

# THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN BIHOR COUNTY'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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**Abstract.** *In the complex international system, made up of modern traditional states, it is necessary that the existing resources of the regions are very well managed to increase the citizens standard of living, which is supported by the European Union through public policies. In order to have all the necessary information, to understand the international, national, regional context, to fit their strategies and to receive support, public authorities (national, regional, county, local) have at their disposal legislative and financial measures, opportunities for national and international cooperation. The next step is to correlate them and implement them so that their results and objectives are felt, known, adapted and adopted for improvement in all areas and for all types of organisations. In this respect, the proposed solution, for the case study of Bihor County is the 2021-2027 Development Strategy for International Cooperation elaboration and design of the Guide for international cooperation development, which will be a practical one, presenting operational methodologies and procedures.*

*The content of the guide will focus on: deepening and updating knowledge on the legal and institutional framework for regional, inter-regional, cross-border development, international partnerships; developing skills to harness European experience in the field of international relations development; planning and analysis of cooperation and partnerships; implementation, monitoring and evaluation of activities in this area. The practical utility of the Guide for the Development of International Cooperation will be that it is a mechanism for initiating, maintaining and developing international cooperation.*

**Keywords:** *European Union, Romania, Bihor, European Instruments, regional development, cross-border cooperation, international cooperation, development strategy*

## **Introduction**

The development of a strategy for the development of a regional administrative unit should also take into account, beyond local-regional and national components, an important component of international development. More since this regional administrative unit is in the border area as is the case with Bihor County. From this latter perspective, the component of cross-border cooperation gives a special note to international cooperation, multiplying it and giving it a much more direct dimension (naturally also by the physical-geographical proximity of the partners involved in the cooperation).

Our work is intended to be an analysis targeted on two main levels: regional development and international cooperation. This theoretical and conceptual analysis is carried out by creating a case study on Bihor County. Thus, at the centre of our debates we place the county's development strategy for the period 2021-2027, with references that

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have an evaluation role for the previous period of 7 years. Our interest is to follow and explicit the role of international cooperation in the process of regional development, at the county level, but also in a cross-border context (given the geographical positioning in the proximity of the border).

At the level of Bihor County, with a view to a unified and coherent development, the objectives of which are set in consultation with the public and administrative-territorial units, the Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County for the period 2014-2020 is still in implementation. It is imperative at present to draw up the strategy for the next budgetary programming period of the European Union. For the implementation of this document it is necessary to ensure an internal management and budgetary programming of the institution of the Bihor County Council, together with the subordinate units, in the medium term. In order to achieve the objectives, set and to implement the necessary activities, it is also imperative that a well-trained staff, with the necessary knowledge and experiences, and with skills and capacities that are constantly being developed.

In the Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County 2014-2020 was defined as a strategic objective: development of public services and administrative capacity. This can be achieved both by increasing the quality of services provided by local and county public institutions, as well as by promoting collaboration between the public and private environment. In the same way, in order to address cross-cutting issues, the County Council can assume the role of facilitator for the creation of partnerships between institutions and structures that address such challenges in an integrated and efficient way.

The next step of effective strategic management is the ability to implement the strategy and meet the strategic objectives set. The Strategic Institutional Plan (SIP) will be a management and internal budgetary programming document of the Bihor County Council, developed in accordance with the Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County, covering the period 2021-2027.

Methodologically, we aim to build the entire architecture of this work based on the stated *aim* of identifying the role and contribution of international cooperation in the development of a region. In this synthetic and analytical mechanism this contribution is intended to be viewed and contextualised within a coherent regional development strategy (in this study we naturally refer to the county administrative-territorial unit of Bihor as a case study).

The assumed *objectives* are: 1. analysis the place held by international cooperation in the process of building a regional development strategy; 2. identifying the role played by cross-border cooperation in stimulating international cooperation and hence regional development; 3. proposing the main pillars for a guide for the development of international relations/cooperation. This guide is intended to be a tool for enhancing theoretical and practical skills, on regional, inter-regional, transnational, cross-border local development, and for stimulating partnerships in the field of international cooperation.

In our analysis we start from the following *assumptions*: 1. the regional development strategy cannot be done without a component that also contains an international cooperation strategy; 2. geographical positioning in the border area stimulates but also requires the multiplication of international cooperation through cross-border cooperation; 3. international cooperation cannot be built and implemented without a guide to international cooperation; 4. Till now, Bihor County does not have such a guide for international cooperation, which explains the lack of sustainable international cooperation with a direct effect on insufficient sustainable regional development mechanisms.

## 1. Regional development of Bihor County. European, national and regional context

The debate on regional development as a concept, but also as a direction of public policy, is a very complex one. In the equation of our analysis, its understanding goes from the European perspective to the national one, so that in the end we can draw some directions of regional development policy at the level of Bihor County.

