# Regional disparities in funding the social economy through POCU 2014-2020: A comparative analysis of the North-West and North-East regions

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**Abstract**

This study provides a comparative analysis of funding allocated to the social economy through the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) 2014-2020, Specific Objective 4.16, across the North-West and North-East development regions of Romania. Drawing on literature on regional disparities in structural funds absorption and the social economy institutional framework, the research investigates whether differences in administrative capacity and economic development are reflected in access to funding for social entrepreneurship. The method is comparative-descriptive, based on official public data from the data.gov.ro portal, specifically the 'Contracted Projects' dataset. The results confirm the main hypothesis (H1): the North-West region contracted a higher number of projects (71 vs. 55) and a higher total funding value (747 million lei vs. 526 million lei), a gap driven primarily by project volume rather than size, as the average value per project differs by 10.2%. The secondary hypothesis (H2) is partially confirmed: NGOs are the dominant beneficiary category in the North-West (43.7%), whilst public institutions constitute the majority in the North-East (58.2%), reflecting a less consolidated non-profit ecosystem in less developed regions. The study contributes to literature on the territorial dimension of social economy policies in Romania and formulates implications for ESF+ interventions during 2021-2027.

**Keywords:** social economy, social entrepreneurship, POCU, North-West, North-East

**JEL Classification: L31, R58, H83**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the social economy has been one of the central pillars of European policies on social cohesion and sustainable development. According to the Action Plan for the Social Economy adopted by the European Commission (European Commission, 2021), the social economy encompasses entities such as cooperatives, associations, foundations and social enterprises, defined by the priority given to social objectives over profit maximisation and by the reinvestment of surpluses for purposes of community interest. In the same conceptual framework, the OECD (2023) defines the social and solidarity economy as a set of organisations that combine economic activity with explicit social missions, participatory governance and a focus on measurable social impact, whilst recognising the diversity of legal and institutional forms through which it manifests itself at national and regional levels. Recent research confirms that hybrid social enterprise models are steadily gaining ground at European level, becoming increasingly aligned with sustainable development goals (Pérez-Barea, 2025).

In the academic literature, the European social enterprise model is conceptualised as a hybrid organisational form, combining market logic with objectives of inclusion and solidarity (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Calò et al., 2024). The specialist literature from 2025 highlights that hybrid social enterprise models are undergoing a sustained process of consolidation at European level, integrating sustainable development goals ever more explicitly into the organisational mission (Pérez-Barea, 2025). This perspective underscores the role of the social economy in creating jobs for vulnerable groups, providing services of general interest, and strengthening social capital at local and community level.

Recent empirical studies that include Romania in their analysis confirm that social entrepreneurship contributes positively to social cohesion and sustainability, with economic and social contextual factors significantly influencing the extent of this impact (Fernández-Guadaño & Diez, 2024).

Within the European Union's cohesion policies, the social economy is recognised as a key instrument for both reducing territorial disparities and promoting balanced regional development (European Commission, 2021). This recognition was reinforced by the 2023 European Council Recommendation on the development of frameworks for the social economy, which urges Member States to integrate the social economy into national employment and social cohesion policies. The 9th Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion (European Commission, 2024) highlights that, although every euro invested in the 2014–2020 cohesion policy generated a multiplier effect of 1.3 euros at European Union level, the impact varies considerably between regions, depending on their administrative capacity and level of development. Interventions financed by the Structural Funds aim not only to stimulate entrepreneurial initiative but also to promote the socio-professional integration of people at risk of social exclusion. In the case of Romania, this territorial variation in impact is reflected in significant differences in access to Structural

Funds across development regions, as confirmed by the empirical data of this study.

