

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS IN BIHOR COUNTY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS FOR THE PERIOD 2023–2027

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

The LEADER approach is an essential tool of rural development policy, operationalized through Local Action Groups (LAGs) that develop Local Development Strategies (LDSs). The paper comparatively analyzes the strategic priorities assumed through the LDSs of the 16 LAGs with territory in Bihor county for the 2023–2027 programming period, aiming to identify common priorities and territorial specificities. The research was based on the documentary analysis of the published strategies and the official selection reports of the MADR, supplemented with derived financial and territorial indicators. The results show a total public value of approximately 40.4 million euros, dominated by the multi-fund model: 15 of the 16 strategies combine EAFRD with ESF+, the only exception being the Codru Moma LAG (mono-fund). The average financing structure is about 73% EAFRD and 27% ESF+, the social component consistently representing almost a third of the multi-fund budgets. The financing mechanism has a pronounced redistributive character, the allocation per inhabitant varying from approximately 49 euros (GAL Bihor near the Hungarian Border) to approximately 137 euros (GAL Crișul Negru). The analysis allowed the outline of three territorial profiles - peri-urban, mountainous and environmental, respectively small and vulnerable rural with a social focus. The main conclusion is that the strategic priorities are not formally chosen, but consistently reflect the real profile of the territory, the correlation between the declared priorities, the territorial profile and the financing structure being most evident in the cases of GAL Crișul Negru and GAL ZMO Dealul Șomleu.

Keywords: (max. 5) priorities, LAG, SP 2023-2027, rural development

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INTRODUCTION

The rural area occupies a considerable share of the territory and population of Romania, which makes rural development an essential component of national and European public policies. In this context, the LEADER approach has established itself, since its introduction at the community level in the 1990s, as a key tool for capitalizing on local resources and for the direct involvement of communities in their own development. Unlike the traditional, "top-down" model, LEADER promotes a bottom-up logic, in which needs and opportunities are identified at the territorial level, and financing decisions are assumed by local partnerships (EU CAP Network, 2023).

The mechanism through which this approach is implemented is Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), operationalized through Local Action Groups (LAGs) - public-private partnerships that bring together authorities, the business environment and civil society. Each LAG develops and implements a Local Development Strategy (LDS), a document

that substantiates the intervention priorities in the targeted territory. The efficiency of this model, however, depends not only on the quality of the strategies, but also on the administrative and financial capacity of the groups, an aspect reported in the specialized literature as a recurring challenge of LEADER implementation in Romania (Crunțeanu & Fîntîneru, 2022).

The 2023–2027 programming period marks a distinct stage in the evolution of this instrument. LEADER continues to be financed through Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), but within a framework reconfigured by the CAP Strategic Plan (CAP SP), which replaces the National Rural Development Programme (NRDP). At European level, over 2,600 LAGs become operational in this cycle, managing approximately 7.7% of Pillar II allocations, and most Member States have foreseen a higher share for LEADER compared to the previous period (EU CAP Network, 2023). In the case of Romania, the number of LAGs has experienced a significant expansion since the launch of the approach, from 163 to 246 groups, which confirms their role in structuring rural development (Chereji et al., 2024).

The comparative analysis of strategic objectives between and within programming periods is a well-established research direction, as it allows the identification of continuities, public policy inflections and the degree of adaptation of strategies to territorial specificities. Such an approach has been applied, for example, in comparing the strategic objectives of the European Union between the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 cycles (Raicov, Fehér, Adamov & Stanciu, 2016), respectively in characterizing the gaps and regional agricultural potential (Fehér, Adamov & Raicov, 2016). The same comparative logic can be extended to the level of the SDSs developed by LAGs, in order to highlight the extent to which the assumed priorities converge or differ according to local needs.

