

## INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS IN ROMANIA. A LOST OPPORTUNITY?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** *The Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA) were introduced in Romania with the purpose of covering the need of local or county territorial administrative units (TAU) to implement common development projects that would benefit the communities of multiple territorial units. The need was especially greater in the case of rural local territorial administrative units, that have a limited financial power, while also being part of a very fragmented administrative level. Thus, the development of larger projects is impossible for some TAUs on their own.*

*The objective of this research is to analyse the IDAs created so far in the Bihor County, considering the legislation that made them possible was introduced almost 20 years ago, even if some associations predate this legislation. The purpose is to understand if there are certain aspects that favour their establishment, without focusing on their activity. Through this study, we are putting together a methodology that will be applied to the entire country, to understand whether our findings for the Bihor County can be applied to other counties as well.*

**Keywords:** *Intercommunity Development Associations, Bihor County, Romania,*

### **Introduction**

It is hard to say when, or if, the need for Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA) was ever felt in Romania, however, they have been around since 2006. Considering that almost two decades passed since they were included in the Romanian legislation, we think that now would be a good time to understand whether they had any impact on the development of the communities they represent. However, our research will not try to understand the aftereffects of the activities of these associations, or, to put it in another way, how did the territories of these associations benefit from them, but, rather, how did they associate, to what purpose, and identify any patterns in their formation.

In short, this is what this paper is about. Looking at the bigger picture, our interest stems from the fact that such associations are imported structures into our legislation and

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<sup>1</sup> This topic was presented, but not published, at the International Jean Monnet Conference “Mechanisms and Models for Decision-Making at the Local/Regional Level”, Chișinău, Moldova, 19-20 April 2024.

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practice, especially in the context of Romania's adherence to the European Union in 2007 (Soare 2020:11), and the preceding candidacy process. This leads to an array of questions around the topic: How many IDAs were created? To what purpose were they created? What is the nature of their association? Are there local administrative units that are centres of gravity for such structures? Are there local administrative units that aren't interested in such associations and how many are there? When were they created and is there an incentive for their establishment? What is the activity of such associations? What kind of projects did they implement? What are the funding sources they mostly use?

It is easily noticeable that these questions target two aspects: one regards the way in which these entities were created and the other reflects on their activity. To be more explicit, on the one hand, our interest lies in telling the story of how and why these associations were created in the Bihor County, which requires data regarding the existing associations. The second aspect regards the activity of these associations, which is strongly linked with financial sources and financing programmes available for such entities. Both aspects are important, but in this study, we're targeting only the first aspect. The reasons are both methodological as well as pragmatic. They are methodological, as we need to understand how and why these associations were created to be able to analyse their activity in a meaningful way. They are pragmatic, as an in-depth analysis of their activity requires a large amount of data that must go through a qualitative and quantitative analysis, which is time consuming as well as complex.

To summarize, our long-term aim is to understand whether these structures had any real effect on the successful association of Romanian local administrative units. This analysis would answer only part of the question we have posed in the title of this paper, which helps us understand if the territorial administrative units from the Bihor County have used the opportunity that these constructions have provided.

The paper is divided in 6 sections, including the current one, the introduction. The second section presents our methodological process and presents the Romanian speciality literature that covers the topic of Intercommunity Development Associations which is quite limited, as we shall see. It also presents the data and the data sources that we used to analyse the IDAs from the Bihor County. The third section focuses on the evolution of the Romanian legislation through which IDAs were introduced to the Romanian administration. The fourth presents briefly the local administrative units from the Bihor County. The fifth section discusses the way in which the local administrative units from our research area have associated. The conclusion summarizes our findings, mentions its limitations and future research needs that result from our results.

### **Methodology**

The methodological aspects that we need to mention refer to the way in which the IDAs were defined and how the data was collected and processed, to reach our conclusions.