### *The concept of regional development*

The conceptual delimitation of our debate must be made through a broad analysis made not only on the concept of regional development, but it must of course refer to the concept of region, but also to that of regional policy. This triad is in a very close regional connection (Marcela Cristina Hurjui, 2015). *The regional development* policy promoted by the EU focuses on reducing development disparities between territorial units. The territorial area subject to the implementation of this policy is *the region*. The latter can be defined as "an area of a territory with a set of distinct and consistent own characteristics (these can be physical or human), which gives it a certain significant unity and distinguishes it from other neighbouring areas" (Apud Verga, 2017). In the European context, regions are therefore the subject of regional development policies. *Regional development* is a concept through which "the aim is to boost and diversify economic activities, stimulate investment in the private sector, contribute to reducing unemployment and not least an improvement in living standards" (Cîrnu, 2010: 75). This development must meet present and future needs. It "responds to the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Apud Verga, 2017).

Without being prisoners of the concept of development, EU Cohesion Policy allows us to introduce the concepts of *cohesion and regional competitiveness* into the sphere of conceptual debate. Regional competitiveness is closely related to regional territorial development, and the latter is not the result of economic growth, but is one of the causes of growth (Cojanu et. Al., 2009: 6). This competitiveness must not be understood strictly in the economic sense only when the analysis refers to regional development. It has a social dimension, a cultural-educational one, but also integrated services, including public health, environmental protection and habitat. All this must be seen in a unitary set at regional level in order to value human potential and regional resources.

The development and implementation of regional development policies is based on several principles such as: decentralization of decision-making mechanisms (in this context regional actors gain additional decision-making power); partnership at all levels between all actors involved in the field of regional development; planning the entire process of development and use of regional resources; co-financing - the financial contribution of the various actors involved in the implementation of regional development programs and projects (Cîrnu, 2010: 76).

In relation to the EU strategy on sustainable regional development, the *main objectives of regional development policy* have also been defined (Pendiuc, 2014: 44) as follows:

- Reducing existing regional imbalances, with an emphasis on stimulating balanced development and revitalizing disadvantaged areas (with delayed development) and preventing the creation of new imbalances;
- Preparing the institutional framework to meet the criteria for integration into EU structures and access to the Structural and Cohesion Funds;

- Integration of sectoral policies at regional level and stimulation of inter-regional cooperation (intern and international) for sustainable economic and social development.

Regional development depends on the consistency of the existence of several factors that act positively at the socio-economic level. Daniela Antonescu (2013) identified six attributes that can be positively correlated with the high economic performance of a region:

- the presence in the region of a group of medium-sized cities in combination with large ones;
- human resources with secondary or higher education, preferably with moderate salaries;
- good accessibility and appropriate and varied services (consulting, finance, etc.);
- institutional infrastructure and support of local authorities, materialized in development strategies and partnerships;
- the image of the region, the existence of a positive social climate;
- the presence of a mix of industries, consisting of small or medium-sized companies, which promote knowledge.

At *European level*, the directions of regional development policy are provided by the institutions of the European Union through programmatic documents, public policies and programs, but also by specific instruments for sustainable regional development.

Within the European Union, regional policy can be understood as an investment policy. Through it, the EU wants to "support competitiveness and growth, improve quality of life, create jobs and sustainable development" (European Commission, 2020a). Based on this goal, regional policy is addressed to all regions and cities in the European Union. Regional entities are supported for job creation, business competitiveness, economic growth, sustainable development and improving the quality of life. In line with the EU Strategy, but also with the principle of European solidarity, the main European funds for cohesion policy are targeted at less developed European countries and regions. The EU's aim is to financially support these regions in order to recover and reduce the existing economic, social and territorial gaps (European Commission, 2020a). Precisely this objective of reducing the existing economic and social disparities between the various regions of Europe, gives this European policy a very high relevance (Marcela Cristina Hurjui, 2015). Through the major implications of this policy on important areas for development, such as economic growth, employment and training, transport, agriculture, urban development, environmental protection, education, etc., the European Union is positioning itself as an important and attractive player for the internal space and proximity.

At the heart of European regional development policy is the political principle that richer countries and regions must stand in solidarity with the poorest. It is also based on the economic principle that the levels of production and development in the field of development must be harmonized by reaching the maximum regional potential. Thus, the less developed regions of the Member States and the poorer regions, or those with a high unemployment rate, are considered a brake on the development of the entire European Union by wasting the existing potential (European Union, 2009: 4). In addition, the EU is considering a mechanism for human solidarity at social and economic level with all European citizens.

Without intending to make a comprehensive diachronic analysis of the main directions of regional development policies expressed in EU documents, we mention that 2020 is the year of paradigm shifts. Following evaluations of the results of the 2014-2020 financial framework, in analytical agreement with the Europe 2020 Strategy, the EU has

recently sought to develop new directions for its regional policy. The EU has set itself three priorities in the Europe 2020 Strategy that are linked to regional development:

1. smart growth (developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation);
2. sustainable growth (promoting a more resource-efficient, greener and more competitive economy);
3. Inclusive growth (promoting an economy with a high employment rate, ensuring social and territorial cohesion) (Verga, 2017).