In Romania, the development of the social economy sector has been supported by the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) 2014-2020, through Specific Objective 4.16 under Priority Axis 4 - Social Inclusion and Combating Poverty, which aimed to support the establishment and consolidation of social economy enterprises through funding schemes dedicated to social entrepreneurship. According to a recent OECD report (2025) on the social economy in Romania, POCU was the main European funding mechanism for supporting social enterprises during the 2014-2020 period, contributing to the significant expansion of the sector, particularly through the European Social Fund.

However, the impact of interventions funded by structural funds is not evenly distributed across the country. The literature on cohesion policies shows that the absorption of European funds is influenced by factors such as regional administrative capacity, prior institutional experience, the level of economic development and the density of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Rodríguez-Pose & Fratesi, 2004; Incaltarau, Pascariu & Surubaru, 2020). Regions with a more robust institutional infrastructure and a more mature entrepreneurial culture tend to make greater use of the available funding opportunities. This dynamic is also relevant in the case of Romania, where recent studies confirm that more economically developed regions tend to attract a greater volume of projects with European funding, including in social sectors (Bostan et al., 2022).

In this context, the North-West and North-East regions of Romania exhibit distinct structural characteristics both in terms of their level of economic development and their experience in managing European funds, which justifies a comparative analysis of the distribution of funding for the social economy under the POCU 2014–2020.

Although the literature on the social economy in Romania is expanding, studies that comparatively analyse the territorial distribution of funding for social entrepreneurship at regional level remain limited. The bibliometric analysis conducted by Calò et al. (2024) on the literature concerning social enterprises confirms that research in the field remains focused on case studies and conceptual analyses, without systematically examining the territorial distributions of public funding. Similarly, existing studies in Romania focus predominantly on the regulatory framework or the social impact of individual enterprises (Gotea, 2024), without capturing intra-national differences in access to structural funds. The regional dimension of the implementation of public policies dedicated to the social economy thus remains insufficiently explored in specialist literature.

Consequently, this study contributes to the literature through a comparative analysis of the distribution and structure of funding allocated under Specific Objective 4.16 of the POCU 2014-2020 in the North-West and North-East regions, highlighting existing territorial disparities and their implications for the effectiveness of cohesion policies.

## 2. THEORETICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. The social economy and social entrepreneurship - conceptual approaches

The social economy is a complex conceptual field, the boundaries of which vary according to the legal and institutional traditions of each Member State. In a broad sense, the social economy encompasses cooperatives, associations, foundations, mutual societies and social enterprises - private entities that prioritise a social mission over profit distribution and operate on principles of participatory governance (OECD, 2023). This definition is also enshrined in Romanian law through Law No. 219/2015 on the social economy, as subsequently amended, which regulates the operating conditions of social enterprises and social integration enterprises.

The concept of the social enterprise has been systematised in European literature through the EMES approach, which identifies a set of defining economic and social criteria for this type of organisation (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). The social enterprise is thus conceptualised as a hybrid organisational form, which combines commercial logic with a mission of inclusion and solidarity (Calò et al., 2024). Recent research shows that these hybrid models are gaining ground at European level, increasingly explicitly integrating the objectives of sustainable development and social cohesion (Pérez-Barea, 2025; Fernández-Guadaño & Diez, 2024).

### 2.2. Social entrepreneurship and regional development

The link between social entrepreneurship and regional development is recognised both in academic literature and in the European Union's public policy documents. Social enterprises contribute to job creation for vulnerable groups, the provision of services of general interest and the strengthening of social capital at local level, thereby generating positive effects on territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2021). The Action Plan for the Social Economy (European Commission, 2021) explicitly recognises the potential of the social economy to reduce territorial disparities by stimulating entrepreneurial initiative in disadvantaged communities and through the socio-professional integration of people at risk of exclusion.

The 2023 Council of the European Union Recommendation on frameworks for the social economy reinforces this direction, calling on Member States to integrate the social economy into national employment and cohesion strategies (Council of the European Union, 2023). Empirically, recent studies confirm that social entrepreneurship contributes positively to sustainability and social innovation, with the effects being significantly influenced by the regional economic and institutional context (Fernández-Guadaño & Diez, 2024).

