

ETHNIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT IN INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION. THE CASE OF INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS IN ROMANIA

Cosmin CHIRIAC*

Abstract. *Ethnic and political contexts may shape intermunicipal cooperation, especially where ethnic groups extend across administrative boundaries. Existing research suggests that economic development and improved public services are often associated with better minority integration by providing better living conditions and opportunities for social participation. In Romania, Intercommunity Development Associations are a form of intermunicipal cooperation through which local and county administrative units collaborate to provide public services and pursue shared local, regional or zonal development goals. This paper examines whether ethnic and political contexts have an influence on the formation and continuity of these associations, without presuming their effects on integration outcomes.*

Keywords: *Intermunicipal cooperation, Intercommunity Development Associations, Ethnic cooperation context, Political cooperation context, Romania.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intermunicipal cooperation in Romania started before there was a law dedicated to the cooperation of territorial administrative units (TAU). There are a few examples such as the Iași and Oradea metropolitan areas, that were initially created through the foundations and associations law from 2000 (OG 26 30/01/2000 - *Portal Legislativ*, n.d.), showing that some of the municipalities from Romania understood the potential of collaboration between administrative units early on. Yet, intermunicipal cooperation through intercommunity development associations is not always successful (Chiriac, 2026, p. 279). This leads to questions regarding the incentives that prompts territorial administrative units to seek to partner up with neighbouring units and what drives these cooperations move forward. Without a doubt, there may be many reasons, which could span political, economic, social or administrative dimensions. In the Bihor County, for example, higher density of IDA units seem to be found around main administrative units, as well as higher ethnic minority distributions (Chiriac & Țoca, 2024, p. 176). This study focuses on political and ethnic contexts, to understand whether they are reflected in TAU participation in intermunicipal cooperation through IDA, without exploring causality claims.

* PhD Lecturer, University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies, Romania, E-mail: chiriac@uoradea.ro.

Even though municipalities might be associated with an urban context, and, in Romania, a Municipality is a higher order urban locality, in this paper, the term inter-municipal cooperation refers to cooperation between any type of local administrative bodies, whether rural or urban. The Romanian legislation defines cooperation between two or more public territorial administrative bodies as Intercommunity Development Associations, as a solution for a highly fragmented local administrative structure, a common issue in many European countries (Bakoš et al., 2021, p. 1; R. Hulst et al., 2009, p. 275; Săgeată, 2012, pp. 96–98), with limited financial power.

Previous research shows that such cooperation is quite widespread in Romania, even though it is not always successful (Chiriac, 2026, pp. 280–283). This may happen for several reason, and it may depend on several contextual aspects, nevertheless, this study investigates whether the ethnic and political characteristics of the members of such associations might have an influence in their outcomes.

Thus, the main objective of this research is to understand whether and how, political and ethnic contexts influence the participation of local Territorial Administrative Units (TAUs) in Intercommunity Development Associations (ISAs) in Romania. Methodologically, this a quantitative secondary-data analysis of how political, ethnic, and demographic characteristics relate to TAU participation in Intercommunity Development Associations. Following the Introduction, in the Literature review section, the paper examines previous work on the topic of inter-municipal cooperation, looking for papers that discuss the context in which local administrative units operate, in various national settings. Additionally, the political context in Romania, at the national and local level, is examined, also considering the implications of ethnic minority specificities in electoral outcomes. Then, the Research process is presented, focusing on the preparation of the datasets, the statistical models used, and the limitations of the study, which focuses on patterns of association rather than causal effects. The section Local level political and ethnic context in Romania, relies on a few metrics to present the political and ethnic setting in Romania, in the relevant timeframe. The next section briefly presents Inter-municipal cooperation through intercommunity development associations in Romania. This is followed by the Data analysis and discussion next section, and the Conclusions section summarizes the results of the entire research process, which seem to suggest that the influence of the elected local councils does not have a significant influence on inter-municipal cooperation, and its outcomes, and ethnic context association is limited.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research in this study revolves around two topics: inter-municipal cooperation, and political context and ethnic context in Romania, approximately between 2008 and 2021. The selected timeframe is selected as such, so that it covers the timeframe of the analyzed datasets (see the *Research process* section for details). The current section investigates existing scholarly papers and relevant documents, to provide a picture of the existing research on these topics, to present the general political and ethnic context in Romania, to understand the various perspectives of inter-municipal cooperation in Romania or elsewhere, and the gap in the literature.

2.1. Inter-municipal cooperation context.

Inter-municipal cooperation in Romania fits a growing European trend, as local administrations try to find solutions to political and administrative problems (Persson, 2026, p. 344; Swianiewicz & Teles, 2018, p. 336). The incentives for cooperation may

be different for the involved actors, as municipality size may be a factor in the dynamics and outcomes of said cooperations, sometimes leading to more conflictual or competitive interactions (Persson, 2026, pp. 357–359).

There are several aspects that are relevant for inter-municipal cooperation, such as the types of involved actors, scope and the association types, which the Romanian legislation defines with much specificity (Chiriac & Țoca, 2024, pp. 172–173). Nevertheless, they fit all of the association types that Hulst and Montfort identify in inter-municipal cooperation in different national settings in western Europe: quasi-regional governments, planning forums, service delivery organizations and service delivery agreements (J. R. (Rudie) Hulst & Van Montfort, 2012, p. 7). The form of association depends also on the legislative tools that are at the disposal of local administrations, along with local traditions (Casula, 2020, p. 22).

Romanian *Intercommunity Development Associations* may cover either of the four categories mentioned above. However, those set up to develop zonal or regional projects, could function either as active, highly regulated, bodies that seek a common and coherent joint development, or as planning forums, that are not as constrained by formally defined regulations within these associations, or they may, simply, seek an association that facilitates access to development funds, even if there are no common plans for development.

The purpose for which inter-municipal cooperation can be set-up, in Romania, according to existing and previous legislation (Guvernul României, 2019; Parlamentul României, 2007), are limited to public services and the implementation of zonal or regional projects, or both. Thus, they define the scope of cooperation and cover different needs: satisfy the needs of their communities, and, respectively, help the communities grow.

Perceived benefits of IMC may range from increased administrative capacity, reduced costs, increased efficiency and wider range of public services, development potential and grant accessibility (Bakoš et al., 2021, p. 7). Nevertheless, there is empirical evidence that suggests that benefits may be greater for small municipalities, and that the advantages of cooperation may be greater for certain services and limited for others (Bel & Sebő, 2021, p. 21), while size asymmetry in participating members, in service delivery agreements, could create a setting for a trade-off between decision making power and service quality (Arntsen et al., 2021, p. 6). In fact, homogeneity, the number of members, and prior cooperation history, could all be an important factor in how committed local administrations are in inter-municipal cooperation associations (Camões et al., 2021, p. 17).

Stănuș (2018, p. 301) finds that, as IDAs in Romania are bottom-up voluntary associations, their likelihood to lead towards amalgamation is low, due to dependences on local political actors, though, in the municipality of Oradea, an actual merger attempt failed following a local referendum (Radio România Actualități, 2015).

Associations that provide the opportunity for frequent face-to-face interaction may also increase cooperation (LeRoux et al., 2010, p. 245), which could also be beneficial for IDAs that truly seek a common development strategy.

Though there is interest in the dedicated specialty literature regarding inter-municipal cooperation, the political context is analysed marginally, while the ethnic context does not seem to be present, at all. This research aims to fill that void.

