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FACULTY OF EUROPEAN STUDIES  
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„INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EUROPEAN STUDIES”

# **European instruments and mechanisms for rural development**

## **SUMMARY**

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**Keywords:** rural development, rural space, European instruments and mechanisms, regulation, financial planning, community public policies, rural development programs, National Rural Development Program (PNDR) Romania, changes, modifications, European Union, international relations, non-agricultural sectors.

## **Introduction**

The continuous evolution of instruments and mechanisms for rural development has resulted in their significant contribution to the growth of rural areas at the European Union level. As economic growth accelerates globally, an increasing number of states are transitioning from agricultural economies to market economies that prioritize services and production, thereby redirecting their development policies predominantly towards urban areas. This trend has been observable for several decades in Western Europe, and more recently, we are witnessing a similar transformation in the states of Central and Eastern Europe.

The European rural landscape continues to grapple with several challenges: A substantial portion of the population remains engaged solely in agricultural activities across both large and small landholdings; There has been a considerable reduction in the labor market, coupled with a lack of remote job opportunities in proximity to their residences, exacerbated by inadequate transport infrastructure; There is a significant outflow of individuals from rural areas; The population is aging, and there is a pervasive deficiency in basic service infrastructure.

To address these issues, a new approach to rural development at the European level has been established, which operates through two primary avenues: 1. A public Community policy, specifically the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); and 2. The Rural Development Policy, which is an integral component of the CAP, rather than being an independent Community policy like the Environmental Policy or the Regional Development Policy. However, even within this framework, the Rural Development Policy only partially addresses the challenges faced by contemporary European rural areas. The exploration of these new paradigms has been developed, articulated, and substantiated as the central theme of the present doctoral thesis. The analysis and research of the rural area are grounded in European and national rural development instruments and mechanisms. The focus is on advancing the rural sector through European and national programs derived from EU public policies, alongside an analysis of the ongoing evolution of tools and mechanisms employed to foster rural development. At the policy level, rural development initiatives have begun to yield significant effects following two concrete actions.

The first action occurred in 1988 during the Luxembourg Conference, where European commissioners proposed the dissociation of rural development from agriculture. They asserted that visible long-term investments in sectors beyond agriculture must commence and persist in the rural areas of member countries. The second action commenced in 1999, culminating in the reinforcement of rural development as a European policy, recognized as the second pillar of the *Common Agricultural Policy* (CAP) through the *2000 Agenda*.

This document enhanced the relationship between agriculture, territory, and the rural development process, focusing on diversity and improving the competitiveness of rural areas. The theoretical framework of rural development legislation, along with financial and planning instruments, has been enhanced at the European level through a collaborative effort between the European Commission and member states. Additionally, the joint efforts of representatives from various associative rural forms have been crucial in this improvement process.

During the period from 2007 to 2020, Romania implemented two rural development programs with a funding allocation of nearly 20 billion euros. However, neither of the two programming periods managed to fully utilize the allocated funds. Each programming period analyzed in this thesis was preceded by another, characterized by different budgets and more favorable financing quotas. Consequently, the anticipated positive domino effect on the rural development process through these development programs in Romania did not materialize. For instance, the SAPARD program was intended to address as many rural needs as possible, identified prior to Romania's accession to the EU. The subsequent program, covering the period from 2007 to 2013, was expected to partially support unresolved issues and emerging needs, as well as other areas of interest, through European funding mechanisms. Thus, the future rural development program should have been innovative and not merely a repetition of previous shortcomings.

The 2014-2020 program was designed to facilitate investments or refinancing of efficient agricultural and non-agricultural activities, contributing to a positive transformation in rural development from both social and economic perspectives. Following its entry into the EU, Romania has endeavored, through the two concluded programming periods, to utilize European development instruments (legislative, financial, and planning) and the European and national implementation mechanisms of the Rural Development Program (RDP) to 'rebuild the rural area by addressing identified needs,' albeit without ensuring the necessary continuity for the development process. Actors from the European countryside were attracted by this European phenomenon of support through European funds in both programming periods. This

aid offered to Romania has developed in the entrepreneurial and public ecosystem in rural Romanian areas especially after 2007, after our country's access to the EU. and the support still continues to this day.