As the speciality literature is scarce, especially regarding the IDAs defined by the Romanian legislation, this activity was not intensive, and the results are briefly presented here, though they are not exhaustive, as much of the literature was not necessarily relevant to our research. One study, financed by the Chamber of Deputies of the Romanian Parliament, published briefly after the law was enacted, analysed the potential effects and the possible solutions for the problems that were anticipated for these types of associations, including, for example, unclear legislation or limited funding (Pop, SUCIU, and Stănuș 2007). Stănuș investigates the reasons for success behind

institutionalization of cooperation, through a survey sent to all local governments from Romania however, it does not exclude cooperation with private entities, which is not the case of our study (Stănuș 2011:194). Lașan (2024) also analyses success factors in the implementation of projects through IDAs, however, the study does so from a project management perspective. One other study opposes these entities to an obsolete, top-down, form of association that had little success, proposed in the North-Western Region of Romania (Chiriac and Bucur 2015). A few laws related studies are available as well, however, this aspect is discussed in the section dedicated to the legislative aspects of this research. There is, obviously, a gap in the research, in understanding whether these associations are successful or not, and why.

The section describing the legislative bounds has the purpose of analysing the relevant laws, to understand who can constitute an IDA, and to what purpose. These are the main aspects we are interested in, for this research, though, these associations can be characterized in more manners.

The Bihor County was also analysed from an administrative and demographic point of view. This serves the purpose of understanding whether there's an influence of these aspects on the formation of IDAs. Demographic data was collected from the Tempo platform, provided by the National Institute for Statistics of Romania. These data were represented through choropleth maps. The administrative details were confronted with the data provided by the Methodology and Summary of administrative changes that the National Statistical Institute offers through its administrative classification system (Institutul Național de Statistică 2024). The demographic data shows the situation for the year 2022, while the administrative data presents the situation of the year 2024, which was mostly the same in 2022, except for one TAU, which doesn't affect our research.

To analyse the IDAs created in the Bihor County, we collected data from various sources such as the data.gov.ro (Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale și Administrației Publice 2016) platform, the website of the National Institute for Statistics of Romania (Institutul Național de Statistică 2023) and the website of the General Secretariate of the Government (Secretariatul General al Guvernului 2020). However, the data.gov.ro data was last updated in 2016, and it is unclear in what context were the other lists provided and how accurate are they. To overcome this issue, the lists obtained from these sources were confronted with data from the *Firme on line* (FirmeOnLine 2024) platform and the databases of the *Romanian Ministry of Finance* (Ministerul Finanțelor n.d.), through their online search platform.

A script written in the R programming language for statistical analysis, through R Studio, was used to collect up to date information regarding the IDAs, based on their Fiscal Identification Number obtained from the data provided by the General Secretariate of the Government website. Through this script, we have obtained the date when they were created, their status (active or not), and their location. Furthermore, based on constitutive documents found on-line, official websites of these entities, the data.gov.ro platform, or simply their name, the member TAUs were identified as well as the purpose for which they were constituted. Both the R programming language and Microsoft Excel were used for data clean-up and processing. Microsoft Excel was also used to prepare and provide data for cartographic representations as well as for graphically presenting data.

When needed, and when possible, this data was associated with map layers, to cartographically present the results of our analysis.

QGIS was mostly used to create the cartographic representations presented in this research. The year and purpose coverage with IDAs of the county's territory was

achieved by using the virtual layer functionality to combine the data through a 1 to many relationships of the layer containing the TAUs of the Bihor County and a table containing the IDAs with and their corresponding TAU members. The membership of the IDAs reflects the most recent known configuration for each association. Thus, the maps presenting the coverage of the IDAs doesn't reflect the correct membership for previous years. Still, this doesn't affect our findings.

### Legislative bounds

As it was already mentioned in the Introduction and in the Methodology, some interest was shown for the concept of Intercommunity Development Associations in the speciality literature from a legislative perspective, which is the focus of this section.

Vlad-Cristian Soare is one of the authors that covered this topic in detail in several publications, from a legislative point of view. His most extensive work is a book published in 2020, in which the above-mentioned author compares these associative structures with similar ones from other European countries (Soare 2020). Even though the Administrative Code (published on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2019), which replaces the original law that introduced the Intercommunity Development Associations, came into effect just before the release of this book, Soare (2020:12, 99) highlights the fact that the new law didn't bring in major changes to these structures, and the provisions of the old law are still relevant as most existing IDAs came into existence before it was published. Furthermore, for the timeframe we are considering for our research, the old law still applies<sup>2</sup>. Since this book is fairly recent and covers extensively the topic of IDAs from a legislative perspective, we're relying on it, and on the legislation to extract the relevant legislative aspects.

