DO INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS FAVOUR POLYCENTRIC DEVELOPMENT? AN ANALYSIS OF TERRITORIAL POLICIES OF THE EU

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Abstract. *For more than two decades now, amongst some of the concepts put forth by informal and official documents of the EU we find polycentric development. The term has been extensively studied in many research papers sparking interest in other parts of the world too. On the other hand, in preparation of Romania's integration into the EU, Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA) were included in the Romanian legislation to facilitate collaboration between various administrative units of Romania, to address the shortcomings of the administrative fragmentation of its local administrative level and the financial limitations that most rural administrative units face.*

The purpose of this paper is to understand whether these territorial structures lead to polycentric development or, on the contrary, they enhance the polarizing effect of existing urban centres. To reach our conclusions, we rely mainly on quantitative methods. Our research covers the entire territory of Romania, as we attempted to get sufficient details that describe existing IDAs and that characterize the local administrative units of Romania.

Keywords*: Intercommunity development associations, polycentric development, effects of EU territorial policies, intra-regional development, Romania.*

INTRODUCTION

Polycentric development, as part of the territorial policies of the European Union, has been adopted in an uneven manner by the various EU members, however, in the early years it was a major aim in the formal policies of many European countries (Waterhout et al., 2005: 165). In Romania, some attempts were made to introduce polycentric development aimed mechanisms and policies at lower administrative levels, in parts of Romania (Chiriac and Bucur, 2015), and a territorial development strategy was proposed for a *polycentric Romania 2035* (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016). One of the means of achieving these goals is for rural territorial units to constitute *Intercommunity Development Associations*, to jointly achieve development objectives that would otherwise not be attainable because of underprepared staff and financial limitations (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 4.3.2.9).

In this context, the question that prompted this research is whether this association possibility for local territorial administrative units (TAU) could provide the necessary legislative tools to promote a polycentric development pattern. The fact that these associations helps local TAUs access EU funding, is especially important for lower tier rural areas, that individually lack the financial power to do it. Instinctively, one could easily answer that it could. However, that does not actually mean that it can or that it will. Polycentric development can be considered at various analytical scales, however, in this

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case we will focus strictly at the sub-national level, both at the level of the entire administrative hierarchy of Romania, but also at county levels.

The paper is divided in five sections, including the *Introduction*. The next section is that of the *Methodological specifications*, followed by the section titled *From EU territorial policies to national territorial strategies*, the *Data analysis & Discussion* section and the *Conclusion*. The *Methodological specifications* section presents the research process adopted for this paper. It presents the research questions and hypotheses, it presents the aims of the literature review, the presentation of the main data sources, the data gathering process, and the main data analysis methods used to reach the conclusions of this research. The Literature review section is constructed around the two main topics of this study: *Intercommunity Development Associations* (IDA) and *Polycentric development*, focusing not only on studies that explain the two concepts, but also on studies that look for drivers of polycentric development and the link between the EU territorial policies and Romania's territorial development strategies. The *Data analysis & Discussion* section presents in detail the data analysis that was performed to try to reach a conclusion regarding the potential of IDAs to generate polycentric development.

The conclusions of the data analysis is that, in general, these association, especially those that have been created for the local/regional/zonal development of the areas they represent, are biased towards top level local territorial administrative units, thus favouring a more monocentric development pattern at county level, a pattern that is generally consistent throughout the country.

METHODOLOGICAL SPECIFICATIONS

As it was mentioned in the Introduction, the aim of this research is to find whether Intercommunity Development Associations, as defined in the Romanian legislation, could lead to polycentric development patterns. Thus, the main objective is to find whether these associations could provide the context for alternative nodes of development in the Romanian territory, however, it will not assess whether polycentric development patterns have emerged or are likely to emerge.

Before delving into the ins and outs of IDAs, and how they may influence the territorial development of the administrative hierarchy of Romania, the focus falls on the two concepts relevant for this study:

- the territorial policies of the EU, more specifically those mechanisms built to support polycentric development adopted by Romanian territorial policies.
- defining IDAs, in their past and current form.

For this part of the research existing specialty literature is analysed, such as various official EU and Romanian official documents, and the Romanian legislation. The aim of this part of the research is to understand the link between the territorial policies of the EU and their adoption in the Romanian policies and legislation. In addition, another objective is to identify the main attributes and characteristics of IDAs, which, in turn, help further develop the research design.

As the literature review shows, there are several interpretations to the concept of polycentric development and the research design of this paper is justified on previous research efforts, considering that the focus falls on the local level of the Romanian administrative hierarchy. As mentioned, we are testing the potential, not the actual impact of these associations.

The research process is constructed as a cross-sectional, observational study. The most up to date known status of these IDAs is analysed to reach our conclusions.

