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The INTEGRA project – *www.interregeurope.eu/integra* – brings together eight partners from eight European countries (France, Italy, Latvia, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Serbia) to strengthen capacities for developing and managing territorial instruments and to leverage their potential to support the green and digital transitions at the local level. Through mutual learning, capacity building, and the development of specialized expertise, the project aims to improve policies in the participating regions and provide good practices for the post-2027 programming period. The project runs from May 1, 2025, to July 31, 2029, and is co-funded by the European Union through the Interreg Europe Programme.

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List of acronyms

API – Application Programming Interface
CELEX – Unique identification system for EU legal acts
CF (FC) – Cohesion Fund
CLLD – Community-Led Local Development
COM – Prefix used for European Commission documents
CPR – Common Provisions Regulation
DG – Directorate-General (European Commission)
EAFRD (FEADR) – European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EDP – Entrepreneurial Discovery Process
EMFAF - European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund
ERDF (FEDR) – European Regional Development Fund
ESF+ (FSE+) – European Social Fund+
EU – European Union
FUA – Functional Urban Area
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
GIS – Geographic Informational System
IDA (ADI) – Intercommunity Development Association
INTEGRA – Integrated territorial strategies for sustainable transition
ITI – Integrated Territorial Investments
IUDS – Integrated Urban Development Strategy
JASPERS – Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions
JRC – Joint Research Centre
LAG (GAL) – Local Action Group
LDS – Local Development Strategy
LEADER – Programul Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale
MA (AM) – Managing Authority
NIS (INS) – National Institute of Statistics (Romania)
NUTS – Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
NW – North West
NWRDA (ADRNV) – North-West Regional Development Agency
OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RCC (CCR) – Regional Coordination Committee
RCO – Regio Common Output Indicator
RCR – Regio Common Result Indicator
RDA (ADR) – Regional Development Agency
RDC (CDR) – Regional Development Council
RDP – Regional Development Plan
RP – Regional Programme
RSSUMSC – Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities of the North-West Region 2021-2027
SDG (ODD) – Sustainable Development Goal
RIS3 – Smart Specialisation Strategy
SUMP – Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan

Executive Summary

This diagnostic analysis provides an overview of how regional and local strategies are developed and implemented in the North-West Development Region, established under Law No. 151/1998 on Regional Development in Romania, which was subsequently repealed and replaced by Law No. 315/2004, through the voluntary association of local and county-level authorities from the counties of Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Maramureș, Satu Mare, and Sălaj.

The analysis presents the current situation, highlights strengths and weaknesses, identifies good practice examples and development opportunities, and serves as a useful tool for mutual learning and the continuous improvement of strategic planning and implementation processes.

The North-West Development Region has a relatively mature and coherent institutional model for developing territorial strategies, consolidated through successive programming periods under the European Union's Cohesion Policy. The North-West Regional Development Agency (NWRDA) coordinates the regional planning process, manages the Regional Programme (RP), and reviews local territorial strategic documents, leveraging its technical and coordination capacity to support an integrated approach to regional development.

This document analyzes the existing regional territorial model through seven dimensions: strategic dimension, territorial orientation, governance, cross-sectoral integration, financing, monitoring, and transformative capacity. The diagnosis is based on an assessment of regional and local strategic documents, using the Joint Research Centre (JRC) methodology, adapted to the INTEGRA project consortium.

The defining characteristic of the regional model is its implementation-oriented approach, whereby territorial strategies are designed not only to articulate a development vision but also to structure project portfolios that can be submitted under relevant calls for proposals, provided that all applicable eligibility and selection criteria are met.

In practice, NWRDA applies a formal mechanism for verifying the compliance and administrative admissibility of local strategies, making investment eligibility conditional on the issuance of a compliance endorsement. This mechanism has contributed to a high level of strategic coverage across the region: of the 43 towns and cities, 37 have approved Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDS), and 35 have endorsed Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP).

The main findings regarding strategic planning processes in the North-West Region are as follows:

- The assessment of the strategic dimension confirms that strategies are well aligned with European policies, that strategic planning processes are coherent at both regional and local levels, and that strategic visions are translated into approved plans and, ultimately, local project portfolios.
- Regional mechanisms help reduce fragmentation and strengthen strategic coherence. The Regional Development Plan (RDP) provides a common regional framework, the Smart Specialization Strategy (RIS3) guides investment in innovation, and program conditionalities require local strategies to be aligned to access funding. However, the links between strategic documents are not always sufficiently explicit to eliminate overlaps or inconsistencies entirely.