The North-West Development Region, of which the analyzed county is part, is one of the most complex territorial units of Romania, characterized by a pronounced geographical diversity, a demographic evolution in slow but constant decline, and an economic structure in continuous transformation (Mănescu, Mateoc-Sîrb, Adamov, Sicoe-Murg & Chende, 2025). Within this regional framework, Bihor County is located in the north-west of Romania, being a border county with an area of approximately 7,539 km² and an administrative-territorial structure formed by 101 units, of which four municipalities, six cities, and 91 communes (Bihor County Council, 2023). With a population of over 600,000 inhabitants, the county represents about 21.7% of the population of the North-West Development Region, ranking second after Cluj County, and the distribution by areas of residence is almost balanced, with approximately half of the population living in rural areas (Bihor County Council, 2023). However, rural Bihor is marked by a sharp administrative fragmentation and the predominance of small and medium-sized communes, many of which are facing demographic aging and population decline (Bihor County Statistics Directorate, 2020). These characteristics place rural development at the center of the territorial agenda and justify the interest in LEADER-type instruments.

In the 2023–2027 programming period, the county is covered by a significant number of Local Action Groups, whose Local Development Strategies were selected for funding through the CAP Strategic Plan mechanism. Thus, ten Bihorean SDLs were retained for the multi-fund component, with a related public value of

approximately 12.5 million euros, to which is added a strategy for the mono-fund component, the total value of funding exceeding 13 million euros (Transilvania Business, 2024). The contribution of local action groups to the rural development of this county has also been documented since the previous cycle, through the analysis of the implementation of the LEADER axis in the PNDR (Chereji et al, 2022), and the particularities of LAG funding in the new CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027 were examined at the level of the entire North-West Region (Chereji et al., 2024). These studies highlight both the heterogeneity of partnership structures, including inter-county collaborations, and the need for solid managerial capacity to manage financial allocations within a compressed implementation timeframe.

In addition to the strictly financial and administrative dimension, recent literature draws attention to the thematic directions towards which rural strategies are oriented: local entrepreneurship, intelligent resource utilization, and rural tourism as vectors of sustainable development (Adamov, Fehér & Stanciu, 2022), as well as the strategic prioritization of interventions according to the specific potential of the territory (Gherdan et al., 2025). Understanding how the LAGs in Bihor establish and prioritize these priorities remains insufficiently explored in a systematic comparative perspective.

Based on these considerations, this paper proposes an analysis of the Local Development Strategies of the Local Action Groups in Bihor County, for the programming period 2023–2027. The research aims to identify common priorities and territorial specificities, thus contributing to a better understanding of how the LEADER approach is translated, at the local level, into concrete development options.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research methodology was based on documentary analysis and comparative study of available information on Local Action Groups (LAGs) and their contribution to local and rural development. The choice of the research topic is justified by the high interest given to the LEADER approach and the role of LAGs in the territorial development process, a subject intensively analyzed in the specialized literature at European, national, regional and county levels.

In the first stage of the research, an analysis of the specialized literature and the institutional framework regarding the

implementation of community-led local development (CLLD) in the programming period 2023–2027 was carried out. Also, official documents published by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), namely the list of Local Action Groups selected for the implementation of local development strategies in the period 2023–2027, were consulted. (LDA, MADR)

In the next stage, the research focused on the Local Action Groups operating in Bihor County. For each LAG, local development strategies, programmatic documents and public information available on their official websites were analyzed. The following structures were included in the analysis: Bihor LAG near the Hungarian Border, Beiuș Country LAG, EuroCrișana LAG, Aleșd Zone LAG – Valea Crișului Repede LAG, Crișul Negru LAG, Metropolitan Zone LAG and Câmpia Crișului LAG, Dealul Șomleu LAG, Valea Velj LAG, Padurea Craiului LAG, Codru Moma LAG and Muntele Șes LAG.

Based on the information collected, the territorial characteristics of the LAGs, the objectives of the local development strategies, the intervention priorities, the proposed measures and their contribution to the socio-economic development of rural communities in Bihor County were analyzed. At the same time, we conducted an analysis of the typology of the strategies, regarding the type of funds included within them. On the other hand, the study is limited to the Local Action Groups operating on the territory of Bihor County, which restricts the possibility of generalizing the results at national level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Within the framework of the CAP SP 2023–2027, 246 Local Development Strategies were selected at national level: 209 on the multi-fund component and 37 on the mono-fund component. Of these, 10 are multi-fund and 1 mono-fund from Bihor County. One of the main novelties of the LEADER approach in the 2023–2027 programming period is the consolidation of the multi-fund model for financing Local Development Strategies (LDS). Unlike mono-fund strategies, financed exclusively from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), multi-fund strategies combine the EAFRD with other European instruments - in particular the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which allows Local Action Groups (LAGs) to intervene simultaneously in

