

THE EUROPEAN RURAL PACT AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT. CASE STUDY ROMANIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

The European Rural Pact is a new instrument from the European Union toolbox meant to help support the rural development of regions throughout a series of measures and actions. It presents the background of the adoption of this new instrument as it does not come out of nothing, but is rather the result of years of applying various other instruments and policies. The Rural Pact emphasizes the importance of the rural areas of the European Union and tries to provide the necessary support for achieving the 2040 long-term vision. This is also important for Romania, as a European Union member state that applies its rules. Therefore the application of the above mentioned provisions would only help its rural areas.

Keywords: Rural Pact; rural areas; Romania; European Union; 2040

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INTRODUCTION

The agricultural and rural development policies of the European Union have always been subject of debates and constant changes and updates due to evolving internal and external situations. One key characteristic of the EU CAP is its long term vision, which separates it from many national policies in that area of activity. This is in part due to the accent put on sustainability in the field, as for instance the CAP is under the pressure of the twin transitions, Green and Digital.

In fact we are now dealing with a continuation of older initiatives that have their mark upon European Union development. For that purposes the territorial pact was indeed a precursor of the Rural Pact as it set up the basis for future developments. From the perspective of the Europe 2020 strategy the territorial pact as understood at the European level was “an agreement between the governmental levels of a country (local, regional, and national), then the parties signing it undertake to coordinate and synchronize their political agendas to focus on objectives and targets through actions and financial resources”. It was an instrument meant to help the states better defines their

targets, implement their initiatives and identify barriers and problems. At the Romanian level we had it mentioned in the National Reform Programme and was supposed to have a similar role (Antonescu, 2015).

A similar approach can be found is we investigate further in the aspects related to rural Local Action Groups, which are funded through the LEADER under the Rural Development Programmes. It matters as we are dealing with a bottom-up approach meant to valorize and put into good use the experience of local actors, in a way similar with the latter Rural Pact. (Crunțeanu et al., 2022).

A similar approach can be found in many other European Union countries, such is the case of Finland, which has adopted a series of measures meant to empower the rural areas in the multi-level governance processes. The initiatives under LEADER as well as its strategies to mobilize diverse local actors. The analyses done at the local level have shown that in that context the Rural Pact “represents an important initiative that may serve as supportive tool” especially given the such of LEADER groups that “have the best potential to address the specific local needs of rural areas.” (Stjernberg, 2023)

The Multi-Actor Platforms (MAP) play a key role in that process as the involvement of as many relevant stakeholders is essential while also assuring the longevity of such structures. Creating the premises for merging them with other rural platforms is therefore essential (Moodle, 2023)

All these past experiences have shown that a series of lessons can be derived from past CAP. We have thus: the importance of continuity between programming periods; the issue of targeting to ensure local socio-economic needs are met; the impact of administrative burdens arising from changes between one programming period and another and the issue of coordination (Augère-Granier, 2021).

The subject of this paper is the presentation of the European Rural Pact in the context of the medium and long term vision for the EU's rural areas.

The paper wants to present the main ideas related to the Rural Pact, its impact on Europe and also the estimated impact on the Romanian agricultural sector.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The paper is based upon an intensive desk research of domestic and international literature, using existing databases and scientific material.

The paper would also mainly use official data and strategic documents of the European Union given their reliability as regards the provided data. Also a special attention would be given to Romanian official data and documents. Tables and graphic representations are going to be used if necessary in the structure of the article.

Due to the chosen topic the desk research also included a survey of reports and articles related to the Common Agricultural Policy and rural areas and related aspects issued either by European institutions or affiliated researchers.

At the end of the article the intention of the authors was to provide a series of main elements that show that the Rural Pact is in fact an instrument to be taken into consideration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

One of the priorities of the von der Leyen Europe Commission is the rural areas, vital for the future of the European Union. "Our rural areas are home to more than 50% of Europeans. They are the fabric of our society and the heartbeat of our economy. The diversity of landscape, culture, and heritage is one of Europe's most defining and remarkable features. They are a core part of our identity and our economic potential. We will cherish and preserve our rural areas and invest in their future." (der Leyen, 2019)

This strategic guideline received a more concrete form in 2021 when was published the EU Vision for the rural areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040. It wants to prepare all the rural regions to improve the living standards and the resilience by 2040 (EC, 2021).

The solution identified at the European level is the creation of a Rural Pact and of a Rural Action Plan that will lead to the fulfillment of the set targets. The Rural Pact has a high level of ambition, which will encompass all levels of governance and all stakeholders, and is intended to support the objectives of this vision 2040.

This was to be supplemented by a series of policy initiatives meant to support the development of rural areas, such as the creation of the Rural Observatory meant to further improve the collection and analysis of data on rural areas respectively to provide evidence to underpin rural development policy-making, while supporting the overall implementation of the rural action plan (EC, 2023B)

In that context the Rural Pact is a key element for the development of long-term vision for EU's rural areas with a series of three main objectives meant to support it (see Figure 1). This is even more obvious if we see the relevant participants in the Rural Pact, which are diverse and representatives, for all the relevant stakeholders (see Figure 2).

