

INTEGRATED FUNCTIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM (IFAR)

SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

The Integrated Functional Administrative Reform (IFAR) is a model of systemic and continuous transformation of local public administration in the Republic of Moldova. The idea at its heart is that administrative-territorial structures should be designed according to the competences to be performed, the necessary administrative capacity, the optimal scale of service delivery, the available financial resources and the mechanisms of democratic accountability. The administrative-territorial reorganization is not the purpose of the reform, rather it is one of the instruments enabling viable local collective formations, better public services and a conducive development environment.

IFAR responds to a fundamental structural public problem: the discrepancy between the number and the size of administrative-territorial units, the volume of competences reserved versus the effective institutional capacity and the financial resources necessary to exercise them. Territorial fragmentation, depopulation, reduced tax base, shortage of qualified personnel, dependence on transfers and functional erosion of the rayon level have resulted in an administrative system, that legally recognizes a local autonomy, while keeping it limited in practice.

The IFAR model offers a continuous, phased, adaptive and differentiated reform.

At **level I**, consolidation is based on three complementary instruments: boosting voluntary amalgamation; targeted reorganization of units with less than 1,000 residents, allowing for customized solutions; and extending inter-community cooperation for the joint provision of services.

At **level II**, rayons are replaced by stronger districts, configured based on functional, territorial and socio-economic criteria, integrated into an intermediate model delimiting the roles of districts, development regions, deconcentrated services and statistical regions.

The structural dimension is inseparable from the following:

- reform of local public finances;
- local development reform;
- professionalization of administration;
- digitalization of services;

Resources should follow functions; unfunded mandates should be excluded; localities that lose their status of administrative-territorial unit should be provided guarantees of representation, access to services and fair allocations.

IFAR integrates the territorial diversity of the Republic of Moldova.

ATU Gagauzia is regarded as an asymmetric form of the intermediate level, functionally integrated, having no uniformity or effect over its constitutional status.

For the localities of the left bank of the Dniester, IFAR can offer a gradual logic of functional convergence through services, infrastructure and joint projects, without substituting the process of political regulation.

Elements of IFAR content

Element	IFAR Essential Content
Starting point	Analysis of functions, competences, services, capacity and resources.
Paradigm shift	From changing administrative boundaries to functionality, performance and public value (from structure to functions).
Vision	What kind of state do we seek, from the administrative-territorial perspective, and what is the content and course of reform to achieve this goal?
Level I	Voluntary amalgamation + targeted reorganization under 1,000 residents + intercommunity cooperation.
Level II	Transition from rayons to districts and functional integration of the intermediate level.
ATU Gagauzia and localities on the left bank of the Dniester	Functional integration of the special status level and localities from the left bank of the Dniester into the administrative space of the Republic of Moldova
Financial pillar	Resources follow functions; fiscal autonomy and sustainability, fiscal equalization and equity, financing of the transition.
Developing pillar	Public authorities capable of ensuring development, attracting investment and managing projects.
Implementation method	Graduality, differentiation, consultation, communication, monitoring and evaluation.
Purpose	Viable local collective formations, affordable services, territorial development and local democracy.

The public problem that IFAR responds to

IFAR starts from the premises that the current system of local public administration is simultaneously affected by territorial fragmentation, demographic decline, reduced institutional capacity, lack of resources, insufficient financial autonomy, overlapping competences and lack of continuity in reforms. These issues do not act in an isolated manner. They reinforce each other and result in a persistent discrepancy between the legal status of local authorities and their real capacity to administer public affairs.

The demographic size is the key. Depopulation, migration and ageing reduce the taxpayer base, the supply in skilled staff and the critical mass needed to organize services. At the same time, maintaining a large number of small units multiplies the administrative staff and fixed costs. Some of the collective formations still exist legally, but no longer have the human, institutional and financial resources to be able to properly exercise their competences.

The financial dimension transforms a formal autonomy into a limited autonomy. Own revenues are low, the financing structure is dominated by transfers, and resources for investment and development are insufficient. Competences are transferred or maintained at the local level without always having the cost standards and financing sources clearly defined. In this context, the local administration manages deficit rather than development.