### 2.3. Theories on regional disparities and the absorption of structural funds

The impact of interventions financed by structural funds is not evenly distributed across the country. The literature on cohesion policies highlights that the absorption of European funds and the efficiency of their use are conditioned by factors such as regional administrative capacity, prior institutional experience, the level of economic development and the density of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Rodríguez-Pose & Fratesi, 2004; Incaltarau, Pascariu & Surubaru, 2020). Regions with a more robust institutional infrastructure tend to make greater use of available funding opportunities, whilst less developed regions often face a vicious circle: low administrative capacity, low absorption, and limited impact on development (Ali, Brasili & Calia, 2025).

This dynamic is also confirmed by the most recent analyses at European level. The 9th Cohesion Report (European Commission, 2024) shows that, although inter-state disparities have narrowed in recent decades, intra-national disparities have increased in many Member States, including Romania. Recent studies conducted at NUTS3 level demonstrate that regions eligible for structural funds may experience an increase in internal disparities if the distribution of funding favours areas that are already more developed within the same region (López-Villuendas & del Campo, 2024).

In the Romanian context, regional differences in economic performance, employment rates and the degree of urbanisation influence the ability of local actors to access and implement projects in the social economy sector. Studies focusing on Romania confirm that more economically developed regions attract a greater volume of European-funded projects, including in social sectors (Bostan et al., 2022). The North-West and North-East regions exhibit distinct structural characteristics both in terms of their level of economic development and their experience in managing European funds, which justifies the comparative analysis proposed by this study.

The analysis of regional disparities in accessing funding for the social economy is not merely a quantitative assessment of the volume of funds attracted, but also a means of understanding the mechanisms through which public policies contribute to reducing or, conversely, perpetuating territorial differences (Rodríguez-Pose & Fratesi, 2004; European Commission, 2024).

### 2.4. Structure of the POCU 2014–2020 and Specific Objective 4.16

The Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) 2014–2020 was the main European Social Fund financing instrument in Romania during the programming period under review. Priority Axis 4 – Social Inclusion and Combating Poverty included Specific Objective 4.16, dedicated to strengthening the capacity of social economy enterprises. Through the calls for projects related to this specific objective, support schemes were funded for the establishment, development and sustainability of social enterprises, with a focus on the socio-professional integration of vulnerable groups. According to public data available on the data.gov.ro portal, the 'Contracted Projects' dataset allows for the reconstruction of the territorial distribution of this funding at regional level, constituting the primary data source for the empirical analysis in this study.

## 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

Building on the theoretical and institutional framework presented, this study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the distribution and structure of funding allocated to the social economy through the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) 2014–2020, under Specific Objective 4.16, in the North-West and North-East development regions of Romania. The aim is to determine to what extent public interventions designed to support social entrepreneurship have been distributed in a territorially balanced manner or, conversely, have reflected significant regional disparities, consistent with the structural differences between the two regions.

Within this analytical framework, the main research question is formulated as follows:

*Are there significant differences between the North-West and North-East regions in terms of the volume and structure of funding allocated to the social economy through POCU 2014–2020 (OS 4.16)?*

To operationalise this research question, the following working hypotheses are formulated:

- **H1 (main hypothesis - volume):** The North-West region has attracted a higher volume of funding for the social economy through OS 4.16 of POCU 2014–2020, compared to the North-East region, because of a higher level of economic development and stronger institutional capacity.
- **H2 (secondary hypothesis - structure):** There are significant differences in the structure of funded projects and the types of beneficiaries involved under SO 4.16 between the North-West and North-East regions, reflecting distinct characteristics of the social economy ecosystem at regional level.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Scope of the research

The analysis focuses on projects funded under the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) 2014-2020, Specific Objective 4.16 - *'Strengthening the c e capacity of social economy enterprises'*, an intervention dedicated to supporting the establishment and development of social enterprises in Romania. The choice of this specific objective is based on its direct relevance to the social economy sector and the clear demarcation of interventions funded by the European Social Fund for social entrepreneurship.