The regions that the European Union considers in terms of its development policy are established in accordance with the *Nomenclature of Territorial Statistical Units* (NUTS). These, for a clear ranking and a real establishment of the directions of implementation of institutional and financial support, are compared (regions on the same level) according to specific indicators, such as gross domestic product per capita and structural unemployment rate. The principles of cohesion policy are taken into account in establishing European support. *NUTS* statistically structure the territorial units of the European Union on three hierarchical levels, achieving structural units of comparable size, which allows the harmonization of regional statistics of member countries, conducting regional analyses within the European Union, developing regional Community policies, etc. The level of statistical territorial units is established by size classes, according to the number of the population (Verga, 2017). In this way, the European Union is able to determine the level of its intervention in terms of the regional support needed to ensure cohesion and the disparity of development disparities between regions.

For the multiannual financial framework 2021-2027, the European Commission has proposed since 2018 "the modernization of cohesion policy, the main investment policy of the EU and one of the most tangible expressions of solidarity". Corina Crețu, the European Commissioner for Regional Policy, stated in that context "Today (May 2, 2018 n.n.) we propose a cohesion policy for all regions, which will not leave anyone behind. We have improved the flexibility of this policy to adapt it to the new priorities and to increase the protection of EU citizens. We have also simplified the rules, and this will benefit everyone, from small businesses to entrepreneurs and to schools and hospitals, who will be able to obtain funds more easily" (Ministry of European Funds, 2018).

Proposals to amend cohesion policy, with a direct reference to regional development policy, take into account:

1. increasing attention to investment priorities through which the EU can deliver (most investments in the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund will be directed towards innovation, support for small businesses, digital technologies and industrial modernization);
2. the implementation of a cohesion policy for all regions and a more adapted approach to regional development (three main categories of regions are identified: less developed regions, transition regions and developed regions - GDP per capita being even after 2020 the main criterion for allocating funds). The role of local and regional authorities in implementing this regional development policy is increasing. Local initiatives are becoming more important, benefiting from financial support, but at the same time the responsibility of these authorities is increasing by assuming, where appropriate, increased co-financing rates;
3. reduction and flexibility of implementation rules by simplifying access to funds. A reduction and simplification of bureaucracy is proposed and at the same time a single regulatory framework. The latter aspect will be able to give an additional impetus to the development of underdeveloped regions which have faced a low rate of absorption

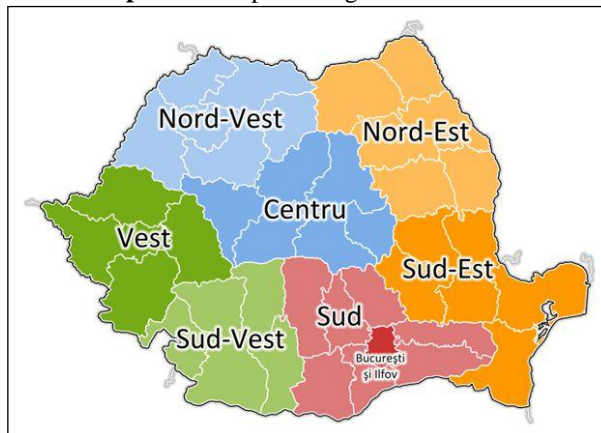
of European funds, a phenomenon also due to regulatory and management obstacles to these funds at national or regional level. Another very important feature, demonstrated in the management of the economic recovery in the context of the health crisis caused by the spread of the COVID-19 virus, is the adaptation to needs as a paradigm shift in the management of cohesion policy programs as a whole;

4. The European Commission aims to make a connection between cohesion policy and the European Semester. The aim of this initiative is to create a favourable environment for business and growth in Europe, so that EU and national investments can be realized to their full potential (Ministry of European Funds, 2018).

At *national level*, Romania understood the need to pay more attention to European cohesion policy, and implicitly to regional development. Since accession in 2007, the European Union has been the largest investor in Romania, with many local and regional communities benefiting from this European policy (EURACTIV, 2019).

In order to harmonize and make compatible with European norms, the Romanian state had to discuss the idea of a reform at administrative-territorial level. However, *the regionalization* of Romania proved to be a difficult and insufficiently motivating process for Romanian decision-makers as well (Brie and Mészáros, 2015). Issues that required a decentralization at all levels of decision-making and implementation of public authority and administration were also discussed. In the Romanian state, the regional development policy is implemented at NUTS 2 level (the national territory was organized in 8 development regions without the status of administrative units - see Map 1), the level of disparities between these regions being followed at the level of several indicators economic and social, the most important and relevant remaining the value of GDP / inhabitant. The main directions of implementation of public policies generated by the regional development policy, respectively financial allocation, are analysed in terms of increasing or decreasing evolution of these indicators (mainly GDP) (Verga, 2017).

**Map 1.** Development regions in Romania



*Source:* author processing according to data from *National Strategy for Regional Development 2014-2020*, Bucharest, 2013, p. 4

The legal framework for the functioning of these development regions has been adopted since 1998 together with *Law no. 151/1998 on regional development in*

Romania<sup>1</sup>, after in 1997 through a PHARE project initiated by the European Union and the Romanian Government, "*The Green Paper of Regional development in Romania*" (Verga, 2017). The Romanian legislator defines the concept of *regional development* as "a set of policies of central and local public administration authorities, developed in order to improve the economic performance of geographical areas established in "development regions" and benefiting from the support of the Government, the European Union and other institutions. and interested national and international authorities" (GD 634/1998). 8 development regions are established equivalent to the second level of territorial classification, NUTS 2 of the European Union, "areas corresponding to groups of counties, constituted by their voluntary association on the basis of convention, signed by the representatives of the county councils and, respectively, of the General Council of Bucharest" (Verga, 2017).

