

SOCIO-ECONOMIC EFFECTS ON THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA IN THE FIRST YEAR OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The emergence of the COVID-19 crisis has represented a challenge for the entire world, generating new social and economic paradigms. Besides the many negative effects, there are also positive effects of the pandemic, and here we must emphasise the change of perspective with regard to the funding policies, which no longer target only the return to the situation before the pandemic, but a step forward, towards a green, digital and more resilient Europe. The immediate effects in the case of the Romanian countryside highlight the different reception of the pandemic shock across the territory. Starting from the calculation of the Rural Development Index at the county level for the period 2018-2020, with 2018 being the reference year, the evolution of the index was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively from the perspective of the effects induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, while before the COVID-19 crisis, the rural development level registered a slight translation of counties from the lower to the upper part of the ranking, during the pandemic the process was reversed, even though at national level there is a constant appreciation of the rural development index.

Key words: rural development, Covid-19 crisis, regional gaps

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented challenges to the economy and the agri-food sector; the lesson that must be learnt is that certain shocks, be they health shocks, extreme weather events or armed conflicts, cannot be prevented. The agri-food sector resilience in the face of these challenges can be increased only by preparing the various actors in the agri-food value chain for a series of major structural changes that will have an impact on the entire sector.

Starting from Romania's situation before the Covid-19 crisis, characterised by major territorial disparities between different rural areas, this phenomenon significantly increased after the change of the political regime in 1989 and continued to perpetuate in the next period, even after Romania's accession to the EU. The Covid-19 pandemic found Romania with a large socio-economic gap between the country's rural regions [10]. The impact of the Covid-19 crisis and the economic recovery after the pandemic, in Romania, will take place asymmetrically, with significant differences across regions and

sectors, and will depend on the effectiveness of economic recovery programmes [13].

The implications of the Covid-19 crisis on rural actors are mentioned in reference documents by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the European Commission. FAO warned that the Covid-19 pandemic could lead to a food crisis, which would affect the most vulnerable persons in the first place, including small farmers, who are facing challenges in the access to markets to sell their products, in the purchase of essential inputs and in the sale of products to consumers with low purchasing power. While the European Commissioner for agriculture highlighted that "*The COVID-19 pandemic has unprecedented consequences on society and economy. Farmers and every actor in the EU food supply chain are working hard to supply our daily food, despite the difficulties they are facing. The European Commission will continue to provide support to farmers and food producers, to collaborate with the EU member states and take all necessary measures to ensure the health and well-being of European citizens*" [8].

There were multiple immediate effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy and the agri-food sector, among which: changing the consumption pattern through food shortage, frantic buying of products, price increases; internal and international movement restrictions; closing restaurants, hotels and schools; delays in the supply of raw materials to agricultural producers; production decline and decrease in the number of jobs; decline in foreign investment, etc.

The resilience of agri-food systems was an important issue after the immediate impact of the Covid-19 crisis, this being a major concern at EU level [5]. The first measures of the European Commission aimed at the temporary suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact (which allows high shares, above the limit of 60% of GDP, of the public debt and the increase of budgetary deficit above the limit of 3% of GDP in order to counteract the negative economic effects of the health crisis) over the entire period of the crisis [12]; this is an unprecedented measure in the EU history: the full suspension of the SGP, even though it is temporary, has never been applied since its adoption.

In a timeframe, the recovery of the EU economy can be seen in 3 directions [2]: 1) emergency measures aimed at ensuring liquidities to combat the negative impact on the European economy and society, adopted after the outbreak of the crisis; 2) measures to support solvency, support and restart businesses and resume economic and social activities and 3) economic recovery measures, the solvency and economic recovery components being found in the form of a new temporary recovery instrument NextGeneration EU (NGEU), adopted in late 2020, which strengthens the Union's post-2020 budget. NGEU has an allocated budget worth 750 billion euros in 2018 prices (about 806 billion in current prices) that strengthens the priorities and the budget of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, of 1,074.3 billion euros, in 2018 prices, relevant for the economic recovery and improving EU's resilience. The NGEU budget is funded from financial resources mobilised

from financial markets (by issuing Eurobonds).

The context of COVID crisis has generated a change of vision and priorities at the level of long-term EU budget: *the recovery* being integrated in the programmes and new priorities and the strengthening of key areas for the post-crisis recovery that target the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, to the detriment of traditional areas dominant in the MFF in previous periods. In these conditions, although the agricultural policy and the cohesion policy remain the main chapters of the budget on the long term, with budget allocations of over 30% of the 2021-2027 MFF, their share has been decreasing compared to the period 2014-2020.