At the institutional level, small units are functionally overloaded and poorly professionalized, while the rayonal level has gradually lost its coherence. The rayon territories are too small for some supra-local services and strategic planning, but large enough to produce institutional overlaps and distances with level I. Deconcentrated services, rayon structures and development agencies operate within different territorial geometries, without having a sufficiently clear delimitation of roles.

The key problem can be formulated as follows: the existing local public administration organization and functioning fail to ensure a correlation between the demographic and territorial dimension and the amount of competences, administrative capacity and financial resources. This results in unequal services, inefficient use of resources, dependence on the center, territorial disparities and distrust in the reform.

Paradigm shift

IFAR puts forward the idea of moving from a formal administrative-territorial reform to a functional and integrated administrative reform. In the traditional paradigm, the decision starts from the number and boundaries of the units, with the functions being subsequently adapted to the new geometry. In IFAR, it takes the reverse order: defining the necessary functions and competences, the optimal scale of services, institutional capacity, financial need and representation requirements, and only then defining the appropriate structure.

This reverse order does not exclude territorial reorganization. It repositions it as a tool. Territorial consolidation is only justified when it improves the exercise of competences, quality of services, financial sustainability and development capacity, without unjustifiably cutting democratic participation and local identity.

Traditional structural approach	The IFAR logic
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Traditional structural approach	The IFAR logic
The borders and number of ATU are the starting point.	Functions, services and capacity are the starting point.
A relatively uniform solution is applied.	Solutions are differentiated according to territorial and institutional conditions.
Success is associated with reducing the number of units.	Success is measured by capacity, services, development, equity and citizen satisfaction.
The reform is treated as selective intervention.	The reform is a continuous, phased, adaptive and assessable process.
Administrative efficiency can dominate representation.	Efficiency is balanced against subsidiarity, proximity and democratic legitimacy.

Definition, character and purpose of IFAR

IFAR is a consistent strategic framework for the transformation of subnational public administration integrating territorial, institutional and functional, financial, human and developmental dimensions. The model is not a one-off selective reform or a single administrative consolidation plan. It is a reform governance mechanism, that can be applied in the long term and adjusted according to demographic, economic, social and political changes.

The functional-centered **nature** means that each level of governance is justified by the functions that it can perform better. The integrated nature means that territorial reorganization, decentralization, financing, public services, local development, human resources, digitalization and democratic accountability are designed together. The adaptive nature requires monitoring the results and adjusting the reform tools. The differentiated nature excludes mechanical application of the same solution to all localities.

The purpose of the model is the establishment of viable and resilient local collective formations, capable of exercising competences, providing affordable and quality services, supporting economic and social development and ensuring effective participation of citizens. The reform should strengthen the administration, and the community, in particular.

Objectives and principles of IFAR

1. Major objectives

1. Stopping depopulation and mitigating its effects on communities and the administration.

2. Creating a local governance base capable of supporting public services, economic development and attracting labor.
3. Ensuring balance between efficiency of administration and democratic participation while preserving the natural connection between citizens and the local government.
4. Maintaining the social cohesion necessary for the acceptance and irreversibility of the reform, in line with the European course of the Republic of Moldova.

2. The IFAR overall objective

The overall objective is to provide a consistent analytical, conceptual and operational framework for the initiation and implementation of a structural and functional reform of local public administration, based on administrative viability, institutional efficiency and territorial equity. This framework should allow transforming the reform from a volatile political issue into a predictable, well-founded and sustainable process.

3. Principles underlying the IFAR model

Principle	Operational significance
Functionality preceding the administrative geometry	Territorial delimitations following the capacity to exercise competences and provide services.
Subsidiarity and proximity	Competences are exercised as close as possible to citizens, at an adequately achievable level.
Graduality, predictability and continuity	The reform is phased, predictable, monitored and adjusted; it does not end with the adoption or implementation of a policy document.
Social/democratic legitimacy	Consultation, communication, representation of localities and protection of identity are key to carrying out the reform.
Differentiation and adaptation	The measures are calibrated against the population, local identity, geography, connectivity, administrative capacity and the level of development.
Resources following the functions	Any competence must have an adequate funding source and institutional capacity to enable its implementation.
Territorial equity	Access to services and opportunities should not be dependent solely on local tax capacity.
Evidence-based decisions	Viability, performance and impact are measured ex ante, on-going and ex post.