Without proposing to make on this occasion an analysis of the legislative and programmatic regulatory framework, we mention as relevant for the current period the *National Strategy for Regional Development (NSRD) 2014-2020*. This document is the framework document under which funding programs from European, national and / or local funds are established, regulated and implemented, aiming at sustainable regional development (Strategy, 2013). The general objective established by the National Strategy for Regional Development is "continuous improvement of the quality of life, by ensuring welfare, environmental protection and economic and social cohesion for sustainable communities, able to manage resources efficiently and capitalize on the potential for innovation and balanced economic development and social development of the regions" (Strategy, 2013: 239). This objective of the national strategy was established in line with the European Union's objective of "increasing the competitiveness of regions and promoting equity by preventing the marginalization of areas with economic and social development problems" (Strategy, 2013: 239).

The implementation of the cohesion policy of the European Union, respectively of regional development, understood in the sense of reducing the development discrepancies between the regions, leads to the conclusion that the expected results have not been fully confirmed. Despite an overall development, the level of development was different from one region to another. Moreover, discrepancies have increased between regions. The richer regions became even richer, the phenomenon not being accompanied by more consistent progress in the poorer regions. Thus, the spatial location of poverty and underdeveloped areas remained the same (North-East, which includes the historical region of Moldova, and South, the largest agricultural area of the country). At the same time, the richer and more developed regions (West, Centre and Bucharest-Ilfov) consolidated their position, increasing the development gap compared to the first mentioned category. This gap can be found in terms of income of the population, endowments with technical equipment, human resources and economic potential (Cîrnu, 2010: 78). In this context, the poorer regions have been forced in recent decades to cope with a massive emigration, not only external but also internal ones oriented towards other regions. This demographic phenomenon has led to an even more severe limitation of reaching the development potential, sometimes registering a reduction of it by decreasing the human resource.

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<sup>1</sup> This law constitutes the legislative regulatory framework that underlies the establishment of development regions and establishes the territorial and national structures for regional development

Without minimizing the role of regional development, at the national level, development theories were developed at the sectoral level, but viewed from a territorial-integrated perspective. Even in these situations, the sectoral development surplus at the level of one region can make up for the disadvantage of another region. Moreover, identifying the regional sectoral potential, adequate public policies for the development of each region can be initiated (Vlad, 2015; Strategy, 2015; National Strategy, 2018).

At *regional level*, Romania's regional development policy was conceived and implemented through two types of structures (each numbering 8 corresponding to each development region), established as a result of the recommendations of the paper "Green Paper of Regional Development in Romania":

- Councils for Regional Development;
- Regional Development Agencies.

Romania was thus divided into the 8 regional development regions mentioned, each corresponding to a Regional Development Agency (RDA) and a Regional Development Council. Bihor County is part of the North-West Development Region created in 1998, along with five other counties Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Maramureș, Satu Mare and Sălaj. The county seat cities (Cluj-Napoca, Baia-Mare, Oradea, Zalău, Satu Mare and Bistrița) are considered poles of regional economic development. Three of these are metropolitan areas (Cluj-Napoca, Oradea and Baia Mare) (ADR, 2020a).

Through public policies and programs, the North-West Development Agency aims, within the development policy of Romania, to achieve three main objectives (ADR, 2020b):

- reducing existing regional imbalances;
- correlation of governmental sectoral policies at the level of regions;
- stimulating inter-regional, domestic and international, cross-border cooperation.

In the context of the national strategy and the regional strategy, the North-West Regional Development Agency follows the national targets and proposes through the *North-West Region Development Plan 2014 – 2020*<sup>2</sup>, a series of measures to contribute to the development of the region in this direction. Some of the strategic objectives for medium- and long-term development (2034) also refer to:

1. Connecting the Region to the international flows of goods, tourists, investments, information and cultural values and ensuring the role of service as a "logistics region";
2. Increasing investments in the human and social capital of the region, in order to ensure support for sustainable development;
3. Transformation of urban centres into spaces of influence and regional and transregional attraction

*The Development Plan of the North-West Region 2014 - 2020* establishes four development priorities, correlated with the general objective, divided into investment priorities and indicative actions (Development Plan, 2015: 159), as follows:

- P1 - Increasing the economic competitiveness of the region and stimulating research and innovation
- P2 - Increasing the accessibility of the region, the mobility of inhabitants, goods and information
- P3 - Increasing the quality of life of the inhabitants of the region

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<sup>2</sup>It was approved by the Regional Development Council on the occasion of the meeting of April 20, 2015 by Decision number 425 (<https://www.nord-vest.ro/strategia-de-dezvoltare-regionala-2014-2020/>), accessed in 11.04.2020).



