

ANALYSIS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN ROMANIA¹

*Laurențiu PETRILA**
*Felix-Angel POPESCU***
*Ana Maria COATU****

Abstract. *The analysis of the electoral promises formulated in the 2012 campaign reveals a remarkable convergence towards a few dominant themes that reflect both the structural deficiencies of regional development in Romania and the politicians' perception of the electorate's expectations. The result was, almost invariably, the transition of these commitments to the register of promises without consequences, with a high reputational cost and with the side effect of disturbing the rational prioritization of budgets. Beyond individual failures and cases of corruption, the analysis reveals deep systemic problems. that transcend political affiliation or regional specifics.*

Keywords: *local, governance, electoral, promises, county, councils, Romania.*

INTRODUCTION. THE ANATOMY OF ELECTORAL PROMISES BETWEEN NECESSITY AND IMAGE

Road infrastructure appears as a quasi-universal promise, being explicitly mentioned by almost all the candidates analyzed. This omnipresence of the infrastructure theme is not surprising, given that at that time, according to data from the European Statistical Institute, Romania ranked last in the European Union in terms of the number of kilometers of motorway per thousand square kilometers (Stancu, 2011).

Beyond road infrastructure, the promises converge on several other main axes: the modernization of water and sewage systems, the development of county health infrastructure, attracting European funds and creating jobs. On the one hand, what is surprising in this list is the elementary nature of many promises, ensuring access to drinking water and sewage in the 21st century should have represented a fundamental obligation rather than a development vision. These promises represent, on the one hand, the minimum response to the historical gap in basic infrastructure and to the social pressure for functional public services.

On the other hand, it betrays the absence of a development vision that goes beyond the level of utilities and curative assistance. In administrative practice, precisely these promises, although apparently modest, have been more frequently fulfilled or pushed into

¹ Acknowledgement: This research has been conducted with the support of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, within the Project 101127024, Jean Monnet Module EnMoDemo -Enhancing and Monitoring Democracy in Romania as a EU Member State, co-financed by European Commission in the framework of Jean Monnet Action

* Ph.D. Lecturer, University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies, Oradea, Romania. E-mail: lauren.petrila@gmail.com.

** Ph.D Lecturer, Agora University of Oradea, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Oradea, Romania. E-mail: felixangelpopescu@gmail.com.

*** Ph.D. Assistant, Agora University of Oradea, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Oradea, Romania. E-mail: anamaria.coatu@gmail.com.

tangible phases of execution, as they align with the legal powers of the county councils, lend themselves to standardized European funding and can be implemented through consolidated inter-community development consortia and associations.

In contrast to these promises related to needs, we can also distinguish a series of image promises such as new airports, light rail, multiple industrial parks announced simultaneously, mega-tourism events without logistical and brand support, which functioned more as rhetorical tools than as projects. They generated, statistically, almost all of the disappointments with visibility, either because they exceeded the competence and real leverage of a county council, or because they were announced in the absence of pre-feasibility and feasibility documentation, sources of co-financing and any anchoring in national master plans.

A particularly relevant aspect is the discrepancy between the promises made and the specific potential of each county. The detailed analysis of the report highlights that the counties with remarkable tourism potential, such as Harghita, Covasna or Maramureș, had candidates who almost completely ignored this dimension in their electoral promises. Similarly, counties with a solid industrial tradition, such as Hunedoara or Galați, did not benefit from coherent promises regarding industrial reconversion or the development of modern economic clusters. This lack of correlation between local resources and strategic vision suggests a superficial understanding of regional development dynamics.

RECURRING PATTERNS IN THE FULFILLMENT OF PROMISES

The stratification of performance in fulfilling electoral promises at county level, viewed as a whole and over the entire 2012–2016 cycle, reveals a surprisingly stable internal order, despite the political and judicial turbulence characterized in particular by the breakup of the coalition that had won these elections. The dissensions between the PNL and PSD that emerged during the Ponta government led in February 2014 to the exit of the liberals from the government and the intensification of political conflicts (RadioJurnal, 2014). A hierarchy of administrative capacity clearly emerges that transcends political affiliations and geography, producing three relatively coherent functional blocks.

