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The impact of European Funds in reducing the interregional economic disparities in Romania (2007-2023)

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The impact of European Funds in reducing the interregional economic disparities in Romania (2007-2023)

Ioan VARGĂ

Impactul fondurilor europene în reducerea decalajelor economice între regiunile de dezvoltare ale României (2007-2023). Studiul de față abordează problematica decalajelor economice interregionale la nivelul României. Cercetarea acestui subiect ia în considerare perioada între momentul aderării României la Uniunea Europeană (2007) și anul 2023. Scopul acestei cercetări este analiza evoluției economice regionale și impactul absorbției fondurilor europene în reducerea disparităților economice între regiuni. Pentru evidențierea evoluției economice la nivel regional a fost calculat indicele dezvoltarii economice, un indicator agregat creat pe baza a trei indicatori macroeconomici definitorii: contribuția la PIB-ul național total a fiecărei regiuni, rata șomajului înregistrată și diferența între salariul mediu net regional și salariul mediu net național. Pentru elaborarea acestui studiu au fost utilizate următoarele metode: metoda studiului de caz, metoda analizei, metoda comparației, metoda cartografică și metoda analizei multicriteriale. Rezultatele cercetării au relevat o accentuare a ecartului economic între regiunile țării, pe alocuri valorile indicatorilor suferind deprecieri considerabile în raport cu anul 2007. Se constată o incapacitate a regiunilor emergente de a își îmbunătăți considerabil performanțele economice, în timp ce regiunile dezvoltate concentrează cele mai importante și cele mai valoroase activități economice din țară, conducând la amplificarea fenomenului polarizării economice excesive la nivel național.

Cuvinte cheie: decalaje economice, fonduri europene, PIB, regiuni de dezvoltare, România.

The impact of European Funds in reducing the interregional economic disparities in Romania (2007-2023). The current study approaches the economic disparities between the Romanian development regions. The research is taking into account the period between 2007 and 2023. The purpose of this paper is to assess the regional economic evolution and the impact of the European funds in reducing the economic disparities between development regions. In order to realize this desideratum, the economic development index was created, an aggregate index based on three major economic indicators, respectively the regional contribution to national GDP, the differences between regional average net salary and national average net salary, and the unemployment rate. The methodology utilized for this study consisted of case study method, analysis method, comparison method, cartographic method, and multi-criteria analysis. The results have revealed an accentuation of the economic disparities between regions, the indicators' values suffering, in some cases, significant impairments in 2023 compared to 2007. It is noticed a fundamental incapacity of the emergent regions to improve significantly their economic performances, while the already developed regions are getting much more developed, concentrating on the most important and valuable economic activities within the country, leading to amplification of the phenomenon of excessive economic polarization at the national level.

Keywords: development regions, economic disparities, European funds, GDP, Romania.

1. INTRODUCTION

The interregional economic disparities inside a country represent a current important topic in the European context, but not only. This concern regarding reducing the economic disparities between regions is confirmed by the important budget allocated by the European Union in order to solve this issue among European countries (Polster, 2021; Nyikos, 2022; Spilioti, Anastasiou, 2024; Oprea et al., 2025).

These interregional inequalities can have various causes, from objective factors such as natural barriers (mountain ranges, large rivers, etc.) to subjective factors, respectively the lack of strategic programs for regional development in common collaboration between regions.

These problems have been previously studied in the literature by different scientists from different fields, such as economy, geography, and sociology, at both national and international levels. The various case studies chosen by the authors, covering approximately all the European space (Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Southern Europe), show that this issue is not particular to a specific geographical area or a specific country. The common character of these economic inequalities is caused, usually, by the objective factors, especially the natural framework, which often prevents the interconnection of different regions through large and complex infrastructure network systems, namely highways and railways (Surubaru, 2020; Pietak, 2024; Moldovan, 2025; Kurek et al., 2026; Frangiamore et al., 2026;).

In Romania's case, this type of analysis is appropriate, especially for the emergent states located in the former Soviet space, due to the fact that there is a common background, which has generated similar economic and social deficiencies. These issues, caused by the same communist regime, have strongly delayed the economic transition of these states compared to the Western states, which led to a huge economic gap between Western and Eastern states (Dominy et al., 2026).

This study can provide an objective perspective of the trajectory that a new European Union member can have after 16 years, especially for the emergent states such as Republic of Moldova, Albania, North Macedonia, and others.