2.2. Romania's political environment and ethnic context

The political environment in Romania is a complicated one. At the national level, Even though two parties were always present, in one form or another, on the main scene (Social Democrat Party/Partidul Social Democrat – PSD and National Liberal Party/Partidul Național Liberal - PNL), to larger or lesser extent, new parties appeared and disappeared, sometimes as spin-offs of the two dominant parties, that usually end up merging back or disappearing. Additionally, many alliances were formed, usually for short periods of time, many times splitting of long before the next round of elections. These alliances were not always the result of elections and were, instead, the result of fragmentation (Martin-Russu, 2022a). These frequent changes in the Romanian party system lead many times to cases of cohabitation (Manolache, 2013, pp. 433–435).

In fact, the relation of the two main parties was always complicated, whether they were together in the government, or in opposition of each other (Stan & Zaharia, 2021). Populist and nationalist parties have also appeared and disappeared on the Romanian political scene, that in the Central and Eastern European scene had positive turn-out effects on the elections, whether they aligned to left- or right-wing views (Leininger & Meijers, 2021, pp. 679–680). Even without populist parties, the actions of the main parties in Romanian politics have raised concerns regarding democratic backsliding (Müller, 2013, p. 139) and various policy domains evolve in diverging ways (Martin-Russu, 2022b, pp. 80–81).

These alliances have sometimes transferred to the local level as well, but that is not always the case, as agreement could not always be met at all levels of the political environment (National Democratic Institute, 2004), and appetite for such alliances decreased in time ('Regional Elections in Romania, 9 June 2024', n.d.). Another important aspect, though not investigated in this study, is that Romania, generally, manifests a high mayoral re-election rate, which may show some stability regarding the direction in which local territorial administrative units evolve (Iațu et al., 2024, pp. 14–15). This may be true even in the case of "indicted mayors that stand for re-election [which] are equally likely to hold their seat as unindicted mayors" (Bågenholm & Charron, 2020, p. 2; Charron & Bågenholm, 2025, p. 15).

Another important characteristic of Romanian politics is that it has always been guided more by "informal rules and practices" and lagged behind other Eastern European countries in implementing a healthy democratic system (Volintiru & Zgut-Przybylska, 2024, p. 75). This raises the question of whether the party structure in local, or national, governance actually matters, even though there is "widespread belief that the central governments and county councils disburse development funding based on politico-electoral motivations" (Stănuș, 2011, p. 203). The ethnic context influences the electoral offer proposed not only by minority parties, but also by major parties (Buta & Gherghina, 2023, pp. 2166–2167).

The Hungarian minority in Romania, which is the most important one demographically, is also represented within the Romanian party system, and has managed to mobilize its electorate when it mattered (Mutnansky, 2025, p. 159). Other minorities are also represented in local councils, through regional parties, especially in local administrations in which they are demographically relevant. Nevertheless, for example, Roma political parties face difficulties in capitalizing the votes of their own electorate (Buta & Farcas, 2025, pp. 47–49).

The local electoral landscape in Romania is, thus, characterized by fragmentation, instability, sometimes with a lack of alignment with the national party

system context, and varying ethnic influences, on which the political representatives do not always capitalize.

Considering the findings from the specialty literature on the political system and the political-ethnic context in Romania on the one hand, and inter-municipal cooperation on the other, there is a lack of research efforts directed towards the understanding of whether the political and ethnic make-up, at the local administrative levels, are associated with inter-municipal cooperation, which this study attempts to address.

3. RESEARCH PROCESS

As stated in the Introduction, the objective of the current research is to understand whether the ethnic and political contexts are associated with TAU participation in inter-municipal cooperation, materialized through Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA). Participation in inter-municipal cooperation is assessed through TAU membership and IDA activity.

To frame and clarify the research process two research questions are proposed:

Q1: How are the local political and ethnic contexts associated with TAU participation in IDAs?

Q2: How are the local political and ethnic contexts associated with IDA activity?

IDA activity, as previously shown, can be assessed either as administrative or operational. However, as previous research shows (Chiriac, 2026, p. 277), most IDAs are still administratively active so there is not enough variation in the data for a regression model to be informative. For this reason, only operational activity will be considered, evaluated through SEAP registered contract activity. Furthermore, most local TAUs are members in at least one public service IDA. For this reason, analysing the association of the political or ethnic context with TAU participation in IDAs, or with the operational activity of IDAs, does not make sense for public service oriented IDAs and will be restricted to development oriented IDAs.

To search for answers to the research questions, five hypotheses are considered:

H1: Political context, estimated through local council concentration, is associated with TAU participation in development oriented IDAs.

H2: Ethnic context, estimated through local ethnic composition, is associated with TAU participation in development oriented IDAs.

H3: Political context is associated with operational activity of development oriented IDAs.

H4: Ethnic context is associated with operational activity of development oriented IDAs.

All the analyses performed within this paper are observational and do not establish a causal relationship between the political and ethnic contexts and inter-municipal cooperation through IDAs and the historical processes through which IDAs were created.

3.1. Data sources and pre-processing

To evaluate the hypotheses and answer the research questions, four datasets are required: TAU political context data, TAU ethnic context data, TAU characteristics and IDA related data.

IDA related data includes the year when they were established, their most recent known members, whether they are still administratively active, how active they were, as reflected by public acquisition data obtained from the Public Acquisition Electronic System (SEAP), and the purpose for which they were created. This data was obtained, updated and verified in a semi-automated manner. All the details of the data acquisition process were already described in previous research (Chiriac, 2026, p. 273). One important note is that for several IDAs, even though some are still administratively active, data regarding their purpose or membership could be not collected. Consequently, they were excluded from the analyses in which these aspects were relevant. The IDA-level analysis reflects established, observable, inter-municipal cooperation arrangements, for which TAU members and sufficiently documented organizational information could be identified. This is significant as the association of the political and ethnic contexts with TAU participation in IDAs is evaluated only for observable cooperation agreements.

The political context was evaluated relying on election data obtained from the website of the Central Electoral Office (BEC) of Romania, specifically the number of mandates obtained in the local councils of all local TAUs from Romania by each party, or independent candidate, in the 2008, 2012 and 2016 local council elections. These three elections were considered relevant, as they cover the most important moments in which IDAs were established in Romania, specifically the year 2008, 2009, 2015 and 2016 (Chiriac, 2026, p. 278). The census data was obtained in Excel format (Rezultate 2011 – Recensământul Populației și Locuitorilor, n.d.; Rezultate definitive, n.d.) and was easier to clean and prepare for analysis, even though it wasn't necessarily straight forward. Once more, in the same manner, Python scripts were written to extract the data, and once more, the TAUs were mapped, both automatically and manually, to the correct SIRUTA codes. For both political and ethnic data, manual mapping was necessary for names containing dashes and/or Romanian special characters.

The ethnic context was evaluated using 2011 and 2021 census data. Even though certain methodological differences were introduced in the data collection process of the 2021 census, they were both used to understand whether any significant differences are identifiable in various parts of Romania, which would enrich the understanding of the ethnic context.