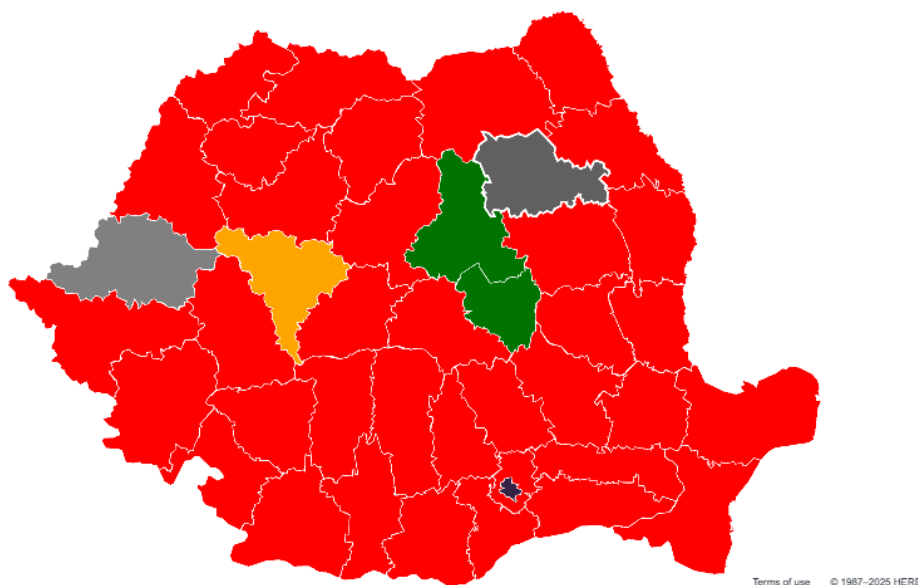
The first block, of operational performers, concentrates those county councils that have transformed promises into portfolios of fundable projects and, more importantly, into completed or highly executed works. The second block, of partial implementers, delivered punctual results with visibility, but failed structural promises or those that called for multi-annual coherence and inter-institutional coordination. The last block, of underperformers, remained captive to a toxic mix of unrealistic promises, vulnerability to integrity shocks and inability to govern large projects. This stratification is not just a snapshot of the past, but a map of risks and opportunities for the following cycles, as the defining features of each category prove persistent (Brie, 2025).

The assessment of the degree of fulfillment of electoral promises reveals complex patterns that transcend the simple success-failure dichotomy. First, a strong correlation is observed between administrative continuity and the rate of project completion. Presidents in their second or third consecutive mandate, such as Paul Stănescu in Olt or Marian Opreșan in Vrancea, show significantly higher project completion rates. In the case of the latter, beyond the fulfillment of specific campaign promises, the emphasis fell on infrastructure rehabilitation and modernization projects, which places him among the few candidates who fulfilled his promises punctually, according to the report (Ratiu Center for Democracy et al., 2017). In some cases, however, some of the promises made during the 2012 campaign had been initiated in previous mandates and presented as "new" promises.

A particularly interesting pattern is the phenomenon that we can call "promise substitution". In cases where original promises have proven unachievable or politicians have been faced with legal or financial constraints, we observe a tendency to present as achievements projects that had not been mentioned in the electoral campaign. This post-factum communication strategy is evident in cases such as that of Nicolae Dobrovici Bacalbaşa in Galaţi or Adrian Țuțuianu in Dâmbovița, where the lack of promised achievements is rhetorically compensated by highlighting secondary or complementary projects.

Out of 41 counties, USL won 36 of the county council presidencies, an impressive record that ensured the political alliance almost complete control. The next party was UDMR which won the presidencies of Harghita and Covasna counties. PDL had a single representative in Alba county, while in Arad county the Christian-Liberal Movement won, and in Neamț county the county council president represented the European Progressive Liberal People's Electoral Alliance (<https://istoric.rezultatevot.ro/elections/101/results?division=county>) [01.09.2025].

Map of the electoral results of the 2012 local elections. County council presidents.



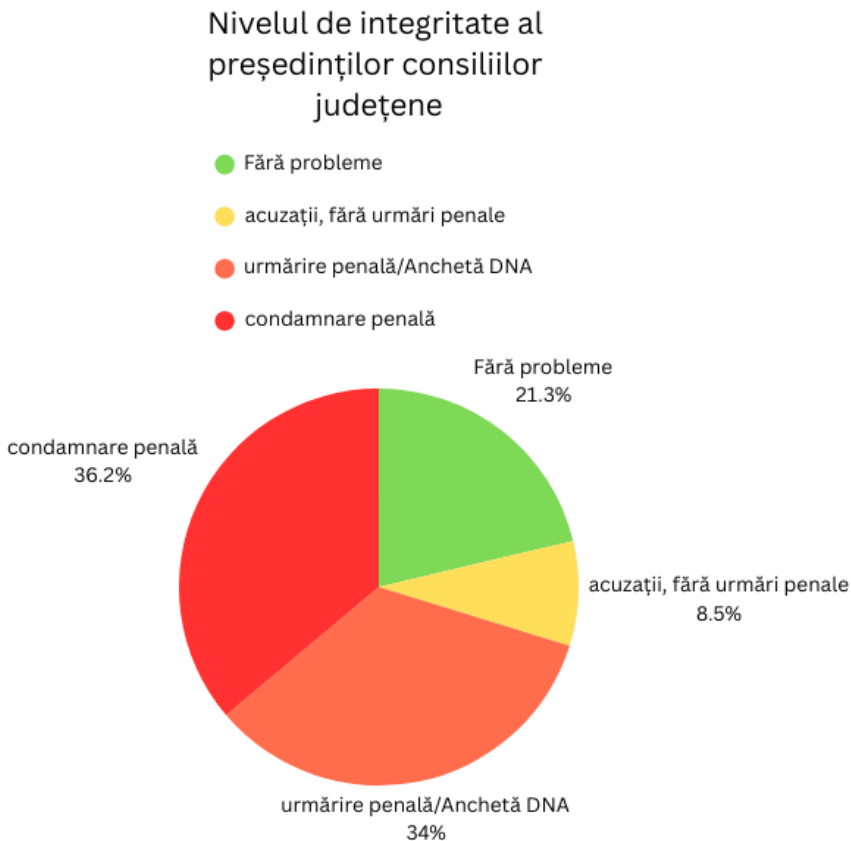
Source: rezultatevot.ro

The comparative analysis by political criteria reveals that there is no significant difference between political parties in terms of the rate of fulfillment of promises. The USL (Social Liberal Union) candidates, although they dominated the 2012 elections, do not have a higher success rate than the opposition in implementing their promises. This suggests that local governance problems transcend political affiliation and are rather related to individual administrative capacity and systemic pathologies of the Romanian public administration.