The purpose of this article is to assess objectively the impact of the European funds in reducing the interregional economic disparities in Romania. For achieving this desideratum have been established three relevant objectives for this analyze, respectively the regional contribution to national GDP, the unemployment rate, and the difference between the regional average net salary and the national average net salary. These objectives have been directly related to the absorption rate of European funds for each region in the current multiannual financial framework, 2021-2027.

The study has revealed direct connections between the absorption rate of European funds and the regional level of economic development throughout the time.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study analyzes the economic situation of Romania's development regions, which have only a role in providing statistics to the European Union's institutions. The eight development regions overlap approximately on the historical regions of Romania, respectively Transylvania (Centru region), Banat (Vest region), Moldova and Bucovina (Nord-Est region), Dobrogea (Sud-Est region), Oltenia (Sud-Vest Oltenia region), and Maramureș (Nord-Vest region).

The article highlights Romania's evolution from 2007 to 2023, divided into three main periods of time, entitled at the European Union's level multiannual financial framework: 2007-2013, 2014-2020, and 2021-2027 (European Parliament, 2026).

In order to elaborate this analysis were utilized the following methods: case study method, comparison method, and multi-criteria analysis (Greene et al., 2011; Chandio et al., 2012; Malczewski, Liu, 2014; Mrak, 2024). The multi-criteria analysis consisted of selecting three economic indicators, calculating specific rates for each region and then cumulating the results into an economic development index.

These three economic indicators selected for this study were: regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the differences between regional average net salary and national average net salary, and the unemployment rate. The regional GDP represents one of the most important indicators in creating an economic analysis, expressing the entire economic productivity of the region; the regional average net salary reflects the current economic status of the regions related to the national economy and the consumer spending power; the unemployment rate indicates the capacity of the region to integrate and capitalize current labor force in local economy (Breaz et al., 2025; Savariapitchai, Chaurasia, 2026).

For better understanding of the impact of the European Union funds in the national economy has been realized, a comparison between the total amount of money absorbed from the European Union and the total amount of investments with national funds has been realized. The sums have been transformed into a percentage share of national GDP. In order to convert the resulting sums in euro have been utilized the archive database provided by the National Bank of Romania for 2007-2023.

Based on these three economic indicators presented previously have been calculated the economic development index, in order to determine the economic evolution for each region (Table 1). These indicators were assigned different weights regarding their economic importance (Table 2). The highest weight was assigned to the regional GDP indicator (50%), followed by the indicator related to the difference between regional average net salary and national average net salary (30%), and the unemployment rate (20%).

Subsequently, each region was assigned a mark from 1 to 10 according to the value class regarding each indicator. Later, every result was calculated to the weight value assigned for each indicator, and then all the values resulted have been cumulate into one value, representing the economic development index.

These values were transposed into different maps, utilizing QGIS 3.28.3, in order to highlight the evolution between 2007 and 2023.

Table 1. Criteria utilized for the multi-criteria analysis and the scoring system

Criterion	Weight	Justification	Category (%)	Mark
Regional GDP	50%	Indicates the entire economic productivity of the regional economic activities	5 - 10	2.5
			10.1 - 15	5
			15.1 - 20	7.5
			20.1 - 25	10
Difference between regional average net salary and national average net salary	30%	Indicates the financial value of the economic activities and the consumer spending power	-15 - -10	2
			-10.1 - -5	4
			-5.1 – 0	6
			0.1 - 25	8
			25.1 - 38	10
Unemployment rate	20%	Indicates the capacity to integrate and capitalize the labour force	7.6 - 10	2.5
			5.1 – 7.5	5
			2.6 - 5	7.5
			0 – 2.5	10

Table 2. The scores resulted for each economic indicator

Region	Regional GDP		Net salary differences		Unemployment rate		Economic development index	
	2007	2023	2008*	2023	2007	2023	2007	2023
NORD-VEST	2.5	2.5	0.6	1.8	1.5	1.5	**4.6**	**5.8**
CENTRU	2.5	2.5	0.6	1.2	0.5	1.5	**3.6**	**5.2**
NORD-EST	2.5	2.5	0.6	1.2	1	1	**4.1**	**4.7**
SUD-EST	2.5	1.25	1.2	0.6	0.5	0.5	**4.2**	**2.35**
SUD-MUNTENIA	2.5	2.5	1.2	1.2	0.5	0.5	**4.2**	**4.2**
BUCUREȘTI-ILFOV	5	5	3	3	1.5	1.5	**9.5**	**9.5**
SUD-VEST OLTENIA	1.25	1.25	1.8	1.2	1	0.5	**4.05**	**2.95**
VEST	1.25	1.25	1.2	1.8	1	1.5	**3.45**	**4.55**

* unavalaible data for 2007

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the period of the multiannual financial framework 2007-2013 European Union allocated Romania funds in total of 40,254,230,000 euro. Romania has absorbed 36,685,400,000 euro of this total amount of money (91.13%; Table 3).