IDAs are analysed to understand their structure, why and when are they created, what are their members and what are the characteristics of their members, along with other relevant factors. This part of the research provides the necessary insights for the next step in the analysis, in which the situation is assessed at county level. The aim is to answer the following research question: Are IDAs created for zonal/regional/local development founded around larger urban centres more likely to be active than those founded around lower urban structures or by rural-only structures?

The data collected for this research relies on multiple sources. The main ones, used to identify IDAs, are the data.gov.ro platform (Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale și Administrației Publice, 2016), the website of the National Institute for Statistics of Romania (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2023), the website of the General Secretariate of the Government (Secretariatul General al Guvernului, 2020) and the website of the Ministry of Justice that provides an up to date registry of the active NGOs, which includes IDAs as well ("Registrul National ONG – Ministerul Justiției", 2026). These data sources were checked against the status of the IDAs (fiscally active/inactive) through the Firme on line platform, which provides data collected from the Ministry of Finance (FirmeOnLine, 2026), and the databases of the Romanian Ministry of Finance were also used directly, sometimes, to confirm inconsistent data (Ministerul Finanțelor, n.d.).

Several technologies were used to obtain and process the data used in this research, and to quantitatively evaluate the research questions presented above. Python was used to collect IDA data in an automated manner, specifically their status, the date when they were founded, their location (locality, county), and Public Acquisition Electronic System (SEAP) activity data. QGIS was used mainly to generate spatial representations of the collected and processed data. GitHub Copilot, integrated in the Visual Studio Code IDE, was used to assist and speed up the Python code writing scripts needed to collect and process data. Several models were used in this process.

Unfortunately, there was no readily available data regarding the TAU membership and scope of IDAs, and there was no way to obtain such data in a dynamic manner. At least, there was no up to date and complete data that could be used to simplify this process. Thus, a semi-automatized process was put in place. In order to minimize the efforts, this data was only collected for active IDAs. Various official documents of the IDAs, or of the members of the IDAs were collected through manual searches, namely constitutive and status documents, as well as adherence or other administrative documents emitted by the member TAUs, that sometimes contained such details. Where this was not possible, the name of the IDAs were sometimes suggestive enough for their membership, and the data.gov.ro database was also used where possible (Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale și Administrației Publice, 2016). Additionally, the NGO registry from the website of the Ministry of Justice was also used to find the scope of many IDAs ("Registrul National ONG – Ministerul Justiției", 2026). The most up-to-date information was used. Nevertheless, there were cases for which data was simply not available, as the *Data analysis and discussion* section shows. The SEAP activity was collected from the Firme on line platform as well (FirmeOnLine, 2026).

The unit of analysis of the econometric model of analysis of this research is the IDA. All identified IDAs were initially considered, regardless of their current status. The territorial coverage of these IDAs was analysed at the level of local TAUs, each TAU being mapped to IDAs that serve its territory.

The activity of the IDAs was assessed at administrative and operational level. If the IDAs are considered active by the ministry of finance, they are considered

administratively active. The operational activity was assessed through the SEAP activity data (number of contracts) which should be a good indicator of how active the IDAs actually are (Chiriac, 2025: 322, 324). The administrative status is by definition binary (active = 1, dissolved or suspended = 0). Operational activity status is evaluated through a numerical indicator (total number of contracts awarded through SEAP), but also as a binary indicator, an IDA being considered active if it is at least registered in the SEAP system, even without running a contract through it.

The difference between the number of administratively active and operationally active IDAs has analytical significance, as it shows that there are several "ghost" IDAs that exist formally but do not produce any measurable output, at least not through SEAP. This group of IDAs could be at the centre of separate research efforts, but it will not be analysed in detail here.

The scope of the IDAs, as is shown in the Literature review section, includes *public services*, *development* (local, regional, zonal), or *mixed*, which implies that those IDAs were created to provide public services and to implement development projects, usually, by attracting EU funding. Further in this research, when referring to development scoped IDAs, we refer to all IDAs that have such objectives, including *mixed* scoped ones.

Another significant aspect for analysing IDAs is that of the anchor tier, which reflects the structural position of the most institutionally capable member of the IDA. These tiers reflect the typology of local TAUs: Tier 1/T1 – county seat municipality (including Bucharest), Tier 2/T2 – non-seat municipality, Tier 3/T3 – town, Tier 4/T4 – commune. Rural only IDAs are also flagged.

Two hypotheses are evaluated:

H1: IDAs anchored to T2, T3 and T4, are significantly less likely to be operationally active than T1 anchored IDAs.

H2: Rural only T4 IDAs are further disadvantaged by their exclusively rural membership.