CORRUPTION AS A DETERMINING FACTOR OF ADMINISTRATIVE FAILURE

Perhaps the most disturbing finding of the report is the extraordinary prevalence of criminal problems among county council presidents. A 2015 article reported that 24 county council presidents have problems with the law, having either been convicted or investigated by the DNA, or declared incompatible or in conflict of interest by the ANI (Ziare.com, 2015). In the meantime, the number has increased, and according to the updated analysis, 70% of the county council presidents monitored have had problems with the justice system, 36.2% having been convicted of corruption, influence peddling or abuse of office, and the remaining 34% having only been investigated by the DNA or put under criminal prosecution. In the case of the latter, the cases were most often dismissed due to the fact that the acts were time-barred, but in some cases the files are still pending, which increases the chances that they will fall into the first category.

Chart no. 1. Integrity level of the chairmen of the County Councils.



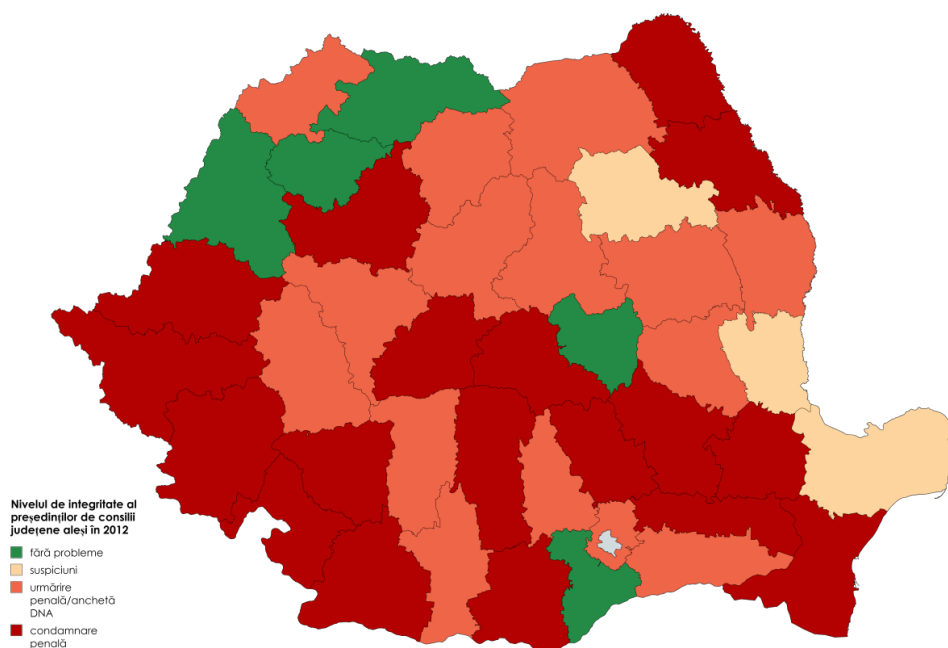
Source: the authors of this paper

It should be noted that the data was updated for the situation in 2025, in the report prepared by the Rațiu Center for Democracy and the Resource Center for Public Participation some of the politicians still appear as being under criminal prosecution, the

conviction occurring only in recent years. In addition to these, there is a percentage of 8.5% of politicians who, although they did not end up being put under criminal prosecution, were linked to scandals that significantly tarnished their image and cast a shadow on their integrity. Only the remaining 21.3% managed not to tarnish their name, maintaining a relatively moral and professional conduct over time. This shocking statistic does not only represent a moral failure of the political class, but has profound implications for administrative capacity and regional development.

Taking a look at the administrative map of the country, we notice that out of 41 county council presidents elected in 2012, an impressive 33 were either convicted or investigated. Unfortunately, only 5 county presidents managed to avoid problems with the law and not be involved in corruption scandals.

Administrative map of Romania illustrating the level of integrity of county council presidents elected in 2012.



Source: author of the paper

The corruption mechanisms identified show remarkable uniformity: preferential awarding of contracts to close companies, employing relatives in public positions, using public resources for personal gain, and creating conflicts of interest by owning shares in companies that contract with the state. The case of Constantin Nicolescu from Argeș, sentenced to 9 and a half years in prison for defrauding European funds, or that of Adrian Duicu from Mehedinți, investigated for multiple corruption offenses, illustrates not only the scale of the phenomenon, but also the sophistication of the mechanisms for embezzling public money.