Soare highlights three main categories of laws that are relevant for these associations. The first category is relevant for their establishment, the second one includes various laws depending on the purpose, or purposes, for which they are constituted. The third category includes laws relevant for their operation (for details see: Soare 2020:96–97). Out of these categories, our interest lies with the first one, which defines the way in which they can be constituted, who can, and for what purpose, amongst others.

Thus, their main characteristics are the following:

- They are cooperation structures.
- They can be constituted by territorial administrative units (of various levels).
- They can be constituted for the purpose of implementing *development projects of zonal or regional interest* or *for providing public services* to their communities (Soare 2020:98, 99).

The territorial administrative units that can constitute these associations can be either local administrative units (municipalities, towns, communes) or county level administrative units (county councils).

The IDAs can take three forms, depending on the members of these associations. They are:

- Metropolitan Areas (MA),
- Urban Agglomerations (UA), and
- regular Intercommunity Development Associations.

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<sup>2</sup> except for the last few months, which doesn't make much of a difference for this research.

Both the old and the new laws define *Metropolitan Areas* as *Intercommunity Development Associations* constituted around the capital of Romania or first rank cities (county seats) and *Urban Agglomerations* constituted by one or more urban territorial administrative units, either with or without rural territorial administrative units found within their influence area. However, the purposes for which they can be constituted are to some extent limited from those for which any other IDA can be constituted (Parlamentul României 2007: art. 1; Guvernul României 2019: art. 5). Both the old and the new law mention that the two special types of IDAs (MAs and UAs) can be constituted for the purpose of infrastructure development and for common development objectives (Parlamentul României 2007: art. 11, 2nd paragraph; Guvernul României 2019: art. 89, 2nd paragraph). However, infrastructure development projects and common development objectives fall under the umbrella of development projects of zonal or regional interest, which excludes the possibility to provide public services for these types of IDAs, which we understand to be different from developing the needed infrastructure for those services. This means that urban TAUs that are members of MAs or UAs, must also be member of additional IDAs if they wish to be included in associations that provide public services to multiple communities. Thus, regular IDAs can be constituted by all other types of territorial administrative units (rural ones and county level units) or by any type of territorial unit, if the purpose is to provide public services.

Considering the above, IDAs can be categorized depending on their purpose or on their constituting members. These categorizations will be reflected in the 5<sup>th</sup> section, in which we're analysing the data collected for the IDAs created in the Bihor County.