These hypotheses are evaluated using four regression models. All four models use the natural logarithm of IDA membership size as a control variable, to absorb variation in IDA size.

The first is a Logit model (C1) which tests whether the anchor tier of an IDA predicts its probability of operational activity (dependent variable). The second model (C2) extends on the first one, by testing whether rural only IDA membership is significant, thus including an additional predictor: T4 + rural only. The third (C3) and fourth (C4) models, for which SEAP awarded contract counts are used, are estimated as Negative Binomial, as contract count data is severely over dispersed ($\alpha \approx 14.6$), and a Poisson model would underestimate standard errors and would overstate statistical significance. The purpose of these models is to test whether the administrative tiers and membership size systematically affect contract volumes. The fourth model (C4) extends on C3 by adding the T4 + rural only predictor.

The first hypothesis is assessed based on models C1 and C3, while the second one is evaluated based on models C2 and C4. Findings are classified as statistically supported when the coefficient sign is consistent with the expected direction and the p-value is below 0.05.

Additionally, several other statistics were computed to understand and present the status of IDAs, in Romania, in general and at county level.

FROM EU TERRITORIAL POLICIES TO NATIONAL TERRITORIAL STRATEGIES

Polycentric development is a topic that gained attention in the speciality literature since the EU has proposed it at the end of the 20th century as part of the European Spatial Development Perspective. It was considered a solution to uneven development levels within the EU, after "past enlargements, and the prospect of future extensions, [….] which demands a spatial development strategy" (European Commission, 1999b: 20), but also to provide a balanced level of competitiveness of the European territory, within the EU, but also at the global level (European Commission, 1999a: 10, 20; Shaw and Sykes, 2004: 302).

However, EU's normative interpretation of polycentric development is essentially different from the analytical perspective used at intra-urban, inter-urban and inter-regional scale (Davoudi, 2003: 988). In the analytical perspective, the intra-urban scale refers mostly to the decentralization processes within cities, while the inter-urban and inter-regional scales are linked with multiple separate urban centres which collaborate to some extent, but in which the separation between these urban areas is not always evident. Polycentric urban regions, conurbations, urban fields, metropolitan areas are somewhat similar concepts (Davoudi, 2003: 981–987). Polycentric urban regions, a concept seem to extend through both inter-urban and inter-regional scales and usually consist of the dissolution of physical delimitation between administratively distinct urban areas, which extend to gigantic proportions in East Asia (Davoudi, 2003: 987). These concepts are, however, closely linked to cooperating urban areas, which are usually not too distant from each other. However, their characteristics are somewhat relative. Parr proposes a set of seven potential criteria for the identification of PURs, such as clustering of centres, upper limit and lower limit on centre separation, size and spacing, size distribution, interaction and level of specialization of centres, which are relative and somewhat overlapping (Parr, 2004: 232–233). Alternative definitions refer to administrative separation, unclear hierarchical ranking, reasonable proximity and functional interconnection (Davoudi, 2003: 986). Nevertheless, some view the separation of the centres of a PUR as also physical, consisting of unbuilt, green areas (Bailey and Turok, 2001: 698–699).

The normative interpretation of polycentricity provided by the EU, especially through the ESDP, is viewed by many as an attempt to reconcile the conflicting goals of competitiveness and balanced development (Davoudi, 2003: 994–995), while the concept has become stretched (Van Meeteren et al., 2016: 1280–1281), is elusive and also malleable (Shaw and Sykes, 2004: 285), and is many times used without providing a clear definition. Its application by the member states of the EU is non-binding, as the ESDP document is legally non-binding (European Commission, 1999a: 11), and real effects were limited (Faludi, 2018: 514, 515).

No clear definition is provided by the Territorial Development Strategy of Romania either, even though it proposes policies to implement the "European concept of polycentricity" and specific strategic options are proposed (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 169). In fact, there are evidences of a variety of interpretations of this concept depending on local factors and characteristics, and the concept itself may also be compatible with bottom-up perspectives and strategies (Shaw and Sykes, 2004: 300–302).

The ESPON 1.1.1. report defines a micro, meso and macro scale to which the concept of polycentricity can apply, with *Functional urban areas*, *Metropolitan regions*

and urban clusters, and *Global economic integration zones* as constituting elements, respectively (Nordregio, 2004: 51), and the identification of these structures relies on three characteristics: size, location, and connectivity (Nordregio, 2004: 61). Functional urban areas include multiple municipalities which are part of a geographic area which, in terms of everyday activity, is somewhat contiguous and, depending on their size may qualify as either regional/local, transnational/national, or Metropolitan European Growth Areas (Nordregio, 2004: 10). These are the building blocks, the centres, of polycentric regions, however, zooming in, they may also constitute polycentric urban regions, or areas.

