

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF THE NORTHWEST DEVELOPMENT REGION

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

The article analyzes the socio-economic evolution of the North-West Development Region during the period 2014–2024, using a mixed methodological framework, which is based on the qualitative analysis of the specialized literature and the quantitative analysis of the statistical series provided by the National Institute of Statistics. The study examines the main territorial, demographic and economic dimensions of the region, correlating population trends with the economic dynamics and the structural particularities of the component counties. The results highlight a slow but constant decrease in the population, determined by the low birth rate and migration, as well as significant internal disparities between counties with strong urban centers (Cluj, Bihor) and predominantly rural ones (Sălaj, Bistrița-Năsăud). From an economic point of view, the region is recording robust growth, confirmed by the doubling of the regional GDP between 2014 and 2022 and the convergence of the GDP/capita to the national average. Agriculture continues to play an important role, especially in the western and northern counties, although constraints related to the fragmentation of holdings and the low level of technology persist. The transport infrastructure is undergoing an accelerated modernization process, contributing to improving regional connectivity. The conclusions emphasize the need to strengthen integrated regional planning, aimed at reducing territorial imbalances, increasing economic competitiveness and capitalizing on existing potential. The paper provides a synthetic and updated picture of the socio-economic evolution of the North-West Development Region, contributing both to specialized literature and to the process of substantiating regional development policies.

Keywords: regional development, economic evolution, population movement, regional planning, North-West
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INTRODUCTION

The socio-economic analysis of development regions constitutes an important direction in contemporary research on territorial dynamics, regional competitiveness and socio-economic cohesion, being closely linked to national and European development policies (Barca et al 2012, Platagea, 2023). The North-West Development Region, analyzed in this article, is one of the most complex territorial units in Romania, characterized by a pronounced geographical diversity, a demographic evolution in slow but constant decline, and an economic structure in continuous transformation. (Mănescu, 2025). The central problem analyzed in the paper refers to the identification and interpretation of the main demographic, economic and territorial trends of the region, in order to understand how they influence its economic performance and sustainable development potential.

The theoretical importance of this topic derives from the need to deepen the way in which processes such as population movement,

urbanization, smart specialization and labor market restructuring shape regional differences (Bakk, Benedek, 2010). At the same time, the topic addressed in the article, the economic and social analysis of the North-West Development Region, has a major practical relevance, as development regions represent the operational framework for the implementation of European programs, including Cohesion Policy and integrated territorial strategies (European Commission, 2017; EU Cohesion Policy, 2021–2027). In this context, updated assessments of population, economic dynamics, agriculture and infrastructure are indispensable for substantiating regional development decisions.

The current state of knowledge regarding the North-West Region highlights several major trends. First, numerous studies highlight the demographic decline, determined by the decrease in birth rate and external migration, processes typical of Central-Eastern European spaces (Mușat, 2024; Balassa, 2024). INS data confirm this trend, indicating a reduction in the region's population from 2.83 million

inhabitants in 2014 to 2.79 million in 2024 (INS, 2024). Secondly, the specialized literature shows that the North-West Region is among the most dynamic regions in Romania, from an economic point of view, especially due to the urban agglomeration of Cluj-Napoca, which functions as a university, technological and innovation hub (ADR Nord Vest, Sicoe-Murg, 2024). This trend is supported by statistical data showing the increase in regional GDP from 76.6 billion lei (2014) to 168.2 billion lei (2022) (INS, 2024).

At the same time, research shows the persistence of internal disparities, between the component counties of the region, between urban and rural areas, reflected in the distribution of infrastructure, public services and investments (Zaman, Vasile, 2006). Agriculture, although it has a lower share in the regional economy, remains significant in the counties of Bihor, Satu Mare and Maramureş. However, it faces challenges related to land fragmentation, insufficient technology and adaptation to climate change (Mănescu 2013; MARD, 2023; Otiman et al. 2025.). At the European level, the need to strengthen regional resilience to these changes is emphasized (EC, 2025).

In this context, this paper makes an original contribution by:

- integration of an extensive and updated set of data for the period 2014–2024, processed graphically and in tables based on the time series provided by the INS, Tempo online, providing a coherent longitudinal image of the region's socio-economic developments;
- detailed correlation between demographic trends and economic development, highlighting causal relationships and territorial dependence;
- comprehensive approach, which integrates geographical, demographic, economic and agricultural characteristics into a single analytical framework;
- identification of strategic vulnerabilities and development opportunities of the North-West Region, relevant for decision-makers, the local environment and regional strategies;
- use of an analytical model derived from own processing, which gives the study an added originality compared to existing descriptive analyses.