- P4 - Protection of the natural and anthropic environment, efficient use of resources and reduction of pollutant emissions

The regional context identified by the Regional Development Council in terms of the level and implementation of regional development policy, mechanisms and instruments is as follows (Development Plan, 2015: 12):

- the process took place partially in the context of the debates on regionalization / decentralisation
- the existence of a development vision adopted during the previous planning process, which covers the remaining period until 2027
- most public administrations do not have planning documents for the 2020 horizon; there are few local public administrations that have developed local development strategies and identified priority projects for the period 2014-2020
- greater emphasis on territorial integrated policies
- there are few mature investment projects without financing (much less compared to the 2005-2007 period in the “project pipeline” due to the different selection methods adopted compared to the pre-accession period) and also the financial resources of the beneficiaries are insufficient for the preparation of project

Given that the counties in the region have different levels of development, the more the potential and the degree of its maximization are different, the need to prepare for each county in the region an integrated regional development strategy within the region is increasingly clear. It is not enough to have a main development pole in Cluj-Napoca, but it is necessary to reach a uniformity of the development stage of the counties. This integrated vision would involve in a first phase the idea of redirecting investors to the counties / regions in these less developed counties (Buda, 2017: 9). Moreover, “for regional development to be sustainable and cohesion policy to be truly a success, its positive effects must be reflected in rural areas as well” (Buda, 2017: 9).

At the *level of Bihor County*, in accordance with the regional development directions conferred at European, national and regional level, the *Sustainable Development Strategy 2014-2020 of Bihor County*<sup>3</sup> was elaborated. The declared vision is for Bihor County to become: *dynamic, competitive, diverse, open*. Bihor aims to become a dynamic and competitive county, in which the well-being will be felt, directly, by all the inhabitants of the county. Bihor wants to be recognised as a gateway to and from Western Europe, where entrepreneurial initiatives are actively supported by public institutions through quality public services and appropriate infrastructure. Complementary, the county wants to be known as an important tourist destination, both in Romania and in neighbouring countries. In this direction, the Bihor County Council aims to contribute to achieving this vision through an active involvement in modernising and expanding existing infrastructure but also in encouraging entrepreneurship and the development of small and medium enterprises as an engine of economic development. In order to reach the proposed level, four strategic development objectives are assumed within the development strategy (Sustainable Development Strategy 2014-2020 of Bihor County, 138-139):

1. Development of public infrastructure in the county;
2. Increasing economic competitiveness in industry and agriculture;
3. Capitalising on the tourist potential of the county;

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<sup>3</sup> See the text of this development strategy on the official website of Bihor County Council <https://www.cjbihor.ro/pdf/Strategia%20pentru%20dezvoltarea%20durabila%20a%20judetului%20Bihor%202014-2020.pdf>, accessed in 11.04.2020

#### 4. Development of public services and administrative capacity.

In order to achieve the assumed objectives, the Bihor County Council, through the sustainable development strategy, established five *strategic development initiatives* at territorial level (Sustainable Development Strategy 2014-2020 of Bihor County, 140):

1. Modernisation of Oradea airport;
2. Development of the business environment in the Tileagd - Aleşd area;
3. Development of sustainable tourism in the area of the Apuseni Mountains;
4. Development of the business environment in the Beiuş area;
5. Diversification and consolidation of the economic base in the micro-region Valea Ierului (Marghita - Valea lui Mihai - Săcueni).

*The principles of development* start from the need for a coherent link and organization at the level of development measures and programs. In this sense, a special emphasis is placed on the development of economic competitiveness, as a foundation for the other levels of development of society. In this sense, the following principles are followed (Sustainable Development Strategy 2014-2020 of Bihor County, 139):

- *Convergent development* aims to stimulate performance without creating development gaps at the territorial level
- *The inter-correlation* implies that the objectives of the strategy take into account the objectives of the national and European plans and strategies but also the adaptation of the projects according to the recommendations of the governance policies of the different institutions acting at local and county level.
- *Sustainable development* means proposing a type of development that ensures a balance between social, economic and environmental aspects and that takes into account the issues related to restricting access to resources for future generations.

Beyond the development theories expressed, Bihor County, like all the others in the country, has to face an unbalanced territorial development. Thus, the development discrepancies are obvious not only between urban and rural, but also between Oradea and the small towns in the county. The level of investment is not evenly balanced. From here, other phenomena arise: starting from lower incomes, less developed regions face a labour migration, reducing the sometimes-untapped potential of the area. Against this background, we notice a decline in development in relation to the initiation potential, both in the case of rural areas and small towns in the county.

The efficient implementation of the development policies of Bihor County therefore also faces the following negative factors. Here are some of them:

- labour market imbalance between supply and demand (including in terms of quality) - if in Oradea it proved to be deficient, in small towns and rural areas it was in surplus generating migration (especially external);
- the physical infrastructure, of the public utilities, but also the social one is deficient in most of the county - this is instituted in an obstacle of sustainable development and with reaching the development potential;
- still strong dependence on the agricultural sector, the decline of small towns and pre-urban economic centres with non-agricultural activities;
- with the exception of the city of Oradea and a few other points, in the county the infrastructure in the field of business is insufficiently developed;
- limited financial, technical and management capacities at regional and local level;

## **2. International cooperation in the strategic development plans of Bihor County**

Without proposing to make an analysis of the way in which the objectives, initiatives and principles expressed in the sustainable development strategy were pursued during the period 2014-2020, we mention that the sustainable development of Bihor County proved to be closely related to factors direct and indirect influence at European, national and regional level. The international component of this development is becoming increasingly important as European transnational economic interconnection.