Polycentric development is also at the heart of the territorial development strategy of Romania, subtitled *Polycentric Romania 2035*, which relies on a set of principles to shape the development of the Romanian territory, such as coherence between the national, inter-regional, European and intercontinental development scales, urban-rural solidarity, while also protecting, promoting and capitalizing on the natural and cultural heritage (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 11). These principles are then infused into the strategic objectives that this document proposes, which also includes aspects relevant for polycentric development (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 21–22).

The development of Romania's urban network through polycentric development was also part of the measures Romania proposed to the European Commission, as part of the agreement for the 2014-2020 programming period (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 22). One aim of this strategy is also to promote medium and large urban areas at national level, as connectivity hubs and providers of optimal basic services for lower urban and rural settlements (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 133). *Intercommunity development associations* represent one of the solutions to extend these basic public services to lower tier settlements (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 59, 79, 156). However, with regard to their potential scope of local, regional or zonal development associations, the strategy only mentions them as "strengths" of urban areas in a SWOT analysis, without directly stating the scope (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 65), and a shallow and imprecise reference is also made to the existence of more than 600 such associations constituted around the main development poles of Romania (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 32). Thus, according to this strategy, IDAs are considered mostly for the potential of extending public services to areas for which individual efforts are not feasible and only hints are made to their potential for local, regional or zonal development, mostly with regard to main urban development poles.

Inter-municipal cooperation is seen by some as "second-best" alternatives to "fully-fledged metropolitan authority", as would be the case for the Randstad urban region in the Netherlands (Hall and Pain, 2012: 144), a common example of polycentric urban regions. Nevertheless, inter-municipal cooperation for the provision of public services may be more beneficial especially to smaller administrative entities than privatization (Bel et al., 2014: 28), which is preferred by lager municipalities (Bel et al., 2013: 20). The effects of inter-municipal cooperation on spending may be limited (Frère et al., 2014: 22), however, the benefits may be found in the possibility of providing services that would otherwise not be available to individual administrative entities.

The Intercommunity Development Associations, which provide the context for inter-municipal and inter-regional cooperation in Romania, have the theoretical potential to instil polycentric patterns within these associations, through the strategic development

of multiple centres of activity within the territory of cooperating administrative units, but also at higher administrative levels such as the county or national level, lower tier urban administrative units benefit from the activity of these associations. There is a parallel to be found here with the *functional urban areas* defined above.

Intercommunity Development Associations were introduced in the Romanian legislation in 2006 (Parlamentul României, 2007), just before Romania became a member of the European Union, one of the purposes being that of helping local administrative units collaborate on various projects and fields of activity that fall under their responsibility and jurisdiction. Other reasons for which this legislative initiative was required in Romania is the very fragmented administrative hierarchy and the lack of financial power of many of the local administrative units.

Currently, these associations are defined by the Administrative Code introduced in 2019, and a dedicated legislation was introduced for metropolitan areas a special kind of IDA, which added some changes that brought some clarity, diversified the scopes of these associations, but also added limitations regarding acceptable member administrative units (Parlamentul României, 2022).

The main characteristics of IDAs, as defined by the Romanian legislation, was already identified and analysed (Chiriac, 2025: 322–324). In short, they may be constituted by territorial administrative units such as counties and urban and rural localities, they may be constituted either as *metropolitan areas*, around county seat and non-county seat municipalities, or as regular IDAs, they may be created to provide *public services*, or *jointly implement local, regional, or zonal development projects*, or both, and they have the statute of contracting authority, which, since 2016 have the obligation of using the SEAP platform.

In summary, the implementation of the territorial policies of the EU, and specifically those related to polycentric development are subject to interpretation and are unevenly adopted at the level of member states. In Romania, the strategic document that proposes a polycentric territorial development for Romania does not explicitly present a definition of polycentric development and makes little reference to the concept of IDAs as part of this strategy, and mainly as a solution to provide public services for underprivileged territorial administrative units. Nevertheless, Intercommunity development associations could prove important as a combination of bottom-up and top-down initiatives, that could help impress a polycentric pattern both withing their territories, but also at county and national levels.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The outcomes of the data analysis presented in the methodology section is presented and discussed in the following paragraphs.

Following the compilation of IDA related data from the various sources mentioned in the methodology section, 684 IDAs were identified, out of which 553 (80.8%) are still administratively active, and only 336 (49.1%) are operationally active. However, some of them are no longer administratively active, which brings the number down to 296 operationally and administratively active IDAs.