- A regional GIS platform enables the geospatial visualization of the existence of local strategies and their endorsement status, based on the data available and updated on the platform.
- NWRDA performs integrated functions in strategic planning, program management, technical assistance, and document review, ensuring continuity between regional planning, financing, and strategy implementation.
- The limited use of innovative governance approaches, such as participatory planning, foresight, and scenario analysis, represents the main area for improvement in strengthening the development and implementation of territorial strategies.
- NWRDA's mechanism for reviewing local strategies ensures consistent application of procedures but does not systematically assess the strategic quality, level of ambition, or transformative potential of local strategies.
- Significant disparities exist in institutional capacity between larger cities (Cluj-Napoca and Oradea) and smaller towns in the region.
- Strategy monitoring focuses more on program results than on integrated territorial outcomes, limiting the model's ability to demonstrate long-term territorial transformation.

1. Introduction

In Romania, development regions are not administrative-territorial units, do not have legal personality, and do not exercise regional public authority. In this context, the existence of Regional Development Agencies, public-benefit organizations that also serve as Managing Authorities, makes these regions particularly relevant as case studies for analyzing how territorial strategies are developed, coordinated, and implemented under conditions of limited institutional autonomy.

The North-West Region is one of Romania's eight development regions (NUTS 2) and falls into the category of less developed regions within the European Union (EU). It includes both the dynamic urban centers of Cluj-Napoca and Oradea and a predominantly rural territory facing persistent structural challenges.

Regional planning and coordination functions are carried out by the NWRDA and the Regional Development Council (RDC), within the limits of the powers established by Regional Development Law No. 315/2004. The NWRDA supports strategic planning and the implementation of Cohesion Policy programs through a set of regional strategies, including the Regional Development Plan (RDP) 2021–2027 [4], RIS3 NW 2021–2027 [5], and several sectoral strategies addressing mobility, tourism, and regional competitiveness. The main regulatory basis is Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, which establishes the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) for the 2021–2027 programming period [2]. The CPR defines five policy objectives that guide EU investments, two of which are particularly relevant to the North-West Region:

- Policy Objective 1 – a more competitive and smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation and regional ICT connectivity.

- Policy Objective 5 – a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives [2].

Complementing this framework, Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) provides the specific basis for regional development interventions, emphasizing integrated territorial approaches and place-based strategies [3]. The regulation supports territorial instruments such as Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI), Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), and other instruments designed by Member States to adapt development interventions to specific territorial contexts [1], [3].

At the national level, Romania implements Cohesion Policy through several **programs for the 2021–2027 period,** which channel European funds toward regional and local development priorities. Regional Programmes (RPs) are the main instruments supporting territorial development, while complementary programs address innovation, digitalization, social inclusion, health, education, and financial instruments [9]. In addition, access to ERDF funding under Policy Objective 1 requires an operational RIS3, ensuring that investments support priority areas identified through regional Entrepreneurial Discovery Processes [5], [7].

European policy priorities related to sustainability and the climate transition also shape the regional development framework. The European Green Deal establishes the EU's commitment to climate neutrality by 2050 and to reducing emissions by at least 55% by 2030 [6].

The Territorial Agenda 2030 also provides the strategic vision for territorial cohesion in the EU. It promotes place-based development approaches, stronger involvement of subnational authorities, and greater use of territorial instruments to support balanced development and improve quality of life across all regions [1], [8].

Methodological framework

The methodology was designed to enable comparison of results across the regions participating in the project while accounting for differences in administrative organization, territorial structure, institutional capacity, and planning experience.

The analysis is not intended solely to describe existing documents and mechanisms, but also to serve as a tool for learning and improving public policies. Its findings are intended to support subsequent experience-sharing and mutual learning activities carried out within the INTEGRA project, as well as the formulation of recommendations for developing integrated territorial instruments in preparation for the post-2027 programming period.