The choice of the 2014–2020 programming period is motivated by three main considerations. Firstly, this financial cycle has been completed, which allows for the use of consolidated, complete and comparable data, unlike the 2021–2027 period, which is still being implemented. Secondly, SO 4.16 is specific to this period, representing the first European funding mechanism explicitly dedicated to the development of the social economy in Romania through the European Social Fund. Thirdly, POCU 2014–2020 constitutes the first period in which the Romanian state has systematically funded social entrepreneurship on a national scale, thereby creating the conditions for a meaningful comparative territorial analysis.

**4.2. Justification for the selection of regions**

The study focuses on the North-West and North-East development regions, selected based on the significant structural contrast between them, which makes them particularly relevant for a comparative analysis of territorial disparities in the absorption of European funds.

The North-West region, comprising the counties of Cluj, Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Maramureș, Satu Mare and Sălaj, is one of the most developed regions in Romania, with a per capita GDP above the national average, a high employment rate and a well-established entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in the city of Cluj-Napoca. It consistently ranks at the top of regional rankings regarding the absorption of European funds and institutional capacity (Bostan et al., 2022).

The North-East region, comprising the counties of Iași, Bacău, Neamț, Suceava, Vaslui and Botoșani, represents, by contrast, one of the least developed regions of the European Union, with one of the lowest GDP per capita figures nationally, a high poverty rate and more limited administrative capacity in managing structural funds (Bostan et al., 2022; European Commission, 2024).

This structural contrast between the two regions provides a relevant analytical framework for investigating how differences in economic development and institutional capacity are reflected in the distribution of funding for the social economy, thereby helping to test the hypotheses formulated.

**4.3. Data sources**

The data used in the analysis is drawn from official public sources relating to projects funded under the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) 2014–2020. Specifically, the analysis is based on *the 'Contracted Projects'* dataset, available on Romania's national open data portal (data.gov.ro), which includes detailed information on the project code (SMIS), project title, beneficiary, region of implementation and related financial figures.

The unit of analysis is the project funded under Specific Objective 4.16 of POCU 2014-2020. The following information was collected for each project: region of implementation, type of beneficiary, eligible value and total project value. The data was subsequently filtered and aggregated to enable a comparative analysis between the North-West and North-East regions, based on the indicators presented in the following section.

**4.4. Indicators used**

To test the hypotheses formulated, the following indicators were calculated:

- **the total number of projects funded** in each region, used to highlight the regional distribution of interventions;
- the **total value of funding attracted**, reflecting the volume of financial resources mobilised at regional level;
- **the average value of funding per project**, calculated by dividing the total value of projects by the number of projects in each region;
- **the distribution of beneficiary types**, used to analyse the structure of the actors involved in project implementation.

These indicators allow for the assessment of both the volume of funding attracted at regional level, with a view to testing hypothesis H1, and the structure of the funded interventions, with a view to testing hypothesis H2.

**4.5. Method of analysis**

The method used is a comparative descriptive-analytical one, frequently applied in studies on the territorial distribution of European Structural Funds (Rodríguez-Pose & Fratesi, 2004; Incaltarau, Pascariu & Surubaru, 2020). This involves calculating and comparing aggregate indicators at regional level, followed by the interpretation of the differences identified in relation to the theoretical framework and the formulated hypotheses.

Hypothesis H1 is assessed by comparing the aggregate values of funding and the number of projects between the two regions, whilst hypothesis H2 is analysed by examining the structure of beneficiaries and the distribution of average project values. The analysis is exploratory and interpretative in nature, without the application of advanced statistical tests, which is consistent with the nature of the available data and the comparative objective of the study.