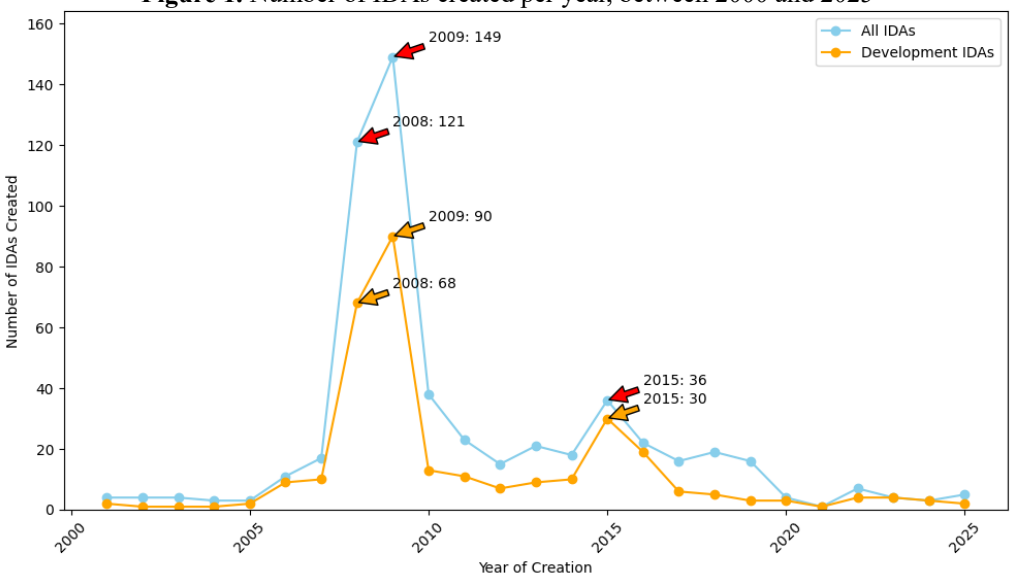
A significant number of IDAs (257 – 37.6%) are only administratively active, but not operationally, which means that there are either used in other ways, or data at the ministry level is not appropriately updated, or they are simply kept active, waiting for appropriate opportunities. Either way, a separate investigation could help uncover relevant aspects regarding the activity and use of IDAs, or certain institutional failures.

Close to 20% of the identified IDAs are no longer administratively active. This percentage includes operationally active and inactive IDAs, which may have served a purpose on short term, or failed to deliver on their objectives.

The timeline of IDA creation was computed to identify some relevance regarding the moment when they were created. There is a main spike, around 2008 and 2009, which is most probably related to funding availability, considering these moments are at the beginning of an EU budgetary cycle. This moment comes also after Romania became an EU member, that also meant increased access to EU funding. The secondary spike in 2015 confirms the link to EU funding availability.

Development IDAs (which includes Mixed scoped ones) follow the same pattern, however, in 2015, there are far less IDAs created with the purpose of providing public services than in 2008 and 2009.

Figure 1. Number of IDAs created per year, between 2000 and 2025



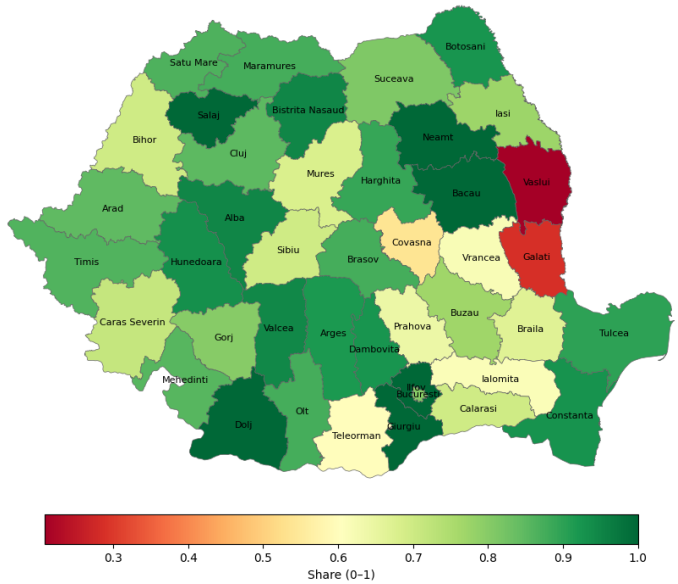
Source: own computations based on data from multiple sources, as presented in the methodology

The counties with the highest number of IDAs created are Cluj, Bihor, Iași, Sălaj and Harghita, and the ones with the lowest number of IDAs created are Mehedinți, Caraș-Severin, Galați, București and Ilfov. When it comes to development IDAs created, the situation is almost the same, with Bihor and Iași trading places, while at the bottom the only change is that Ialomița takes the place of Mehedinți. The situation in Bucharest and Ilfov, which now have 1 and, respectively, 0 active development IDAs, is somewhat natural, considering that any such association that includes Bucharest would make any other association around it pointless. Bucharest is part of a metropolitan type IDA in which it partnered with the Ilfov county council directly, and not the local TAUs that are part of the Ilfov county, which is usually an odd type of association considering how the legislation defines metropolitan areas.