The positioning of the county in the immediate vicinity of the border imposed a deep inclination on the cross-border dimension of its sustainable development. Cross-border cooperation therefore becomes one of the important vectors of regional development that Bihor County can not only exploit, but must also do. Inter-connectivity at all levels, including cross-border, can ensure a sustainable perspective on development. However, cross-border cooperation is only part of the dimension of international cooperation.

International cooperation is an essential part of a region's vision of sustainable development. In the context of globalisation, but also of the multiplication of exchanges of any kind in which the regions are included (here we include, of course, Bihor County), international interconnection at all levels requires flexibility and a strategic approach to international communication. They must take into account both the public and private dimensions, but also civil society. Economy, education, health, culture, but also forms of leisure require exchange of expertise. International knowledge is therefore multiplying at regional and local level. Resources and capital move and enhance regional potential. Bihor County tends to understand this aspect more and more. This understanding comes from examples of good practice, cooperation for the management of European cooperation projects, increasing the level of foreign investment, direct and indirect learning. European regulations and EU instruments have made public authorities and private entities more receptive to cooperation, hence the need to create cross-border networks and connections.

Cross-border cooperation has brought Bihor County together primarily with Hungarian neighbours who have become indispensable partners in implementing specific EU-funded projects through instruments for cross-border cooperation. Cross-border cooperation can be defined in relation to direct collaboration between neighbouring regions, found along a border, regardless of the level at which this relationship is achieved. Collaboration can be achieved in all areas, between all national, regional and local authorities, involving all actors. The efficiency, reliability, authenticity and legitimacy of European construction, European integration are also linked to the success of cross-border cooperation (Bărbulescu et. Al., 2016). "The basic principle of cross-border cooperation is the creation of contractual spaces in border areas in order to find common solutions to similar problems, state entities not ignoring, compared to their peripheral communities, the particularity and specificity of neighbourhood problems they face" (Ricq, 2010: 10).

Cross-border cooperation is proving to be "a classic type of mutual cooperation between two neighbouring border regions". It involves states, regions, administrative units at different levels and / or social groups, etc., covering all areas of daily life and participating in the development of common programs, priorities and actions (Bărbulescu et. Al., 2016). Cross-border cooperation is favoured by cultural, ethno-linguistic, historical heritage (see the case of the Habsburg heritage in Central Europe) or the presence of national minorities (as is the case of Hungarians in Bihor County or Romanian communities in Hungary).

The efficiency of cross-border cooperation depends on the coordination of all actors involved in this process, but also on cooperation at all levels, doubled by the existence of an adequate legal framework. Malfunction at one of the levels can cause it to fail. Therefore, cross-border cooperation is no longer the strict prerogative of states as international actors (Brie, 2017a). An important role in this process is played by local and regional administrative structures in border areas, development associations created by them, but also transnational corporations interested in promoting an economic and political environment conducive to business development (Săraru, 2011: 88). Bihor County is such an administrative-territorial unit, and in order to be successful, in the border areas it must cooperate with cross-border partners on an equal footing and respect the interests of each party involved. The European Union encourages and stimulates the development of partnerships in cross-border cooperation that Bihor County, localities or public or private actors to achieve with partners at the same level in Hungary. The EU's interest is not only to harmoniously develop the regions on either side of the border or the security interest in the development of a cooperative and stable neighbouring region, but also to strengthen the European spirit and identity among its citizens, beyond the identities. their national-ethnic (Brie and Blaga, 2015). "The financial instruments and non-financial efforts (e.g. promoting standards to increase competitiveness, methodical approaches, implications for adjusting the regulatory framework, etc.) of European partners in border areas are consistent and designed for a long period of time" (Roscovan et al., 2010: 101). Cross-border cooperation, both at inter-state and regional or local level, has been in the attention of the European institutions throughout the European construction process (Brie, 2017b). In order to make this collaboration more efficient and to direct the numerous existing initiatives in a unitary way, an attempt was made to create a normative framework, including models of partnership and association agreements (European Framework Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation, 1980). Starting from all these conceptual-contextual aspects, cross-border cooperation is no longer a desideratum in the case of Bihor County, but is a necessity required by the international context and the need for sustainable development.

National legislation on international and cross-border cooperation is clearly specified. Emergency Ordinance no. 57 / 3.07.2019 specifies, among others, the following: the local public administration authorities in Romania may conclude twinning / cooperation agreements with the local public administration authorities in other states, ..., joint cultural, sports, youth and educational programs, vocational training courses and other actions that contribute to the development of friendly relations, including their financing (OU 57, art. 89, 14). The responsibility for the cooperation or association agreements concluded by the administrative-territorial units rests exclusively with them (OU 57, art. 89, 15). Decides, in accordance with the law, the twinning of the county with administrative-territorial units from other countries; decides, in accordance with the law, to cooperate or associate with other administrative-territorial units in the country or abroad, as well as to join national and international associations of local public administration authorities, in order to promote common interests (OU 57, art. 129, 9 ).