The Rural Pact is being accompanied by the Rural Action Plan meant to support the implementation of the Rural Pact with a series of key objectives, such as: foster territorial cohesion and create new opportunities to attract innovative businesses; provide access to quality jobs; promote new and improved skills; ensure better infrastructure and services; leverage the role of sustainable agriculture and diversified economic activities (Ristic et al., 2022)

One should note that the importance of the Rural Pact became clearer if we take into consideration the fact that it was mentioned in an European Parliament resolution regarding the future of the rural areas and the role that the Rural Pact is going to have in the future. This matters due to the very important role of the European Parliament as a legislative body and because it contains elected representatives from across the European Union Member States. Thus, the representativity of the resolution and the fact that at the national Member States the Rural Pact is going to be taken seriously is more obvious than ever.

“16. Supports the development of a Rural Pact, stressing the importance of the inclusive involvement of local, regional and national stakeholders in its governance, including civil society, for the successful outcome of the initiative;

17. Considers that the Rural Pact needs concrete objectives, deliverables, multilevel governance, and monitoring systems, along with clear institutional responsibilities; believes that the Rural Pact should serve as a platform to share good practices between rural areas and support them in employing the available tools, contributing to synergies, complementarity, and coherence of EU interventions, and facilitating the strategic autonomy of the EU;” (EP, 2022)

We have a similar positioning at the national level in Romania. Before going through other documents, we need to mention that we have had a similar reaction in the Romanian Parliament. Thus, during the process of parliamentary examination of European Union documents, an Opinion was drawn up where we can see a series of ideas that the Romanian Members of the Parliament have on this (see Table 1).

Why so much importance given to this aspect? A government analysis from 2020 makes an x-ray of rural areas in Romania. Thus, rural areas in Romania occupy 87% of the national territory and the rural population totals 46.14% of Romania's population. The rural population, however, is marked by a remarkable and inexorable demographic decline. "The decline of the rural population, which began as a consequence of the modernization of society, became permanent through the combination of several demographic, economic and social factors. The demographic decline is also associated with the continuous degradation of the age structure, caused by the aging process of

the population, much more pronounced in rural than in urban areas” (Băileşteanu, 2020)

It matters also because a high percentage of Romanian citizens believe that agriculture is important in our day to day life. Thus among the most recent opinion polls organised at the European level have shown a high level of interest for this type of rural areas (see Figure 3)

A key element in the analysis of the needs of rural areas is that of the analyses carried out at the national level to prepare the National Strategic Plan 2021-2027. The SWOT analyses carried out at the national level represent the most recent and complete analysis of the agricultural system in Romania and its challenges. They show the need for deep reforms in the countryside, reforms that can lead to the improvement of life in rural areas

For instance, the challenges are the following:

- the large number of small farms,
- poor technological endowment and the dual structure of agricultural holdings,
- large number of agricultural plots,
- climate change and the environmental ambition assumed by the EU and other environmental aspects that can lead to a decrease in the productivity of farmers,
- the degradation of the rural area and the aging of the population in the rural area as well as the depopulation of the villages,
- reduced access to basic services and poor rural infrastructure,
- insufficient land improvement infrastructure,
- reduced number of value-added products,
- the external trade balance deficit with agri-food products,
- low degree of innovation, shortage of qualified personnel in the agricultural sector,
- poor income diversification of farmers and the rural population (MADR, 2022).

One concrete example that a series of authors provide is that of the Romanian mountain area which for many still present a series of competitive advantages that need to be maintained and that are not encountered in many other European countries. As an example the approx. 3 million ha from the mountainous

area are mostly chemical free, with an important biodiversity and often free of pollution. These traits should and can be maintained through the Rural Pact (Manta, 2022).

In fact as mentioned before we have “for the first time (...) witnessed a large-scale reflection process throughout the European Union member states. (...) As for Romania, it shares a series of common problems with Bulgaria and other Central and Eastern European countries. It was at the end of the day a process of soul-searching in the area of agricultural processes.” (Chereji, 2023)

This is line with the new performance based CAP as CAP is now more focused on compliance and its managerial implications. For that purpose the Rural Pact helps improving the new management in agriculture and moves toward a performance-orientated agricultural

policy. “The aim is to shift responsibility and opportunities in a common Community framework, clearly defined and implemented, in order to achieve several key objectives at the same time - simplification, results-oriented (rather than compliance) and the effectiveness of agricultural policy (Chesnoiu, 2022).