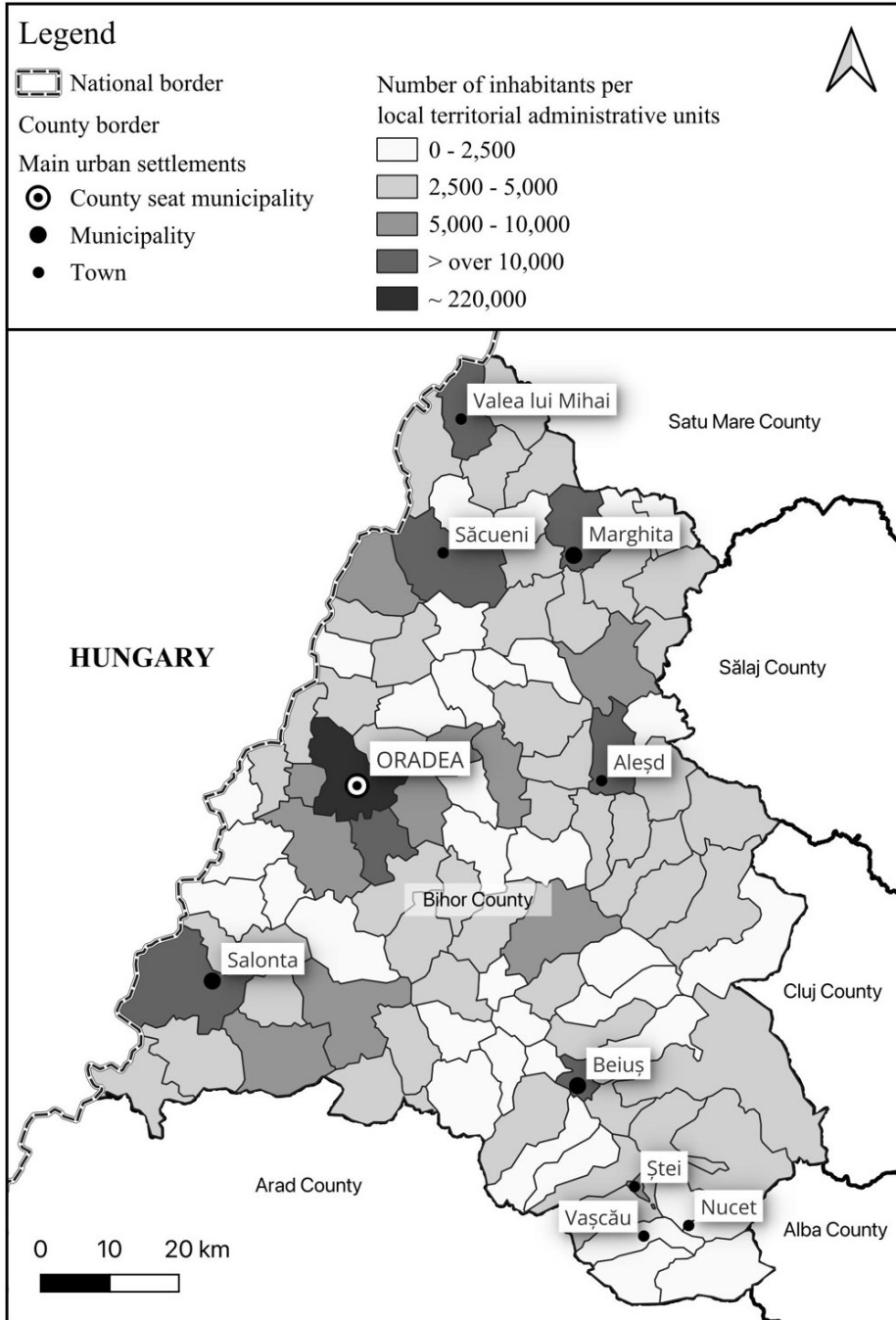
As already mentioned, there are several other laws that are relevant for these structures, some of them strictly dependent on the purpose for which they were created. However, we will not look at those laws as they are not relevant for the purpose of this study.

### **Administrative make up and evolution of the Bihor County**

As already mentioned in the introduction, understanding the administrative make-up of the Bihor County serves the purpose of understanding some of the outcomes of the data analysis of the IDAs created by the Bihor County local TAUs. Even though this is information that can be easily obtained in various other sources, we considered this section necessary. Especially the administrative levels of the constituting entities are of significance, but other aspects as well.

The Bihor County contains 101 local administrative units. Currently, 10 of them are urban administrative units, however, there is a big difference between Oradea, the county seat, and the other urban entities.

As the map in figure one shows, Oradea, which is the county seat, is the largest administrative unit demographically, which is reflected in other aspects as well (economy, institutional presence, various territorial structures and trends, etc.). The Bihor County includes nine other urban administrative areas, however, none of them get close to the size of the county seat. There are four municipalities in total, including Oradea, which implies that these urban settlements meet certain criteria (size, infrastructure, etc.) that such a rank comes with.



**Figure 1.** Administrative and demographic map of the Bihor County, representing the situation in 2024 – Own elaboration (Spatial data sources: Crăciunescu 2022).

Besides Oradea, all other local administrative units, whether urban or rural, have less than 20,000 inhabitants, which places them at a large distance from the county seat in terms of demographic size, which, as mentioned, is reflected in other aspects as well.

Amongst the 10 largest administrative units from the county three are rural areas, Sântărmartin (4<sup>th</sup> with over 13,000 inhabitants), Sântăndrei (9<sup>th</sup> with over 9,000 inhabitants), and Tinca (10<sup>th</sup> with over 8000 inhabitants). The first two have grown largely due to their vicinity to Oradea. Most local administrative units around Oradea have grown, due to migration from the city to new neighbourhoods developed in some of the settlements that make them up (a more detailed account of this trend, which did not stop yet, can be found here: Filimon 2017).