In the following multiannual financial framework, 2014-2020, Romania has recorded a higher rate of funds absorption, 98.21%, contracting European projects in the amount of 51,571,190,000 euro out of a total sum of 52,509,170,000 euro.

In the current multiannual financial framework 2021-2027, the absorption rate is the lowest one considering previous financial periods, with only 31.55% absorbed of the total amount of money allocated by the European Union (50,531,330,000 euro).

Alongside these three major financial frameworks created by the European Union's institutions, it can be added the NextGeneration EU 2021-2023 project. Romania has benefited from 6,525,240,000 euro out of a total amount of 17,007,160,000 euro (Ministry of Finance, 2026).

In the period of 2007-2026 Romania has absorbed European funds in a total amount of 110,726,640,000 euro from a total amount allocated of 160,301,890,000 euro, representing an average absorption rate of 69.07%.

In the same period of time, Romania has contributed to the European Union's budget with 36,644,910,000 euro. Considering this financial contribution, it results in a net balance in Romania's favor of 74,081,730,000 euro in 2007-2026 (Ministry of Finance, 2026).

Table 3. The financial report of Romania, considering the EU funds received until 28.02.2026 (million euro)

Period of time	EU funds received	EU funds allocated for Romania	Absorption rate %
2007-2013	36,685.40	40,254.23	91.13
2014-2020	51,571.19	52,509.17	98.21
2021-2027	15,944.81	50,531.33	31.55
NextGeneration EU 2021-2023	6,525.24	17,007.16	38.37
Total (I)	110,726.64	160,301.89	69.07
Romania's contribution to EU budget 2007-2026 (II)	36,644.91	-	-
Net balance (I-II)	*74,081.73*	-	-

Source: Ministry of Finance, 2026

In the multiannual financial framework 2021-2027 European Union allocated to Romania 11,503,720,724 euro for financing the regional programs. The highest amount of money was distributed to the Nord-Est region (1,760,457,242 euro), and the lowest amount of money to the Vest region (1,179,093,826 euro). The other regions have received, on average, approximately 1,400,000,000 euro each (Table 4).

It is noticed low absorption rates especially for the regional projects, the average value recorded being 17.11% (Figure 1). The highest absorption rate is recorded in the Nord-Vest region, 24.94%, while the lowest rate is found in the Sud-Est region, 13.78% (Ministry of Investments and European Projects, 2026).

Table 4. EU funds received by each region in the multiannual financial framework 2021-2027 (euro)

2021-2027	EU funds allocated	Absorption rate %
PR NORD-EST	1,760,457,242	13.92
PR SUD-MUNTENIA	1,576,796,471	15.21
PR SUD-EST	1,488,071,059	13.78
PR NORD-VEST	1,437,252,471	24.94
PR CENTRU	1,384,456,339	15.95
PR SUD-VEST OLTENIA	1,211,128,522	15.73
PR VEST	1,179,093,826	19.91
PR BUCUREȘTI-ILFOV	1,466,464,794	20.35
Total	11,503,720,724	17.11