IFAR lines of action

The vision of structural and functional organization

The **first IFAR line of action** lies in the area of developing a National vision of structural and functional organization of public administration. The vision should give answers to fundamental questions: what type of administrative and territorial organization the state pursues; how many levels of governance are needed; what functions and competences belong to each level; what resources are needed; how the administrative and democratic responsibility is implemented; what is the continuity and the term of the reform.

The **vision** defines the strategic orientation, the order of steps, the safeguards of coherence between levels of governance, delimitation of responsibilities and evaluation of results. It constitutes "the starting point" of the public administration reform, in general, and of the subnational/local public administration, in particular, meant to ensure a systemic approach to the entire reform process aiming to transform the state and the public administration. Ensuring the presence of a reform vision is a necessary stage of preparation of structural and functional actions that will determine the content of the public administration reform and ensure the success of the implementation process.

Level I: integrated administrative and functional consolidation

At level I, IFAR does not mechanically oppose large units and small units or sacrifice local democracy in the name of generalized efficiency. Consolidation is a means of capacity building in all its forms, and the choice of the reform tool should be based on identity, accessibility, functional relationships, economic potential, infrastructure and the will of communities.

The model combines three tools. They are not exclusive alternatives, but complementary mechanisms that can be applied in different successions and proportions.

Tool	Function	Conditions and guarantees
Voluntary amalgamation	Democratic, gradual and continuous consolidation, based on the decisions of the communities and serious social and economic analysis.	Simple procedures, credible incentives, representation of localities, communication, post-amalgamation support.
Reorganization of ATU under 1,000 residents	Targeted intervention where minimum capacity can no longer be sustained and where voluntary amalgamation has not produced results.	Viability methodology, consultation, individualized solutions, motivated exemptions, transition fund.

Tool	Function	Conditions and guarantees
Intercommunity cooperation (ICC)	Joint provision of services without allowing the legal identity of the ATU to disappear.	National policy, methodological framework, incentives, assistance, governance and evaluation.

1. Voluntary amalgamation

Voluntary amalgamation is rightly considered the main democratic form of administrative-territorial consolidation. It reduces the fragmentation and political risks of imposed mergers, with its results being dependent, however, on the continuous nature of the process, incentives and people's trust in the reform. The modest impact of the initial stages, so far, is explained by the short duration, bureaucratic procedures, insufficient incentives, identity resistance and communication unable to transform the advantages of the reform into convincing public arguments.

Priority areas are the following:

- simplification of the procedures and setting a well-defined place of amalgamation in the overall reform policy;
- government leadership, defining the roles of level II and territorial offices of the State Chancellery in the voluntary amalgamation process;
- predictable financial incentives and correlation of amalgamation with regional development;
- adaptation of the electoral system for the representation of all component localities;
- proactive communication and consultation strategy;
- post-amalgamation guide to institutional, financial, heritage and digital transition;
- focused monitoring and evaluation of the process and its results.

2. Targeted reorganization of units under 1,000 residents

For units under 1,000 residents, IFAR offers a targeted regulatory intervention, justified by the frequent inability to support a minimum of the administrative staff or provide quality public services. The threshold is intended to serve as a triggering value for evaluation and reorganization, not as a substitute for viability analysis. The targeted nature allows avoiding generalized mergers, preserves graduality and continuity and creates prerequisites for the continuation of the process based on comprehensive research that identifies the need, timeliness and efficiency of the next reform actions.

The regulatory framework should establish the types of reorganization of a new ATU – merger, absorption or creation, the rules of representation, public consultation, the principles of graduality and subsidiarity, as well as the criteria of individualized solutions

and possible exemptions. The application should be based on an operational methodology, justified choice of administrative centers, a Territorial Consolidation Fund, a communication strategy and an evaluation framework.

3. Intercommunity cooperation (ICC)

Intercommunity cooperation is the functional pillar that allows achieving economies of scale and improving services without the mandatory modification of the status of each locality. Joint structures will allow units to organize utility services, infrastructure, project management, procurement, record-keeping and other functions that require a scale bigger than that of a single locality.