economic, social, educational and environmental fields. The development of a rural territory cannot be reduced to supporting agriculture or economic investments, but also involves responses to social needs - the inclusion of vulnerable groups, access to services, support for children and young people, employment. By combining funds, the multi-fund strategy provides the LAG with the necessary tool to address these dimensions coherently, within the same territorial vision, instead of treating them fragmentedly or leaving them outside local intervention. However, it must be emphasized that the advantages of the multi-fund model are accompanied by increased administrative and managerial complexity. The coordination of several sources of funding, with distinct rules and procedures, requires a solid institutional capacity on the part of the LAGs, and the specialized literature already signals the challenges related to the functioning and financial management of these structures (Crunțeanu & Fîntîneru, 2022). Therefore, although multi-fund strategies represent a valuable tool for integrated local development, the full exploitation of their potential depends on the strengthening of the LAG's administrative capacity.

The analysis of the 16 LAGs that include territories in Bihor County highlights a significant diversity in terms of territorial, demographic and financial aspects. (Table 1) Most of the strategies are multi-fund, combining interventions financed by EAFRD and ESF+, which reflects the current orientation of the LEADER approach towards the integrated development of rural communities. Although financial allocations are influenced by the size of the territory and the population served, the analysis of funding reported to the number of inhabitants highlights a relatively higher support for territories with a low population, thus contributing to the reduction of the existing development disparities between rural communities.

The total public value of the 16 strategies amounts to approximately EUR 40.4 million, of which approximately 73% comes from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and approximately 27% from the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). This distribution confirms that, although the EAFRD remains the main source of financing for rural development, the social component has gained a significant share in the current programming period. The most important aspect that emerges

from the table is the almost total preponderance of multi-fund strategies: 15 out of the 16 LAGs opted for combining the EAFRD with the ESF+, the only exception being the Codru Moma LAG, with a single-fund strategy financed exclusively from the EAFRD. This configuration reflects, at county level, the dominant trend at national level, where 209 out of the 246 selected strategies are multi-fund. Such a pronounced focus on the multi-fund model indicates that local actors in Bihor perceived the simultaneous access to several funds as an opportunity to respond to a broader spectrum of needs, going

beyond the strictly agricultural and economic framework of classical interventions.

Table 1

Analysis of financing of LAGs with territory in Bihor County - Programming period 2023–2027											
No	Local Action Group	SDL type	COU NTY	U A T N O.	Surface (km²)	Popul ation	EAFRD (€)	ESF+ (€)	Total SDL (€)	% EAF RD	% ESF +
1	Bihor LAG near the Hungarian Border	Multifund	Bihar	19	1,271.63	75,977	2,869,155	822,406	3,691,561	77.7 %	22.3 %
2	GAL Tara Beiuşului	Multifund	Bihar	5	309.36	11,744	1,009,266	451,197	1,460,463	69.1 %	30.9 %
3	Euro-Crişana LAG	Multifund	Bihar	5	496.01	18,071	1,267,435	534,202	1,801,637	70.3 %	29.7 %
4	GAL Aleşd Area – Crişului Repede Valley	Multifund	Bihar	8	521.19	32,004	1,521,082	615,768	2,136,850	71.2 %	28.8 %
5	Crişul Negru LAG	Multifund	Bihar	5	277.51	10,985	970,577	532,150	1,502,727	64.6 %	35.4 %
6	LAG Metropolitan Area and Criş Plain	Multifund	Bihar	5	326.73	17,620	1,121,747	487,367	1,609,114	69.7 %	30.3 %
7	GAL ZMO Dealul Şomleu	Multifund	Bihar	5	287.24	35,052	1,381,158	664,183	2,045,341	67.5 %	32.5 %
8	GAL Valea Velj	Multifund	Bihar	8	603.91	25,592	1,481,314	602,972	2,084,286	71.1 %	28.9 %
9	LAG Forest of Craiului	Multifund	Bihar	8	946.42	21,620	1,694,371	711,481	2,405,852	70.4 %	29.6 %
10	LAG Muntele Şes Bihor County	Multifund	Bihor, Salaj	11	684.43	39,590	1,781,210	739,430	2,520,640	70.7 %	29.3 %
11	Codru Moma Local Government Area Office	mono-fund	Bihar, Arad	10	575.42	23,035	1,415,286	0	1,415,286	100.0%	0.0 %
12	LAG Micro-Region of	Multifund	Arad, Bihor	23	1,898.55	88,824	3,595,689	1,296,138	4,891,827	73.5 %	26.5 %