Source: Ministry of Investments and European Projects, 2026

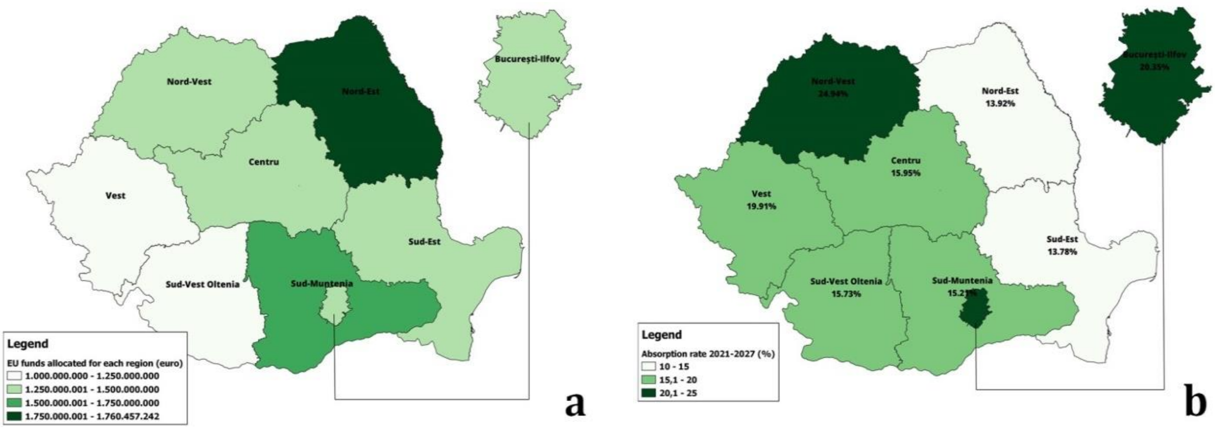

Figure 1. European funds allocated to each region (a) and their absorption rate (b)
Source: Ministry of Investments and European Projects, 2026

For better understanding of the importance and the economic dimensions of these amounts of money that Romania has benefited from, a comparison was made with investments realized from national funds in the same period of time (Table 5). Also, the sums invested were transformed into percentage points of the national GDP for each multiannual financial framework.

The economic analysis has revealed that investments made by European funds from 2007-2013 were 2.92 times higher than the investments made by national funds. In 2014-2020, the European funds absorbed were 3.27 times higher and, in 2021-2027, 1.39 times higher than national investments (National Institute of Statistics, 2026; Ministry of Finance, 2026).

In 2007-2026, the European investments have represented, on average, 2.60% of the national GDP, while the national investments have represented 1.29% of the national GDP (National Institute of Statistics, 2026; Ministry of Finance, 2026).

Table 5. Total investments realized with EU funds vs. total investments with national funds (billion euro)

Period	EU funds investments	% of national GDP	Investments with national funds	% of national GDP
2007-2013	36.6	3.86	12.5	1.32
2014-2020	51.5	3.92	15.8	1.20
2021-2027	15.9	1.88	11.4	1.35
NextGeneration EU 2021-2023	6.5	0.77	-	-
Total	110.7	-	39.7	-

Source: National Institute of Statistics, 2026; Ministry of Finance, 2026

In order to display the evolution of economic productivity to each Romania's development region, the regional GDP was calculated and related to the national GDP, in an attempt to observe precisely the contribution of each region (Table 6, Figure 2).

In 2007, the highest contribution to national GDP was recorded by the București-Ilfov region, 24.13%, while the Sud-Vest Oltenia region recorded the lowest contribution, only 7.99%. In 2007, excepting the București-Ilfov region, the other regions had an average contribution of 10.82% to national GDP, which means 2.22 times less than the value recorded by the București-Ilfov region (National Institute of Statistics, 2026; Figure 3).

In 2023, only two development regions increased their contributions, respectively Nord-Vest region (+0.26 percentage points) and București-Ilfov region (+4.85 percentage points). All the other regions have decreased their values between 0.22 and 1.73 percentage points compared to 2007. Sud-Vest Oltenia and Vest remained the economic negative poles, with the lowest recorded values, down compared to 2007, respectively -0.33 percentage points less, in the case of the Sud-Vest Oltenia region, and -0.88 percentage points, in the case of the Vest region. The biggest drop was recorded by the Sud-Muntenia region, -1.73 percentage points (National Institute of Statistics, 2026).

In 2023, excluding the București-Ilfov region, the other regions produced, on average, 10.14% of national GDP, representing 2.85 times less than the value recorded by the București-Ilfov region (28.98%).

The unemployment rate recorded percentage reductions in 2023 compared to 2007 in five of eight regions. The greatest improvements were recorded in the Vest region, -50%, and Centru region, -48.86%, while the Sud-Vest Oltenia region recorded the biggest rise in the unemployment rate, +25% (Table 7, Figure 4).