The investments made with the the European funds were and are visible in the rural communities, but, without falling into eurosceptic thinking. It is also noted that the financing of investments was not planned in a logical manner to achieve the desired growth according to European standards

A tendency of overspending attitude of European money prevails. Mainly because they are non-reimbursable, and it is spent on measures that do not have economic sustainability, or on entrepreneurial activities carried out by inexperienced people, on projects that are changed upon completion. Those that could generate added value are dispersed, or excluded from future funding. This aspect is due to the way the Romanian state understood to build the planning and financial instruments and mechanisms. Through the analysis applied at the level of Bihor County, the paper aims to capture the perception of direct, public and private beneficiaries regarding the implementation of both rural development programs in both programming periods. It is also important to pursue the views of the experts involved in the phases of the process of construction of these rural development instruments and mechanisms. Because rural development also has among its objectives the increase of the living standards of the people in rural areas. This scientific approach measures whether the investments made by the two PNDRs were useful for the inhabitants of the rural area subjected to this research.

### **The purpose and objectives of the thesis**

This paper aims to carry out a theoretical and applied academic analysis, leading to the understanding and clarification of European tools and mechanisms for rural development. Concretely, the research aims, based on theoretical and practical analysis, to understand the complexity of European rural development tools and mechanisms and the effects generated in rural areas, in two programming periods, carried out between 2007-2020. Also, to make practical contributions to the researched field, to support the improvement of a European rural development policy, but also to be useful to future beneficiaries of European public policies on rural development.

### **The research is based on four specific objectives:**

1. Identifying, comprehending, and analyzing EU policies in the field of rural development;

2. Conducting a comparative analysis of the multiannual programming periods to determine the impact of changes and modifications on tools and mechanisms in rural development at the EU and Romania , using Romania as a case study;

3. Examining the efficiency of implementing EU rural development instruments and mechanisms in Romania;

4. Developing comprehensive proposals to improve rural development mechanisms and tools, in line with the identification of weak implementation functionalities during the two programming periods.

**The research is conducted according to three hypotheses.**

**Hypothesis No 1 (I 1):** Over-regulation of instruments and mechanisms at the EU and national level determines the effectiveness of the rural development process.

**Hypothesis No 2 (I 2):** The second programming period assessment has led to the enhancement of rural development through changes and modifications to instruments and mechanisms.

**Hypothesis No 3 (I 3):** An insufficiently unclear and simplified framework at the level of instruments and mechanisms has led to the lack of functionality in the implementation process.

**The scientific approach is founded on two questions:**

*Question 1 (Q 1): How do the EU's rural development policies influence the adaptation of instruments and mechanisms during the two programming periods at the European and national levels?*

The first question is related to research objectives 1 and 2, as well as hypothesis 1. The anticipated outcome is a knowledge and comprehension of the concepts of European rural development, rural space, rural development tools, and mechanisms for European rural development and community policies in rural development (Rez.1).

*The second research question (Q 2): Was the framework of instruments and mechanisms at European and national level in line with rural development needs and beneficiaries' expectations?.* This research question is correlated with objectives 2, 3, and 4 and the assumptions (I 2) and (I 3) of this research.

The expected results are:

(Rez.2) Identifying the differences between the two programming periods as a result of changes in European rural development instruments and mechanisms.

(Rez.3) Identifying the processes that have impeded the implementation of rural development projects and evaluating the impact of changes in instruments and mechanisms on the European rural development process.

(Rez.4) Producing suggestions for enhancing development tools and mechanisms at the European, national, consultant, and beneficiary levels.

This scientific approach focuses on a complicated subject, namely European tools and mechanisms for rural development, which encompasses various theoretical concepts like rural development, community policies, and rural space, but also notions that have an applicative significance, such as legislative, planning, and financing instruments. These concepts and notions have been addressed individually in several research areas and have been explained based on specific methods.

Because our research subject is composed of a mix of concepts and applied notions, it led us to realize a research plan based on several research methods, which allows us to state that the research methodology of this scientific approach is an alternation between the comparative method, the quantitative method, and the qualitative method. During the analysis stages of primary and secondary sources, three methods were utilized based on the level of analysis and completed: the content analysis method and the deductive method.