Another example is that of the President of the Buzău County Council, Marian Cristinel Bîgiu, who was finally sentenced to five years and two months in prison for bribery only in December 2016. He was in pre-trial detention for almost six months, starting in December 2014, but once the Călărași Tribunal ordered the judicial control measure, it allowed him to return to work for a short time, ultimately requiring a judicial interdiction to prohibit him from exercising his function (Sterian, 2018).

Often, convictions came only at the end of his mandate or a few years after its end. An example in this regard is Nicușor Constantinescu, finally sentenced in 2019 by the High Court of Cassation and Justice to ten years in prison in the case in which he was accused of having paid 30 million lei from the County Council budget for the planting of forest curtains and for other projects that were not carried out (Free Europe, 2020). In turn, the former Minister of Education and former president of the Iași County Council, Cristian Adomiștei, was sentenced only in 2020 to 3 years and 2 months in prison for committing the crimes of aiding and abetting the perpetrator and intellectual forgery, committed when he was president of the Iași County Council (Free Europe, 2020).

Examples include Adrian Duicu, former head of the Mehedinți County Council, who was sentenced only in 2020 to a year and a half of suspended imprisonment (Budușan, 2020), while the former president of the Gorj County Council (CJ) Ion Călinoiu was sentenced to four months of suspended imprisonment for repeated false statements (Viteanu, 2016).

In some cases, the files opened during Laura Codruța Kovesi's mandate as DNA chief prosecutor were closed after 2018. Among these cases are the former president of CL Dolj Ion Prioteasa (Costache, 2020) or the president of Ilfov County Council, Marian Petrache, accused of bribery and blackmail (Sârbu, 2018).

In some cases, politicians escape punishment due to the statute of limitations. An example of this is the former president of the Prahova County Court, Mircea Cosma, who was sentenced to eight years in prison in November 2016 by a panel of three judges from the High Court of Justice. However, the appeal requested a retrial, and the Prahova Court ended up ordering the termination of the criminal trial due to the statute of limitations (AP, 2023).

The inverse relationship between lack of integrity and administrative performance is noticeable. Cases of incompatibility, conflict of interest, bribery, influence peddling and abuse of office have not only impacted ethically, but have also directly disrupted project governance, budgetary discipline and the cohesion of the technical apparatus.

Projects blocked or delayed due to criminal investigations have generated huge opportunity costs for local communities. Where presidents have been criminally investigated, the same recurring scenario is observed, which includes an increase in decision-making uncertainty and a tendency to prioritize projects with the potential to smear the image at the expense of those with a real impact on development. The phenomenon of contracts for just a few kilometers of asphalt road, inaugurated with pomp by the entire leadership of the county council, perfectly illustrates this perversion of administrative priorities. These risks becoming a political survival strategy, which absorbs institutional energy (Stoica, 2025).

Along with the evolution of criminal investigations comes the period of interims and the fragmentation of majorities in the council, which blocks allocations, re-quotes, work supplements and, ultimately, leads to missing the European absorption windows. Cluj County, for example, stagnated significantly during the period when Horea Uioreanu

was under preventive arrest, losing opportunities for financing and development. He was definitively sentenced to 6 years in prison in 2018 (Badea, 2018).

Financial corrections, prolonged appeals, contract terminations and court backlogs produce a ripple effect. The cost of the lost opportunity becomes difficult to quantify: projects worth tens of millions of euros remain unfinished, and qualified personnel migrate to more stable entities. This pattern, repeated in numerous counties, confirms that integrity is, in practice, a condition of institutional functionality, not just a virtue.

EUROPEAN FUNDS: BETWEEN OPPORTUNITY AND MIRAGE

Attracting European funds was one of the universal promises of the 2012 campaign, reflecting both the opportunities offered by EU membership and the awareness of national budgetary limitations. However, a detailed analysis of the report reveals a nuanced and often disappointing picture of the absorption capacity of European funds at the county level (Gaidoș, 2025).

Counties with notable performances in attracting European funds, such as Bihor, Sibiu or Sălaj, share several common characteristics: administrative continuity, the existence of teams specialized in the management of European projects and, perhaps most importantly, the absence of major criminal problems in the leadership of the county council. The contrast with counties such as Vaslui, where administrative incompetence combined with systemic corruption to generate losses of tens of millions of euros in European funds, is edifying.

A particularly relevant aspect is the time lag between the promise of attracting European funds and the actual capacity to implement projects. Many of the projects presented as achievements in the 2012-2016 period had in fact been contracted in the previous programming period (2007-2013), and new applications submitted after 2012 were only starting to generate concrete results towards the end of the mandate. This temporal reality is rarely communicated to the electorate, generating unrealistic expectations and public frustration.

The capacity to absorb EU funds significantly contributes to the ability of county councils to implement the promises made during the electoral campaign. The capacity to absorb EU funds is emerging as the most predictive factor for the fulfillment of promises. High-performing counties share dedicated organizational architectures, with professional project management units, standardized procurement procedures, robust internal control and a culture of proactive portfolio preparation.