## 5.RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

This section presents the results of the comparative analysis of projects funded under POCU 2014–2020 within Specific Objective 4.16, at the level of the North-West and North-East regions. The results are organised according to the working hypotheses formulated, aiming to assess both the volume of funding attracted at regional level (H1) and the structure of beneficiaries and the funding intensity per project (H2).

**5.1. Regional distribution of projects and funding attracted (testing H1)**

The first working hypothesis concerns the existence of differences in the volume of funding attracted through OS

4.16 between the two regions analysed. The distribution of contracted projects and the associated financial values is presented in Table 1

**Table 1. Distribution of POCU OS 4.16 projects in the North-West and North-East regions**

| Region | Number of Project | Total eligible value (lei) | Total project value (lei) | Payments to beneficiaries (lei) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **North-East** | 55 | 444,678,129 | 525,541,084 | 317,145,400 |
| **North-West** | 71 | 631,451,534 | 747,388,905 | 481,456,077 |
| **TOTAL** | **128** | **1,076,129,663** | **1,272,929,989** | **798,601,477** |

Source: own analysis based on data from the 'Contracted Projects' dataset, the government opens data portal data.gov.ro.

The data in Table 1 highlight clear differences between the two regions in terms of the volume of funding attracted. The North-West region accounts for 71 funded projects, representing 56.35% of the total 126 projects across the two regions, compared to 55 projects in the North-East region (43.65%). The difference in absolute terms is 16 projects, indicating a greater capacity among beneficiaries in the North-West to access available funding.

From a financial perspective, the gap is even more pronounced. The total eligible value of projects in the North-West region exceeds 631 million lei, compared to approximately 445 million lei in the North-East region, and the total value of projects reaches 747 million lei in the North-West, compared to approximately 526 million lei in the North-East a difference of over 221 million lei, equivalent to approximately 42% of the total value of projects in the North-East. Similarly, payments made to beneficiaries are significantly higher in the North-West (over 481 million lei) compared to the North-East (approximately 317 million lei), suggesting not only a higher volume of contracted projects, but also a greater capacity for implementation and effective absorption of funds.

These results are illustrated comparatively in Figure 1, which shows the distribution of the total values of projects and payments made in the two regions, visually highlighting the extent of the regional disparity.