Through this structure, the article contributes both to the enrichment of the specialized literature on regional development and to the current practice of territorial planning, offering an integrated and updated

perspective on the economic and social evolution of the North-West Development Region.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The methodology used in this article combines qualitative and quantitative methods, with the objective of analyzing the demographic, economic and social developments of the North-West Development Region during the period 2014–2024. The article begins with qualitative analysis, a documentary analysis of the specialized literature in the field of the research topic.

The research is predominantly based on official statistical data (quantitative analysis) provided by the National Institute of Statistics (INS), including Tempo-Online and the Statistical Yearbook of Romania 2024, extracted and processed in tables and graphs in the article.

The article mainly uses time series (INS) on the evolution, structure, and natural dynamics of the population, total and regional GDP, GDP/capita and GDP in agriculture (INS, Tempo online, 2025).

The data at the level of the component counties of the region (Bihor, Cluj, Satu Mare, Maramureş, Bistriţa-Năsăud and Sălaj) are also analyzed, as well as European reports and documents (European Commission, 2024) on regional contextualization.

The analysis period (2014–2024) was chosen to capture recent changes (depending on data availability, for some indicators the analysis stops at 2022), changes that influence the competitiveness of the region.

The processing and analysis of the extracted statistical data began with a descriptive analysis (the evolution of indicators over time and the identification of trends and fluctuations). This was followed by a comparative analysis by reporting the situation of the North-West Region to the national average, to macro-regions and to other development regions in order to highlight territorial differences, but also an internal structural analysis (evaluation of the distribution of population, GDP and area at the level of the six component counties).

Through these analyses, the aim was to obtain a complex analysis correlating demographic results with economic developments to highlight interdependencies, in accordance with the approaches in the regional development literature (Mănescu, 2025). The

tables and graphs (Fig. 1–7, Tab. 1–7) are the result of our own processing based on INS data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

General characteristics of the North-West Development Region. The North-West Development Region is located in the north-west of Romania. It borders Ukraine to the north (through Maramureş County), the North-East

Region (Suceava County) to the east, the Central Region (Mureş and Alba Counties) to the south, the West Region (Hunedoara and Arad Counties) to the south and Hungary to the west (through Bihor and Satu Mare Counties).

The North-West Region includes 6 counties: Bihor, Bistriţa-Năsăud, Cluj, Maramureş, Satu Mare and Sălaj (figure 1.).



Figure 1 North-West Development Region

The North-West region consists of 43 cities, including 15 municipalities, 403 communes and 1,800 villages. The region has a

complex administrative structure, but rural units predominate (table 1).

Table 1.

Administrative-territorial organization of the NORTH-WEST Region, 2023

Specification	Total area	Population*	Cities and municipalities	of which:	Communes	Villages
	- km ²			of which:		
	km ²	pers.		nr.		
North- West	34152	2798667	43	15	403	1800
Bihor	7539	608526	10	4	91	430
Bistriţa-Năsăud	5358	322896	4	1	58	235
Cluj	6665	744022	6	5	75	420
Maramureş	6303	508261	13	2	63	214
Satu Mare	4420	377678	6	2	59	220
Sălaj	3867	237284	4	1	57	281

Note: *population is as of July 1, 2024

Source: Own processing based on the National Institute of Statistics, Statistical Yearbook of Romania, 2024, https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/anuarul_statistic_al_romaniei_carte_ed_2024.pdf

The total area of the region is 34,152 km², representing approximately 14.3% of

Romania's territory (figure 2).