The share of administratively active IDAs per county shows that in many counties, the percentage is generally high. The two exceptions are Galați and Vaslui, that have a ratio of 0.28 and 0.20 active IDAs from the total number of IDAs created in these counties. All the rest have more than 0.50 still active IDAs, from an administrative point

of view. At the top, Dolj, Sălaj, Neamț, Bacău, Giurgiu and Ilfov have a perfect record, but the first two stand out as having far more IDAs than the others (around 30). These numbers paint a picture that, intuitively, is not expected to be true, as these associations rely on external funding for development projects that would improve the social and economic status of their members, and there is only so much funding to go around.

Figure 2. Share of administratively active IDAs per County

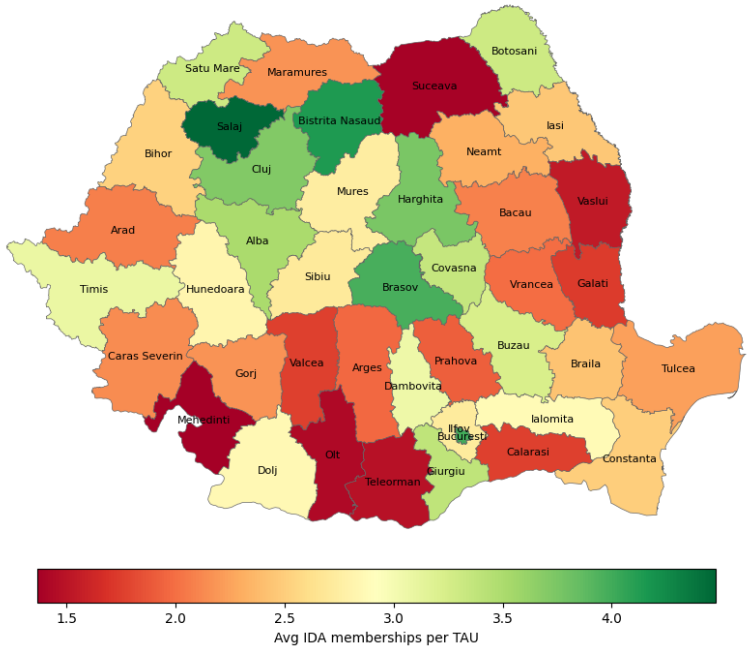


Source: own computations based on from multiple sources, as presented in the methodology

An interesting aspect about IDAs, as defined by the Romanian legislation, is that they may overlap, meaning that TAUs may participate in more than one such association. In fact, a TAU may be part of an IDA created to provide sanitation services, another created to provide water supply and sewage services and be part of one or more development scoped IDAs. It all depends on the prevalent strategy of the region. However, there are also cases of TAUs that seem to have tried to create several partnerships with neighbouring TAUs, one with each neighbour TAU. By analysing the IDA population data, 68 IDAs consisting of 2 or 3 members, across 16 counties, 25 active and 43 inactive, were identified as containing at least one member which is present in several similarly sized associations. For example, Cluj County has 22 such IDAs, with bilateral pairings centred on communes like Mociu (6), Cătina (4), Geaca (4), Luna (4) and Mărgău (4). In the county of Dolj similar patterns are present around Perișor (6) and Plenița (4).

Even though all counties have an average of over 1 IDA per TAU, there are quite a few units that are not members in any IDA. The coverage is generally close to 75% or over. Nevertheless, the situation is somewhat different when it comes to administratively active development IDAs. Out of the around 3200 local TAUs, approximatively 43% are part of at least one administratively active development IDA while 57% are not part of any such association. This shows that the high percentage of coverage of administratively active IDAs is due to those that have public services within their scope.

Figure 3. Average number of administratively active IDAs per TAU, at county level



Source: own computations based on from multiple sources, as presented in the methodology

Considering these initial insights, especially the fact that there is such a large share of local territorial administrative units that are not part of a development scoped intercommunity development association (which includes mixed scoped ones), and the fact that there are so many IDAs that are not operationally active, prompts an investigation into why that is.

The rest of the analysis focuses strictly on development IDAs. Thus, whenever IDAs are mentioned in the remaining part of this section, it is implied that their scope is development of mixed.