	the Crișurilor Alb și Negru Valleys										
13	GAL Sebiș-Gurahonț-Hălmagiu Depression	Multifund	Arad, Bihor	14	1,364.04	27,774	2,138,131	667,366	2,805,497	76.2 %	23.8 %
14	GAL Gate of Transylvania	Multifund	Cluj, Salaj, Bihor	13	1,264.54	33,365	2,150,470	858,125	3,008,595	71.5 %	28.5 %
15	South-West GAL Satu Mare	Multifund	Satu Mare, Bihor	23	1,483.25	72,364	2,981,404	1,152,000	4,133,404	72.1 %	27.9 %
16	GAL Crasnei and Barcăului Valley	Multifund	Salaj, Bihor	16	860.97	53,563	2,159,045	727,502	2,886,547	74.8 %	25.2 %
	TOTAL (16 LAGs)			178	13,171.20	587,180	29,537,340	10,862,287	40,399,627	73.1 %	26.9 %

Source: SDL final selection reports, session 01/2023, MARD - no. 141879/2024 (monofund) and no. 141880/2024 (multifund). Values in euros.

The analysis of the weights reveals a remarkably stable pattern among the multi-fund strategies. The weight of the EAFRD ranges between approximately 65% and 78%, and that of the ESF+ between approximately 22% and 35%, with an average of approximately 71% EAFRD and 29% ESF+. In other words, in the structure of the multi-fund strategies related to the analyzed area, the social component consistently represents almost a third of the budget. This consistency suggests that the allocation to the ESF+ is not a marginal or random element, but an assumed and relatively uniform option, probably also influenced by the bonus mechanism and the selection criteria applicable to the ESF+ component provided for in the MARD methodology.

The variations between LAGs, although relatively small, are not without significance. The Crișul Negru LAG records the highest ESF+ share (35.4%), which indicates the strategy with the most pronounced orientation towards the social dimension of development. At the opposite pole, the Bihor LAG near the Hungarian Border presents the lowest ESF+ share among the multi-fund strategies (22.3%), which can be linked to its

territorial profile: it is the largest LAG in Bihor in terms of population (over 75,000 inhabitants), and a more consistent economic and agricultural component seems to have prevailed in the construction of the strategy. An interpretative hypothesis is thus outlined: smaller and more vulnerable territories tend to give a higher share greater social interventions, while larger and more economically dynamic territories tend towards a structure in which the EAFRD remains predominant.

LAG Codru Moma has the only single-fund strategy, with a structure of 100% EAFRD and 0% ESF+. This case deserves special attention in the comparative analysis, as the absence of the ESF+ component means that the strategy does not include interventions explicitly dedicated to vulnerable groups or social services financed through this fund. Being a mountainous territory, located in the Apuseni area, the profile of the strategy seems to have been mainly oriented towards the valorization of local resources and classic economic support.