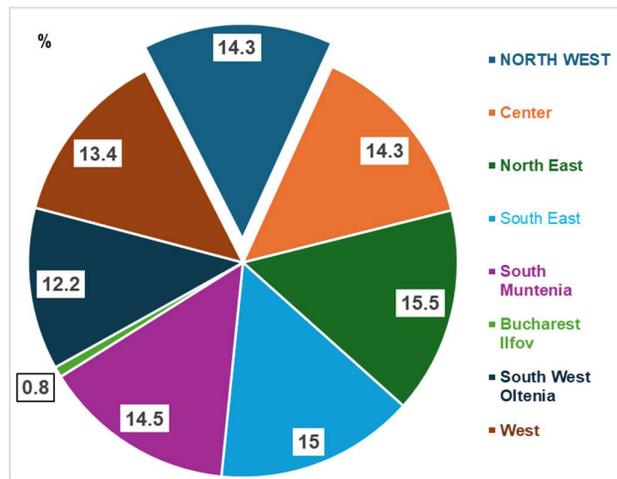


Figure 2. Share of the North-West Development Region in the total area of Romania
Source: own processing

Analyzing the area of the constituent counties of the North-West Region (figure 3), the following can be noted:

- Bihor County has the largest area, 7,539 km²;
- Cluj (6,665 km²) and Maramureș (6,303 km²) counties have similar areas;
- Bistrița-Năsăud County has an average size (5,358 km²);

- Sălaj County is the smallest county in the region in terms of area (3,867 km²), but with values close to Satu Mare County (4,420 km²). The area of the counties influences the administrative organization as well as the economic development.

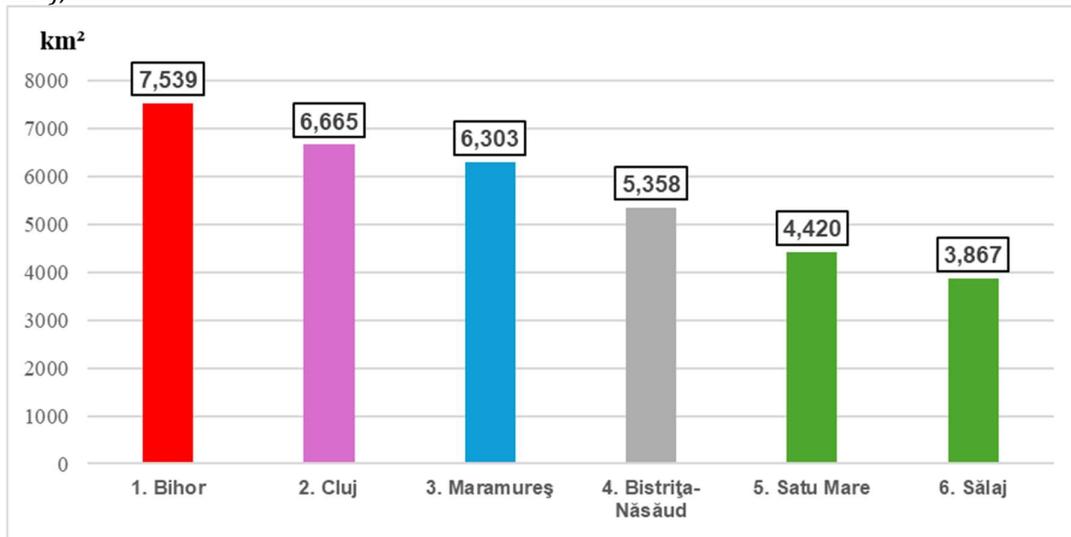


Figure 3 Area of the North-West Region by counties
Source: own processing

Geographical and natural characteristics. The North-West region is distinguished by a diversified relief, arranged in steps from west to east: plains, located in the west (Bihor and Satu Mare counties), part of the Western Plain - lowlands, with fertile soils, favorable for agriculture, hills and plateaus - Transitional areas between plains and mountains, used for orchards, vineyards and pastures (found in Cluj, Sălaj, Bistrița-Năsăud counties), as well as mountains, present in the

east and northeast of the region (Apuseni Mountains, Rodnei and Țibleșului Mountains) in Maramureș, Bistrița-Năsăud and Cluj counties have mountainous portions.

The climate is temperate continental, influenced by altitude and proximity to mountains. Winters are cold, harsher in mountainous areas. Summers are warm and relatively humid, milder in plain areas. Annual precipitation is moderate to high (600–1,200 mm/year), higher in mountainous regions.

The region is crossed by numerous rivers, many of them tributaries of the Someș or Mureș rivers, the most important being: the Someș river – crosses Satu Mare, Maramureș and Sălaj counties, the Crișul Repede – crosses Bihor county, the Barcău, Lăpuș, Iza, Vișeu, Someșul Mare rivers – important in Maramureș and Bistrița-Năsăud counties (<https://www.nord-vest.ro/>).