Table 6. The contribution of each region to the national GDP (million lei)

Region	2007		2023	
	Regional GDP	% of national GDP	Regional GDP	% of national GDP
NORD-VEST	51,229.1	12.03	195,580.5	12.29
CENTRU	50,452.4	11.85	179,095	11.26
NORD-EST	46,061.8	10.82	168,565.3	10.60
SUD-EST	45,984.3	10.80	150,855.2	9.48
SUD-MUNTENIA	52,803.9	12.40	169,747.9	10.67
BUCUREȘTI-ILFOV	102,709.8	24.13	461,034.7	28.98
SUD-VEST OLTENIA	34,016.8	7.99	121,820.7	7.66
VEST	42,057.9	9.88	143,150.3	9.00

Source: National Institute of Statistics, 2026

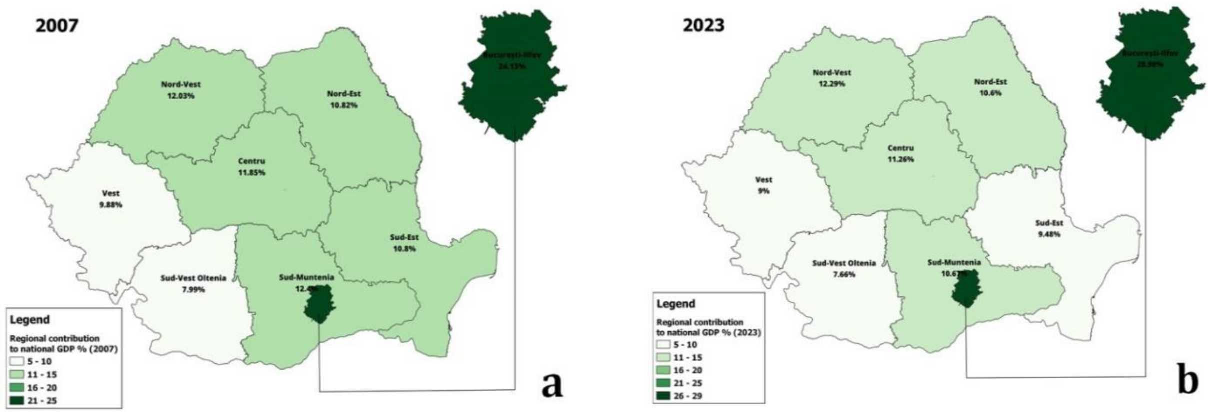

Figure 2. The contribution of each region to the national GDP, 2007 vs. 2023
Source: National Institute of Statistics, 2026

It is observed a direct correlation between high values of the unemployment rate and low values of the regional GDP. The highest unemployment rates were recorded in 2023 (higher than in 2007), in the Sud-Est region (9.1%) and the Sud-Vest Oltenia region (9%), the regions with two of the lowest contributions to the national GDP (National Institute of Statistics, 2026).

There are drawn two diametrically opposed development patterns of evolution between the inner regions which overlap to the historical regions of Transilvania, Banat, and Maramureș, and the regions from the Old Kingdom, respectively Oltenia, Muntenia, Moldova, and Dobrogea. The regions of Centru, Nord-Vest, and Vest have reduced the unemployment rate, on average, by 43.82% compared to 2007. The rest of the regions, excluding the București-Ilfov region, have raised their unemployment rate, on average, by 7.71%.