The other municipalities from the Bihor County are Salonta (since 2001), Beiuș (since 2003), and Marghita (since 2003). There are six other urban local administrative units in the county, Săcueni being the one that reached this statute most recently (since 2004). However, they are all declining demographically, especially Ștei (dropped to about 6500 inhabitants in 2024 from over 9000 in 2000), Vașcău (little over 2000 inhabitants), and Nucet (less than 2000 inhabitants). The last three urban administrative units mentioned here are in close vicinity, so, together, they might form a larger urban area but, still, their demographic decline suggests a lack of attractiveness.

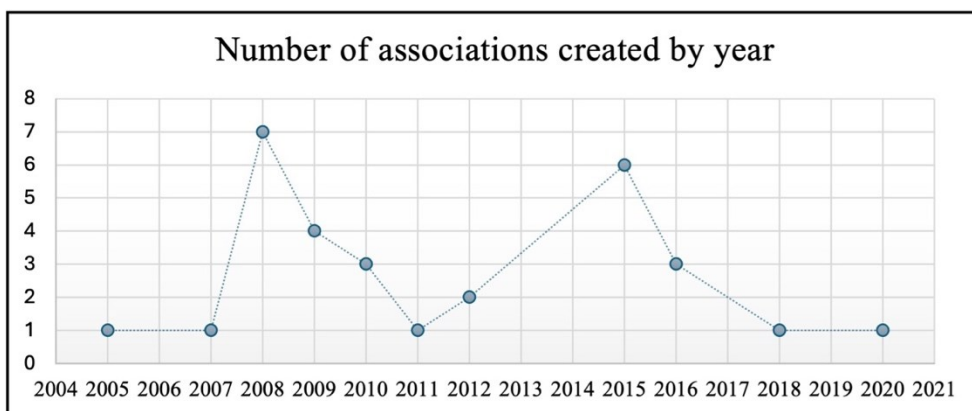
All demographic data, unless explicitly specified otherwise, reflect the current situation, more specifically, that of the year 2024.

There are a few takeaways from this section that we can mention. First, Oradea is, by far, the largest and most developed TAU from the county, having a visible effect on the neighbouring TAUs. The other municipalities and towns from the county, besides the county seat, are much smaller demographically. Finally, the urban TAUs are distributed in a rather balanced manner within the territory of the county.

As we shall see later in the paper, these takeaways explain, to some extent, the way the IDAs were established in the county, but fail to explain other aspects.

### Intercommunity development ASSOCIATIONS IN the Bihor County

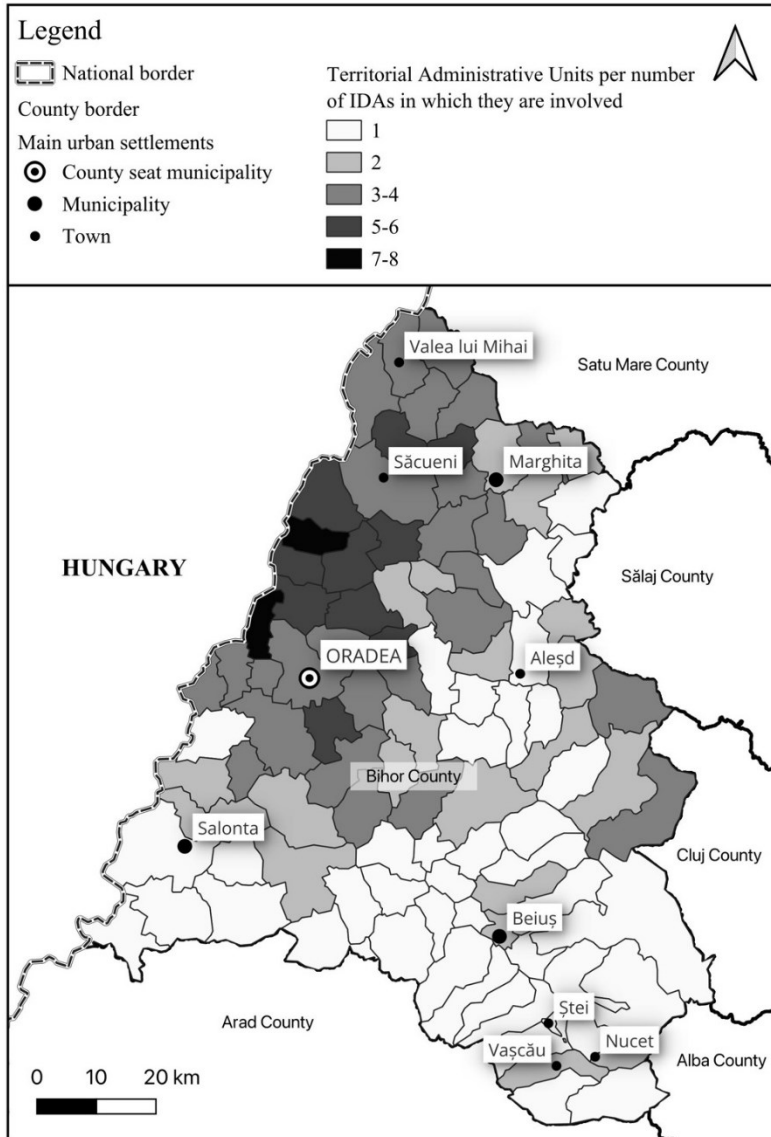
The data collection process presented in the methodology section uncovered a few facts about the IDAs created by TAUs from the Bihor County. In total, there were 29 associations created, out of which 28 are still active according to the database of the Ministry of Finance.