In our view, a research plan that utilizes five methods is more beneficial than one with fewer methods, as the use of mixed methods can provide additional relevant information during the research stages, like establishing hypotheses and formulating research questions. Additionally, it enables us to compare the effectiveness of regulatory instruments and mechanisms on rural development processes during two distinct programming periods.

To understand the functionality and effects of European regulatory tools and mechanisms on the rural development process, research has been carried out on three levels of analysis: *European, national, and local*. The three levels are a comprehensive framework for analyzing the phenomena that have promoted rural development with European funds, as well as the processes that have caused shortcomings in the implementation of tools and mechanisms for regulating European rural development.

*First level of analysis* is understanding the architecture and how the EU contributed theoretically and practically to the construction of Community public policies on rural development (DR, see list of abbreviations) is determined by the European level of analysis.

The reforming stages of the PAC, the establishment of rural development as the second pillar of the PAC, the evolution of the European institutions, and the changes in the instruments

and mechanisms for regulating rural development carried out in accordance with the EU enlargement process are defining elements of this level of analysis.

By using *the national level analysis*, one can research how European DR instruments and mechanisms have been implemented at the Romanian level during two different programming periods. The critical approach taken by the Romanian state in constructing and implementing both rural development programs.

Our objective is to highlight the poor rural development process caused by an unclear and complicated national framework of regulatory tools and mechanisms through a comparative analysis between the two programming periods. This level of analysis was based on the statistical data contained in the 22 annual reports made by MADR between 2007 and 2020, as well as on the content analyses of the programming documents represented by the PNS, PNDR, and the Applicant Guides from the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 periods.

The analysis at the European and national levels has led us to expand research *at the local level*, making it more accessible for field research by conducting applied analysis and a case study in Bihor County. The use of this level of analysis has led to research that explores the perception of the effectiveness of regulatory tools and mechanisms among three categories of actors involved in the rural development process: ***direct beneficiaries*** are divided into two categories: public and private; ***indirect beneficiaries*** are those who represent the inhabitants of rural areas where the investments took place. Both of the above categories of actors are individuals who engage in economic activities and reside in one of the seven UATs in Bihor County. ***The third group*** of people involved in the process are ***experts*** who are either directly or indirectly involved in rural development. The research tools employed at this level have produced solutions to improve rural development mechanisms and tools based on the identification of poor implementation functionality during the two programming periods.

## **Research objectives**

The first objective of the research was:

*O.1. Identifying, comprehending, and evaluating EU policies related to rural development. This is linked to Chapter 2. Theories of rural development. Concepts of European rural development and rural area. Theoretical and conceptual analysis, and Chapter 3. The European model of rural development. Common Agricultural Policy.*

This objective aims to gain insight and comprehension of the concepts of European rural development, rural space, rural development tools, and mechanisms for European rural

development and community policies in rural development. By analyzing European policies that represent the research field, the objective was achieved in the first research phase and reported it to theories of social constructivism, dependence, participation, and economic theories. The analyses show that the European rural area has gone through various stages during the development of the European world and the transition of the contemporary rural world to new periods of development, directed towards traditional agriculture and activities that are unrelated to agriculture, is supported by the political and economic transformations in developed countries.

The analysis revealed that the European rural development process is intertwined with a continuously changing rural world, whose social realities change depending on the interaction and interests of the actors. By conducting detailed analyses of the primary Community public policy, the PAC, we were able to comprehend that the construction process of European rural development policy took 20 years to become a European public policy under the PAC, with impacts on rural areas..

The construction of a new public policy was possible only through the involvement of European actors in the construction of a new vision and the assumption of common interests, which occurred after three reforms of the PAC. Thus, the proposed objective has been achieved, providing a clear image on the concept of rural development through community public policies.

Second objective of research, *O.2. A comparative analysis of the multiannual programming periods was developed to measure the impact of changes and modifications on instruments and mechanisms in rural development at the EU and Romania levels. This was taken as a case study, which has been correlated with Chapter 4. Analysis of European rural development instruments and mechanisms.*

This objective focused on two aspects:

1. Determine the differences between the two programming periods as a result of changes in European rural development instruments and mechanisms in the field of rural development.