Demographic characteristics.

Regarding the evolution of the population of the North-West Region, it is observed that the population of the region has decreased from 2,837,677 in 2014 to 2,798,667 in 2024. The decrease is slow but constant, caused by low birth rates and migration (table 2).

Table 2

Evolution of Romania's population by macroregions, regions and counties 2014-2024

Specification	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*	2022**	2024***
	persons									
Total	22299730	22286392	22247551	22219173	22208803	22193286	22142153	22046917	21942721	21762992
M 1	5476177	5475244	5471884	5468140	5466148	5461493	5453027	5432188	5410579	5391660
North - West	2837677	2837487	2830367	2834633	2834067	2832363	2828521	2818287	2807762	2798667
Bihor	620866	620188	615444	618362	617628	616703	615444	612754	610141	608526
Bistrița-Năsăud	329592	329631	327523	329043	328775	328212	327523	325944	324229	322896
Cluj	718633	721393	723828	727240	730878	734910	737992	739575	740858	744022
Maramureș	527663	526690	525572	524232	522912	521495	519386	515971	512588	508261
Satu Mare	392129	391541	390649	389523	388554	386995	385190	382876	380430	377678
Sălaj	248794	248044	247351	246233	245320	244048	242986	241167	239516	237284

Source: Own processing based on the Statistical Yearbook of Romania 2020, Time series 2012-2020, * Statistical Yearbook of Romania 2021, ** 2022, ***2024;

The population of the region on July 1, 2024 was **2,798,667 people**, representing 12.9% of the total, which makes the North-West Region the third most numerous among the

regions of the country (figure 4), and the population density is 81.2 inhabitants/km², lower than the national average of 91.3 inhabitants/km².

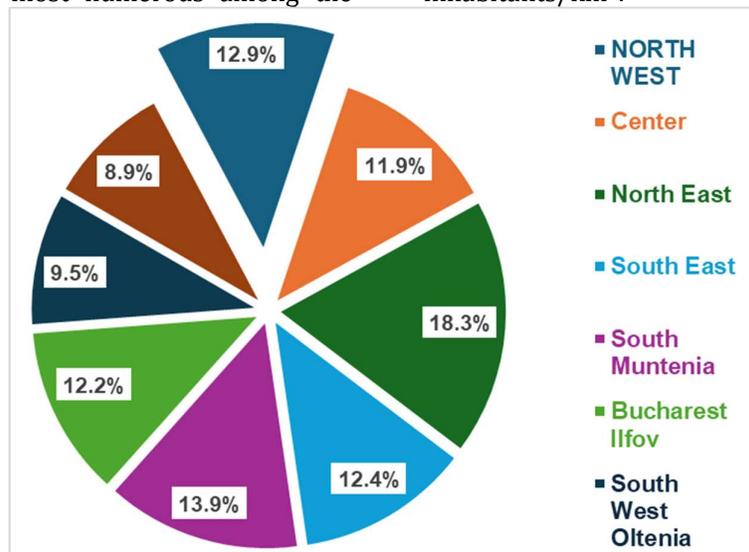


Figure 4 Structure of the total population of Romania by development regions, North-West Region

Source: own processing

Regarding the distribution of the population by county (figure 5), the situation is as follows:

- Cluj County is the most populous county in the region (744,022 inhabitants);

- Bihor and Maramureș counties have over 500,000 inhabitants each;
 - Satu Mare and Bistrița Năsăud counties have between 300,000 and 400,000 inhabitants;
 - Sălaj County is the county with the lowest population (237,284 inhabitants).