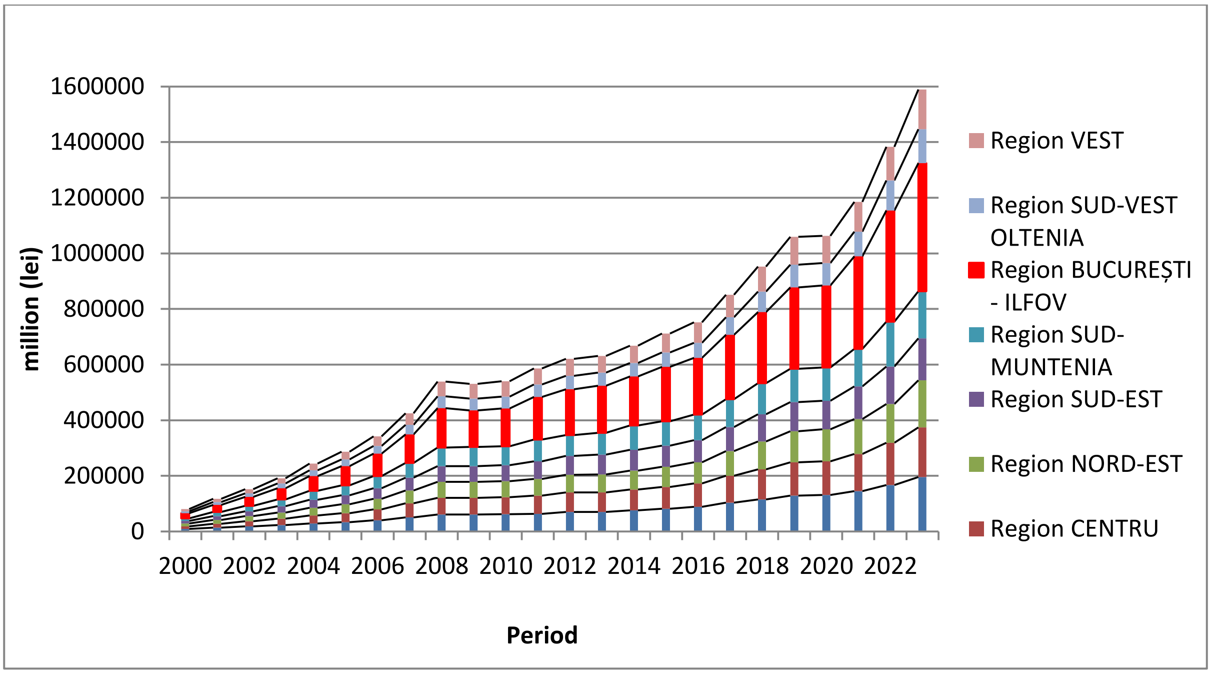

Figure 3. The evolution of regional GDP, 2000-2023
Source: National Institute of Statistics, 2026

Table 7. The unemployment rate recorded in each region

Region	2007	2023	Evolution %
NORD-VEST	4.6%	3.1%	-32.61
CENTRU	8.8%	4.5%	-48.86
NORD-EST	5.5%	5.9%	+7.27
SUD-EST	8.8%	9.1%	+3.41
SUD-MUNTENIA	8.3%	7.9%	-4.82
BUCUREȘTI-ILFOV	4.3%	2.8%	-34.88
SUD-VEST OLTENIA	7.2%	9.0%	+25.00
VEST	5.8%	2.9%	-50.00

Source: National Institute of Statistics, 2026

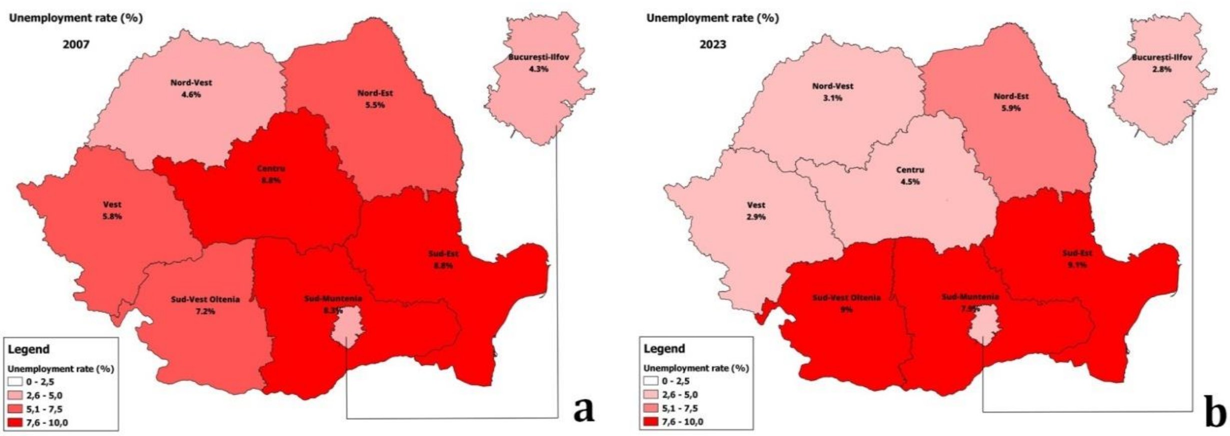

Figure 4. The unemployment rate in each region, 2007 vs. 2023
Source: National Institute of Statistics, 2026

The national average net salary has recorded major value increases in each development region in 2023 compared to 2008[1] (Table 8, Figure 5). The national average net salary has risen by 237%, representing a total sum of 4412 lei in 2023, 3103 lei more compared to 2008, 1309 lei (National Institute of Statistics, 2026).

Between 2008-2023, the regional average net salary has increased its value either. The greatest wage improvements were recorded in the Nord-Vest region, 274.43%, Centru region, 255.57%, while the Sud-Vest Oltenia has recorded the lowest increase among all regions, 202.62% (National Institute of Statistics, 2026).

In 2023, the greatest regional average net salary was recorded in the București-Ilfov region, 5842 lei, and the lowest was recorded in the Sud-Est region, 3733 lei.