In these administrations, major projects have been matured since the previous term, and the new electoral cycle inaugurated serial execution: county roads in logical segments, outpatient clinics and hospital wards in the network, transfer stations and SMID infrastructures, integrated water and sewage networks through regional operators.

On the other hand, counties with poor absorption share the same symptoms. Tenders are launched late or with incomplete documentation, clarifications, appeals and cancellations multiply, and the procedures resume the cycle without institutional learning. Co-financing is not ensured in multi-annual budgets, and collaboration with regional operators is tense. The lack of routine in design, management and control makes projects fail not at the technical stages, but at the governance stage.

POLITICAL CLIENTELISM AND ASYMMETRIC DEVELOPMENT

Another relevant pattern is political competition for allocations within the county. There is a perception, often well-founded, that county council presidents tend to

systematically favor localities led by mayors from the same political party or their areas of origin, ensuring them more funding for roads, water and sewerage or school rehabilitation. This politicization of resources undermines county cohesion and creates enclaves of modernization. In terms of fulfilling promises, this pattern produces an uneven distribution of achievements. Achievements accumulate in political islands, and the rest of the territory internalizes a justified cynicism.

A study conducted by Expert-Grup reveals that, during the electoral period, localities whose mayor was affiliated with the government received 2.3 to 2.6 times more financial allocations than those led by opposition mayors. Political clientelism generates the migration of mayors from one political party to another, being closely linked to the phenomenon of party politics (Anticoruptie.md, 2020).

The mechanisms through which this clientelism operates are varied: from the preferential allocation of funds for infrastructure to the prioritization of certain localities in European-funded projects. The case of Bihor County, where the opposition constantly accused the allocation of funds on political criteria, or that of Argeș, where the president of the county council was nicknamed " *the neighbor* " due to the multiple properties owned in the county, illustrate the extent of the phenomenon (Ratiu Center for Democracy et al., 2017:10).

The consequences of this clientelism are profound and long-lasting. Politically "punished" localities accumulate development deficits that become increasingly difficult to recover, generating internal migration and depopulation. Moreover, this practice undermines trust in institutions and fuels cycles of political revenge upon changes of power, preventing the development of coherent long-term strategies.

TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL PATTERNS

An internal delivery schedule is also outlined, valid in most cases, reflecting administrative inertia, budget cycles and political logic. The first 18 months of the mandate focus on the results of previously prepared projects, when teams find documentation, approvals and open funding lines on the table. At this stage, inaugurations and receptions seem to flow, and campaign promises stick to planned achievements in the previous cycle. In the next twenty or so months, the pace drops dramatically, partly due to the complexity of the award and execution phases and partly due to exogenous shocks, such as the breakup of the governing alliance, which redrawn majorities at the county level and fueled an internal competition for resources. Towards the end, electoral pressure revives a wave of inaugurations, but this often covers works with a local impact or intermediate phases of large projects. In practice, few manage to break this cyclicity, and those who do have invested, constantly and discreetly, in the professionalization of the technical apparatus, in a project pipeline, and in the continuity of the teams.

There is also a geography of performance that is not sufficiently explained by the level of development. The North-West region is distinguished by an institutional culture oriented towards European projects and inter-county cooperation, while the South and North-East concentrate more administrations vulnerable to integrity shocks and limited technical capabilities.

An article by Ibinceanu et al. analyzes the regional situation up to 2016, showing that the South-West Oltenia and North-East regions were below 45% and 36% of the EU average GDP, respectively. In contrast, the West, Center and North-West regions

performed better, and Bucharest–Ilfov recorded the fastest GDP per capita growth in the EU (Ibinceanu et al., 2021).

Other sources also highlight that the West and Central regions have become industrialized and urban centers, while the South and East, predominantly rural, experience major gaps, especially in economic development and territorial cohesion (Mitrică et al., 2020:23).

There are positive contagion effects, so that neighboring counties with performers adopt similar practices, standards and tools, creating corridors of good practices. This is not just an academic curiosity, but a pragmatic invitation to replicate successful models on short administrative routes, rather than seeking miraculous solutions in the legislature.

CATEGORIES OF PROMISES AND THEIR FULFILLMENT RATE

If we were to extract a taxonomy of promises based on the rate of achievement, we would see a clear gradient. Local road infrastructure works, rehabilitations and punctual modernizations have the greatest chance of completion within four years, because they are modularizable, have well-known technical standards and are financeable through established European lines or predictable national programs. Health modernizations involving facilities and outpatient clinics fall into the area of relative success, because they allow for the fragmentation of investments and can be delivered without massively depending on additional human resources. In contrast, water and sewage networks, where regional operators do not have a solid institutional design, suffer from a lack of synchronization between design, execution and operation, and the dependence on lengthy approvals and authorizations pushes deadlines beyond the electoral cycle.

Economic development and jobs represent the most rhetorical terrain and the poorest in direct results. Without regional fiscal instruments and no explicit competences in industrial strategies, county administrations have few levers to support net job creation, and where the narrative has translated into reality it has been due to the happy alignment of infrastructure, human capital and proximity to dynamic urban poles rather than a local magic formula. Tourism, despite the consistent potential of many counties, has remained the least fruitful promise, in the absence of an integrated approach that combines access, reception infrastructure, brand and a calendar of events with critical mass. Specific investments have been made, but without a coherent strategy, the effects have been dispersed.