Considering the amount of data that was processed and the data sources, the data extraction efforts were significant and required several iterations, with subsequent verifications and improvements, mainly in the case of election data. The 2008 (<https://beclocale2008.roaep.ro/documm/Consilierii%20Locali/Partide%20Localitatii/clpartpeloc.pdf>) and 2012 (<https://beclocale2012.roaep.ro/Consilieri%20locali.html>) election data was obtained in PDF format, while the 2016 data was obtained in Excel format (https://locale2016.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/SIAL2016_CL_vve_mandate_loc.xlsx). In all cases, the data was formatted for presentation and not appropriately structured for data analysis. Thus, Python scripts were implemented, with the help of Github Copilot (several models) and Mistral (mistral medium 3.5), to streamline as much as possible the process. All local TAUs were matched to the most recent version of the SIRUTA code at the time the article was written (Registrul Unităților Administrativ-Teritoriale a României | Institutul Național de Statistică, n.d.), to facilitate the data analysis process.

The Municipality of Bucharest was not included in this research mainly due to its size, make-up, and administrative level, which matches the county level. Furthermore, its IDA related activity is limited.

3.2. Measures of political and ethnic context

The political context was measured primarily through the *Herfindahl concentration index* applied to the distribution of local council mandates. Higher values indicate a greater concentration within the local council, while lower values indicate greater fragmentation.

The ethnic context was also measured through the concentration, or fragmentation, of ethnicities at the local TAU level, using the *Herfindahl concentration index*. Additionally, group-share measures were calculated, mainly for the Hungarian population, which has significant shares in several TAUs. For these measures, non-response categories were excluded from the denominator, while “other ethnicity” category was retained.

For IDA-level analysis, TAU-level political and ethnic context measures were aggregated across the IDA members, the values representing the average political and ethnic context of the territories participating in each IDA.

3.3. Hypothesis tests and statistical models

Two primary outcomes were considered at TAU level: a binary indicator, if a TAU belonged to at least one IDA (1), and the count of IDAs in which a TAU participated (2).

At the IDA-level, administrative activity was derived from the administrative status of the IDAs, as it was obtained from the already mentioned sources, nevertheless, it was not modelled as it was nearly constant throughout the dataset. Operational activity, on the other hand, was evaluated through registration in the SEAP system combined with the number of recorded procedures in the same system. Registration without any recorded procedures added is not enough to consider an IDA operationally active.

IDA purpose was classified as development-oriented, public-service-oriented, or mixed where classification was possible. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, for all hypotheses tests, only development oriented IDAs and TAUs participating in development oriented IDAs were analysed.

H1 and H2 were tested mainly through a binomial logistic model, with the binary participation indicator as the dependent variable, and local council political concentration, ethnic concentration, and logged population indicators as independent variables. The county and TAU type were excluded as they produced unstable uncertainty estimates. H1 was tested through political concentration while H2 through ethnic concentration. The Hungarian population share was evaluated separately as a measure of ethnic context. Operational activity intensity was not tested inferentially due to varied activity timeframe, limited number of development oriented IDAs with operational activity, and extreme variation in procurement counts. Consequently, a Poisson model was not suitable and a negative-binomial alternative did not converge and did not yield finite uncertainty estimates.

In a similar manner, H3 and H4 were also evaluated using a binomial logistic model at the IDA level, which tests whether any operational activity occurred. Tests to evaluate operational intensity were also considered, however, similarly, the Poisson

model was rejected due to extreme overdispersion, and a negative binomial model alternative optimization failed to produce finite uncertainty estimates.

The generalized linear models used to evaluate the five hypotheses were estimated using HC3 heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors, confidence intervals, and p-values, but not the fitted coefficients

The next sections present the descriptive findings and the results of the model estimates.

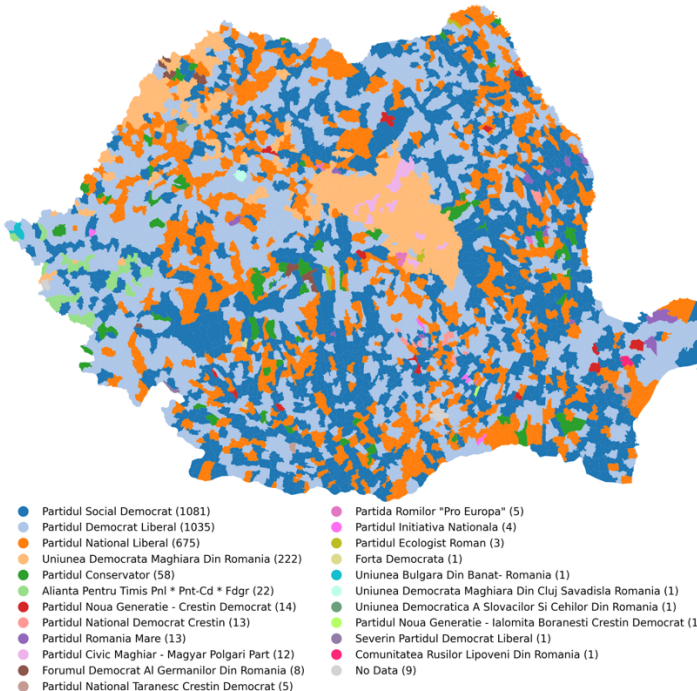
4. POLITICAL AND ETHNIC CONTEXT IN ROMANIA, AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The political context in Romania is complicated, as new parties are created all the time and alliances are made and un-made irregularly, but frequently. Thus, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify real changes through the years, for the Romanian electorate, at least in the matter of ideological preference. Nevertheless, certain changes in party distribution within the local councils can be obtained by identifying the dominant party, the level of fragmentation

4.1. Local council make-up in Romania, in the 2008, 2012 and 2016 elections

Romanian local councils displayed a predominantly competitive but concentrated political structure across the three electoral cycles. Local councils typically included several represented political actors, but mandates were generally distributed around one or two major parties or electoral coalitions rather than evenly across a large number of competitors. The median council included four represented parties or political categories in 2008 and three in both 2012 and 2016.

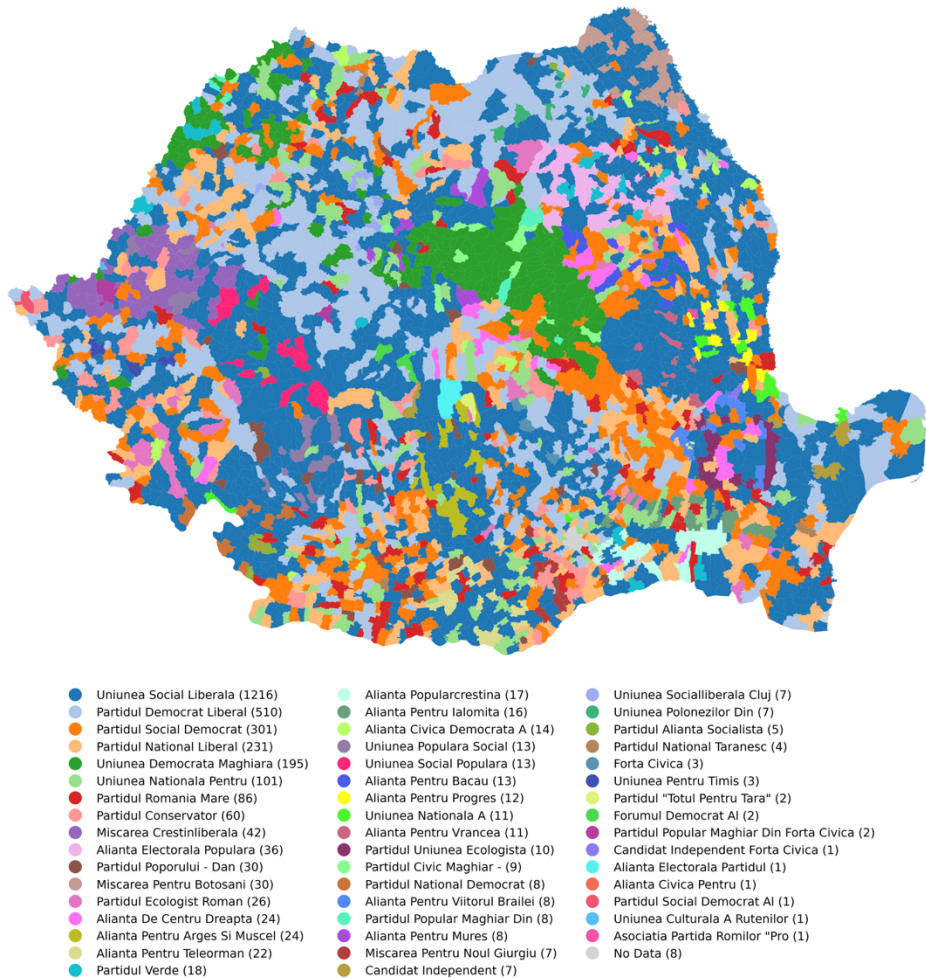
Figure 1. Dominant party per TAU local councils, after the 2008 local elections in Romania



Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

The 2008 councils showed the most pluralistic configuration of the period. The average effective number of parties was approximately 2.9, while the average dominant-party mandate share was about 51 percent. The principal political forces were the Social Democratic Party, the Democratic Liberal Party, and the National Liberal Party. Their prevalence as dominant actors indicates a broadly bipolar or tripolar local political environment in which competition was substantial, but councils were rarely fragmented into many equally powerful groups.

Figure 2. Dominant party per TAU local councils, after the 2012 local elections in Romania

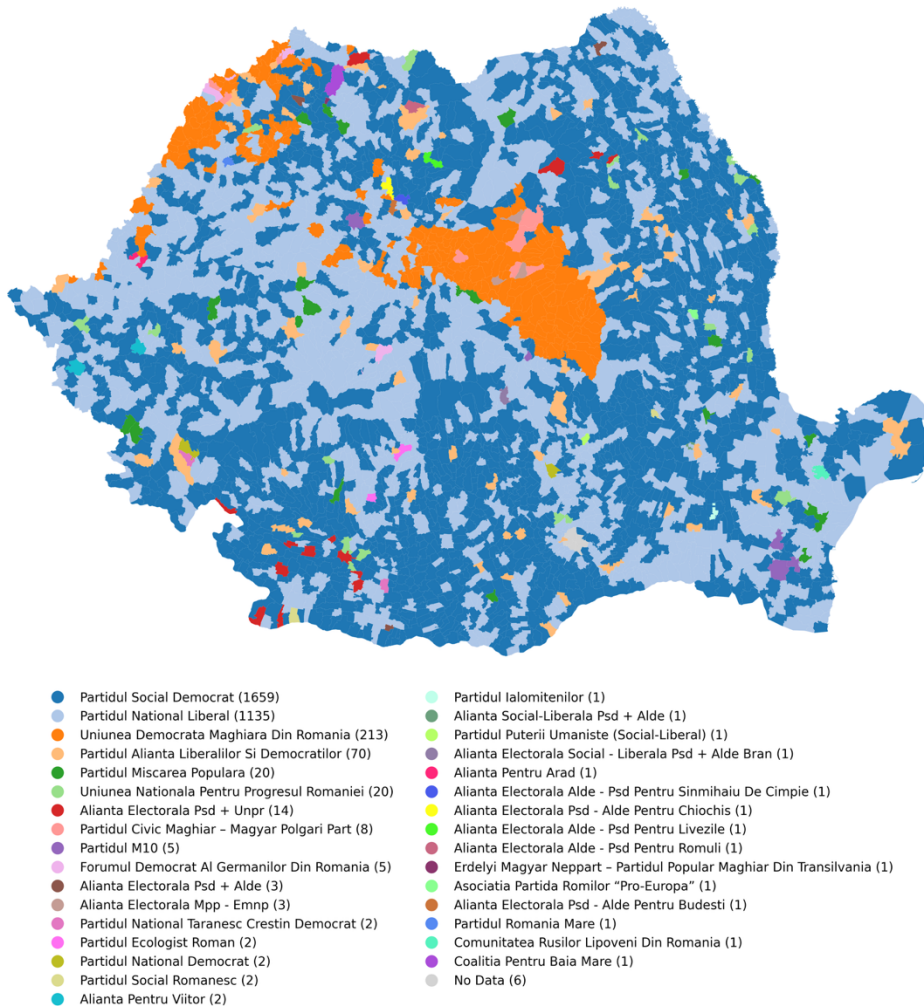


Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

The 2012 election marked a shift toward greater concentration. The average Herfindahl index increased from approximately 0.39 in 2008 to 0.44, while the effective number of parties declined from approximately 2.9 to 2.5. The average share held by the dominant political actor increased to approximately 56 percent, and the median dominant share reached approximately 55 percent. The most frequent dominant actor was the Social Liberal Union, an electoral coalition that consolidated the support of major centre-left and liberal parties in many local councils. The 2012 configuration therefore reflects

not simply stronger single-party dominance, but also the importance of electoral alliances in structuring local political control.

Figure 3. Dominant party per TAU local councils, after the 2016 local elections in Romania



Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

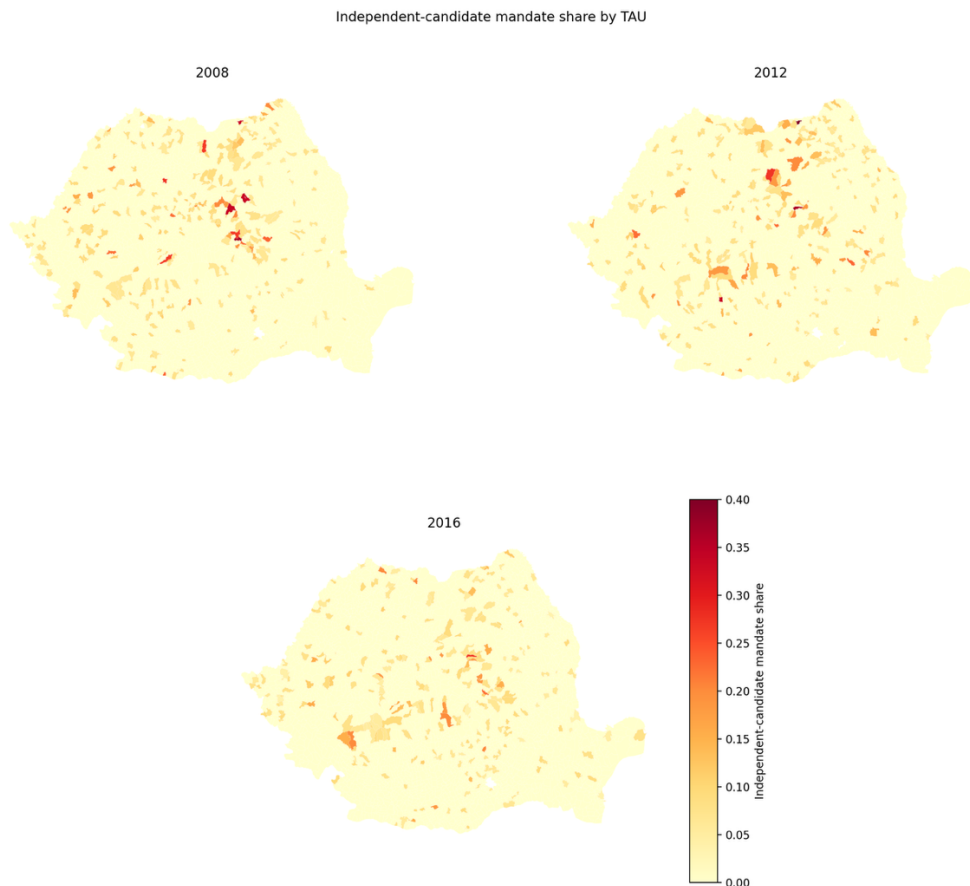
By 2016, the concentration observed in 2012 remained evident. The average Herfindahl index rose slightly further to approximately 0.45, while the effective number of parties remained close to 2.5. The average dominant-party share was approximately 57 percent, and the median was approximately 55 percent. The Social Democratic Party was the most frequent dominant actor, followed by the National Liberal Party. Compared with 2008, the 2016 councils were therefore characterized by somewhat fewer effective political competitors and a greater concentration of mandates in the leading party.