**Figure 2.** Number of associations created by year, in the Bihor County, between 2004 and 2020 - Own elaboration.

The chart below presents how many IDAs were created each year since the law was introduced, until 2020. It highlights the fact that there are two moments which

favoured the establishment of IDAs. They are both at the beginning of long-time budget time frames of the European Union, which is when the opportunity to apply for EU financed projects arises.

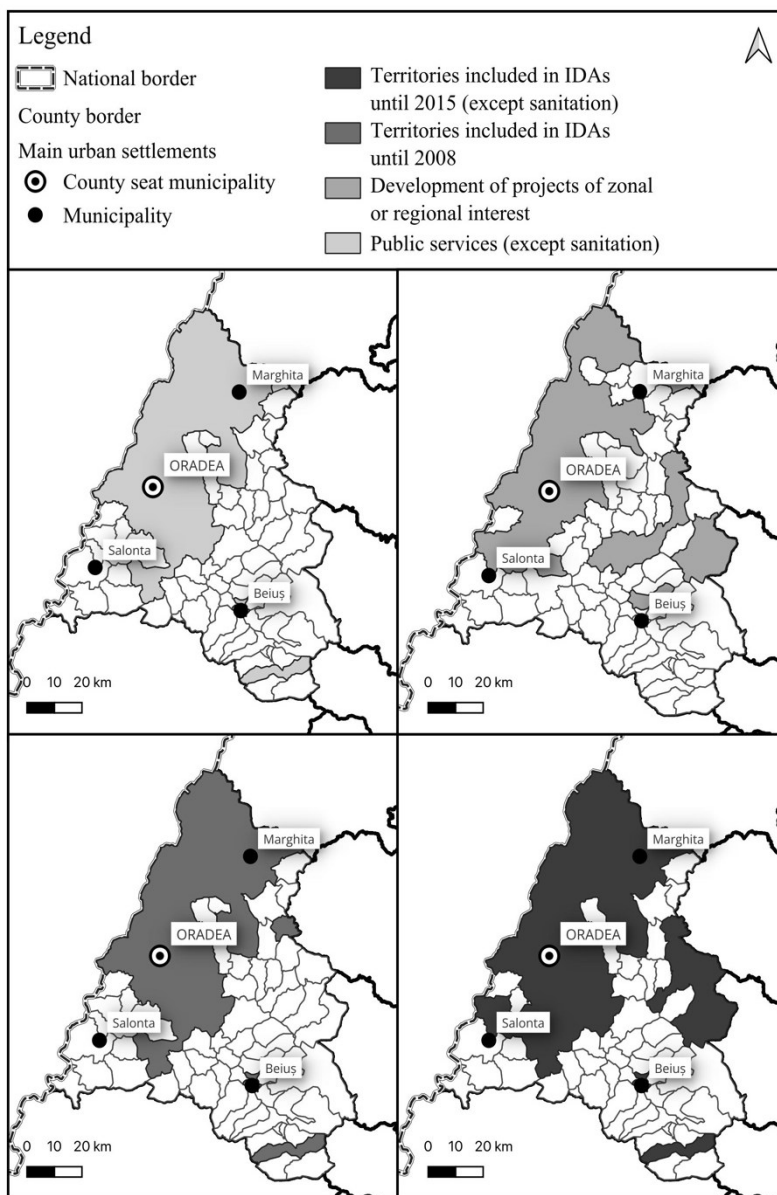


**Figure 3.** Number of IDAs in which each TAU from the Bihor County is a member (2024) – Own elaboration – Own elaboration (Spatial data sources: Crăciunescu 2022)