Strategic coherence appears as another Achilles' heel. Few administrations have managed to insert promises into a clear public policy architecture, with measurable objectives, deadlines and credible budgetary vectors. Much more frequently, commitments have been formulated in the form of long, heterogeneous lists, with disparate objectives and without an order of priorities. This lack of strategic discipline has generated a dilution effect of efforts, in which too many projects started simultaneously fight for resources and management. When a volatile political context is superimposed on this, the daily order of political survival inevitably undermines the multi-annual perspective. Several county council presidents have compensated by institutionalizing a phased project portfolio and by publishing periodic reports to track the status of works, budget execution and result indicators. This transparency has functioned not only as a communication tool, but as an internal discipline, forcing the apparatus to report and correct deviations.

A persistent structural problem is the absence of organizational learning. Failures in one mandate are not systematically processed to rewrite the way of promise and implementation in the next. The same promises are repeated without local feasibility, the same explanations for failures are recycled, and the same patterns of tenders and appeals are resumed, as if time does not extract lessons. In a few administrations, this blindness has been broken by creating management units with institutional memory and by stabilizing careers around projects, but, on average, political turbulence and the attraction of the private sector to specialists undermine the construction of an administrative tradition.

The dependence on the central level produces another paradox. Many promises, especially those with media coverage, are in reality pleas for budgets or investments managed by ministries, national companies or agencies. This deliberate or not confusion between the role of operator and that of political advocate turns against the promiser. The electorate judges the results, not the institutional nuances, and when the highway or the bypass does not appear, the bill is placed on the account of the one who promised, not on the complicated division of competences. Where local leaders have simultaneously built a realistic portfolio on their own competences, expectations have been managed much more healthily.

An aspect often ignored in the public debate is the differential impact of the socio-economic context. It is true that counties with dynamic economies and rich human capital benefit from a comparative advantage in implementing promises, but the final difference is not determined by the context, but by the quality of governance. This is demonstrated by counties that, under similar starting conditions, have large divergences in results after four years. What made the difference was the professionalization of the apparatus, realistic planning, the integrity of the leaders and the ability to learn from mistakes in real time.

If we narrow the perspective to the internal mechanisms of a county administration that manages to fulfill its promises, the profile is remarkably homogeneous. At the top stands a leader who understands the difference between what he can operate directly and what he can influence through advocacy, who refuses to promise miracles and publicly assumes the realistic project calendar. Under him operates a project management unit that acts as a programming and tracking office, not as a formal department. Public procurement is treated as a critical business function, not as a bureaucratic chore. Legal is involved ex-ante, in drafting documentation and anticipating appeals, not just ex-post. Internal control reports along the way, not just at the end, so that slippages are corrected before they have significant consequences. Public communication is anchored in indicators, project maps and deadlines. Finally, the relationship with regional operators and ADIs is not formal, but one of co-governance, with arbitration mechanisms and transparency on financial flows.

In the mirror, administrations that fail to deliver look just as predictable. Leaders promise what they cannot deliver, intentionally or unintentionally confuse institutional roles, delay the preparation of documentation, do not assume co-financing, use the technical apparatus as a political appendage, rely on loyalties instead of skills, and treat integrity as an image issue, not an efficiency one. From here follows a chain of functional failures: problems with tenders, contractors who abandon work, necessary corrections for European projects, projects re-tendered after the funding window has been missed, losses of highly qualified personnel, and, finally, a list of promises that moves intact into the program of the next electoral cycle.

Subtly, but essentially, the role of political stability is also seen. Majority changes in county councils, especially when they are the result of the disintegration of national alliances, decisively slow down implementation. Any reset of power relations requires

renegotiations of priority lists, restarts discussions with suppliers and pushes back critical stages of projects. Where a minimum of political cohesion was maintained around the investment portfolio, even in conditions of electoral competition, the implementation effort continued, and the promises had an institutional, not partisan trajectory.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND MANIPULATION OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION

The report's analysis reveals sophisticated strategies for manipulating public perception, which go beyond simple unfulfilled promises. A recurring tactic is the repeated inauguration of the same objectives, presented at different stages of execution as distinct achievements. County roads, in particular, are susceptible to this form of manipulation, being "inaugurated" successively upon pouring the first layer of asphalt, upon completion of markings, and upon final acceptance.

Another strategy identified is that of "transfer of responsibility", whereby failures are systematically attributed to the central government (invariably of a different political color), while achievements, however modest, are presented as personal successes. This rhetoric, evident in the statements of Paul Stănescu from Olt or Titu Bojin from Timiș, creates a narrative in which the president of the county council is permanently in battle with hostile external forces, thus legitimizing his own failures.

The selective use of statistical data is another form of manipulation identified. Presidents frequently present global amounts invested without detailing the nature or real impact of the investments, or use misleading units of measurement (kilometers of road "rehabilitated" can mean anything from filling potholes to completely rebuilding the road structure). Quite a few administrations have insistently communicated ongoing projects as if they were completed or have mixed initiatives financed and implemented by other authorities into their own balance sheets. This inflated balance sheets produces reputational costs in the medium term, when the physical reality of the works contradicts the rhetoric. Administrations that preferred a sober register, oriented towards result indicators, have built more robust trust, which has allowed them to manage failures without political collapse.

