

An overview of the doctoral dissertation „Administrative Regionalisation of the Portuguese Mainland. Analysis of Public Discourse” by Magdalena Katana Mendes

There have been numerous approaches to delegating authority to subordinate levels since the premodern era. Due to the expansion and improvement of these techniques and methods in the modern era, state organisations have become more complex in terms of both structure and competency.

Decentralisation in its two-level form, i.e., the central state authority and the self-governing commune, is a generally common solution, though the specific solutions can differ significantly. The three-level structure, which consists of a regional level that is autonomous or self-governing in between the central and commune levels, is less prevalent. The European Union promotes the three-level structure, which gives the regions a lead role in development policy. This is a solution that is very popular among the Member States.

However, not all of them appear to be persuaded by it. Portugal is one of them, and searching for regions within its territorial structure would be pointless. De jure administrative regions exist, but de facto they do not, so the latter's legal status is still up for debate.

The Portuguese Republic's Constitution, which was ratified following the Carnation Revolution in 1976, distinguishes the country's territorial structure by dividing its continental part into administrative regions (Article 236.1) and two autonomous regions in the Atlantic Ocean (the Azores and the Archipelagos of Madeira). Both types of regions were established as an intermediate level between the central government and civil parishes and municipalities. Even though the Constitution was adopted nearly fifty years ago, the provision on administrative regions in the continental part has yet to be implemented.

The reason why the provisions of the fundamental law are not implemented in a matter as fundamental as the territorial system in a democratic state of law like Portugal, is an intriguing research question that is raised by this suspended legal status and the long-standing, obvious disparity between the constitution's provisions and their implementation.

It is undeniable that Portugal has not implemented the constitutional provision pertaining to the vertical division of powers. As such, it cannot be the subject of research, just as none of the circumstances surrounding it. The latter can only be employed if it is appropriate for elucidating the research problem and, as a result, aiding in the attempt to address the question mentioned earlier.

Assuming this, the paper offers a theoretical perspective of public discourse as an analytical method suitable for explaining the Portuguese case of administrative regionalisation.

This is because discourse allows one to identify and interpret views that are exchanged either through consensus, as J. Habermas desires, or, conversely, through conflict, the struggle for the dominance of one interpretation over another, as discussed by M. Foucault. The fact that discourse is ascribed an agentic power (in different ways) is not without importance.

Discourse analysis is a qualitative research technique that examines various written and spoken statements and their effects on society. They are analysed within a particular sociopolitical framework, in the spirit of critical discourse analysis, the fight for dominance and hegemony, and political objectives. It has therefore been used in this doctoral dissertation.

The argument put forth in this work was that, while public debate on the Portuguese administrative regionalisation issue did not result in consensus and an agreement that would have implemented administrative regions, it was not entirely ineffective.

The methodological presumption when building the work's structure was that each chapter should, above all, serve a purpose to the research problem and the main thesis, as well as reflecting the research process. Consequently, five chapters were used to present the problem:

- 1) Public discourse as a viewpoint for research
- 2) Theoretical aspects of region and regionalisation,
- 3) The administrative regionalisation in Portugal. Historical background and current political and systemic determinants,
- 4) Public discourse participants in Portugal's administrative regionalisation process
- 5) Institutional endeavours to put the public discourse's outcomes into practice.

With definitional findings and a typology of phenomena in the fields of discourse (including public discourse) and regionalisation (preceded by remarks concerning the region), respectively, the first two chapters are theoretical. Additionally, some discourse concepts and research findings pertaining to discourse as a method are included in the first chapter.

By detailing the development of Portugal's administrative regionalisation process and introducing its constitutional and legal presumptions, the third chapter aimed to set the scene for the considerations. Along with describing the Regional Coordination and Development Committees (Comissões de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional, or CCDR) as effectively operating at the regional level, it also discusses the structure and the outcomes of the 1998 referendum on administrative regionalisation.