Also another thing that came up on the agenda as the Rural Pact and its action plan are unfolding is going to be its impact on adding new people to the agricultural sector and into the social life of the rural areas. One such areas where progress is to be expected is in reducing the gender gap in agriculture as we need to take more measure towards d gender equality, particularly in agriculture and rural areas (Diamanti, 2023)

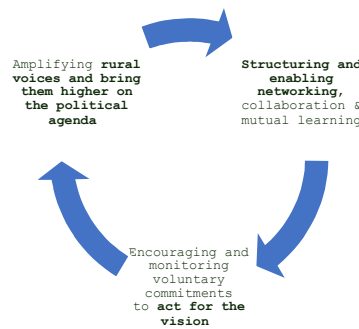


Figure 1 Objectives of the Rural Pact
Source: Own Representation (EC, 2023B)

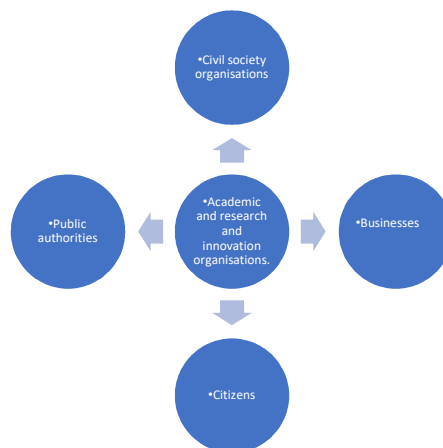


Figure 2 Participants in the Rural Pact
Source: Own Representation (EC, 2023B)

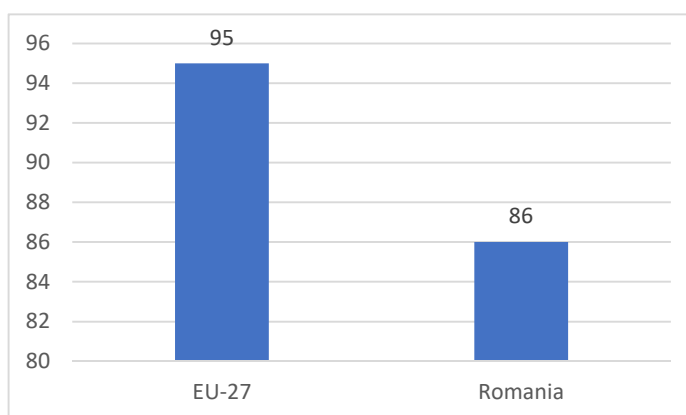


Figure 3 Percentage of citizens that think that agriculture and rural areas are important “for our future” in the EU

Source: Own Representation (EC, 2020B)

(Table 1

Recommendations of the Chamber of Deputies

Source: Decision of the Chamber of Deputies adopting the Opinion (92/21.12.2021) (CD, 2021)

<p>1. supports the long-term vision of the European Commission for rural areas of the European Union, to rural areas may strong, connected, resilient and prosperous by 2040;</p> <p>2. believes that a sustained effort at the level is necessary of the Union for the fastest possible adaptation of the rural infrastructure to demographic changes, especially to the aging of the population;</p> <p>3. emphasizes that diversification of production and encouragement the reintroduction of traditional species into culture contributes to the economic resilience of rural areas and supports the maintenance biodiversity and ecosystem services;</p> <p>4. recommends encouraging industrial processing close to place of agricultural production, thus contributing to diversification economic activity in the countryside and the creation of new places for work;</p> <p>5. emphasizes the need to pay more attention rural areas less exposed to culture and landscape restoration cultural to capitalize on the full range of talents and diversity in our societies and to promote conditions favorable and attractive to live in;</p>	<p>6. recommends encouraging non-formal education in order to reduce the school performance gap between urban areas and rural ones and to ensure professional training conditions corresponding to the development objectives of the digital society;</p> <p>7. recommends encouraging the development of technologies and solutions modern and innovative, such as satellite ones, for se provide access to broadband internet at a convenient price for everyone, as soon as possible;</p> <p>8. emphasizes the need for the implementation of the Plan rural action of the European Union and its periodic update to permanently aim at reducing the administrative burden and bureaucratic, of critical importance for the rural area;</p> <p>9. recommends the development of a roadmap for application coordinated programs aimed at compliance and promotion of children's rights in hard-to-reach rural areas or removed.</p>
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CONCLUSIONS

Now we are dealing with a mechanism under construction, in which the administrative and technical wheels are not yet very clearly outlined. First of all, it is worth pointing out that both in the case of success and in the case of a potential failure to fulfill these ambitious objectives, the responsibility is shared. We are not only dealing with the responsibility of the European institutions, but also with the responsibility of the member states. The way in which the Member States will use the information provided, the way in which they will manage the preparation of projects in the agricultural field, the way in which the National Strategic Plans in the field of the Common Agricultural Policy will reflect these problems of

rural areas, all these will have a say in the implementation with the success of the long-term vision of rural areas.

One final conclusion is that we need to have a multidimensional perspective concerning the Rural Pact and the national projects. We need to have integration and coordination and build upon the past success and apply the lessons learned.

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