Compared to previous programming periods, a number of priorities – such as research & development, the Connecting Europe Facility, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism – have been strengthened and new priorities have been introduced, such as: health, fair transition, digital transformation, etc.

The EU recovery, in the context of MFF 2021-2027 and NGEU, is not limited to financing measures *to return to the pre-crisis status quo*, it rather aims *to achieve a step forward that involves undoing the short-term damages caused by the crisis in a way that also invests in the Union's future on the long term* [7], to make Europe **greener, more digital and more resilient**.

The **green economy** elements and the green transition become permanent points on the strategic agenda of the European Union. A series of documents – targeting the previous programming period “*Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030*”, as well as the present and next period – the EU Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024 – highlight the need to move from a linear to a circular economy and the importance of sustainable development to reduce the negative impact of the economy on the environment [6].

Digital transformation is an important pillar in achieving the objective of *developing a solid and dynamic base* from the EU Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, representing the core element for the implementation of the EU's priority *Europe fit for the digital age* from the

political agenda of the European Commission for the period 2019-2024 [9].

Digitalisation/digital transformation aims at creating new development opportunities for regional and national economies, as well as at improving citizens' quality of life and promoting sustainable development. The digitalisation effects are perceived in all areas of economic, social and political life [3].

Resilience is defined by the European Commission as “*a broader concept applicable at the level of society and its components, including aspects of democracy, trust in institutions, sustainable development and reform capacity*” and is correlated with the political and external security context, economic resilience and environmental challenges and risks (climate change).

In the European discourse, the **resilience** concept was introduced by the European Commission in 2012, being associated, in a first stage, with addressing the issue of security and food crisis: resilience is defined as *the ability of an individual, community, country or region to adapt and recover quickly after a crisis or shock* (COM (2012) 586 final) and implies: a) the intrinsic capacity of a community/region/system to withstand a shock or crisis and b) the ability of the entity concerned to withstand and quickly recover after the shock or crisis that has affected it.

The predictors of a resilient economy/society assume a number of characteristics that these should meet [1]: *digital development, education, gender equality, public spending, innovation, labour market policies, macro-economic indicators, business and regulatory environment, governance, quality of life, attitudes in society, sustainability of economic development models.*

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological scheme to quantify the Covid-19 crisis effects on the Romanian rural area will focus on the following elements:

-quantification of the composite index of the socio-economic development of the Romanian rural area [4], at county level, in the period 2018-2020 (2018 is considered the reference

year) and the analysis of the COVID pandemic effects on the socio-economic development index of the rural area, by counties;

-all these aspects will be analysed at national, macro-regional and county level;

-quantitative and qualitative analysis of investigated phenomena.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The rural socio-economic development index, in the present research study, aims to capture the rural development phenomenon across counties following the Covid-19 crisis, in dynamics, in the period 2018-2020. For a most clear picture of the evolution of rural development process in the territory, both the composite index (that allowed a ranking, a typology of counties by their rural development level) and its component dimensions were considered, in order to identify the factors that have influenced the rural development level.

Overall, in the investigated period, the rural development index (RDI) slightly appreciated in the year 2020, yet its evolution was different across the territory (Table 1).

Table 1. RDI evolution by degree of rurality, in the period 2018-2020

		RDI 2018	RDI 2019	RDI 2020
Total		1.36	1.36	1.40
Rurality	predominantly urban	1.99	1.98	2.34
	intermediate	1.46	1.47	1.53
	predominantly rural	1.27	1.27	1.29

Source: author's own processing of statistical data collected from NIS Tempo online, accessed on September 30, 2022 [11].

The territorial discrepancies reveal that the benefits of post-communist transition and of the EU membership have been unevenly distributed, with a strong polarisation between urban and rural areas and between different rural areas. This fact is also reflected in the different impact of the Covid-19 crisis at territorial level.

Thus, it can be noticed that the most obvious discrepancy in terms of the rural socio-

economic development index depends on the rurality level, so that this index (RDI) is higher as the degree of rurality decreases (the predominantly urban counties have the highest values of this index (2.34), followed by the intermediate rural counties (1.53) and ultimately by the predominantly rural counties (1.29)). The increasing trend in all these categories is worth noting, yet in the case of predominantly urban areas the increase is significant, by 17.59%, as against 4.79% in the intermediate rural areas and only 1.57% in the predominantly rural areas.