And

2. Investigate the impact of changes in instruments and mechanisms on the European rural development process. The objective was achieved through the systematic analysis of every instrument and mechanism of development based on the specific analysis indicators identified at the (Et-4) stage of this research.

Based on the analysis of legislative instruments and mechanisms, it was observed that

the changes and modifications had distinct effects on the rural development process during the two programming periods. The legal framework at the European level was more stable during the first programming period than it was during the period 2014-2020.

The development of regulatory instruments was intense during the first period under review until mid-term, but then decreased and maintained until the end of the programming period. The FEADR provided beneficiaries of European funding with a legal framework and regulations to support the spending of FEADR funds, indicating relative stability in this development.

The second result is that, at the European level, the total number of legislative instruments is increasing in the second programming period, while those of the type of regulations, which are binding on all member states, have increased significantly (58) by 32 more compared to the previous period (25).

Their evolution suggests that there was an overregulation of the rural development process within the European legislative framework, but this did not impact the average absorption rate of funds.

The EU institutional framework analysis reveals that in the second programming period, the process of adopting legislative instruments becomes more difficult and time-consuming, which has led to delays in the issuance of legislative acts and legislative changes. These delays have caused a chain reaction. The first issue they faced was the inability to create their own legal framework for the rural development process, which is legally binding and must be constructed in accordance with European legislation, and the second issue was the inability to finalize their PDR-type planning instruments.

The level of absorption of funds for European rural development was a reflection of these phenomena. The first multiannual programming period saw an oscillation in the average absorption rate at the EU level as a result of the four legislative changes made to the regulation on which the entire rural development process was applied. The fact is that legislative changes, although not frequent, have hurt the rural development process during this period, as they created obligations that were difficult for beneficiaries to fulfill. At the end of the programming period, the average absorption rate at EU level was 79%.

In the second programming period, the average absorption rate increased, except in 2020, even though 22 amendments were made to the regulation that governs the entire rural development process. It is demonstrated that during the second programming period, the legislative changes have had a positive impact on the rural development process by being more targeted towards the actors involved and the implementation procedures. Following the

extended programming period, the average absorption rate was 83%.

The analyses conducted in Romania show that the national rural development process was overregulated during the second programming period. The high frequency of legislative act changes within the legislative framework in our country demonstrates a lack of legal vacuum. Another phenomenon complementing this negative aspect is the repeated changes in the procedures for implementing regulatory instruments, which are manifested through changes brought by the same institutions to the changes made by them. Romania's average absorption rate oscillated during the first programming period, following the trajectory at the European level. The average low absorption rate in our country was most influenced by the large amount of legislation that was issued simultaneously with amendments to previously adopted legislation during the same programming period. The 84 legislative acts issued and 55 amendments to the legislative framework have caused Romania to have a lower absorption rate than the average in Europe. This indicates that the legislative changes have had a negative impact on the rural development process during this time. At the end of the programming period, Romania had an average absorption rate of 67 percent, which was 12 percent lower than the European average absorption rate recorded.

The second programming period saw an increase in Romania's average absorption rate, except in 2020, following the same pattern as recorded at the European level. Even though Romania had a lower average rate than Europe during the first five years of the programming period, the amendments to the legislative framework led to a positive evolution in the rural development process. However, the situation has remained the same as it was in the previous period due to the large number of legislative acts and repeated changes in procedures. Although it was lower than the European average by 11 percent, Romania's average absorption rate was above the average recorded in the previous period at 72%.

The results show that legislative changes have had a positive impact on rural development during the second programming period by leading to the implementation of rural development tools and mechanisms, and a negative impact, present in both periods of programming, which is the Romanian government's lack of efficiency in spending and directing all the European money allocated to the entrepreneurial and public ecosystem in rural Romania.