POSITIVE EXCEPTIONS AND BEST PRACTICE LESSONS

Despite the overall bleak picture, the report also identifies some examples of good practice that are worth highlighting. Tiberiu Marc from Sălaj stands out for its administrative transparency, with all annual reports being publicly available and easily accessible. Tamás Sándor from Covasna, despite facing challenges specific to a county with a large ethnic minority, managed to implement significant development projects without being involved in major corruption scandals. These positive exceptions share several common characteristics that could form the basis for systemic reforms: proactive administrative transparency, genuine consultation with local communities, focus on projects with measurable impact and, perhaps most importantly, a clear separation between personal/political interests and administrative responsibilities.

CONCLUSIONS. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The comprehensive analysis of the performance of county council presidents in the period 2012-2016 offers valuable insights into the dynamics of local governance in post-communist democracies that impose three lessons. The first says that promises must be made in the vocabulary of institutional competence, that is, they must be formulated as

operational objectives within the scope of control of the county council, with budget annexes, deadlines and result indicators. Anything beyond this scope can be assumed as an advocacy priority, but not as a delivery commitment. The second sets integrity as a determinant of performance and treats prevention as a public policy. Integrity tests, procurement transparency, preventive control and whistleblower protection are instruments of operational efficiency, not just of public morale. The third claims professionalization as a current investment, not as a sporadic project. A career in public project management must be possible and attractive in the county administration, otherwise the skills deficit will deepen with each cycle, and promises will dissolve into the habit of failure.

Many county administrations have fallen into the middle capability trap, where institutions have enough capacity to maintain the appearance of functionality, but not enough to generate real and sustainable development. The increased pressure to deliver results leads to the use of shortcuts and a focus on short-term strategies, which affects administrative capacity in the medium and long term, causing the cycle to repeat itself.

The behavior of county council presidents confirms predictions regarding the maximization of personal utility at the expense of the public interest. The prevalence of corruption and clientelism suggests that current institutional incentives fail to align the personal interests of decision-makers with those of the communities they represent.

The analysis also reveals a fundamental problem of information asymmetry between voters and elected officials. The complexity of development projects, combined with administrative opacity and manipulation of public communication, makes it extremely difficult for citizens to truly assess administrative performance. This asymmetry is systematically exploited by politicians to ensure their re-election despite mediocre or even disastrous performances.

Electoral promises, for the most part, reflect basic development needs rather than strategic visions for the future. The fact that in 2012 candidates were still promising running water and sanitation as major achievements underscores Romania's dramatic development gap compared to European standards.

The extraordinarily high rate of criminal problems among county council presidents, with over 60% having problems with the justice system, is perhaps the most serious finding of the study. This reality not only undermines development by blocking or diverting resources, but fundamentally erodes public trust in institutions and the democratic process itself.

The experience of the 2012-2016 period suggests the need for deep structural reforms. First, it is imperative to strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms, including through mandatory and standardized publication of all information on budget execution and project status. Second, institutional incentives need to be revised to more effectively penalize corruption and clientelism, possibly by introducing performance evaluation mechanisms independent of the electoral cycle.

Finally, perhaps the most important lesson of this analysis is the need for a profound cultural shift in understanding the role of local public administration. As long as leadership positions in local administration are perceived primarily as opportunities for personal enrichment or the exercise of clientelistic power, Romania will continue to lag behind European development, despite the considerable resources available through structural and cohesion funds.

In the absence of an alchemy between realistic promises, integrity and professionalism, the probability that the following cycles will repeat the same scenarios remains high. But in the few places where this alchemy has been tried, the results have