The variations of the rural socio-economic development index, in the period 2018-2020, at macroregional level, reveals an increasing trend of the index in most macro-regions; decreases were found only in Macro-region 1, but this region still maintains its first position in the ranking, at considerable distance from the other macro-regions.

By development regions, the region București-Ilfov has a top position in the ranking (2.34), followed at a significant difference by the Centru Region (1.67), Vest Region (1.48), Nord-Vest Region (1.47), Nord-Est Region (1.40), while the last positions of the ranking are occupied by the regions Sud-Est (1.28), Sud (1.27) and Sud-Vest (1.08).

Table 2. RDI evolution by degree of rurality, by macro-regions and regions, in the period 2018-2020

		RDI 2018	RDI 2019	RDI 2020
Total		1.36	1.36	1.40
<i>Macro-region</i>	<i>Macro-region 1</i>	1.60	1.58	1.57
	<i>Macro-region 2</i>	1.28	1.30	1.34
	<i>Macro-region 3</i>	1.28	1.28	1.40
	<i>Macro-region 4</i>	1.22	1.21	1.26
Region	Nord-Vest	1.53	1.52	1.47
	Centru	1.66	1.64	1.67
	Nord-Est	1.37	1.39	1.40
	Sud-Est	1.18	1.21	1.28
	Sud	1.18	1.18	1.27
	București-Ilfov	1.99	1.98	2.34
	Sud-Vest	1.05	1.03	1.08
	Vest	1.44	1.44	1.48

Source: author's own processing of statistical data collected from NIS Tempo online, accessed on September 30, 2022 [11].

By county, the ranking begins with Brașov (2.45), Ilfov (2.34), Timiș (2.08), Suceava

(1.70), Bihor (1.65), Maramureș (1.64), Sibiu (1.62), and ends up with Olt (0.85), Caraș-Severin (0.95), Vâlcea (0.97) and Teleorman (0.97) (Table 2).

The smaller the territorial unit we refer to, the higher the discrepancy of the development index, so that while the gap is 0.31 at macro-regional level, it is 1.26 at regional level, to reach 1.60 at county level.

The classification of counties by the rural development level results in the following ranking:

- counties with good development level: Ilfov and Brașov;
- counties with an acceptable development level: Timiș;
- counties with medium development level: Harghita, Dâmbovița, Mureș, Iași, Alba, Călărași, Sibiu, Maramureș, Bihor, Suceava;
- counties with low development level: Ialomița, Gorj, Tulcea, Brăila, Neamț, Dolj, Vrancea, Covasna, Botoșani, Bacău, Argeș, Cluj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Hunedoara, Galați, Arad, Constanța, Satu-Mare;
- counties with very low development level: Olt, Caraș-Severin, Vâlcea, Teleorman, Buzău, Giurgiu, Mehedinți, Vaslui, Prahova, Sălaj.

Even though overall, the rural development index increased in all categories of counties, the translating of counties into lower categories is worth noting. Thus, the counties with very low and low development level cumulated 39.02% in 2018, while in the year 2020 their share reached 69.29%, to the detriment of counties with medium, acceptable or good development level. This evolution highlights the different responses to the crisis caused by COVID 19 at territorial level (Fig. 1).

Depending on the evolution of the rural development index, in the period 2018-2020, three directions of evolution of rural areas can be noted at county level: *counties with a steady trend* (19 counties: Argeș, Bihor, Botoșani, Brașov, Buzău, Călărași, Dâmbovița, Dolj, Galați, Giurgiu; Hunedoara, Ialomița Iași, Ilfov; Olt, Teleorman, Tulcea Vâlcea); *counties in moderate decline* (17 counties: Alba, Arad, Bacău, Brăila, Caraș-

Severin, Constanța, Covasna, Harghita, Maramureș, Mehedinți, Mureș, Neamț, Sibiu, Suceava, Timiș, Vaslui, Vrancea); *counties in strong decline* (5 in number: Bistrița-Năsăud; Cluj; Prahova, Sălaj, Satu Mare).