The dominant-party pattern also varied across the territorial and political structure of the country. The Social Democratic Party, Democratic Liberal Party, and National Liberal Party were the principal dominant actors in 2008, while the Social Liberal Union became especially prominent in 2012. By 2016, the main pattern was

organized around the Social Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party. The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania was also frequently dominant, reflecting the geographically concentrated political representation of Hungarian communities rather than a nationwide electoral pattern.

In the three analysed local elections, independent candidates generally represented only a small share of council mandates. Their average mandate share remained below one percent in each election year and decreased gradually (2008: 0.89%, 2012: 0.86%, 2016: 0.74%). Independent candidates therefore did not constitute a major structural alternative to party-based representation in local councils, at national level. Their importance was concentrated in particular local councils (especially in the Harghita, Covasna, Suceava, and Mureş counties) rather than reflected in the general composition of Romanian councils.

Figure 4. Independent candidate mandate share per TAU local councils, after the 2008, 2012 and 2016 local elections in Romania



Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

Overall, the three elections indicate a gradual movement from a relatively more competitive local political configuration in 2008 toward greater concentration in 2012 and 2016. This change is visible simultaneously in the increase in mandate concentration, the reduction in the effective number of parties, and the rise in the share of mandates held

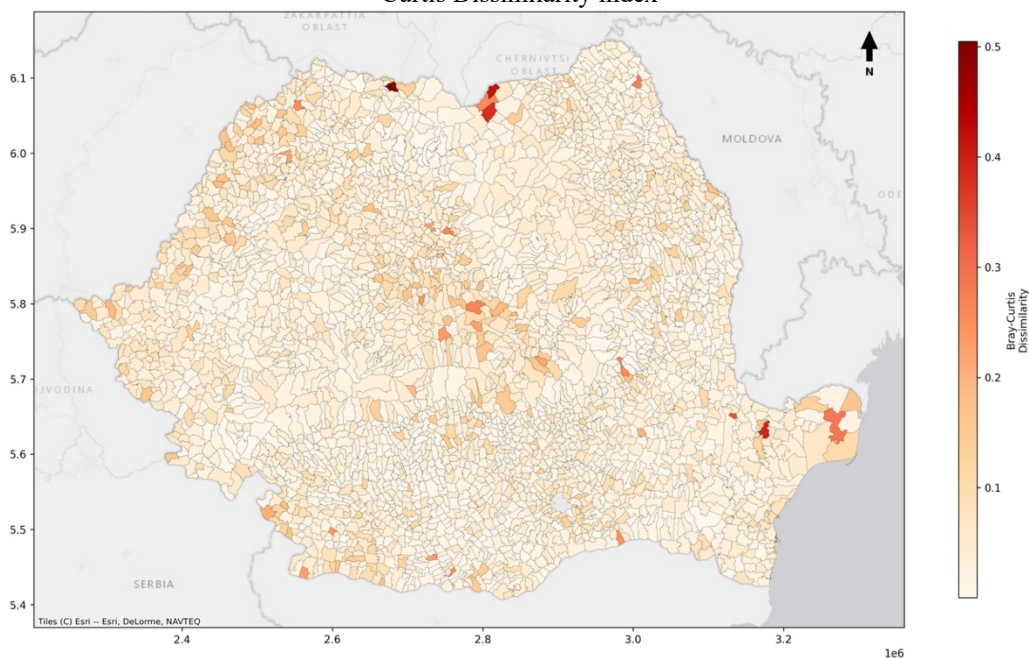
by the leading political actor. Nevertheless, the local political environment remained heterogeneous: some councils were strongly dominated by one party or coalition, while others retained meaningful multi-party competition.

This combination of concentration and territorial variation is important for understanding intercommunity cooperation. Local governments participating in the same IDA could be politically similar, particularly where one party or coalition dominated several member councils, but they could also combine councils with different dominant actors and different degrees of party fragmentation. The political context of IDA participation should therefore be understood as a structured but uneven environment in which both political alignment and political diversity were present.

4.2. Ethnic make-up of TAUs in Romania

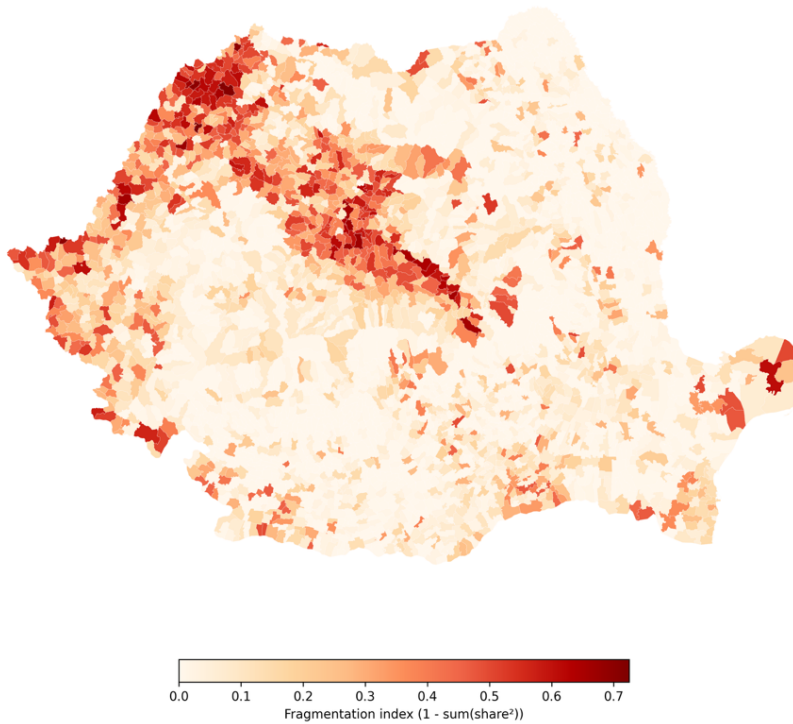
Considering that ethnicity related data at the local level is only provided through censuses (2011 & 2021), to understand how the ethnic make-up at the local level evolved between the two censuses, ethnic volatility was calculated using the Bray-Curtis Dissimilarity index.