The distribution of IDAs that have, at least, registered in the SEAP platform already shows an interesting outcome:

- County seat municipalities (T1): 159 IDAs, with an 79.5% activation rate.
- Municipalities (T2): 32 IDAs, with a 37.5% activation rate.
- Towns (T3): 70 IDAs, with a 33.3% activation rate.
- Commune anchor (T4): 152 IDAs, with a 43.3% activation rate.

This already shows that, as opposed to IDAs created around county seat municipalities, all the other tiers have a very low activation rate, towns being even more disadvantaged than other municipalities or communes. Thus, without considering the results of the four models, this already indicates a bias towards higher ranks, suggesting a monocentric pattern at county levels. Nevertheless, the four models presented in the methodology section test whether this activation gap and volume of SEAP activity, can be explained by the administrative tier of the anchor TAU.

However, for the econometric analysis, 381 development scope Intercommunity Development Associations were used (IDAs with mixed or development scopes). Out of these, a number of 177 (46.5%) are operationally active, meaning that they are registered in the SEAP platform. The procurement output data analysis shows that there are 4087 total

contracts awarded across the sample. However, most IDAs (76.9%) have zero contracts awarded, which results in an extremely right-skewed distribution, in which the median is at 0, with the 90th percentile at only 14 contracts and a maximum of 538 contracts.

Table 1 shows that the 44 T1 anchored IDAs (11.5% of the sample) account for 70% of all contracts, while the 321 T3 and T4 anchored IDAs (84% of the sample) account for only 22% percent of the contracts. Geographically, with the exception of Iași, which also has one of the first (if not the first) metropolitan area type IDA ever created in Romania, most contracts are awarded by counties in the North-western, Western and Central regions of Romania (67%, with 689 in Harghita, 644 in Brașov, 554 in Bihor, 540 in Cluj, and 233 in Iași. Six counties have no contracts at all, and 1 county has no active development IDA (Galați).

Table 1. Statistics about contract count distributions per tier, for development scope IDAs.

Tier	n	Active	Median contracts	Mean	Total contracts
T1	44	35 (79.5%)	10	65.0	2,862
T2	16	6 (37.5%)	0	20.6	329
T3	30	10 (33.3%)	0	4.1	122
T4	291	126 (43.3%)	0	2.7	774

Source: own computations based on data from the SEAP platform

The results of the four models, synthesized in Table 2, show support for the initial assumptions regarding the IDA anchor tier, in most cases of models C1 and C3, but not at all for the C2 and C4 models. The models test whether the administrative tier around which an IDA is anchored, systematically explain the activation gap of the development scoped IDAs.

The first two models (C1 and C2) test the activation probability. Model C1 confirms that the anchor tier is a strong predictor of whether a development IDA becomes operationally active or not. Relative to the reference category (T1), all the other tiers show far lower probabilities. Tier T2, with a log-odds coefficient of -1.810 ($p = 0.006$), corresponds to a marginal effect of -41% in activation probability. The third tier (T3), representing town anchored IDAs, show the largest disadvantage, with a coefficient of -1.915 ($p < 0.001$) and a marginal effect of approximately -44 percentage points, confirming the 33.3% activation rate mentioned above. Rurally anchored IDAs (T4), with a coefficient estimated at -1.211 ($p = 0.004$), shows a marginal effect of -28%, corresponding to the 43.3% activation rate. The control variable, ln(members), is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.395$, $p = 0.002$) in all specifications, thus showing that larger IDAs are more likely to be operationally active, regardless of tier.

As mentioned in the methodology, Model C2 extends the baseline logit model by including a rural only flag in interaction with the T4 dummy. The corresponding term is not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.272$, $p = 0.34$). This shows that for the T4 tier, a purely rural membership does not imply an even lower probability for an IDA to be operationally active, besides the effect of the corresponding tier level. Consequently, from the point of view of the operational activation dimension, the second hypothesis is not supported.

The last two models (C3 and C4) test the hypotheses from the point of view of the number of awarded contracts. The Negative Binomial model only shows robustly significant deficit for T4 anchored IDAs ($\beta = -2.298$ ($p < 0.001$; IRR = 0.100), suggesting 90% fewer contracts than T1 anchored IDAs. For T3 anchored IDAs the results are not statistically significant ($p = 0.072$), so the 83% fewer contracts disadvantage could be a

sampling artefact. T2 anchored IDAs show indistinguishable contract volume from T1 anchored IDAs (β = −0.483, p = 0.668). Once again size matters, as the size control ln(members) term is positive and significant (β = 0.641, p = 0.014), confirming that larger IDAs award more contracts.

The second hypothesis is not supported on the procurement volume dimension either, as the interaction coefficient is not statistically significant, and the point estimate is positive (β = +0.438, p = 0.387). The T4 anchor effect remains large and significant in model C4 as well (β = −2.574, p < 0.001; ~92% fewer contracts).