In 2008, the București-Ilfov region recorded a net salary of 38.27% higher than the national average value. All the other regions recorded values below the national average value, and this situation continues in 2023.

In 2023, the economic disparities increased in the following regions: the Sud-Vest Oltenia region (from -3.74%, in 2008, to -13.58%, in 2023), the Sud-Est region (from -9.09%, in 2008, to -15.39%, in 2023), and the Sud-Muntenia region (from -6.80%, in 2008, to -11.67%, in 2023).

Table 8. Regional average net salary (lei)

Region	2008	2023	Evolution %
NORD-VEST	1119	4191	+274.53
CENTRU	1150	4089	+255.57
NORD-EST	1155	3914	+238.87
SUD-EST	1190	3733	+213.70
SUD-MUNTENIA	1220	3897	+219.43
BUCUREȘTI-ILFOV	1810	5842	+222.76
SUD-VEST OLTENIA	1260	3813	+202.62
VEST	1207	4250	+252.11

Source: National Institute of Statistics, 2026

Considering the economic indicators that have been calculated previously, the economic development index has been calculated in order to display precisely the evolution of each region from 2007/2008 to 2023 (Figure 6).

It can be observed a general improvement of the economic parameters at the national level, except for the particular cases of the Sud-Vest Oltenia region and the Sud-Est region, which have recorded major decreases in 2023 compared to 2007. The Sud-Vest Oltenia region has recorded a decrease of 27.16%, in 2023, and the Sud-Est region has recorded a decrease of 44.04% in the same year.

[1] unavailable data for 2007

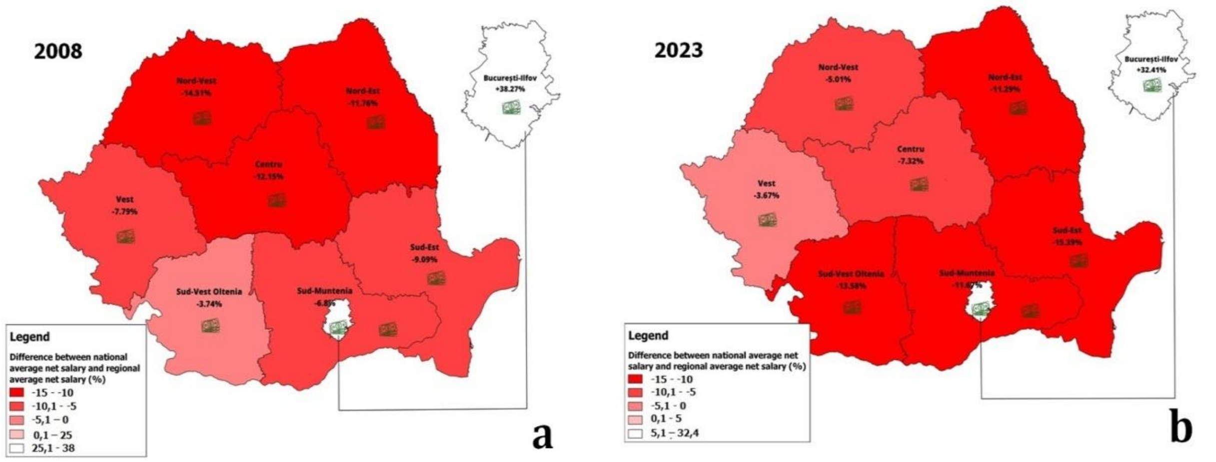

Figure 5. The difference between the regional average net salary and the nation average net salary, 2008 vs. 2023
Source: National Institute of Statistics, 2026

The regions Sud-Muntenia and București-Ilfov have stagnated, while the Nord-Vest, Centru, Nord-Est, and Vest regions have improved their index value.

The greatest index improvement was recorded by the Centru region, 44.44%, followed by the Vest region, 31.88%, then the Nord-Vest region, 26.08%, and the Nord-Est region, with a raise of 14.63%.