Figure 5. Ethnic volatility by TAU, between 2011 and 2021, in Romania, based on the Bray-Curtis Dissimilarity index

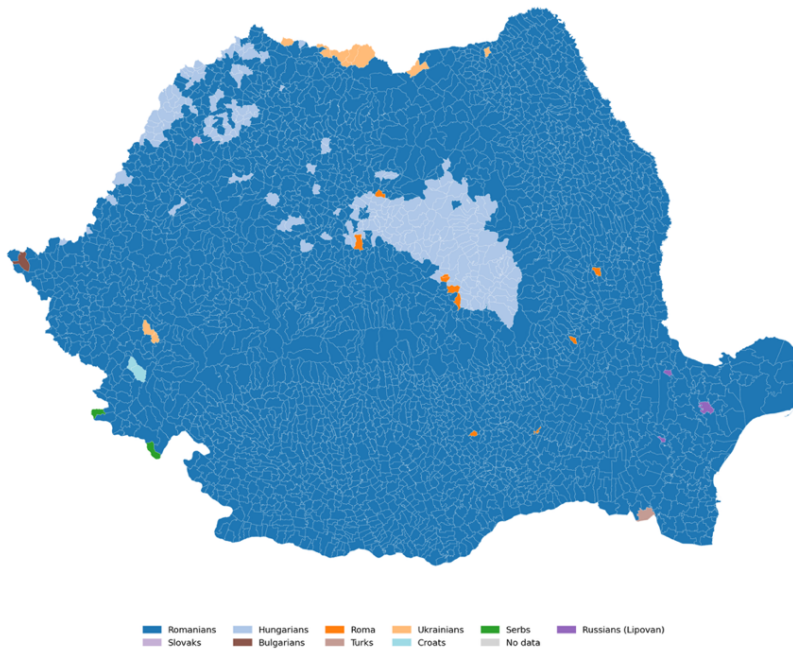


Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

The map in Figure 4 shows that ethnic volatility is quite low in most of the country. The outcomes were split into four stability categories, which shows that most TAUs were stable (2517 TAUs, Bray-Curtis index < 0.05), a significant number of TAUs showed low volatility (614 TAUs, Bray-Curtis index between 0.05 and 0.15), a few showed moderate volatility (65 TAUs, Bray-Curtis index between 0.15 and 0.30) and 5 showed High volatility (Bray-Curtis index larger than 0.30). As mentioned previously, the Municipality of Bucharest was not included in this analysis.

Figure 6. Ethnic fragmentation by TAU, in 2011.

Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

Figure 7. Dominant ethnic group by TAU, in 2011.

Source: Own computations based on ethnic population share data, for 2011 (see the *Research process* section)

The largest minority in Romania is the Hungarian one, which is dominant in several local administrative units, mainly in the central and the north-western part of Romania. The central and north-western part of Romania, along with several TAUs on the Western part of Romania, are also areas with moderate or high fragmentation values, nevertheless. Scattered around Romania, though not with that much frequency, the Roma, Ukrainian and other ethnicities dominate a few local TAUs.

Considering the above, from the point of view of the dominant ethnic group, the ethnic context is relevant mostly for the Hungarian ethnic group, and, generally, from the point of view of the fragmentation, to understand whether such context may inhibit, have no influence or, on the contrary, are favourable contexts for inter-municipal cooperation.

5. INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION THROUGH INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS IN ROMANIA

The objective of the current section is to present the manner in which inter-municipal cooperation functions in Romania, as it is established by the legislation that defines IDAs. Previous research already analysed in more depth the legislative bounds of IDAs and the (Chiriac & Țoca, 2024, pp. 172–173). Consequently, this section is just a summary of that research effort.

The Local Public Administration law from 2001 (Parlamentul României, 2007), updated in 2006, applies to the analysed timeframe for Intercommunity Development Associations. Even though it was replaced by the Administrative Code (Guvernul României, 2019), the changes were not significative. A separate law was dedicated to Metropolitan Areas in 2022, which introduced certain limitations and clarification regarding the TAUs that may create and join such an association (Parlamentul României, 2022).

Both legislative configurations include three types of IDAs: regular IDAs, Metropolitan Areas and Urban Agglomerations. Any type of local administrative unit (municipality, town or rural) may join any type of IDA, but a Metropolitan Area must be formed around a municipality, and is limited in space, while Urban Agglomerations must include at least one town. There is no limitation regarding the number of IDAs a TAU may join. IDAs may be established either to provide public services, to implement development projects of zonal, regional or local importance, or both.

Along with local TAUs, county councils can join IDAs, though they are not considered in the current analysis, as the focus falls on the local administrative level. Any type of local administrative unit may join.

According to the data collected so far, 684 IDAs were created in Romania. Aggregated by year, most were created in 2008 and 2009, followed by a much smaller secondary spike in 2015 and 2016 (Chiriac, 2026, p. 278). More than 80% still appear as administratively active, however, operationally, according to the SEAP activity, a little less than 50% are still active (Chiriac, 2026, pp. 277–278). Around 55% of IDAs were created for development projects, IDAs created to provide public services usually include most member TAUs of a county. Development IDAs that include are created around a municipality are usually the most operationally active ones.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in the third section examines the association between local political and ethnic contexts and the participation in, or operational activity of, Intercommunity Development Associations. These entities represent inter-municipal

cooperation in Romania. The focus falls on development-oriented associations (1,115 of 3,221 TAUs, approximately 34.6%), since most TAUs are part of a public service oriented IDA (3,171 of 3,221 TAUs, approximately 98.5%). This shows that IDAs seem to be the solution TAUs revolve to in order to cover the basic needs of their communities. Consequently, there is no driver to look for in this case, besides the necessity to cover these basic needs. Furthermore, it makes no sense to keep public service oriented IDAs in the analysed dataset, as it will only affect the outcome without providing additional insights. And, as a final remark, development oriented IDAs seem to be the type of inter-municipal association that relies more on voluntary association, which is where political or ethnic contexts may be more relevant.

For the first two hypotheses, H1 and H2, the dependent variable is TAU participation in a development oriented IDA. The reduced binomial logistic model was estimated on 3096 TAUs with complete predictor data and determined development IDA membership. This reduced the dataset by 85 TAUs for which the orientation of the IDA they are part of could not be established. These TAUs were treated as indetermined and were not included in any of the The dataset contains 1,090 TAUs as participants in development-oriented IDAs and 2006 as non-participants.

For H1, political concentration is negatively associated with participation in development-oriented IDAs. An increase of 0.1 in the local council Herfindahl concentration index corresponds to an estimated odds ratio of 0.93. In other words, TAUs with higher political concentration have an estimated 7% lower odds of participating in development oriented IDAs, conditional on the other predictors in the model.

For H2, there was no clear association determined between ethnic concentration and participation in a development oriented IDA, considering an estimated odds ratio per 0.1 increase of 0.97 (95% CI: 0.92 - 1.01, $p = 0.159$). On the other hand, the Hungarian population share showed a positive association with TAU participation in IDA. Each 10-percentage-point increase corresponded to estimated odds 1.24 times as high (95% CI: 1.19 - 1.29, $p < 0.001$), conditional on the model covariates. A potential explanation for this result is that the Hungarian share is the only one that has enough high ethnic share geographical coverage for this measure to significantly be associated with TAU participation in development oriented IDAs. Nevertheless, additional investigations would be required to consider this perspective.