Indicators calculated per LAG - density, funding per inhabitant and per km²

N o.	Local Action Group	Density (inhabitants/km ²)	Total SDL / inhabitant (€)	Total SDL / km ² (€)	EAFRD / inhabitant (€)	ESF+ / inhabitant (€)	Total SDL (€)
1	Bihor LAG near the Hungarian Border	59.7	48.6	2,903.0	37.8	10.8	3,691,561
2	GAL Tara Beiuşului	38.0	124.4	4,720.9	85.9	38.4	1,460,463
3	Euro-Crişana LAG	36.4	99.7	3,632.3	70.1	29.6	1,801,637
4	GAL Aleşd Area – Crişului Repede Valley	61.4	66.8	4,099.9	47.5	19.2	2,136,850
5	Crişul Negru LAG	39.6	136.8	5,415.0	88.4	48.4	1,502,727
6	LAG Metropolitan Area and Criş Plain	53.9	91.3	4,924.9	63.7	27.7	1,609,114
7	GAL ZMO Dealul Şomleu	122.0	58.4	7,120.7	39.4	18.9	2,045,341
8	GAL Valea Velj	42.4	81.4	3,451.3	57.9	23.6	2,084,286
9	LAG Forest of Craiului	22.8	111.3	2,542.1	78.4	32.9	2,405,852
10	LAG Muntele Şes Bihor County	57.8	63.7	3,682.8	45.0	18.7	2,520,640
11	Codru Moma Local Government Area Office	40.0	61.4	2,459.6	61.4	0.0	1,415,286
12	LAG Micro-Region of the Crişurilor Alb şi Negru Valleys	46.8	55.1	2,576.6	40.5	14.6	4,891,827
13	GAL Sebiş-Gurahonţ-Hălmagiu Depression	20.4	101.0	2,056.8	77.0	24.0	2,805,497
14	GAL Gate of Transylvania	26.4	90.2	2,379.2	64.5	25.7	3,008,595
15	South-West GAL Satu Mare	48.8	57.1	2,786.7	41.2	15.9	4,133,404
16	GAL Crasnei and Barcăului Valley	62.2	53.9	3,352.7	40.3	13.6	2,886,547

Source: own processing based on data from table 1

LAGs with a small population benefit from a significantly higher public value per inhabitant than those with a large population, as a result of the fixed bonus component and the logic of balancing funding. Thus, strategies in small and fragmented territories have relatively generous resources in relation to the number of inhabitants, which is an advantage for small rural communities, often affected by demographic decline - a recurring feature of the rural space in Bihor county. This mechanism partially mitigates the structural disadvantages of small territories and supports the redistributive role of the LEADER approach. (table 2)

The public value of the SDL, relative to the number of inhabitants, varies almost threefold between extremes: from about 48.6 euros per inhabitant in the case of the Bihor LAG near the Hungarian Border, to about 136.8 euros per inhabitant in the case of the Crişul Negru LAG. This amplitude is not accidental, but reflects the redistributive nature of the financing mechanism, in which the fixed bonus component systematically benefits territories with low population.

Crişul Negru (approximately 11,000 inhabitants), Tara Beiuşului (124.4

euros/inhabitant) and Pădurea Craiului (111.3 euros/inhabitant) are at the top of the ranking, while LAGs with large populations - Bihor near the Hungarian Border (over 75,000 inhabitants) or Valea Crasnei şi Barcăului (53.9 euros/inhabitant) - are at the opposite pole. In practice, small rural communities, often the most affected by demographic decline and administrative fragmentation, have a proportionally more generous volume of resources per capita. This mechanism represents a territorial balancing instrument, mitigating the structural disadvantages of small areas and supporting precisely the territories with the greatest revitalization needs.

The financing indicator per square kilometer tells a slightly different story, as it is primarily influenced by population density and the size of the territory. The values range from approximately 2,057 euros/km² (Sebiş-Gurahonţ-Hălmagiu Depression) to approximately 7,121 euros/km² (ZMO Dealul Şomleu). It is no coincidence that the ZMO Dealul Şomleu LAG - which also records the highest population density in the entire corpus (122 inhabitants/km²) - is also the territory with the most intense concentration of financing per unit area.

This LAG covers peri-urban communes in the immediate vicinity of Oradea municipality (Sânmartin, Sântandrei, Oșorhei), which explains the atypical profile: a small, densely populated and relatively prosperous territory.

At the opposite end, the mountainous and low-density LAGs - Sebiș-Gurahonț-Hălmagiu Depression (20.4 inhabitants/km²), Poarta Transilvaniei (26.4 inhabitants/km²) and Pădurea Craiului (22.8 inhabitants/km²) -

present the lowest values of funding per square kilometer. In these large and sparsely populated territories, the same resources are dispersed over large areas, which may represent an additional challenge for the effective implementation of the strategy.