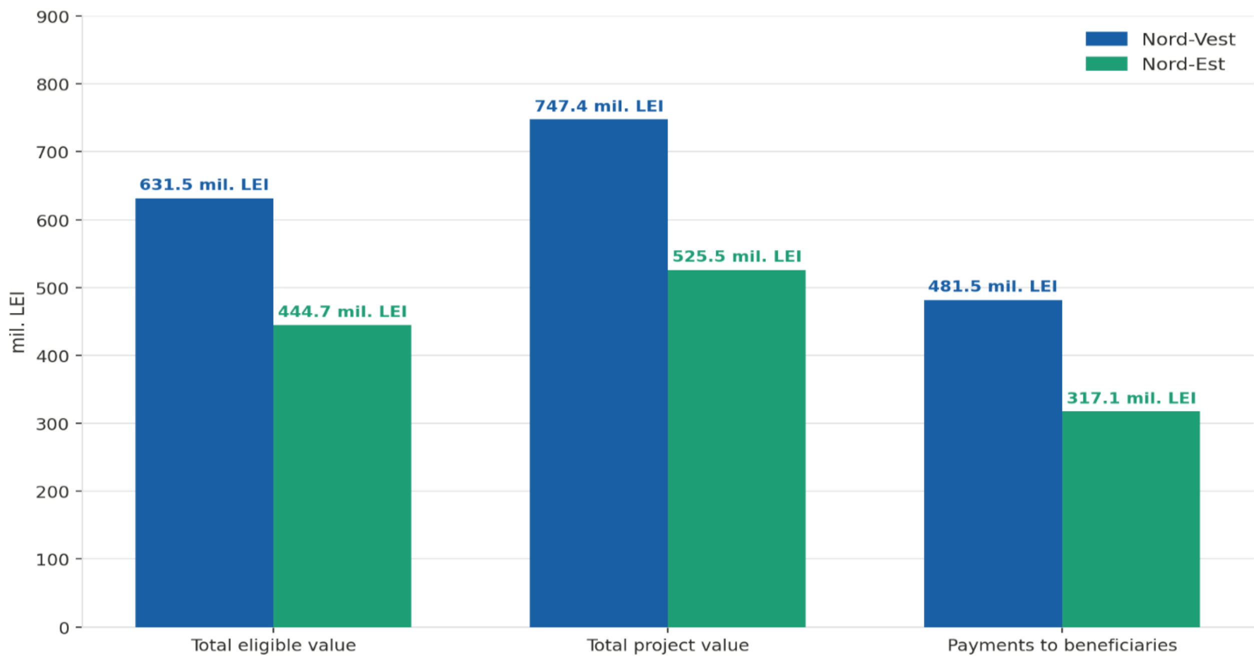


**Figure 1. Regional comparison - total value of projects and payments made (lei)**

Source: Author

(Comparative bar chart: North-East vs. North-West for total project value and payments made) Based on these results, hypothesis H1 is confirmed: the North-West region attracted a significantly higher volume of funding for the social economy through OS 4.16 of the POCU 2014-2020, both in terms of the number of projects and the total value of funding contracted and absorbed.

**5.2. Funding intensity per project and beneficiary structure (testing H2)**

The second hypothesis concerns the existence of differences in the structure of projects and beneficiaries funded between the two regions. The analysis considers two complementary dimensions: the average funding intensity per project and the distribution of beneficiary types

**Average funding per project**

**Table 2. Average funding per project in the regions analysed**

| Region | Number of projects | Total project value (lei) | Average value per project (lei) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **North-East** | 55 | 525,541,084 | 9,555,292 |
| **North-West** | 71 | 747,388,905 | 10,526,604 |

Source: own analysis based on data from the 'Contracted Projects' dataset, the government opens data portal data.gov.ro.

An analysis of the average funding per project reveals a more moderate difference between the two regions compared to the gap recorded in the total volume of funding. In the North-West region, the average value per project exceeds 10.5 million lei, compared to approximately 9.6 million lei in the North-East region – a difference of approximately 971,000 lei per project, representing around 10.2%.

This relatively small difference in the average value per project suggests that the structure of the funded interventions is comparable in terms of the average size of projects in the two regions. In other words, the major gap identified in terms of total volume is determined primarily by the higher number of projects attracted by the North-West, rather than by a significantly different size of these projects. This result indicates that beneficiaries in the North-West were more numerous and more active in accessing funding, rather than having implemented larger-scale projects.

**Structure of beneficiary types**

**Table 3. Distribution of beneficiary types across the analysed regions**

| Region | NGOs/associations/foundations | Commercial companies | Public institutions | Other entities | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **North-East** | 19 | 3 | 32 | 1 | **55** |
| **North-West** | 31 | 9 | 30 | 1 | **71** |
| **Total** | **50** | **12** | **62** | **2** | **126** |

Source: own analysis based on data from the 'Contracted Projects' dataset, the government opens data portal data.gov.ro.

An analysis of the beneficiary structure reveals similarities, but also notable differences between the two regions. In the North-West, public institutions and NGOs are practically on a par: 30 projects implemented by public institutions (42.3%) compared to 31 projects implemented by NGOs/associations/foundations (43.7%). In the North-East, public institutions are the dominant category, with 32 projects (58.2%), compared to 19 projects implemented by NGOs (34.5%).

Commercial companies constitute the third largest category, with 9 projects in the North-West (12.7%) and 3 projects in the North-East (5.5%) a significant proportional difference between the two regions. The most notable difference is precisely in the case of NGOs: they are implementing 31 projects in the North-West compared to just 19 in the North-East, suggesting a more established and active non-profit ecosystem in the North-West. In contrast, the North-East is characterised by a more pronounced involvement of public actors, possibly because of a less developed non-profit sector.