Table 2. Summary of the results of the four models used to analyse

Variable	C1 Logit	C2 Logit+Int	C3 Neg.Bin.	C4 NB+Int
Intercept	**0.627**	**0.543**	**2.589*** **	**2.504*** **
	(0.441)	(0.450)	(0.780)	(0.758)
Tier T2 (Municipality, non-seat)	**-1.810****	**-1.815****	**-0.483**	**-0.461**
	(0.654)	(0.659)	(1.126)	(1.120)
Tier T3 (Town)	**-1.915*** **	**-1.911*** **	**-1.799**	**-1.732**
	(0.552)	(0.556)	(1.002)	(0.993)
Tier T4 (Commune)	**-1.211****	**-0.974***	**-2.298*** **	**-2.574*** **
	(0.418)	(0.486)	(0.682)	(0.732)
T4 × Rural-only	—	**-0.272**	—	**0.438**
		(0.283)		(0.505)
ln(Members)	**0.395****	**0.445****	**0.641***	**0.683****
	(0.129)	(0.141)	(0.260)	(0.251)
N	**381**	**381**	**381**	**381**
Pseudo R^2	**0.067**	**0.068**	**0.038**	**0.039**
Log-likelihood	**-245.6**	**-245.1**	**-570.9**	**-570.6**

*Significance: *** p<0.001 ** p<0.01 * p<0.05*
Standard errors in parentheses.
Reference category: T1 — Municipality, county seat + Bucharest Municipality.
C1/C2: logit coefficients (log-odds). C3/C4: Neg. Binomial coefficients (log-count; α≈15.0).

In summary, the evidence produced by the four models, consistently supports the first hypothesis, showing that IDA shaped inter-municipal governance in Romania is monocentrically biased towards upper tier urban administrative units on the operational activation dimension. The T4 tier shows extreme marginalization on both dimensions, as the only tier with statistically significant results on the procurement volume dimension. However, the effect of rural only membership is not statistically significant in models C2 and C4. Consequently, H2 is not supported in either model. On the other hand, the size of the IDAs is significant across all models, as large IDAs are more likely to be operationally active and award more contracts.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the results of the data analysis presented in the previous section, the evolution of these bottom-up initiatives does not indicate a potential for polycentric development at the intra-regional scale. After a laborious data collection process, 684 IDAs were identified, out of which less than 300 are both operationally and administratively active, while around 250 are only administratively active, without showing traces of operational activity through the SEAP system.

There were two prevalent moments in which Intercommunity Development Associations were created, both in the beginning of new EU financial cycles, when new funding opportunities were available. The most significant period was in the first couple of

years after Romania achieved EU membership status. However, as mentioned above, many of them did not manage to capitalize on these opportunities, as SEAP procurement output shows.

The IDAs that have the purpose of providing public services usually include a large number of TAUs as members, thus helping provide a more balanced playing field for all the included territories. However, they do not have the potential to lead directly to polycentric development. Rather, they solve persistent issues with lacking basic public services and the lack of institutional capacity of rural territorial administrative units.

Some IDAs were specifically created to access funding dedicated to development projects, as their constituting and statute documents show. Others have multiple objectives related to local, regional or zonal development, or simply state that they were created for this general purpose, or for more specific development objectives (e.g. tourism). However, if national coverage is very high, when all IDA types are included, this changes when only development IDAs are considered.

Only 55% of all IDAs were created for local/regional/zonal development, and less than half of them are operationally active. County seat municipality anchored IDAs are by far the most active (2,862 awarded contracts), while rurally anchored IDAs are severely disadvantaged in terms of contract numbers, which could be considered normal, to some extent, as the needs and possibilities of large urban areas are far greater than those of rural areas. However, non-county seat municipalities and towns are less present as contractors on the SEAP platform than rural areas, which suggests that they are far less active as part of inter-municipal governance associations than their rural counterparts. The results of the models that test their operational activity on the procurement output volume dimension are not statistically significant to support the first hypothesis. Nevertheless, considering they are far less present on the SEAP platform, and that they are the territorial entities that are more likely to close the gap to top-tier municipalities, does suggest a monocentric bias towards top level territorial administrative units in terms of IDA activity, at county level.

In some instances, a few territorial administrative units also attempted to create several small associations with several neighbouring counterparts, which suggests that, at least in these cases, IDAs served more as shallow attempts to attract funding, rather than associations that could be used to devise and implement a common development strategy for a more territorially extended area, with common interests.

Thus, even though, theoretically, these associations provide the legislative framework needed to promote polycentric development, in practice, the effect seems to be reversed considering the activity of development scoped Intercommunity Development Associations.

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