Tabel 3

The main strategic guidelines of the LAGs with territories exclusively in Bihor County

No. crt.	Local Action Group	Main elements identified in the SDL
1	Bihor LAG near the Hungarian Border	Cross-border cooperation, development of the rural entrepreneurial environment, community services, development of local infrastructure, capitalization of the border position.
2	GAL Tara Beiușului	Developing the local economy, supporting rural entrepreneurship, capitalizing on natural and cultural resources, increasing the attractiveness of the territory.
3	Euro-Crișana LAG	Modernization of rural farms and businesses, development of services for the population, increase of local economic competitiveness.
4	GAL Aleșd Area – Crișului Repede Valley	Local economic development, capitalizing on tourism and natural potential, improving rural services and infrastructure.
5	Crișul Negru LAG	Increasing the quality of life in rural areas through economic, social and environmental measures; involving the local community in the development of the territory.
6	LAG Metropolitan Area and Criș Plain	Development of localities in the vicinity of Oradea municipality, public services, mobility and peri-urban economic development.
7	GAL ZMO Dealul Șomleu	Integrated territorial development, support for local businesses, services for the population and strengthening rural communities (peri-urban profile).
8	GAL Valea Velj	Developing agriculture, supporting family farms, diversifying the rural economy and developing local services.
9	LAG Forest of Craiului	Sustainable development, conservation of natural capital, environmental protection, valorization of natural and tourist heritage; high share of Natura 2000 sites in the territory.

Source: own processing based on SDLs available online

Tabel 4

LAGs with territory in Bihor and other counties

Welshman	COUNTY	Main elements identified in the SDL
Codru Moma Local Government Area Office	Bihar, Arad	Development of mountain and hilly areas, supporting local economic activities and capitalizing on natural resources. <i>(the only single-fund strategy — without ESF+ component)</i>
LAG Muntele Șes Bihor County	Bihor, Salaj	Development of isolated rural communities, services for the population, supporting economic activities and reducing territorial disparities.
LAG Micro-Region of the Crișurilor Alb și Negru Valleys	Arad, Bihor	Predominantly agricultural profile (almost half of the active population works in agriculture); development of local economic competitiveness, strengthening partnership and services for the population.
GAL Sebiș-Gurahonț-Hălmagiu Depression	Arad, Bihor	Unifying theme oriented towards solidarity and community progress; increasing the quality of life and services for the rural population; approach focused on the needs of communities in a mountain depression area.
GAL Gate of Transylvania	Cluj, Salaj, Bihor	Integrated rural development, valorization of natural and cultural heritage, connecting mountain and hill areas.

South-West GAL Satu Mare	Satu Mare, Bihor	Strong social component (services for the elderly, children and vulnerable groups); valorization of cultural heritage and tourism (about 150 cultural objectives identified); competitiveness of agriculture and the food industry; reduction of the digital divide.
GAL Crasnei and Barcăului Valley	Salaj, Bihar	Local economic development, public services, rural entrepreneurship and inter-community cooperation.

Source: own processing based on SDLs available online

The nine Local Action Groups with territory located entirely in Bihor County represent the most relevant core of the analysis, since conclusions regarding the specifics of the county can be formulated without the reservations imposed by the inter-county LAGs (table 4). The examination of their strategic orientations reveals both a common thematic background and a territorial differentiation that is closely correlated with the demographic, spatial and financial profile of each group. The development of the local economy and the support of rural entrepreneurship appear, in one form or another, in all nine strategies, as does the concern for services intended for the population and for the improvement of basic infrastructure. This common background confirms the existence of structural needs shared by the entire rural area of the county, economic revitalization, maintenance of services and increased quality of life beyond the particularities of each area. At the same time, precisely because these priorities are found at the level of the SDLs, they do not differentiate the strategies from each other, so their role is to mark membership in a common development agenda, not to express the identity of each territory. The real differentiation between the nine LAGs appears at the level of the "third pillar", the distinctive element that each strategy adds over the common core. These elements are grouped, in turn, into several coherent territorial profiles.

