communes, on the potential that chosen plasa seats might prove and on the impact this re-investment might have, consequently, it must be carefully considered.

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