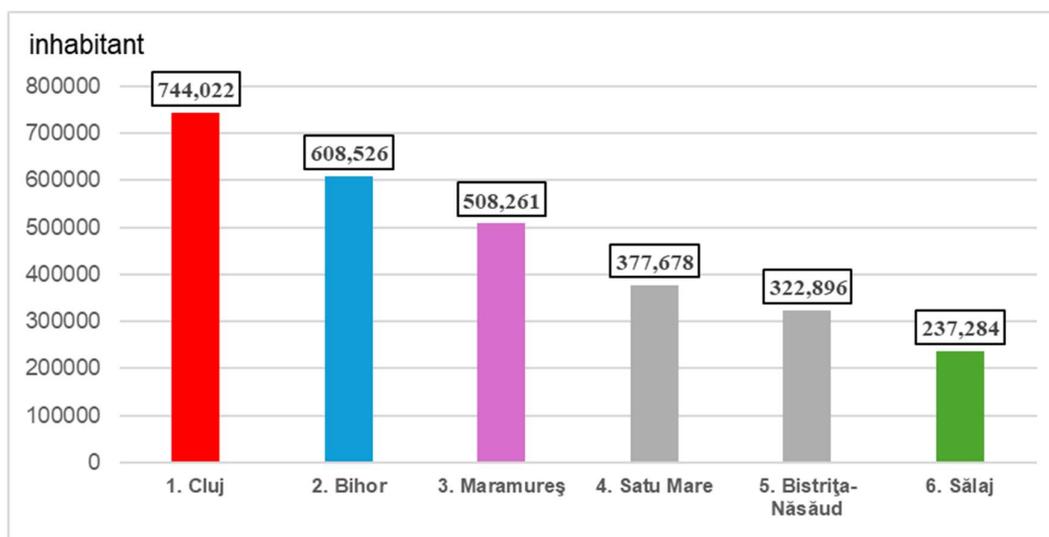


Figure 5 Population of the North-West Region by counties, 2024

Source: own processing

Natural population movement. The North-West region, in the period 2014–2024, lost approximately 39,000 inhabitants. All counties in the region recorded a negative natural increase, the largest losses being in the

counties of Cluj (-1,614), Maramureș (-1,535), Bihor (-1,492), and the smallest decrease in Bistrița-Năsăud (-106). The phenomenon reflects an aging population and low birth rate (table 3).

Table 3

Natural population movement, North-West Region

Nr. crt.	Specification	Live birth	Dead	Natural spore
		persoane		
1.	TOTAL	164004	244624	-80620
2.	MACROREGION ONE	44347	57405	-13058
3.	NORTH-WEST Region	23452	29929	-6477
4.	Bihor	5426	6918	-1492
5.	Bistrita-Nasaud	2859	2965	-106
6.	Cluj	6264	7878	-1614
7.	Maramures	3796	5331	-1535
8.	Satu Mare	2872	4076	-1204
9.	Salaj	2235	2761	-526

Sursa: Prelucrare proprie după Tempo online, 2025.

Economic characteristics. In 2014, the total GDP of the region was approximately 76765.5 million lei, in 2018, these values increased to

115562.6 million lei, reaching that in 2022, the GDP of the North-West region will be 168235.9 million lei (table 4, figure 6).

Table 4

Evolution of regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 2014-2022

Nr. crt.	Anul	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
		Millions lei								
1.	Total	668876.4	712543.6	752116.4	851619.7	959058.6	1063794.6	1066780.5	1189089.8	1389450.0
2.	M 1	150539.4	160564.2	173390.6	200390.4	225182.7	249901.9	253734.5	280357.8	320035.0
3.	N-W	76675.5	81505.6	88380.9	104056.6	115562.6	130049.6	132190.5	146199.6	168235.9

Source: own processing based on Tempo online 2025, <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>,

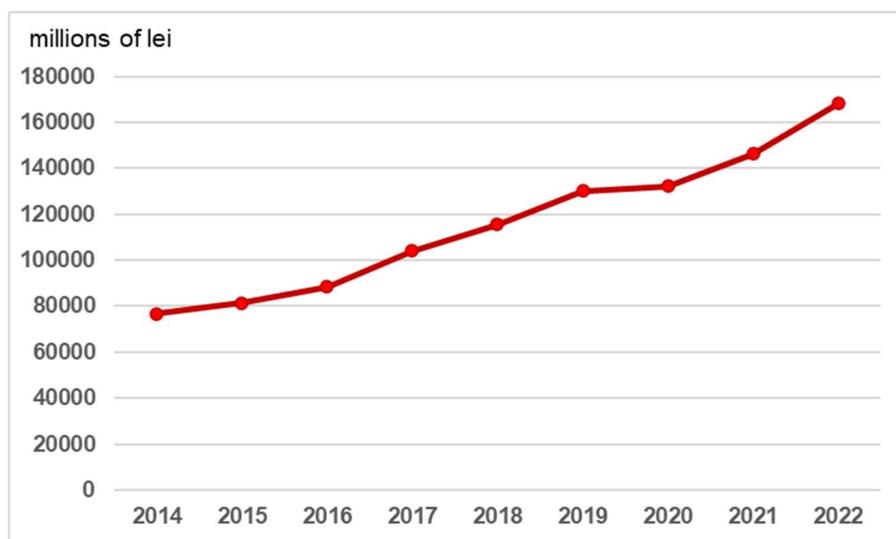


Figure 6 Evolution of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) - North-West Region
Source: own processing

The total GDP of the North-West Region, in 2022, amounted to 168,235.9 million lei, i.e. 12.1% of the national GDP (table 5).