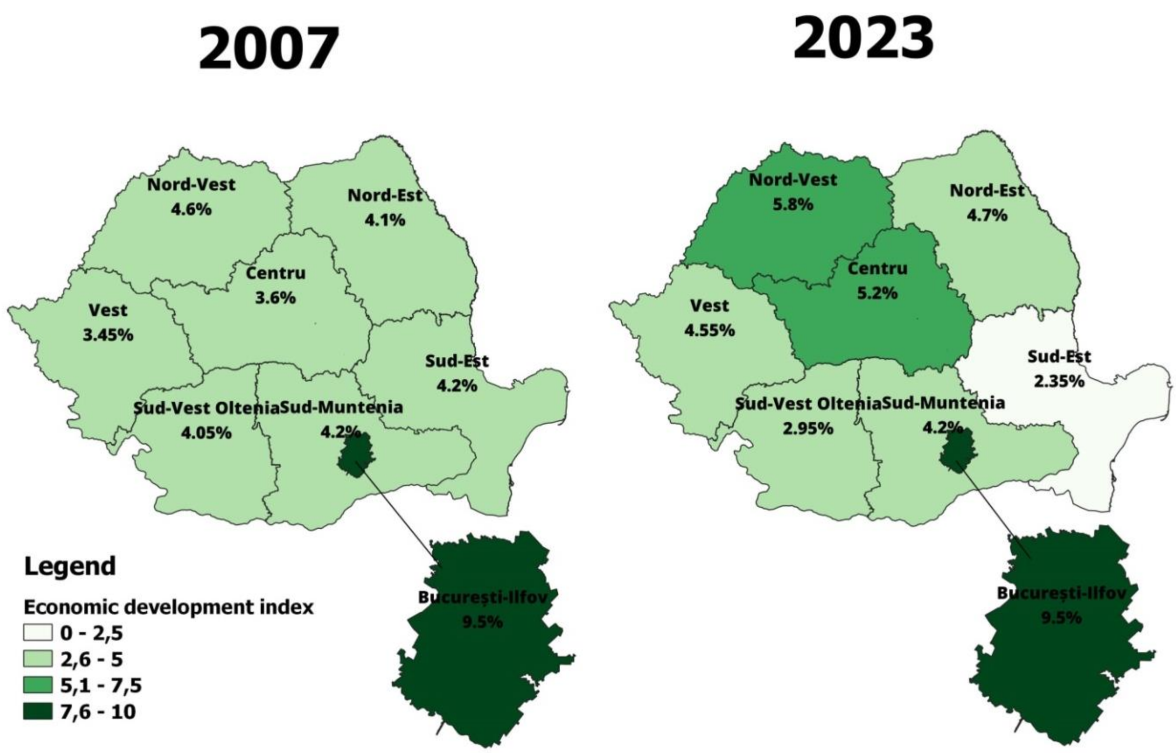

Figure 6. The economic development index comparison between 2007 and 2023
Source: own elaboration

4. CONCLUSIONS

It can be observed a direct correlation between the absorption rate of European funds and the level of improvement of the economic indicators taken into account for the analysis. This fact is confirmed by the positive trajectory of the regions as Centru, Vest, and Nord-Vest, which, despite the fact that they have benefited from considerably fewer funds for implementing regional projects in 2021-2027 compared to other regions, have reached better results due to the better absorption rate and the better use of these funds.

The study reveals a general improvement of the economic condition at the regional level, but it displays the accentuation of the interregional economic disparities throughout the time. The București-Ilfov region has increased its economic importance and clarified its role as the major economic pole at national level to the detriment of the other regions and other major cities.

It is noticed a precarious economic condition especially in the regions that are under the Bucharest's influence, such as Sud-Muntenia, Sud-Vest Oltenia, and Sud-Est. These regions record the lowest economic values on each indicator assessed, and, more important, these record a strong decrease in economic terms.

The major economic disparities between the București-Ilfov region and the rest of the regions highlight fundamental issues within the settlement system of Romania. University urban centers, excluding the capital city, cannot fully accomplish their territorial and economic role of assuring the territorial balance at the national level. These major cities cannot act as real urban poles in order to attract strong, diversified, and high-value economic activities in order to reduce the migration and to attract the young categories inside the surrounding counties to the city. This incapacity of developing their economic potential leads directly to intensifying the capital's congestion and increasing the level of hypertrophy. The demographically unbalanced territorial distribution contributes later to these economic disparities between regions.

The study reveals the fact that regional development fundamentally depends on the high rate of European funds absorption, considering the low amounts of money allocated for investments from the national budget. The dependency is confirmed by the situation in the current multiannual financial framework (2021-2027), where the regions with the lowest economic performances (Sud-Vest Oltenia, Sud-Muntenia, and Sud-Est) could not compensate for the low absorption rates with national funds for investments.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the European funds have represented essential financial instruments in the evolution of each development region since the beginning, helping in real terms to improve the general economic context. Nevertheless, these funds could not avoid the raising of the economic disparities between regions.

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