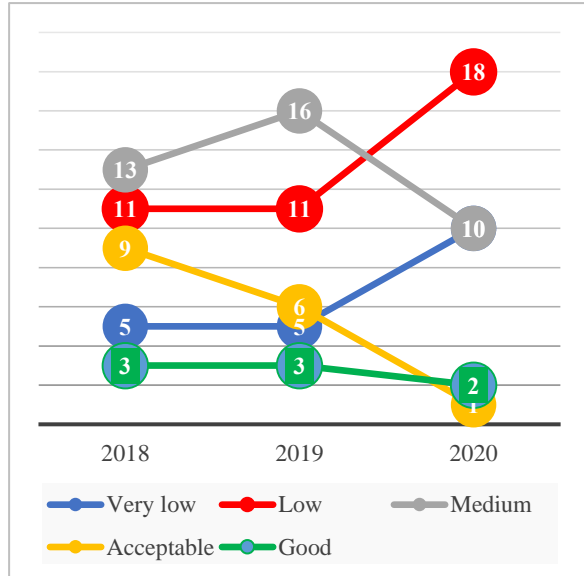


Fig. 1. Evolution of counties in number by categories according to the rural development level in the period 2018-2020

Source: author's own processing of statistical data collected from NIS Tempo online, accessed on September 30, 2022 [11].

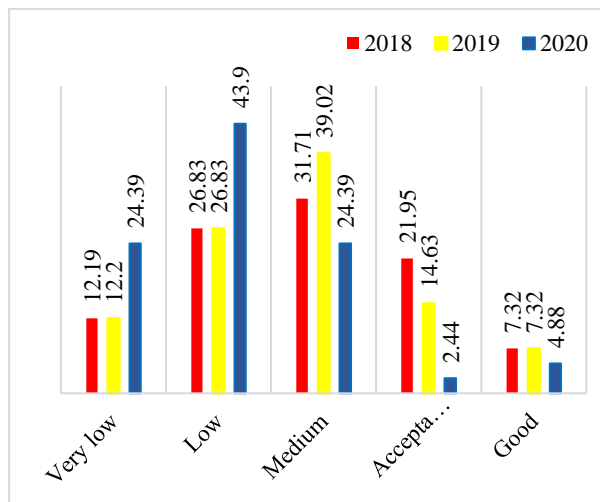


Fig. 2. Evolution of counties in percentage by categories according to the rural development level in the period 2018-2020

Source: author's own processing of statistical data collected from NIS Tempo online, accessed on September 30, 2022 [11].

In order to find explanations for this evolution, the analysis will start from the evolution of index for each category; the evolution of the dimensions related to the

index, as well as the indicators related to each dimension will be analysed.

In the category of counties in strong decline, in the year 2020, the average rural development index was 1.33, ranging from 1.16 in Prahova County to 1.48 in Satu Mare. Out of the counties in this category, in the year 2020, 60% were counties with low development level and 40% with very low development level, these coming from the category of counties with medium and acceptable development level in the year 2018 (Table 3).

Table 3. Evolution of the RDI index and component dimensions, in the period 2018-2020, for the counties in strong decline

	RDI		Demographic dimension		Social dimension		Economic dimension		Ecological dimension	
	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020
Counties in strong decline	Decreasing trend		Decreasing trend		Oscillating trend		Oscillating trend		Decreasing trend	
Bistrita-Nasaud	1.54	1.43	0.63	0.60	0.30	0.33	0.40	0.37	0.21	0.13
Cluj	1.58	1.41	0.52	0.51	0.36	0.35	0.33	0.35	0.36	0.20
Prahova	1.29	1.16	0.46	0.36	0.39	0.36	0.34	0.28	0.11	0.16
Salaj	1.28	1.18	0.46	0.47	0.31	0.27	0.43	0.41	0.09	0.04
Satu Mare	1.55	1.48	0.67	0.65	0.32	0.30	0.31	0.25	0.25	0.27
TOTAL	1.45	1.33	0.51	0.49	0.37	0.37	0.30	0.33	0.20	0.16

Source: author's own processing of statistical data collected from NIS Tempo online, accessed on September 30, 2022 [11].

A decrease was noticed in the absolute values of all dimensions that make up the rural development index, for this category of counties, as follows: demographic dimension -5.47%, social dimension -4.17%, economic dimension -8.29%, ecological dimension -21.57%.

There are certain changes in the evolution of the RDI index structure, with a slight increase in the importance of demographic dimension (from 37.85% to 38.89%) and of social dimension (from 23.20% to 24.17%); the economic dimension remains at about the same level (24.93%), while the importance of the ecological dimension decreased (from 15.32% to 12.01%).

The counties with the sharpest decrease are Cluj (-10.74%) and Prahova (-10.08%). The evolution of the two counties has no common points in terms of the structural evolution of the development index; it can be noticed that in the period 2018-2020 Cluj County had a favourable evolution in economic terms, a slight decrease in the demographic and social dimension and an ecological depreciation. At the same time, Prahova County had a positive evolution only in ecological terms, and significant decreases were noticed in all the other dimensions.