Table 5

Regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Structure, 2022

No.	Year	2022	
		Mil. lei	%
1.	Total	1389450.0	100
2.	Macroregion 1	320035.0	-
3.	- North-West Region	168235.9	12.1
4.	- Central Region	151799.1	10.9
5.	Macroregion 2	275652.7	-
6.	- North-East Region	140470.1	10.1
7.	- South-East Region	135182.6	9.7
8.	Macroregion 3	561926.4	-
9.	- South - Muntenia Region	160933.0	11.6
10.	- Bucharest - Ilfov Region	400933.4	28.9
11.	Macroregion 4	230907.8	-
12.	South-West - Oltenia	108430.5	7.8
13.	West	122477.3	8.8

Source: own processing based on Tempo online, 2025, <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>.

The North-West region is the third most important region, economically speaking, after Bucharest-Ilfov and South-Muntenia.

GDP/capita in 2022 was 59,918 lei, above the average of the macroregion one and close to the national average. (table 6, figure 7).

Table 6

Evolution of GDP/CAPITA by macroregions and development regions in Romania

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	lei/capita								
Romania	29994.7	31972.1	33806.1	38328.1	43183.7	47933.2	48178.7	53934.5	63321.7
M 1	27489.8	29325.5	31687.5	36646.9	41195.9	45757.0	46530.9	51610.5	59149.9
- N-W	27020.5	28724.5	31225.9	36709.0	40776.2	45915.6	46734.8	51875.3	59918.1
- C	27994.6	29971.9	32182.1	36580.0	41647.6	45586.2	46311.1	51324.8	58321.0
M 2	21099.0	21713.5	22734.3	25824.3	29193.7	31952.6	32075.1	35908.6	40868.0
- N-E	17381.4	18264.5	19298.7	22360.3	25230.0	28128.0	28870.2	31438.3	35219.5
- S-E	26122.1	26417.7	27451.3	30622.9	34739.6	37365.8	36642.6	42709.6	49040.8
M 3	45679.1	49152.4	51442.2	57555.6	64319.0	71672.2	72019.4	81249.2	98115.4
- S-M	26695.2	26651.8	28378.1	31034.3	35352.0	38117.5	38181.0	43287.1	52310.3
- B-I	70840.7	78692.8	81427.4	80816.5	100680.0	112910.3	112837.6	126150.2	151278.8
M 4	26620.6	28369.3	30314.5	34274.4	39249.7	43851.9	43391.3	43743.6	56873.7
- S-W O	22794.7	23607.4	24785.8	29104.9	34056.1	38101.2	37923.9	42096.0	51825.7
- W	30663.4	33593.4	36396.2	39899.0	44872.9	50044.8	49248.6	54386.8	62240.9

Source: own processing based on Tempo online, 2025, <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>.

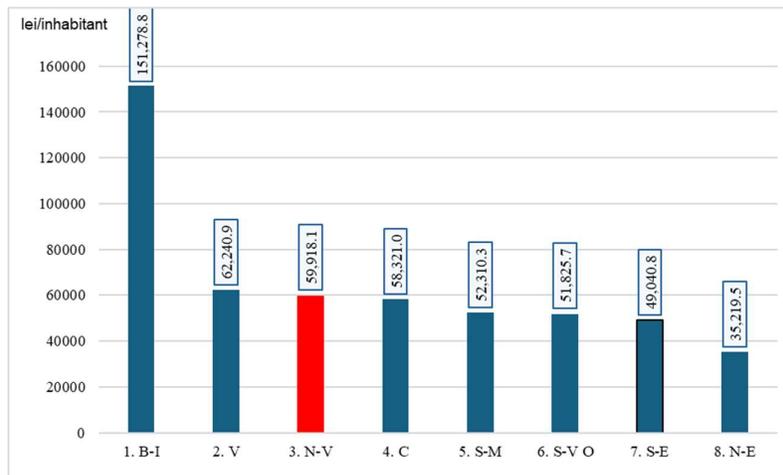


Figure 7 GDP per capita by development regions, 2022

Source: own processing;

The region is among the most economically dynamic, along with Center and South-Muntenia. The North-West region has a diversified economy, with important contributions from industry, services, agriculture and IT (especially in Cluj County, Cluj-Napoca being the main economic, university and technological center).