For H3, a positive association was identified between average political concentration across the member TAUs of an IDA and the odds of operational activity. The result of the analysis determined that a 0.1 increase in average political concentration corresponded to an estimated odds ratio of 1.38 (95% CI: 1.04 - 1.83, $p = 0.024$), conditional on the structural covariates.

For H4, average ethnic concentration amongst IDA member TAUs was not clearly associated with operational activity, as a 0.1 increase in average ethnic concentration corresponds to an estimated odds ratio of 0.93 (95%, CI: 0.76 - 1.14, $p = 0.490$), as the confidence interval includes 1, which is compatible with no association. Once more, the Hungarian share, calculated as an average for the IDA member TAUs, was positively associated with operational activity, as 10% point increase in the average member-TAU Hungarian share corresponds with 1.16 odds of operational activity (95% CI: 1.03 - 1.31, $p = .013$).

Operational activity intensity, quantified as the number of SEAP registered procurements, did not produce meaningful results for H3 and H4. Consequently, no conclusions could be drawn regarding the association of political and ethnic

concentration and operational activity intensity. In the dataset, 64 development-oriented IDAs with positive procedure counts and complete covariates were identified. For this reduced dataset, the procedure-count data were highly overdispersed (the Poisson Pearson dispersion ratio was approximately 79.6). As an alternative, a negative-binomial distribution model was attempted but did not converge with finite uncertainty estimates.

To summarize, political concentration is associated with both TAU participation in an IDA and with operational activity of a development oriented IDA, even though the association is negative for the first one and positive for the second one, even though, in this second case, the result has a high level of uncertainty. The ethnic concentration index does not indicate a clear association with TAU membership in an IDA or with operational activity of an IDA, though the Hungarian share is positively associated with both outcomes. However, the estimates are imprecise and should not be treated as causal association. Additionally, these findings shouldn't be generalized to IDAs whose purpose was not established or treated as evidence about IDAs with undetermined membership.

Even though the focus falls strictly on concentration values for both local political and ethnic data, there are other aspects that were not analysed as this point, such as the relevance of the dominant political party. The intensity of operational activity might also deserve additional attention, but statistical methods might not be the best research alternative in this case. Also, caution is necessary regarding these associations, as IDA membership and purpose data is not complete for all the IDAs, and information regarding the timeline of changes to both aspects might highlight other interesting aspects regarding the implications to success in inter-municipal cooperation through Intercommunity Development Associations.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The current study examined whether political or ethnic composition of Romanian local governments is associated with participation in, and the activity of, inter-municipal cooperation. To this end, local electoral data, census-based ethnic composition data, characteristics of local territorial administrative units, and IDA membership, characteristics and activity data were analysed.

The specialty literature regarding inter-municipal cooperation reflects more on the joint provision of public services rather than on cooperation regarding common development strategies, even though this is an acknowledged potential scope for inter-municipal cooperation. Academic interest regarding political or ethnic contexts in inter-municipal cooperation seems to be absent, thus far, which is a gap that this paper tried to cover.

Participation in IDAs is widespread, though it seems to be mainly a general solution for the provision of public services to most local TAUs, and less a generalized solution for cooperation towards the common development of local, regional or zonal projects. Nevertheless, an interesting aspect to investigate further is whether the IDAs are a solution for certain public services, or for all, and how are these numbers reflected in the actual provision of these services to the communities that they provide for, especially considering that there is evidence that they seem to benefit more small communities than large ones, and efficiency may be greater for certain services than for others (Bel & Sebő, 2021, p. 21).

Even though there seems to be little interest in the specialty literature regarding the political environment at the local level, the national political context in which local administrations need to operate seems to be quite volatile in Romania. Furthermore,

informal rules and practices, at all levels, may render political context less relevant than one might expect it to be.

The local election data suggest an evolution from more towards less diversity in the dominant party in the local elections, between 2008 and 2016. Alliances were also an important part of the general political context at the local level. The importance of independent candidates was concentrated in particular local councils, though their share gradually dropped even in those instances. The data shows a move towards a less competitive local political cooperation from 2008 to 2016. The ethnic configuration shows, generally, little volatility between 2011 and 2021, in the ethnic make-up of the local TAUs. There is an geographic overlap between higher ethnic fragmentation values and the dominance of the Hungarian ethnicity, while the other ethnicities are dominant in very isolated instances. These data constitute the context within which IDA activity was analysed.

To evaluate the political context in inter-municipal cooperation, the current study focuses more on the concentration, or fragmentation, of local council mandates and doesn't investigate the implications of party ideologies, which may not be that relevant in Romania, considering the volatility of the Romanian political system, at least for the investigated timeframe. On the ethnic side of the research, the dominant ethnicity may be relevant, as the findings suggest a positive association between the Hungarian share within the population of local TAUs and TAU participation in an IDA. Additionally, a positive association, though loose, is identified regarding the Hungarian share within the total population of local TAUs and operational activity of the IDAs that they are a member of. Nevertheless, no association was identified between ethnic concentration and the two investigated outcomes.

The association of the political and ethnic contexts with operational activity intensity was not investigated either, as the available dataset would require a different approach.

Several limitations must be mentioned. First, the dataset would require further updates, to fill in the missing purpose and membership data for several IDAs. Nevertheless, in the absence of a centralized source of information, the only alternative would be to contact all TAUs that "hosted" the IDAs with missing data, which might be a failed enterprise. Additionally, these IDAs that lack information might very well be failed attempts to establish inter-municipal cooperation. From this perspective, the outcomes presented above are relevant for observable inter-municipal cooperation. Second, the analysis is observational and does not determine causality. Third, operational activity is measured through SEAP procurement data, which serves as a proxy and doesn't cover all potential IDA activities. The Hungarian-share analysis is exploratory and the relevance of the geographical distribution of this ethnicity needs to be investigated further.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a methodological contribution, as it presents an approach to examining how the political and ethnic contexts of member TAUs are associated with participation in, and operational activity of, development-oriented IDAs. The findings are mixed: some measures were associated with these outcomes while others show no clear association. Therefore, they do not establish that political or ethnic contexts drive inter-municipal cooperation, and other factors may also shape cooperation among Romanian local governments and require further investigation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arntsen, B., Torjesen, D. O., & Karlsen, T.-I. (2021). Asymmetry in inter-municipal cooperation in health services – How does it affect service quality and autonomy? *Social Science & Medicine*, 273, 113744. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.113744>
- Bågenholm, A., & Charron, N. (2020). Accountable or Untouchable? Electoral accountability in Romanian local elections. *Electoral Studies*, 66, 102183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102183>
- Bakoš, E., Hrůza, F., Fiedor, D., & Klemešová, K. D. (2021). The perception of inter-municipal cooperation by local officials and managers. *Central European Journal of Public Policy*, 15(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.2478/cejpp-2021-0002>
- Bel, G., & Sebő, M. (2021). Does Inter-Municipal Cooperation Really Reduce Delivery Costs? An Empirical Evaluation of the Role of Scale Economies, Transaction Costs, and Governance Arrangements. *Urban Affairs Review*, 57(1), 153–188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087419839492>
- Buta, O., & Farcas, R. (2025). Clientelism and digitalisation of Roma parties' electoral campaigns: A case study. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 31(1), 34–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12636>
- Buta, O., & Gherghina, S. (2023). Organisational capacity and electoral gains: Why majority parties nominate Roma candidates in local elections. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(9), 2154–2171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2031921>
- Camões, P. J., Tavares, A., & Teles, F. (2021). Assessing the intensity of cooperation: A study of joint delegation of municipal functions to inter-municipal associations. *Local Government Studies*, 47(4), 593–615. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2020.1857245>
- Casula, M. (2020). A contextual explanation of regional governance in Europe: Insights from inter-municipal cooperation. *Public Management Review*, 22(12), 1819–1851. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1665700>
- Charron, N., & Bågenholm, A. (2025). Political corruption and voting in Romanian municipal elections: Why perceptions of collective action matter. *European Journal of Political Research*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1475676525100352>
- Chiriac, C. (2026). Do Intercommunity Development Associations Favour Polycentric Development? An Analysis of Territorial Policies of the EU. *Analele Universității Din Oradea. Seria: Relații Internaționale Și Studii Europene*, (XVIII). <https://doi.org/10.58603/RWEP2986>
- Chiriac, C., & Țoca, C.-V. (2024). Intercommunity Development Associations in Romania. A lost opportunity? *Analele Universității Din Oradea Seria Relații Internaționale Și Studii Europene*, XVI, 169–180. <https://doi.org/10.58603/BVHJ5431>
- Guvernul României. (2019, July 5). *Ordonanța de urgență numărul 57 din 3 Iulie 2019 privind Codul Administrativ* [Law Portal]. Portal legislativ. <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/215925>
- Hulst, J. R. (Rudie), & Van Montfort, A. J. G. M. (André). (2012). Institutional features of inter-municipal cooperation: Cooperative arrangements and their national contexts. *Public Policy and Administration*, 27(2), 121–144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076711403026>