Poor use of ICC is associated with poor integration into national policies, lack of leadership, insufficient incentives and assistance, low initiation capacity, and reluctance to delegate to joint structures. IFAR suggests a specific national policy, modification of the legal framework, methodologies and agreement templates, financial incentives, legal and technical assistance, monitoring and involvement of level II, Regional Development Agencies, deconcentrated services in facilitating cooperation.

Level II: from rayons to districts

IFAR states that the current rayon model is functionally outdated. Fragmentation of level II, the intermediate one, limits supra-local services, policy coordination, territorial planning and resource use. On top of that, the different administrative-territorial and functional configurations of rayons, deconcentrated services and development regions create overlaps and unclear responsibilities.

The solution is to adopt an integrated intermediate model featuring the reorganization of rayons into districts having a critical administrative, financial and professional mass. A district should not be configured solely based on the population number. The delimitation should be a combination of accessibility and time of travel, connectivity, territorial continuity, urban polarization, socio-economic links, labor market, critical infrastructure and potential administrative capacity.

1. Competences and the role of the district

The district level should take over the functions of supra-local interest and provide strategic and operational support to level I. Its role includes coordinating the services that go beyond the scale of a commune, territorial planning, infrastructure, economic development, attracting funding, legal and administrative assistance, digitalization and compensation of capacity differences between localities.

The reform suggests express delimitation of the district, level I and central administration duties. The deconcentrated services should be reorganized and coordinated within district-compatible geography, without confusing legality control and the implementation of central policies with the autonomy of the district authorities.

2. Integrated intermediate level model

The **originality of the solution** consists in the integration of four distinct components in the framework of the integrated intermediate model, rather than in the concentration of all functions in one institution. Each component has its own logic, while efficiency results from their delimitation and coordination.

Component	Predominant function	Relationship with others
District	Administers and provides supra-local public services; supports level I ATU.	Intermediate local public authority with democratic legitimacy.
Development region / RDA	Plans, coordinates and implements regional development programs.	Does not become ATU; cooperates with districts in a formalized manner.
Deconcentrated services	Apply the policies and competences of central administration in the territory.	Their location, administrative area and coordination should be harmonized with the new administrative-territorial configuration.
Statistical region	Measures, analyzes and evaluates territorial processes.	Provides the database for policy, financing and impact assessment.

The synthetic formula of the integrated intermediate level model is the following: the district administration administers; the development region plans and coordinates development; the deconcentrated services exercise the duties of the central public administration; the statistical region measures and evaluates. This differentiation diminishes institutional competition, integrates regional development without transforming regions into administrative-territorial units and builds on data in the decision-making process.

Priority measures include the following: delimitation of districts and a timetable of transition; redefining the competences; reorganization of deconcentrated services; development of cities - poles of growth; formalized cooperation with RDA; redefining the responsibilities and roles of RDA and statistical regions; predictable funding; investment in human resources and digitalization.

Local public finance reform: resources following functions

IFAR regards the financial reform as a constituent condition, not as a secondary measure. No reorganization can produce local autonomy and better services if the new structures inherit financial dependence, unfunded mandates and unequal access to investment. The fundamental rule is that each competence assigned should be

accompanied by a cost assessment, identified sources and responsibilities established for the results.

Own competences should be supported by own income, shared quotas and general transfers. Delegated competences should be fully financed through earmarked transfers calculated based on cost standards. Any piece of legislation creating local burdens should provide an ex ante financial assessment and an automatic compensation mechanism.

Priority measures include:

Area	Summary of content
Own income	Property tax reform, updated valuation bases, simpler and more appropriate local taxes, digital fiscal administration.
Local heritage	Delimitation, stock-taking, registration and transparent capitalization of the local public patrimony.
Transfers	Basic component + equalization component + performance component; transparent and predictable formulas.
Equalization	Compensation of real differences in fiscal capacity, without penalty for own fiscal effort.
Transition	The Territorial Consolidation Fund for costs of reorganization, systems integration, staff, services and digitalization.
Development funds	National co-financing mechanism for the new ATU, with public criteria and differentiated capacity-based access.
Unfunded mandates	Effective prohibition, ex ante evaluation and full compensation of the imposed burdens.