Agriculture is important, especially in Bihor, Satu Mare, Maramureş counties. The region contributed 10.6% to the national agricultural GDP in 2022. Agriculture is mixed, including cereal crops, vegetables, fruit growing and animal husbandry. It faces challenges related to land fragmentation and farm modernization.

Table 7

Evolution of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from agriculture, at regional level

Specification	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	
									Mil. lei	%
TOTAL	33099.7	31536.9	32282.7	37802.1	43137.1	45855	43478.1	54912.5	52978.4	100
N-W	3975.9	3742.7	3784.7	4248.4	4949.5	5262.9	5651	5967.8	5640.8	10.6
C	4134.2	3829.2	3791.3	4121.3	4776.6	5101.9	5644.8	6310.4	6296.7	11.9
N - E	5807.3	5328.1	5241.9	6089.8	7221.6	7353.4	7642.4	9474.4	8592.3	16.2
S-E	5490.4	5445.1	5706.1	6756.8	7451.3	7192.8	5557.7	9871.8	8033.0	15.2
S M	501.5	489.9	827.7	1097.1	1387.1	1810.1	1895.8	1847.9	1714.8	3.2
B-I	5984.5	6022.5	5947	6941.5	7606.8	8063.7	6965.7	10019.9	11347.3	21.4
S - W O	3637	3482.9	3483.6	4592	5016.8	5382.9	5387.9	6358.4	6299.3	11.9
W	3568.9	3196.5	3500.4	3955.2	4727.4	5687.3	4732.8	5061.9	5054.2	9.5

Source: own processing based on Tempo online, 2025, <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>

Infrastructure of the region. The region benefits from a dense road network, which includes national and European roads (E60, E81, E79). The A3 (Transylvania) motorway is under development, which will connect Cluj-Napoca to Borş (the Hungarian border), facilitating traffic to Western Europe. Other major projects in the region are. The Satu Mare – Baia Mare Expressway and the A10 (Sebeş–Turda) motorway, which indirectly connects Cluj to the Pan-European corridor. Road traffic is intense in urban areas, especially around Cluj and Oradea.

CONCLUSIONS

The North Development Region registers constant economic growth (especially in Cluj County) during the period 2014–2024,

confirmed by the doubling of the regional GDP and its contribution of over 12% to the national GDP.

On the other hand, the population of the region registers a long-term downward trend, determined by the decrease in the birth rate and external migration, which leads to a gradual reduction of the available human resource.

The demographic and economic structure highlights clear differences between the component counties of the region, especially the counties of Cluj and Bihor (due to the dynamic urban centers of Cluj-Napoca and Oradea) and the other counties, which present significantly lower demographic and economic values.

The regional economy is diversified, with strong sectors in industry, IT, services and agriculture, and developments in the last decade

confirm the consolidation of the region's role as a growth pole at the national level.

GDP per capita indicators show a gradual convergence towards the national average, reflecting a sustained increase in economic competitiveness and a high capacity to attract investments.

Agriculture remains an important sector in the western and northern counties of the region, contributing significantly to national agricultural production, although challenges related to land fragmentation and low technological level persist.

Internal territorial disparities persist, being visible in the distribution of population, income and infrastructure, with higher performances in Cluj and Bihor counties and lower values in Sălaj and Bistrița-Năsăud counties.

The transport infrastructure is in the process of modernization, and major ongoing projects contribute to improving regional connectivity and supporting economic development.

The analysis confirms the need to strengthen integrated regional planning, aimed at reducing territorial imbalances, increasing economic attractiveness and efficiently using regional potential.

The research results provide a synthetic and consistent picture of the demographic and economic evolution of the region, based on official data series, statistical processing and analytical interpretations, thus contributing to a clear understanding of the current situation of the North-West Development Region.

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