- Hulst, R., Van Montfort, A., Haveri, A., Airaksinen, J., & Kelly, J. (2009). Institutional Shifts In Inter-Municipal Service Delivery: An analysis of developments in eight Western European countries. *Public Organization Review*, 9(3), 263–285. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-009-0085-8>
- Iașu, C., Fedor, A.-D., & Grecu, S.-P. (2024). Predictors of mayoral reelection in Romanian local elections. Long-term analysis 1996–2016. *Heliyon*, 10(21), e39812. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e39812>
- Leininger, A., & Meijers, M. J. (2021). Do Populist Parties Increase Voter Turnout? Evidence From Over 40 Years of Electoral History in 31 European Democracies. *Political Studies*, 69(3), 665–685. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720923257>
- LeRoux, K., Brandenburger, P. W., & Pandey, S. K. (2010). Interlocal Service Cooperation in U.S. Cities: A Social Network Explanation. *Public Administration Review*, 70(2), 268–278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02133.x>
- Manolache, C. (2013). Post-communist Romania: A peculiar case of divided government. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 13(3), 427–440.
- Martin-Russu, L. (2022a). Fragmentation: A Trait of the Romanian Political Elite. In L. Martin-Russu, *Deforming the Reform* (pp. 91–122). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11081-8_3
- Martin-Russu, L. (2022b). Towards a Theory of De-Europeanization, an Elite-Based Approach. In L. Martin-Russu, *Deforming the Reform* (pp. 19–90). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11081-8_2
- Müller, J.-W. (2013). Defending Democracy within the EU. *Journal of Democracy*, 24(2), 138–149. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0023>
- Mutnansky, A. R. (2025). Why Ethnic Mobilization is Sustained: The Case of the Hungarian Minority in Romania. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 17(Studies of Transition States and Societies, Vol. 17 (2025): Studies of Transition States and Societies), 146–161. <https://doi.org/10.58036/STSS.V17I0.1321>
- National Democratic Institute. (2004). *Romania local elections 2004: Post-election report*. National Democratic Institute. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/1725_ro_report_070104_5.pdf
- OG 26 30/01/2000—Portal Legislativ. (n.d.). Retrieved 5 September 2026, from <https://legislatie.just.ro/public/detaliiDocument/20740>
- Parlamentul României. (2007, February 20). *Legea numărul 215 din 23 aprilie 2001 a administrației publice locale* [Law Portal]. Portal Legislativ. <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/214333>
- Parlamentul României. (2022, July 25). *LEGE 246 20/07/2022—Privind zonele metropolitane, precum și pentru modificarea și completarea unor acte normative* [Law Portal]. Portal Legislativ. <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/257798>
- Persson, B. (2026). Exploring regional aspects of intermunicipal cooperation: An analysis of municipal federations for upper secondary education in Sweden. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 14(2), 344–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2024.2427802>
- Radio România Actualități. (2015, May 11). *Referendum eşuat pentru alipirea Sânmartin la Oradea*. [romania-actualitati.ro. https://www.romania-actualitati.ro/stiri/romania/referendum-esuat-pentru-alipirea-sanmartin-la-oradea-id70964.html](https://www.romania-actualitati.ro/stiri/romania/referendum-esuat-pentru-alipirea-sanmartin-la-oradea-id70964.html)

- Regional elections in Romania, 9 June 2024. (n.d.). *Groupe d'études Géopolitiques*. Retrieved 9 September 2026, from <https://geopolitique.eu/en/articles/regional-elections-in-romania-9-june-2024/>
- Registrul unităților administrativ-teritoriale a României | Institutul Național de Statistică*. (n.d.). Retrieved 17 September 2026, from <https://insse.ro/cms/ro/siruta>
- Rezultate 2011 – Recensământul Populației și Locuitorilor*. (n.d.). Retrieved 23 September 2026, from <https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rpl-2011/rezultate-2011/>
- Rezultate definitive: Caracteristici etno-culturale demografice – Recensământul Populației și Locuitorilor*. (n.d.). Retrieved 23 September 2026, from <https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-rpl-2021/rezultate-definitive-caracteristici-etno-culturale-demografice/>
- Săgeată, R. (2012). Inter-Communal Cooperation and Regional Development: The Case of Romania. *QUAGEO*, 31(2), 95–106. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10117-012-0022-8>
- Stan, L., & Zaharia, R. (2021). Romania: Political Developments and Data in 2020. *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook*, 60(1), 330–347. <https://doi.org/10.1111/2047-8852.12312>
- Stănuș, C. (2011). Patterns of Inter-Municipal Cooperation and Local Government Characteristics in Romania. *Southeastern Europe*, 35(2), 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633311X585379>
- Stănuș, C. (2018). The Architecture of a Complex System: The Oradea Metropolitan Area in Romania. In F. Teles & P. Swianiewicz (Eds), *Inter-Municipal Cooperation in Europe* (pp. 293–303). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62819-6_16
- Swianiewicz, P., & Teles, F. (2018). Inter-municipal Cooperation Diversity, Evolution and Future Research Agenda. In F. Teles & P. Swianiewicz (Eds), *Inter-Municipal Cooperation in Europe* (pp. 335–350). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62819-6_20
- Volintiru, C., & Zgut-Przybylska, E. (2024). The Eroding Force of Informal Rules: Romania Between Democracy and Europeanization. In L. Stan & D. Vancea (Eds), *Post-Communist Progress and Stagnation at 35* (pp. 57–81). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55750-7_4