About attracting funds for international / cross-border cooperation, the legislation specifies, among other things, that strategic initiatives involve projects that are framed by all the objectives of the development strategy and present a type of intervention at territorial level, of integrated type. In this case, the initiatives include project packages both developed by the Bihor County Council and projects in which the Bihor County Council has the role of partner.

Analysing the role of international cooperation in the sustainable development strategy 2014-2020 of Bihor County, we notice that it is not highlighted or exploited enough for the purpose of sustainable development of the county.

At the level of the assumed strategic and specific objectives, the mechanisms and instruments of international cooperation are mentioned indirectly rather than directly in the following situations (Sustainable Development Strategy 2014-2020 of Bihor County, 141-151):

**1. Strategic objective I. *Development of public infrastructure in the county***

- Specific objective 1.1. Modernisation of the transport infrastructure in the county / Measure 1.1.2. Modernisation of air transport infrastructure. The component of international cooperation is indirectly achieved through the expansion and modernisation of Oradea Airport
- Specific objective 1.2. Network infrastructure development / Measure 1.2.1. Extension and modernisation of technical and municipal networks in the county (I.1215 - Use of geothermal water resources in the cross-border area for the creation / rehabilitation of facilities for the purpose of cross-border circuits. The component of international cooperation is achieved indirectly by making investments in geothermal water use in tourism and heat supply activities on both sides of the border.
- Specific objective 1.3. Development of social infrastructure / Measure 1.3.1. Development of physical infrastructure in the social field (I.1314 - Development and modernization of health infrastructure (hospitals, clinics) and establishment of first aid points in crowded tourist areas or without appropriate medical coverage (construction of new buildings, rehabilitation of existing buildings, purchase of equipment modern in the medical fields) in the cross-border area, on both sides of the border, for treating patients; I.1317 - Development of the cross-border telemedicine network; I.1318 - Rehabilitation of poor suburban areas in the Ier Valley (Development of poor cross-border areas)). The component of international cooperation is indirectly achieved through cross-border medical and social cooperation.
- Specific objective 1.4. Increasing energy efficiency in the county / Measure 1.4.1. Development of energy reduction projects (I.1411 - Improving the energy efficiency of public buildings (hospitals, schools, administrative buildings) by using alternative green energy resources and by thermal rehabilitation. Rehabilitation of public buildings in the cross-border area with major impact on energy efficiency).

**2. Strategic objective II. *Increasing economic competitiveness in industry and agriculture***

- Specific objective 2.1. Business Environment Development / Measure 2.1.1. Attracting investors (C.2112 - Participation in international missions and visits to identify investors; C.2113 - Development of a network of fairs with national and international participation). In order to develop the business environment, the Bihor County Council "will actively promote potential business opportunities to domestic and international investors." It will also facilitate "together with local entrepreneurs' participation in international missions and visits to identify investors and promote international exchanges of experience."

**3. Strategic objective III. *Capitalizing on the tourist potential of the county***

- Specific objective 3.1. Development of tourism services in the county / Measure 3.1.1. Tourism promotion (T.3111 - Elaboration of concepts for capitalization of tourist

destinations of national and international importance in Bihor county (Oradea, Băile Felix, 1 Mai, Apuseni Mountains area, Valea Ierului); T.3114 - Participation in international tourism fairs together with local entrepreneurs; T.3115 - Promoting international exchanges of experience).

- Specific objective 3.2. Preservation and capitalization of natural and built heritage / Measure 3.2.1. Preservation and capitalization of natural heritage objectives (T.3217 - Development of environmental infrastructure in protected areas in Bihor and Hajdu Bihar / development and continuation of previous projects).

#### 4. Strategic objective IV. *Development of public services and administrative capacity*

- Specific objective 4.1. Development of public services / Measure 4.1.1. Increasing the quality and diversification of services (A. 4114 - Integrated projects to improve public services and infrastructure in poor and isolated cross-border areas).
- Specific objective 4.2. Increasing administrative capacity / Measure 4.2.1. Human capital development (A.4213 - Supporting the association of ATUs from Bihor county on the cross-border area).

The conclusions that we can draw from the analysis of these objectives but also of the context of the implementation of this development strategy of Bihor County are the following:

- ✓ The focus is on cross-border cooperation rather than international cooperation. In this case, from our perspective, cooperation is understood somewhat in terms of the immediate neighbourhood with which cooperation is needed and less in terms of the idea of international cooperation.
- ✓ Cross-border cooperation has been supported with the aim of gaining access to funding provided by European programs for cross-border cooperation and less to develop international cooperation
- ✓ Through the attributions offered legislatively to the public administration, the Bihor County Council has all the levers to effectively contribute to the local, regional, national and international development
- ✓ Since the elaboration of the Sustainable Development Strategy 2014-2020, the part related to international cooperation, including cross-border cooperation, is extremely poorly addressed.
- ✓ Sustainable development of Bihor County is not at the scheduled / expected level, the stage of international cooperation being far below the existing potential
- ✓ Bihor County Council and territorial administrative units in the county have sporadic international cooperation, with very few twinning that have results or are constantly maintained
- ✓ At the county level there was no coordination and exploitation of international cooperation in the sense of capitalising on them for the purpose of sustainable development
- ✓ There is no guideline or manual for coordination and implementation of international cooperation

Given that the period for which this planning document was prepared expires this year, it is imperative to draw up the strategy for the next budget programming period of the European Union 2021-2027 based on the assumption that only coherent international

cooperation can ensure Bihor County sustainable development. The European, national and regional context calls for such an integrated approach.