Guarantees for constituent localities

Localities that lose the status of an administrative-territorial unit should get guarantees that the reorganization is not going to reduce access to services, investments and representation. IFAR supports allocations for constituent localities, participatory budgets or dedicated budget lines, basic services obligations, territory-based reporting, an internal development fund of the new collective formation and representation of villages in priority setting.

Transition funds should not be consumed predominantly for current spending. They should be used for institutional and digital integration, service modernization, infrastructure, capacity development and projects producing observable benefits for constituent communities.

Local development reform;

IFAR aims to transform local administration from a development deficit manager into a development actor. Administrative-territorial consolidation only makes sense if new administrative capacities are used for services, investments, jobs, infrastructure and improvement of the living conditions. Therefore, the local development reform constitutes a pillar of local government reform, not a parallel policy.

The main problem is the institutional fragmentation of the development mandate, reduced planning and project management capacity, unequal access to funding, lack of data and poorly structured civic participation. Small ATUs are not always able to form multidisciplinary teams and ensure project continuity, with local strategies often remaining disconnected from budgets and regional policies.

The reform package includes:

- a *national framework for local socio-economic development*, defining the LPA mandate, administrative capacity standards, local development planning methodology and relationship with regional and sectoral policies/funds;
- strengthening of project development, cofinancing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation capacity, including through shared services and district support;
- correlating local strategies with budgets, investments and outcome indicators;
- smart local digitalization based on process reengineering, service registers, "once only" principle, payments, appointments, feedback and satisfaction measurement;
- professionalization of human resources through continuous training, new occupational profiles, certification, expert mobility, networks of practice and attracting youth and diaspora;
- institutionalization of citizen participation and partnerships with businesses, civil society and educational institutions.

Relevance of IFAR in territories with special status

1. ATU Gagauzia

IFAR interprets ATU Gagauzia not as an exception, but as an asymmetric form of the intermediate level. The difference from districts consists in the legal regime and the extent of competences, not the position in the system of subnational administration. A system's functional unit is compatible with institutional diversity.

Integration into the single administrative space should be achieved through cooperation and coordination, not uniformity. Autonomy authorities should be involved in territorial strategies, regional development, European-funded programs and joint planning and evaluation mechanisms. Voluntary amalgamation, intercommunity cooperation, interinstitutional cooperation (districts, RDA, statistical regions) can be adapted and

applied under the constitutional and legal framework, without affecting the status of autonomy.

2. Localities on the left bank of the Dniester

For the localities on the left bank of the Dniester river, IFAR can function as an instrument of gradual administrative convergence between the two banks. The convergence can start from functional dimensions – public services, infrastructure, education, health, social protection, population records, local development, economic cooperation and joint projects – that produce tangible benefits and increase confidence.

The model is not a substitute for political regulation or the reinstatement of constitutional control. Its relevance is attributable to the method that builds on graduality, consultation, differentiation and orientation on people's needs. Protection of local identity, proximity and social consensus can make the necessary preparations for the institutional convergence and subsequent integration into the administrative and constitutional space of the Republic of Moldova.

Monitoring, evaluation and adaptability

IFAR suggests that the reform cannot be fully designed once and then rigorously executed that way. Territorial heterogeneity and uncertainty regarding its effects require a continuous cycle of diagnostics, implementation, monitoring, correction and evaluation. Therefore, evaluation is not the final phase, but a governance function within the reform.

The first step is the legal and operational definition of administrative viability. It should incorporate institutional, functional, financial, demographic, territorial and service dimensions. The population threshold is relevant, but it cannot be the only criterion. A national methodology is required that would measure the exercise of competences, coverage and quality of services, human resources, revenue, heritage, digitalization and development capacity.

Time of evaluation	Function in IFAR
Ex ante	Justifies the intervention, compares options, estimates the costs, capacity and risks.
Ongoing	Tracks the transition, services, funding, representation and territorial effects; allows adjusting the reform instruments.
After the election cycle – 4 years	Evaluates the efficiency of the structures and services and justifies the continuation, adjustment or extension of the reform.

The indicators should go ahead of the reduction in the number of ATUs. They should be following the accessibility and quality of services, administrative costs, own revenue, investment capacity, attraction of funds, resolution time, degree of digitalization, civic engagement, equity between constituent localities and population satisfaction.