The unstable legislative framework of both programming periods has caused distrust among Romanian entrepreneurs in rural areas about how state institutions operate the rural development process. This distrust can be observed in the low number of funding applications and the high number of project selection stages. The analysis of financial instruments and mechanisms has revealed that two phenomena exist at the level of all member states. That is

the tendency to use non-reimbursable financial instruments, such as grants/firsts/grants, to finance investments. This phenomenon has encouraged agricultural entrepreneurs, farmers in particular, to avoid working and instead expect financial support from the EU, which has had negative effects on entrepreneurs who perform non-agricultural activities and have more limited access to European funds. The second factor is the decrease in the co-financing rate given to European funds beneficiaries, which led to a boost in rural development during the second programming period.

As a result of the analysis of planning instruments, there has been an improvement in the rural development process due to changes in the planning instruments. By amending the financing mechanisms in the Joint Strategic Framework, it is now possible to finance an operational program, like PDR, in the second period with more funds, which is beneficial for rural areas. The second programming period's reduction of financing measures without losing functionality is another positive aspect of the analyses, providing the beneficiaries with a more coherent planning framework and direction for their business plans. These analyses demonstrate the interconnectedness between regulatory instruments and the significance of the three instruments and mechanisms in the rural development process.

Moreover, the modifications were undertaken to enhance the implementation of Community public policy within a shared framework. To sum up, the objective was achieved, and the analyses captured both positive and negative impacts brought about by changes in the tools and mechanisms in rural development during the two multiannual programming periods.

Third objective of research. *O.3. Analysis of the effectiveness of the implementation of EU rural development instruments and mechanisms in Romania* was correlated with *Subchapter 4.5 Applied analysis that deals with the issue of the mechanisms used to implement planning instruments. Case study Romania.*

The objective was to pinpoint the processes that make it challenging to execute rural development projects. The objective was achieved during the Et-4 phase of this scientific approach by conducting field research and analyzing the perceptions of direct, public, and private beneficiaries on the implementation process of rural development instruments and mechanisms as well. Examining the perception of rural residents about the effectiveness of investments made in two programming periods. Regarding this context, 201 questionnaires were given out to subjects involved in the process, as follows: 100 questionnaires to direct beneficiaries from the first programming period, 101 to direct beneficiaries from the second programming period. The focus group included 11 experts who gave conclusive opinions on the processes that have made it difficult to implement rural development projects in Romania.

Last but not least, with the help of the 67 questionnaires applied to the inhabitants of the research area and our findings indicate that the improvement of quality of life is primarily dependent on investments in non-agricultural activities, the way public institutions approach future rural development strategies financed by PDR, and the actions of private beneficiaries.

The qualitative analyses indicate that the implementation of regulatory instruments has been hindered in both periods by various factors, mostly independent of the beneficiaries. According to them, technical tools, such as the applicant's guide and funding application, caused the most significant problems in the implementation process. The data collected showed that the beneficiaries had difficulty comprehending these technical tools, and to finish the financing request, most of them required assistance from consulting firms. According to the beneficiaries, the implementation process has been more challenging because guides require an excessive amount of documents when applying for funding. Also, the impact of state institutions making changes to the legislative framework during implementation and failing to inform beneficiaries and consultants about the effects of new normative acts has had an impact on the conduct of activities contained in business plans. According to public beneficiaries, the implementation process is hindered because the funding rules in both programming periods have restrictive selection criteria that prevent UATs from obtaining additional funding as members of the association.

The analysis findings confirm that the investments made using European and national instruments and mechanisms have been beneficial and have helped develop the rural environment and improve quality of life in the rural areas of Bihor County. The objective was accomplished by demonstrating that European and national development instruments and mechanisms are crucial in the development of rural areas.

The fourth objective of research, *O.4. Development of proposals for improving rural development mechanisms and instruments, in line with the identification of weak implementation functionality during the two programming periods* was correlated with *Chapter 4. Analysis of European rural development instruments and mechanisms*.

This objective aimed at developing comprehensive proposals to improve rural development mechanisms and tools in line with the identification of poor implementation functionality during the two programming periods. The goal of the research stage (Et-5) was achieved by developing a set of proposals to improve development instruments and mechanisms, which were aligned with the problems identified after theoretical and practical analyses from previous research stages. The 39 solutions are targeted at the level of European, national actors as well as consultants and beneficiaries.