Figure 2 presents the percentage distribution of beneficiary types across the two regions, visually illustrating both the similarities and the structural differences identified.

Based on these results, hypothesis H2 is partially confirmed: although the overall structure of beneficiaries shows certain similarities, with a high proportion of both public institutions and NGOs in both regions, there are notable differences in their distribution, particularly regarding the role of the non-profit sector, which is significantly more active in the North-West, and the greater involvement of public institutions in the North-East.

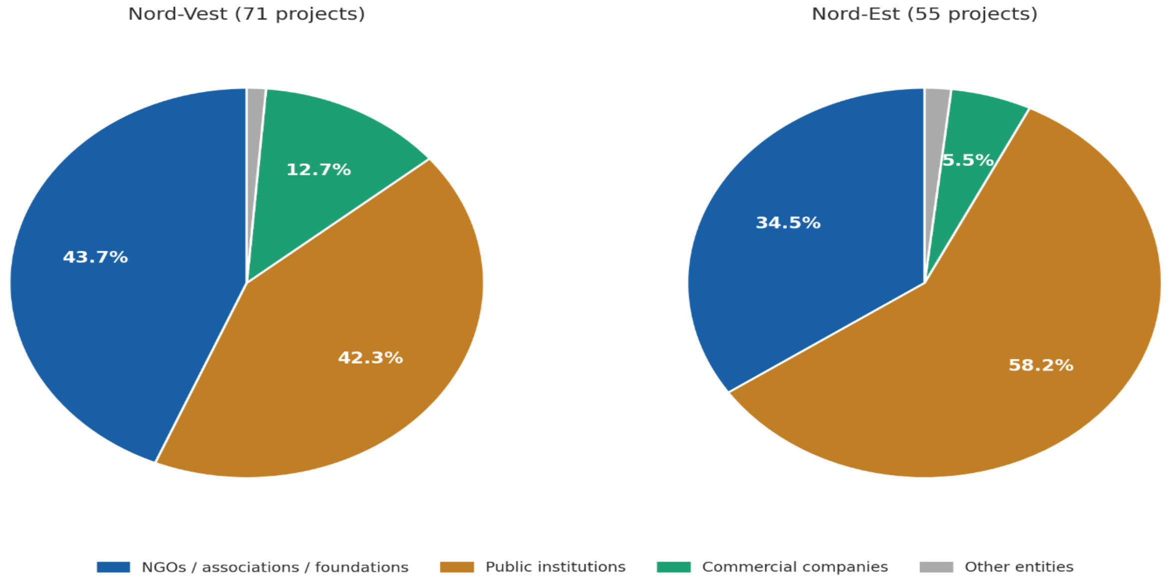


**Figure 2. Structure of POCU OS 4.16 beneficiaries - comparison between the North-East and the North-West(%)**
Source: Author

Based on these results, hypothesis H2 is partially confirmed: although the overall structure of beneficiaries is similar in the two regions, with NGOs predominating in both cases, there are notable differences in the proportions of beneficiary categories, particularly regarding the involvement of public institutions and non-profit organisations, reflecting distinct characteristics of the social economy ecosystem at regional level.

**Comparative summary**

Taken together, the results of the analysis paint a coherent picture of regional disparities in the distribution of funding allocated to the social economy through POCU OS 4.16. The North-West region outperforms the North-East both in terms of the number of projects attracted and the total volume of funding contracted and absorbed. The difference in the average value per project is smaller, indicating that the gap is mainly driven by the greater capacity of the North-West's entrepreneurial ecosystem to generate and sustain a larger number of projects, rather than by their differing sizes.