In the category of counties in moderate decline, in the year 2020, the average rural development index was 1.43 and varied from 0.95 in Caraş-Severin to 2.08 in Timiş.

In the year 2020, out of the counties in this category, 41.18% were counties with low development level, 35.29% counties with medium development level, 17.65% counties with very low development level and 5.88% counties with acceptable development level.

The absolute values of all dimensions that make up the rural development index, for this category of counties, decreased in the demographic (-3.08%) and social (-12.36%) dimensions, while an increase was noticed in the economic dimension (+8.96%) and the ecological dimension (+1.67%).

Certain changes were noticed in the evolution of the RDI index structure, with an increase in importance of the economic dimension (from 21.60% to 24.05%) and of the ecological dimension (from 14.79% to 15.03%); a decrease was noticed in the social dimension (from 26.08% to 23.35%) and in the demographic dimension (from 38.01% to 37.64%) (Table 4).

Table 4. Evolution of RDI index and component dimensions, in the period 2018-2020, for the counties in moderate decline

	RDI		Demo dim.		Social dim.		Econ. dim.		Eco dim.	
	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020
Counties in moderate decline	Decreasing trend		Maintain g trend		Oscillating trend		Increasing trend		Oscillating trend	
Alba	1.63	1.59	0.41	0.40	0.46	0.45	0.36	0.36	0.41	0.38
Arad	1.46	1.45	0.51	0.49	0.52	0.49	0.30	0.27	0.13	0.21
Bacău	1.38	1.38	0.57	0.54	0.29	0.25	0.32	0.36	0.20	0.24
Braïla	1.10	1.23	0.44	0.44	0.20	0.23	0.06	0.10	0.40	0.46
Caraş-Severin	1.06	0.95	0.33	0.31	0.30	0.19	0.39	0.39	0.05	0.06
Constan ța	1.43	1.47	0.74	0.72	0.52	0.44	0.07	0.17	0.10	0.14
Covasna	1.31	1.35	0.62	0.64	0.24	0.21	0.32	0.36	0.14	0.14
Harghita	1.65	1.51	0.60	0.58	0.56	0.39	0.30	0.36	0.19	0.17
Maramureş	1.76	1.64	0.58	0.54	0.35	0.30	0.64	0.65	0.20	0.15
Mehedi nți	1.07	1.05	0.38	0.38	0.36	0.31	0.16	0.17	0.18	0.19
Mureş	1.54	1.51	0.59	0.56	0.35	0.41	0.36	0.34	0.24	0.20
Neamț	1.35	1.27	0.50	0.47	0.40	0.36	0.24	0.26	0.22	0.18
Sibiu	1.73	1.62	0.70	0.68	0.40	0.33	0.45	0.45	0.17	0.16
Suceava	1.77	1.70	0.78	0.72	0.28	0.28	0.38	0.40	0.32	0.30
Timiş	2.04	2.08	0.69	0.68	0.48	0.46	0.52	0.60	0.35	0.35
Vaslui	1.07	1.14	0.50	0.51	0.26	0.23	0.19	0.25	0.12	0.15
Vrancea	1.46	1.34	0.49	0.48	0.50	0.34	0.30	0.35	0.17	0.17
TOTAL	1.46	1.43	0.55	0.54	0.38	0.33	0.32	0.34	0.21	0.21

Source: author's own processing of statistical data collected from NIS Tempo online, accessed on September 30, 2022 [11].

Table 5. Evolution of RDI index and component dimensions, in the period 2018-2020, for the counties with a steady trend