For 6 out of the 28 active IDAs we found no data, statutes or constitutive documents that would attest to the purpose for which they were created. Out of the 22 IDAs for which we managed to collect such data, around two thirds, 16 to be exact, were created for a purpose that falls under the more general scope of creating *development projects of zonal or regional interest*. The rest of them, 6 in total, have a very specific purpose: 3 of them are for providing public utilities services of water supply and



sewerage, 1 is for sanitation, 1 for energy production, and 1 for public transport. Only one has a mixed purpose, including both scopes mentioned by the law.



**Figure 4.** Territorial extent of all IDAs by their scope and the year they were established – Own elaboration (Spatial data sources: Crăciunescu 2022)

Considering that MAs and UAs are defined by the types of members included in them and that they cannot be created for providing public services, we can consider that all three types of IDAs are present in the Bihor County. More specifically, Oradea, as the county seat municipality is present in 5 IDAs. One is that of the Metropolitan Area of Oradea, which is also the oldest existing IDA in the county and one of the first from

Romania. The rest of the IDAs that include Oradea provide public services, which probably stems from the fact that an MA or an UA cannot provide public services so it cannot do it through the MA. Again, considering their members and their scope, there is one Urban Agglomeration in the Bihor County, though not explicitly declared as one, which includes the Săcueni town. This town is also a member of several other IDAs. The rest of them are regular IDAs. The Council of the Bihor County is included in only one IDA, which also includes 23 local TAUs, created to provide water supply and sewerage services.

The territorial distribution of IDAs within the territory of the Bihor County is presented in the map in figure 3. Two aspects are immediately noticeable through this cartographic representation. First, all TAUs from the Bihor County are involved in at least one IDA. Second, there seems to be an increased activity in certain parts of the county. More specifically, around Oradea, around the three northern urban TAUs of the Bihor County (more around Săcueni and Valea lui Mihai than Marghita) and there is also a concentration to the north of Oradea.

If we look at the distribution, by scope, of the IDAs within the Bihor County, nothing really changes. There is still a grouping of the IDAs around the western, northern and north-western part of the county. Figure 4 shows the IDAs that were created for the generic purpose of *development of projects of zonal or regional interest* as well as for various *public services*, except sanitation, which is not represented because it covers the whole county. The western, northern and north-western part of the county was covered by various types of IDAs as early as 2008. Afterwards, IDAs were slowly created outside of this area but, as we already know, only timidly, or for new purposes mostly in the same area.

All other municipalities and towns seem to be less active from this point of view and are not representing a polarizing force for the nearby TAUs.

There are also two IDAs which cross the limit of the county, forming smaller associations, however, these are exceptions. Still, this shows that where it makes sense, these structures provide the opportunity for bottom-up initiatives outside of the administrative divisions of the country.

## Conclusions

As we can see, at least to some extent, some TAUs have seized the opportunity provided by the Intercommunity Development Associations. Whether they are actually used or not, that is not clear yet. Thus, the question in our title is not answered in full, for now.

Nevertheless, we can briefly summarize our findings as follows:

- There seems to be a strong connection between funding possibilities and the establishment of these associations.
- A TAU might need to be part of multiple IDAs to cover the needs of their communities.
- Most IDAs are grouped in the western, north-western, and northern part of the county.
- Many TAUs are only members in one IDA, that covers the entire county.
- Most IDAs from the Bihor County were created for the purpose of implementation of zonal or regional development projects, only a third of them having the purpose of providing public services.

These conclusions bring up further questions that would need further investigation. For example: How active are the existing IDAs? What financing sources do they prefer? Why are there so few IDAs created to provide public services? Are the projects implemented by the IDAs, if any, reflected in any way in their territories and in their communities? Why are so many TAUs not using this legislative tool? Is the situation any different in other counties?

Obviously, there is no easy way to find answers to these questions and large amounts of data and intensive documentation and research activities are required, which is to be accomplished in subsequent studies.

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