From the perspective of beneficiary structure, the predominance of non-governmental organisations in both regions confirms the central role of the non-profit sector in the implementation of public policies dedicated to the social economy. This finding is consistent with trends identified at European level, where NGOs, associations and foundations represent the main categories of beneficiaries of European Social Fund funding for the social economy (Calò et al., 2024; OECD, 2025). The differences in the proportions of beneficiary categories also reflect the specific characteristics of the local ecosystem, in particular the varying degrees of maturity of the non-profit sector in the two regions, more established in the North-West, more dependent on public actors in the North-East (Bostan et al., 2022; Pérez-Barea, 2025).

## 6.CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to conduct a comparative analysis of the distribution and structure of funding allocated to the social economy through the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) 2014-2020, under Specific Objective 4.16, in the North-West and North-East development regions of Romania. The approach was based on the premise that interventions funded by structural funds are not uniformly distributed across the territory, and that administrative capacity, institutional experience and the level of regional economic development significantly influence access to these resources (Rodríguez-Pose & Fratesi, 2004; Incaltarau, Pascariu & Surubaru, 2020; Ali, Brasili & Calia, 2025).

The results of the analysis confirm hypothesis H1: the North-West region attracted a significantly higher volume of funding for the social economy through OS 4.16, both in terms of the number of projects contracted (71 compared to 55) and the total value of funding (over 747 million lei compared to approximately 526 million lei in the North-East). The difference in the average value per project is, by contrast, relatively small, approximately 10.2%-which indicates that the regional gap is primarily driven by the North-West's ecosystem having a greater capacity to generate a higher number of projects, rather than by differences in their size. This result is consistent with the literature on the absorption of structural funds, which shows that regions with a more robust institutional infrastructure and a more mature entrepreneurial culture make greater use of available funding opportunities (Bostan et al., 2022; European Commission, 2024).

The results also confirm hypothesis H2: there are differences in the structure of beneficiaries between the two regions, reflecting distinct characteristics of the social economy ecosystem at regional level. In the North-West, NGOs/associations/foundations represent the slightly dominant category of beneficiaries (43.7%) compared to public institutions (42.3%), whereas in the North-East, public institutions constitute the majority category, accounting for 58.2% of all projects, compared to 34.5% represented by NGOs, confirming the central role of the non-profit sector in the North-West and the more pronounced involvement of public actors in the North-East (Calò et al., 2024; OECD, 2025). This difference suggests that in less developed regions, public actors partially compensate for a less established non-profit ecosystem. Commercial companies account for 12.7% of projects in the North-West compared to just 5.5% in the North-East, reflecting a more active entrepreneurial environment in the former region.

From the perspective of its contribution to the literature, this study provides an empirical analysis focused on the territorial dimension of the implementation of public policies dedicated to the social economy in Romania – a perspective insufficiently explored in existing research, which concentrates predominantly on the regulatory framework or on individual case studies (Gotea, 2024; Calò et al., 2024). The results highlight that regional disparities in accessing European funds are not merely a matter of administrative efficiency, but reflect deeper structural differences, with direct implications for the design of future cohesion policies. In this regard, the 2021–2027 programmes, funded through the ESF+, should incorporate additional support mechanisms for regions with limited administrative capacity, to prevent the perpetuation of the identified territorial disparities (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2025).

**Limitations and directions for future research**

This study has several limitations that should be noted to ensure a correct interpretation of the results. The analysis is limited to two development regions and a single specific objective within the POCU, which restricts the possibility of generalising the conclusions at national level. The public data available on data.gov.ro provides aggregated information on projects, without reflecting the dynamics of implementation or the long-term impact of interventions on the development of the social economy. Furthermore, the absence of disaggregated data at county level limits the depth of the territorial analysis.

These limitations point to clear directions for future research: extending the analysis to all eight development regions of Romania, including other specific objectives relevant to the social economy, or integrating measurable social impact indicators that would allow for the assessment of the long-term effects of interventions funded by the European Social Fund.

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