Lastly, the research chapters are the fourth and fifth. The fourth displays the opinions of the people involved in the public discourse, including political parties, the presidents of the republic, governments, local authorities, the media, and experts. The fifth chapter lists the

outcomes of the discourse, which include alternative administrative solutions at the regional and subregional/supramunicipal levels as well as legislative changes in the regionalisation process. Additionally, it presents the results of the work of the Independent Commission for Decentralisation (Comissão Independente para a Descentralização, or CID), legal changes to the regulation of the constitutional provisions on the creation of administrative regions, and the possibility of another referendum on the creation of administrative regions based on public opinion polls.

By examining the public discourse on the regionalisation of Portugal's mainland, we can verify that the Habermasian ideal of complete consensus, a perfect communication, cannot be realised. Discourse is not a process of deliberation; rather, it is a space of conflicting interpretations, conflicts of interest, and democratic political game. Furthermore, despite popular belief, reaching consensus and bringing about the desired change is not always necessary; failing to reach a consensus does not always have to be a totally negative thing. This is confirmed by the public debate over the administrative regionalisation of Portugal's mainland.

As this public discourse was not primarily a way of coming to an agreement or consensus, the constitutional provision on the vertical division of power was never put into effect. Conflict, a struggle for meaning and interpretation, a struggle for power, and a victory have always characterized this public discourse - exactly the kind of struggle that M. Foucault addresses in his concept. What matters here is not the general lack of organisation of actors around the issue of administrative regionalisation, but rather the lack of political will to implement regions and ultimately use this issue as a political tool.

The outcome of the public discourse on the administrative regionalisation of Portugal's mainland was influenced to varied degrees by its participants: political parties, governments, presidents, local authorities, the media, and experts. The political parties did not engage in public discourse to the same degree; the Social Democratic Party, for example, set the tone and made statements that were at odds with its true objectives, while the other parties failed to provide a convincing defence of their positions, made concessions, and typically put the matter on hold for later consideration. There was frequently a glaring contradiction between the provisions (or lack thereof) and the actual actions of the executive authorities who included the issue of administrative regionalisation in their programs. On the other hand, the presidents typically showed a conservative or opposing attitude toward the process. In the grand scheme of things, only local governments are shown as supporters of the third tier of local government. The role of experts and the media was not fulfilled. Among other things, the nature of the

information to be distributed, supply constraints, the shortcomings of the media market, and its specificity are to blame. Regarding experts, they did not address the issue of administrative regionalisation in the manner that is customary in academic settings. Only after 2019 did their existence become apparent, and they are more journalistic views than scientific knowledge. Furthermore, this topic was rarely discussed continuously; instead, it was typically brought up before the Assembly of the Republic elections.

The referendum's negative outcome demonstrated the lack of political will; citizens were not persuaded that administrative regions would be beneficial. Political parties (and other political actors, the government and the president) failed to collect enough data to create knowledge about administrative regionalisation, or at least it was not properly organised and distributed. The chaos brought on by the political conflict further suggested how complicated this issue was. According to S. Bowler and T. Donovan, this image, which was incomprehensible in its essence and was reported by the media, described the issue of administrative regionalisation as a particularly complex and, more importantly, political one. As a result, it failed to persuade and even deterred citizens from supporting the institution or from casting "yes" votes in the referendum. Furthermore, it can be inferred from the theory of S.M. Lipset and S. Rokkan that the administrative regionalisation issue in Portugal lacked the political significance to split society, which would subsequently rally around the issue. Knowledge has not been arranged or effectively communicated in public discourse to have an impact on consensus and implementation of regions. Instead, political actors - political parties, government, and the head of state - deliberately created chaos to upset the status quo and allow for the spread of negative interpretations, which are far more powerful than positive ones. Notwithstanding the lack of agreement, the inefficiency of public discourse, and the absence of administrative region implementation, the creation of the Independent Commission for Decentralisation (CID) and the rise of alternative forms of space development between the commune and the state (Regional Coordination and Development Committees, or CCDR; Inter-communal Communities, or CIM; and Metropolitan Areas, or AM) - also described as „hidden regionalisation”- are specific outcomes of public discourse. Following nearly fifty years of public discussion on regionalisation, citizens now express support for the process and are willing to vote in favour of it in any future referendum, which is another significant issue.