### ***Hypothesis validation***

*Hypothesis 1: „The effectiveness of the rural development process is determined by overregulation of instruments and mechanisms at EU and national levels”.* This is correlated with the objectives of O2 and O3.

Research results *do not validate the hypothesis* for the first programming period, neither at the EU level or at the Romanian level. The assumption cannot be validated by the quantitative data analysed. Comparative analyses of legislation issued at European and national levels show that the phenomenon of overregulation did not have any impact on the rural development process during this programming period. At the European level, 97 legislative acts were issued during this program period, while in our country, 91 normative acts were issued.

Validation of the hypothesis occurs during the second programming period. *Hypothesis 1 is confirmed* by the data obtained from analyzing legislative acts during the second programming period. This EU programming period saw the release of 129 legislative instruments, which is 32 more than in the previous period. During this period, Romania issued 331 legislative instruments, an increase of 240 over the previous period.

*According to Hypothesis 2, „The second programming period assessed contributed to the stimulation of rural development by changing instruments and mechanisms”.* This is correlated with O2 objectives and O3.

*This hypothesis is partially validated.*

The analysis of the effects of changes in planning instruments on the average absorption rate validates hypothesis 2. Changes in planning tools have positively influenced the absorption of money allocated for rural development, according to the research results.

Comparative analyses of planned versus spent indicators do not validate this hypothesis. The Romanian level has a disproportionate ratio between planned and spent amounts. Although the changes brought improvements, it was not possible to spend as much as planned in either period.

The hypothesis is supported by the results obtained from content and comparative analyses about the changes made to legislative instruments, which is focused on the average absorption rate. DRs were influenced by changes in tools and mechanisms during the second programming period. The average absorption rate increased significantly during each year of implementation during the second programming period.

*Hypothesis 3. „Poor functionality during the implementation process has been caused*

*by the lack of clarity and simplification in the framework of instruments and mechanisms”,* which is linked to the objectives of O2 and O3.

*This hypothesis is validated* by the results of the research obtained from comparative analyses, content, and case studies conducted at the level of the regulatory instruments and mechanisms issued at EU and Romanian level in both programming periods, as well as by the results obtained through interviews applied at the local level.

The analysis revealed that the PDR was approved by the CE in both programming periods, but only after multiple revisions after the start of the multiannual financial periods. Due to the rule that legislative acts are first issued at European level, Member States were unable to draft the PDR early and SM had to create all their documents related to the rural development process on their own. Case studies on the mechanisms for the adoption of European legislation have demonstrated that the procedures for adopting European legislation are complicated. Even though they start well ahead of programming periods, they have failed to issue final legislative acts before programming periods to allow member states to prepare their programs and harmonise their legislation. The cumbersome mechanisms for adopting legislation at the European level support our hypothesis.

The second data set that validates hypothesis (I 3) is composed of opinions from beneficiaries and experts, along with content and comparative analyses of PNDR and financial reports on budget implementation. During both periods, the beneficiaries reported that the implementation process was hindered by the following reasons. Increased bureaucracy, ambiguous legislation, and unclear guidelines written in a language too complicated for beneficiaries have been the result of poor communication between the financier, beneficiaries, and other institutions involved in the implementation process. According to experts, the poor functionality is due to the failure of local institutions to cooperate with beneficiaries and the poor inter-institutional relationship between MADR and other state institutions involved in the process. The hypothesis (I 3) of this research is validated by the solid arguments provided by the European data gathered through case studies and quantitative and qualitative analyses, along with the identified factors from the field analysis.

We have concluded from the results that the tools and mechanisms studied contributed to the development of European rural areas during the 2007-2020 period, and adapting them to the needs of the players involved in this process is a continual process

This research provides practical input that is relevant for European, national, and local institutions, as well as public and private beneficiaries who implement investments using European and national instruments and mechanisms for rural development. The benefits of this

approach extend beyond the rural development process; they can be applied to any community and national public policies that involve actors with common interests. This paper's results have a significant impact on the advancement of academic research in the field of European studies. European studies and international relations cover the theoretical analysis of these scientific approaches, which include European instruments and mechanisms, the development of the European rural area, and community public policy.

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