Key stages and the tentative schedule

Stage	Period	Key activities
1. Initiation and legitimization	Early 2026	Vision; communication strategy; consultations with LPA, academia, partners, civil society and citizens.
2. Boosting the voluntary amalgamation	2026	Legislative changes; simplified procedures; incentives; support and evaluation mechanisms.
3. Development of intercommunity cooperation	2026	National policy; amendments to the legal framework; methodology; incentives and assistance.
4. The set of regulatory acts for levels I and II	2026	Reorganization methodology; legislation; electoral adjustments; Territorial Consolidation Fund.
5. Related functional reforms	In parallel	Decentralization; local public finance; heritage; local development; human resources and digitalization.
6. Implementation	2027–2031	Continuation of voluntary amalgamation and ICC; modern services; institutional consolidation.
7. Monitoring and evaluation	2027-2031 and after 4 years	Indicators framework; post-amalgamation support; ex-post evaluation; decisions on next steps.

The schedule presented in the Study is a tentative one and should be updated based on the real-time conditions of the political decision. Essentially, the key IFAR element is not the formal year, but the sequence: vision and consultation → voluntary instruments and cooperation → regulatory and financial framework → structural and functional implementation → evaluation and adjustment.

Reform governance and actors

The Government initiates and coordinates the reform, develops the policies and draft regulations, organizes consultations and ensures the financing of the transition. The Parliament adopts the legislative package and the electoral adjustments. Local and district

authorities participate in shaping the solutions and implement the measures. The State Chancellery's territorial offices, the deconcentrated services and the RDA should be given clear responsibilities in the new reform model.

The academia, experts and the civil society provide their input to the diagnostics, evaluation and public scrutiny. Development partners can provide assistance and funding without substituting national responsibility. Citizens are not passive beneficiaries: their consultation, participation in priority-setting, representation of constituent localities and access to information are the conditions of legitimacy.

For the purpose of ensuring continuity, IFAR needs a stable coordination mechanism, capable of overcoming election cycles. It should publish data, methodologies, progress reports and evaluations, manage the transition risks and maintain coherence between the territorial, functional, financial and development components.

Expected outcomes and success criteria

Area	Expected outcome
Administrative capacity	Institutions with sufficient staff, procedures, data and resources for the competences assigned to them.
Public services	Closer and fairer access, better quality, sustainable costs and shared services where needed.
Local autonomy	More real discretion in decision-making, own financial basis and responsibility for results.
Local democracy	Representation of localities, participation, transparency and protection of community identity.
Finances	Correlation of functions with resources, predictable transfers, equalization and investment capacity.
Development	LPA able to plan, attract funds, create partnerships and support the local economy.
Territorial cohesion	Reduction of disparities and functional integration of levels and territories with different regimes.
Sustainability	Adaptive policy, monitored and continued beyond a single political cycle.

IFAR success cannot be assessed by the sheer reduction of the number of town halls or rayons. A reform is only successful when new structures better exercise public functions, citizens have better access to services, resources are used more efficiently, autonomy and accountability increase, while constituent communities enjoy fair benefits resulting from investments and development.

Conclusion

IFAR answers the question "What kind of local public administration reform is needed in Moldova?". The answer is not an exclusive administrative-territorial reform, nor a generalized merger. It is a comprehensive, continuous, function-centered, integrated, gradual, differentiated and democratically legitimized reform, with the structure resulting from an analysis of functions, which is supported by resources, capacity and evaluation mechanisms.

At **level I**, the model combines voluntary amalgamation, targeted reorganization of non-viable units and intercommunity cooperation.

At **level II**, IFAR introduces strong districts and an integrated model that delimits and at the same time puts together the administration, regional development, deconcentrated services and the statistical function.

The **public finance reform** applies the rule of resources following the functions.

The **local development reform** transforms LPA into an actor of development.

Gagauzia and localities on the left bank of the Dniester are integrated through differentiated and functional solutions.

The **model's value** consists in the transition from a stand-alone decision on the administrative-territorial boundaries to a continuous governance of administrative transformation. IFAR does not offer a clear-cut administrative-territorial configuration, but rather the criteria, tools and a sequence allowing a responsible adjustment of the administrative-territorial organization that is results-based and citizens-oriented.