We therefore propose to develop a Strategy for the development of international cooperation for 2021-2027 of Bihor County. We include in this strategy cross-border cooperation as a separate chapter. In order to implement it, it is necessary to develop a guide for the development of international relations / cooperation, useful both for local public administrations and for any type of organization.

The role and content of the *Guide for the Development of International Cooperation* will be practical, presenting operational methodologies and procedures. This guide aims to provide a tool for enhancing theoretical and practical skills on local regional, inter-regional, transnational, cross-border development, to stimulate international partnerships and cooperation.

The content of the guide will focus on: deepening, updating knowledge on the legal and institutional framework of regional, inter regional, cross-border development, international partnerships; developing the skills to capitalise on European experience in the field of international relations development; planning and analysis of cooperation and partnerships; implementation, monitoring and evaluation of activities in this field.

The practical utility of the Guide for the development of international cooperation will consist in the fact that it constitutes a mechanism for initiating, maintaining, developing international cooperation. The guide can provide templates and standard document sheets to facilitate the initiation of cooperation agreements. At the same time, it can shape responsible attitudes in the use of resources and tools for the development of international cooperation, while providing examples of good practice.

The guide can also address issues related to the application of international recommendations on sustainable development integrated into the planning and implementation of national and international regional development policies, as well as the current model of integrated regional development of the European Union.

In this context, we propose that in the Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County 2021-2027 to be more clearly defined the modalities of international cooperation, to provide logistical support, namely guides for local public authorities, at county level, to develop a specific strategy for international cooperation to be in line with the sustainable strategy 2021-2027 and a vision as clear as possible over a longer time horizon.

## **Conclusions**

Regional development "involves the use of resources (primarily local, but also those attracted from the national and international environment) to increase the overall competitiveness of the territory, increase the adaptability of production and functional components to the needs of structural adjustment (to meet regional and national needs) and, ultimately, from a macroeconomic perspective, to reduce the gaps between the different components of the structure of the national economic space" (Jula, 2002).

International cooperation is an essential part of a region's vision of sustainable development. In the context of globalization, but also of the multiplication of exchanges of any kind in which the regions are included, the international interconnection at all levels requires flexibility and a strategic approach of international communication.

The great paradox of the 21st century is given by the fact that the more technology, knowledge, progress in general offers more development opportunities, the more and more forms of vulnerability appear. Life in this century is one with a greater potential for the unforeseen, for the unknown, but this uncertainty, which is also reflected

in the intellectual world, will lead to a different, diverse strategic thinking, to new approaches. Some of these can be scenarios and possibilities, which are based on correct, accurate and current information.

The development of technology, the fact that access to information and the latest discoveries in all fields, which show a form of progress has not necessarily led to moral or political progress in the structure of international relations.

It is increasingly difficult for states to control the transmission of ideas, goods, people across national borders, so the classic role of the state can be transformed according to Manuel Castells' theory into a network state that generates a "complex communication structure built around a set. of objectives that simultaneously ensure its unity of purpose and adaptability to the environment in which it operates. " (Castells, 2008).

Networks have already been created that develop according to purpose, degree of interest, content that are international, receiving interest in their development, easily exceeding physical boundaries. For example, culture, art, the Internet for communication, science and technology, etc.

For example, the social networks Facebook, Instagram have turned any user into a source of information, maybe even an opinion former or a reporter.

International relations in the past were based on similarity, rules, codes of stability, diplomacy, cooperation, reason. These international relations have changed since the emergence of these "non-state" identities, which do not respect any rules, which create international tensions because their actions are unforeseen.

It is important that efficiency is given by the overall capacity to react, by the creation and approach of mixed capabilities and capacities that can ensure, when moments of crisis occur, the management of the situation even in moments of uncertainty conferred by new, unprecedented situations. , where roles and risks can change constantly, where information and knowledge are vital.

Starting from all these aspects of conceptual-contextual nature, international cooperation is no longer a desideratum in the case of Bihor County, but is a necessity required by the international context and the need for sustainable development.

For efficiency and involvement from the public administration we propose to develop in the first stage a Strategy for the development of international cooperation for 2021-2027 of Bihor County followed by the initiation of a guide for the development of international relations / cooperation, useful for both local public administrations and for any type of organization.

The role and content of the Guide for the Development of International Cooperation will be practical, presenting operational methodologies and procedures. This guide aims to provide a tool for enhancing theoretical and practical skills on local regional, interregional, transnational, cross-border development, to stimulate international partnerships and cooperation.

A very important aspect is the access to quality information, which is based on studies, research on the international context, the interpretation of this information, its adaptation and implementation, in real time in the communities of a county / region / country, flexibility and commitment to making the best decisions and solutions for creating a safe development environment and increasing the living standards of citizens.



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