	RDI		Demo dim.		Social dim.		Econ. dim.		Ecol. dim.	
	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020	2018	2020
Counties with a steady trend	Increasing trend		Decreasing trend		Oscillating trend		Increasing trend		Increasing trend	
Argeş	1.26	1.39	0.38	0.31	0.42	0.56	0.39	0.40	0.07	0.12
Bihor	1.49	1.65	0.57	0.53	0.40	0.37	0.47	0.48	0.05	0.29
Botoşani	1.14	1.35	0.49	0.49	0.28	0.32	0.20	0.29	0.17	0.25
Braşov	2.12	2.45	0.77	0.77	0.52	0.55	0.64	0.61	0.19	0.53
Buzău	0.83	0.98	0.28	0.29	0.34	0.39	0.18	0.27	0.02	0.03
Călăraşi	1.41	1.61	0.50	0.49	0.32	0.41	0.16	0.30	0.42	0.41
Dâmboviţa	1.35	1.51	0.55	0.47	0.34	0.52	0.34	0.35	0.12	0.18
Dolj	1.21	1.30	0.27	0.29	0.52	0.50	0.11	0.11	0.30	0.40
Galaţi	1.23	1.45	0.58	0.57	0.30	0.37	0.03	0.08	0.31	0.43
Giurgiu	0.95	1.04	0.42	0.43	0.24	0.32	0.18	0.17	0.11	0.12
Gorj	1.27	1.22	0.43	0.41	0.42	0.37	0.38	0.41	0.03	0.04
Hunedoara	1.18	1.45	0.24	0.22	0.47	0.39	0.43	0.59	0.05	0.25
Ialomiţa	1.23	1.21	0.44	0.45	0.35	0.34	0.09	0.20	0.35	0.23
Iaşi	1.51	1.58	0.81	0.82	0.37	0.35	0.17	0.24	0.17	0.18
Ilfov	1.99	2.34	0.94	0.92	0.46	0.77	0.43	0.43	0.16	0.22
Olt	0.79	0.85	0.12	0.10	0.40	0.37	0.16	0.17	0.11	0.21
Teleorman	0.78	0.97	0.05	0.05	0.30	0.47	0.13	0.15	0.30	0.29
Tulcea	1.04	1.23	0.46	0.44	0.37	0.42	0.14	0.25	0.07	0.11
Vâlcea	0.89	0.97	0.31	0.26	0.06	0.14	0.42	0.44	0.10	0.13
TOTAL	1.25	1.40	0.45	0.44	0.36	0.42	0.27	0.31	0.16	0.23

Source: author's own processing of statistical data collected from NIS Tempo online, accessed on September 30, 2022 [11].

In the category of counties with a steady trend in the year 2020, the average rural development index was 1.40, ranging from 0.85 in Olt county, to 2.45 in Braşov county. Out of the counties in this category, in the year 2020, 42.11% were counties with low development level, 26.32% counties with very low development level, 21.05% counties with medium development level and 10.52% with good development level (Table 5).

The absolute values of all dimensions of the rural development index, for this category of counties, decreased only in the case of the demographic dimension (-3.48%), while significant increases were noticed in the economic dimension (+17.62%), social dimension (+15.26) and ecological dimension (+42.58%).

Certain changes were noticed in the evolution of the RDI index structure, with an increase in the importance of the social dimension (from 29.07% to 29.87%), of the economic dimension (from 21.34% to 22.37%) and of the ecological dimension (from 11.68% to 16.65%); a decrease was noticed in the demographic dimension (from 36.38% to 31.30%).

CONCLUSIONS

The territorial discrepancies reveal that the benefits of post-communist transition and of EU membership have been unevenly distributed, with a strong polarisation between the urban and rural areas, as well as between different rural areas. This fact is also reflected in the different impact of the Covid-19 crisis at territorial level.

The Covid-19 crisis also came with a series of negative effects in the short and medium term, but also with a series of opportunities for Romania's economy, as well as for agriculture and rural areas, with medium and long-term effect. The intervention of the European Union has been more prompt and more focused than ever in combating the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic effects.

The most important support instrument established at EU level, the Next Generation (NEXTGEN) Programme, allocates financial resources of exceptional magnitude (1,850

billion euros, out of which about 550 billion in non-refundable form, and the difference up to 1,850 billion, in the form of credits at an extremely low interest rate), and has ambitious goals, not only to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, but also to build the foundation of a stronger future European Union, which is greener, more digital and more resilient.

For Romania, this instrument takes the form of a National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) that represents the greatest opportunity to fight the effects of the pandemic, especially considering that our country will benefit from some of the most substantial allocations – about 33 billion euros in non-reimbursable form and about 55 billion euros in repayable form.

In Romania, the estimated effects of NRRP should materialise in the number of jobs created, economic growth and increase of the institutional resilience. The European Commission estimates that 90,000 jobs will be created as a result of infrastructure investment projects (an important component of NRRP) and of the digitalisation and education component. NRRP represents a great opportunity for the recovery and sustainable transformation of the economy in Romania (visible through the estimated effects on GDP, cohesion, green and digital transformation, under different scenarios) that our country should not miss; otherwise, the result will be a wider gap between Romania and the rest of the EU.

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