A first profile is the peri-urban one, represented by the Metropolitan Area and Criș Plain GAL and the ZMO Dealul Șomleu GAL. Both cover localities in the immediate vicinity of Oradea and orient their strategies towards public services, mobility and peri-urban economic development. This profile is confirmed by territorial and financial data: the ZMO Dealul Șomleu GAL has the highest population density in the entire corpus (around 122 inhabitants/km²) and the highest funding per square kilometer (over 7,100 euros/km²), typical features of a small, dense and relatively

prosperous territory, gravitating around the urban pole. A second profile is the mountainous and environmental one, most clearly embodied by the Pădurea Craiului GAL. Its strategy is distinguished by the emphasis placed on sustainable development, the conservation of natural capital and the valorization of natural and tourist heritage, given the high share of Natura 2000 sites in the territory. The profile is coherent with the physical reality of the area: Pădurea Craiului has the lowest population density among the Bihor LAGs (approximately 22.8 inhabitants/km²), being a large and sparsely populated territory, in which orientation towards the environment and tourism represents a natural option for capitalizing on resources.

A third profile, perhaps the most significant for the paper, is that of the small and vulnerable rural area with a social focus, illustrated by the Crișul Negru LAG. Its strategy explicitly formulates the increase in the quality of life through economic, social and environmental measures, along with the involvement of the local community. This case offers the strongest overlap between the declared priority and the funding structure in the entire paper: the Crișul Negru LAG has the highest share of the ESF+ component of all the strategies (35.4%) and the highest social investment per inhabitant (approximately 48 euros/inhabitant), while being the smallest LAG in terms of population. In other words, the strategic statement and the budget allocation confirm each other, which gives this LAG the value of an exemplary case study. Beyond the three profiles, two LAGs deserve mention for their specificity. The Bihor LAG on the Hungarian border is the only one that lists cross-border cooperation as an explicit priority, derived directly from its border position, a feature that no other Bihor LAG shares. Being also the largest LAG in terms of population (over 75,000 inhabitants), its strategy places a stronger emphasis on the economic and entrepreneurial component, which also explains the lowest share of ESF+ among the multi-fund strategies (22.3%). In turn, the Valea Velj LAG is

distinguished by a stronger agricultural orientation than the others, focused on supporting family farms and diversifying the rural economy.

The GAL Țara Beiușului, GAL Euro-Crișana and GAL Zona Aleșd – Valea Crișului Repede, on the other hand, fall into a register closer to the common core, combining local economic development with the valorization of natural, cultural and tourist resources and with the improvement of services without showing an equally pronounced thematic specialization. Țara Beiușului, although close to the common profile, nevertheless benefits from one of the highest allocations per inhabitant (over 124 euros/inhabitant), as a result of its small population, which gives it a proportionally generous intervention potential.

The analysis of the nine exclusively Bihor LAGs confirms that the strategic priorities are not chosen formally or randomly, but consistently reflect the real profile of the territory: peri-urban, mountainous or small and vulnerable rural. On a common background of economic development, services and infrastructure, each LAG adds a distinctive emphasis correlated with its specific needs and resources, and the overlap between the declared priorities and the financing structure visible most clearly in the cases of Crișul Negru and Dealul Șomleu provides empirical evidence of this correlation.

The seven Local Action Groups that extend across the territory of Bihor County and neighboring counties raise a distinct methodological issue, but also offer a valuable perspective on the transterritorial nature of the LEADER approach. Unlike the exclusively Bihor LAGs, these partnerships cannot be read as a "pure" expression of the county's specificity, as their priorities reflect the realities of a wider area, which goes beyond the administrative borders of Bihor. (Table 4) Beyond the degree of affiliation, the orientations of these LAGs fit into recognizable territorial profiles. The mountainous, hilly and depression character predominates, which explains the recurrence of themes related to the valorization of natural resources, the reduction of disparities and the support for isolated communities. GAL Codru Moma is oriented towards the development of mountain and hilly areas and the valorization of natural resources, GAL Muntele Șes Bihor County focuses on isolated rural communities and the reduction of territorial disparities, and GAL Poarta Transilvaniei aims to connect

mountain and hilly areas and the valorization of natural and cultural heritage. These orientations are consistent with the low population density and the dispersed nature of the settlements in the respective areas.