been tangibly seen. County roads rehabilitated on complete and coherent corridors, equipped and functional outpatient clinics, waste systems that actually operate, modernized airports with growing traffic, water and sewage networks connecting tens of thousands of households, rehabilitated and operationalized social centers. There, the promises were no longer simple electoral texts, but governance propositions, written in the language of deliverables, not applause. And this is, after all, the only meaning that matters.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anticoruptie.md (2020), Political clientelism in the allocation of public money. Government-affiliated mayors, advantaged; available at: <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/clientelism-politic-la-alocarea-banilor-publici-primariile-afiliate-guvernarii-avantajate.com> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- AP (2023), Mircea Cosma and his son Vlad escape prison after the acts have expired, in Digi24.ro; available at: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/justitie/mircea-cosma-si-fiul-sau-vlad-scapa-de-inchisoare-dupa-ce-fapte-s-au-prescris-2540665> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- Badea Camelia (2018), Horia Uioreanu was convicted definitively sentenced to 6 years and 4 months in prison in the bribery case, in Ziare.com; available at: <https://ziare.com/horea-dorin-uioreanu/dna/horia-uioreanu-a-fost-condamnat-definitiv-la-6-ani-si-4-luni-de-inchisoare-in-dosarul-de-mita-1499804> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- Brie Mircea (2025), Inclusivity. Vision, Mission, Goals, and Perspectives. *Inclusivity*, 1, 7-14. <https://doi.org/10.58603/XQZT9578>.
- Buduşan Iulian (2020), Adrian Duicu , former Head of the Council County Mehedinti , was sentenced to one year and half a suspended prison sentence , in Libertatea ; available at : <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/fost-baron-psd-de-mehedint-acum-la-pro-romania-condamnat-la-un-an-si-jumatate-de-inchisoare-cu-suspendare-2888531> (accessed on 02.09.2025) .
- Costache Alex (2020), Operation " Save " the barons!". DNA ranked APPLICATIONS may SEVERAL barons local open in MANDATE Kovesi. Last on the list: Ion Prioteasa from Dolj , accused of fraud fund European , in G4Media ; available at: <https://www.g4media.ro/operatiunea-salvati-baronii-dna-a-clasat-dosarele-mai-multor-baroni-locali-deschise-in-mandatul-lui-kovesi-ultimul-pe-lista-ion-prioteasa-de-la-dolj-acuzat-de-fraudarea-fonduril.html> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- Elections 2012. President council county, in Commit Global, accessible at: <https://istoric.rezultatevot.ro/elections/101/results?division=county> (accessed on 01.09.2025)
- Free Europe (2020), Former Minister Cristian Adomniţei, sentenced to 3 years and 2 months in prison with execution; available at: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/fostul-ministru-cristian-adomnitei-condamnat-la-3-ani-%C8%99i-2-luni-de-%C3%AEnchisoare-cu-executare/30972261.html> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- Free Europe (2020), Nicuşor Constantinescu, convicted definitively to 4 years in prison in FILE Siutghiol, in europalibera.org; available at: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/nicuser-constantinescu-condamnat-definitiv-la-4-ani-de-inchisoare-in-dosarul-siutghiol/30719311.html> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- Gaidoş Larisa Bianca (2026), Review of Istvan József Polgar and Mircea Brie (Coordinators), *The Enlargement of the EU Towards the Western Balkan*, Editura

- Universității din Oradea, 2025, p. 279, ISBN 978-606-10-2484-1. Inclusion, 4, 171-175. <https://doi.org/10.58603/PREN7346>.
- Ibinceanu Onica Mihaela Cristina, Cristache Nicoleta, Dobrea Razvan Cătălin and Florescu Margareta, "Regional Development in Romania: Empirical Evidence Regarding the Factors for Measuring a Prosperous and Sustainable Economy," Sustainability 13, no. 7 (2021): 3942; available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/1057834> (accessed 02.09.2025).
- Mitrică Bianca, Grigorescu Ines, Săgeata Radu, Mocanu Irena and Dumitrașcu Monica, "Territorial development in Romania: Regional disparities" in Dilemmas of Regional and Local Development, ed. Jerzy Bański, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 23 ; available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429433863> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- RadioJurnal (2014), Crin Antonescu: USL no longer exists; available at: <https://www.romania-actualitati.ro/stiri/politica/crin-antonescu-usl-nu-mai-exista-id53947.html> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- Ratiu Center for Democracy, Resource Center for Public Participation (2017). *Monitoring report A activity council presidents counties in Romania for period 2012-2016*, p. 162.
- Sârbu Adriana (2018), DNA, file Ranking and in EVENT Marian Petrache, in Europafm.ro ; available at : <https://www.europafm.ro/dna-dosar-clasat-si-in-cazul-lui-marian-petrache/> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- Stancu Răzvan (2011), Romania, last place in regard EU motorways, on Radio Romania News; available at: <https://www.romania-actualitati.ro/stiri/romania/romania-ultimul-loc-in-privinta-autostrazilor-din-ue-id30557.html> (accessed on 01.09.2025).
- Sterian Cristina (2018), The Former Head of the Council County Buzau Cristinela Bâgiu, found in prison, his sentence was increased, in Libertatea; available at: <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/fostul-sef-al-consiliului-județean-buzau-cristinel-bagiuaflať-in-inchisoare-sa-ales-cu-pedeapsa-majorata-2256958> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- Stoica Aalina (2025), Strengthening Social Resilience Through Cultural Diplomacy at the Eastern European Union Border. Inclusion, 1, 33-43. <https://doi.org/10.58603/TOZW1537>.
- Viteanu Anca (2016), The Former Head of Gorj County Court Ion Călinoiu, sentenced to suspended prison sentence for false in statements, in news.ro; available at: <https://www.news.ro/justitie/fostul-sef-al-cj-gorj-ion-calinoiu-condamnat-la-inchisoare-cu-suspendare-pentru-fals-in-declaratii-1922412225012016101715608067> (accessed on 02.09.2025).
- Ziare.com (2015), Romania penal: Half of the heads of the CJ and 1 in 3 mayors of municipalities have problems with the law, available at: <https://ziare.com/politica/politica-interna/romania-penala-jumatate-din-sefii-de-cj-si-1-din-3-primari-de-municipii-au-probleme-cu-legea-1378264> (accessed on 02.09.2025).