Two cases stand out, however, by their specificity. The Sud-Vest Satu Mare LAG is distinguished by a pronounced social component - services for the elderly, children and vulnerable groups -, doubled by the valorization of a rich cultural heritage and by the only explicit mention of reducing the digital divide in the entire corpus. This social profile is also confirmed by its financing structure, the strategy being multi-fund with a consistent share of the ESF+ component. The Sebiș-Gurahonț-Hălmagiu LAG adopts, in turn, a unifying theme centered on solidarity and community progress, with an emphasis on increasing the quality of life and on services for the rural population. At the opposite end of the thematic spectrum, the Micro-Region of the Crișurilor Alb și Negru LAG presents the most pronounced agricultural profile in the entire corpus, with almost half of the active population of its territory working in agriculture. The Codru Moma LAG deserves special attention, being the only single-fund strategy in the entire corpus, financed exclusively from the EAFRD, without an ESF+ component. This particularity takes on additional significance in the context of the inter-county group: unlike Sud-Vest Satu Mare or Sebiș-Gurahonț-Hălmagiu, which capitalize on the social dimension through ESF+, Codru Moma remains exclusively oriented towards classical economic support and the valorization of natural resources. Even among strategies with a strong anchoring in the county, financing and prioritization options can diverge significantly.

An element that appears more frequently in this group than among the exclusively Bihor LAGs is cooperation - inter-community and trans-territorial. The Valea Crasnei și Barcăului LAG explicitly mentions inter-community cooperation, and the Poarta Transilvaniei LAG builds its identity around the connection of areas located at the intersection of three counties. By their very inter-county nature, these partnerships are built on the idea of collaboration across administrative borders, which gives them a more pronounced vocation for cooperation.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis of the strategic priorities assumed through the Local

Development Strategies of the 16 Local Action Groups with territory in Bihor County for the programming period 2023–2027 highlighted both a core of common priorities and significant territorial specificities. Against a shared background of local economic development, support for rural entrepreneurship, services for the population and basic infrastructure, each LAG adds distinctive guidelines, correlated with the demographic, spatial and economic profile of its territory.

In terms of funding structure, the multi-fund model has emerged as the dominant option: 15 of the 16 strategies combine EAFRD with ESF+, the only exception being the Codru Moma LAG, with a single-fund strategy. The total public value of the 16 strategies exceeds 40 million euros, of which approximately 73% comes from EAFRD and 27% from ESF+, the social component consistently representing almost a third of the multi-fund budgets. This configuration confirms, at county level, the current orientation of the LEADER approach towards the integrated development of rural communities.

The analysis of the derived indicators revealed the redistributive nature of the financing mechanism, with territories with a low population benefiting from significantly higher per capita allocations, which supports precisely small rural communities affected by demographic decline. At the same time, the research allowed the outline of distinct territorial profiles – peri-urban (Metropolitan Area and Criş Plain, ZMO Dealul Şomleu), mountain and environmental (Pădurea Craiului) and small and vulnerable rural with a social focus (Crişul Negru) – each with its own set of priorities.

The main conclusion of the study is that strategic priorities are not chosen formally or randomly, but consistently reflect the real needs of the territory. The overlap between the declared priority and the funding structure is most clearly visible in the case of the Crişul Negru LAG – the strategy with the most pronounced social orientation and the highest ESF+ share (35.4%) – and the ZMO Dealul Şomleu LAG, with its peri-urban profile and the highest funding per square kilometer. These cases provide empirical evidence of the correlation between the assumed priorities, the territorial profile and the funding options.

The study also presents some limitations. For LAGs with a territory extended over several counties, the data refer to the entire partnership,

and not exclusively to the Bihor region, which requires caution in generalizing the conclusions at the county level. Also, the analysis is based on publicly available programmatic documents, without capturing the actual degree of implementation of the strategies. Future research could follow the evolution of implementation and the concrete impact of the funded interventions, including the reduction of the digital divide – a topic still marginal in the analyzed strategies.

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