The main reference framework is the Handbook of Territorial and Local Development Strategies, developed by the JRC [1]. The handbook proposes an integrated approach to territorial development, adapted to the geographic, economic, social, and institutional characteristics of each territory.

The JRC methodology is structured around six key elements of territorial strategies: strategic dimension, territorial orientation, governance, cross-sectoral integration, financing and financial resources, and monitoring.

These elements were translated into a matrix of analytical questions used to conduct a comparative assessment of regional and local strategies. The questions aim to translate the general principles of the JRC framework into criteria applicable to the analysis of territorial documents and mechanisms in the North-West Region.

The INTEGRA project methodology complements the JRC framework with a seventh dimension focused on transformative capacity. This dimension examines the extent to which territorial strategies move beyond isolated or predominantly incremental interventions and can contribute to long-term structural change. The analysis considers the contribution of strategies to the green and digital transitions, climate change adaptation, social and demographic resilience, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [6], [10].

By introducing this component, territorial strategies are analyzed both as planning and coordination instruments and as potential mechanisms for mobilizing stakeholders, resources, and investments around territorial transformation objectives.

The analytical framework integrates three complementary conceptual perspectives:

- It uses a place-based development approach, which emphasizes adapting public interventions to territorial characteristics and needs, leveraging endogenous resources, and coordinating policies across different levels of governance [11]. This approach, reinforced within the European Union's Cohesion Policy, including through the Barca Report [12], highlights the importance of local context and institutional capacity in formulating regional development policies.
- It incorporates the principles of smart specialization, through which regions identify priority areas with economic development and innovation potential as part of Entrepreneurial Discovery Processes that bring together public authorities, businesses, research institutions, and civil society representatives [13], [14].
- It is based on the perspective of multilevel governance, according to which territorial development depends on coordination among European, national, regional, and local levels, as well as cooperation across policy sectors and among different stakeholder groups [15], [16].

The use of a common framework facilitates comparisons among the INTEGRA project's partner regions, while adapting the criteria to the regional context allows the results to be interpreted in relation to the institutional and territorial characteristics of the North-West Region. The analysis combines a review of public policy documents and regional strategic frameworks with a comparative assessment of a sample of local territorial strategies from the North-West Region.

A database of regional and local documents was compiled using resources available from the NWRDA. These were organized into a digital knowledge base using the NotebookLM

tool to facilitate the identification of relevant information, systematic querying of documents, and cross-comparison of strategies.

A total of 33 strategies from the North-West Region were selected for analysis, predominantly Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDSs), alongside Local Development Strategies (LDSs). The selection aimed to ensure diverse coverage of settlement types and levels of the urban hierarchy across the region's six counties.

The sample included:

- One strategy for each county seat.
- Two to four strategies for other cities.
- Three to four strategies for towns.
- One strategy for a commune.

The selection constitutes a purposive sample designed to capture the diversity of territorial and administrative contexts, rather than a statistically representative sample of all administrative-territorial units in the region.

Each strategy was assessed using an analytical matrix derived from the JRC building blocks and the additional module on transformative capacity. Six dimensions of the building blocks were assessed at the document level, supported by seven analytical subquestions (Q1–Q7) for the strategic dimension building block, as detailed in Chapter 2:

- Strategic dimension (Chapter 2.1)
- Territorial dimension (Chapter 2.2)
- Governance (Chapter 2.3)
- Cross-sectoral integration (Chapter 2.4)
- Financing (Chapter 2.5)
- Monitoring (Chapter 2.6)

Each component was assessed on a scale from 0 to 3, allowing comparisons across strategies and the identification of trends within the regional governance model.

Table 1 – Rating scale for territorial strategies

Score	Explanation
0	The element is not mentioned in the document.
1	The element is mentioned briefly, without clear elaboration.
2	The element is clearly described, but information on its application is limited.
3	The element is developed in detail and accompanied by implementation mechanisms, responsibilities, or tools.

Source: analysis conducted by Urbasofia and based on the INTEGRA project methodology.

The scoring system facilitates the identification of common patterns, differences among the strategies analyzed, and areas in which the documents demonstrate varying levels of development. Scores are used as a comparative and synthesis tool and should be interpreted alongside the qualitative analysis of the documents. The scoring system enables strategy comparisons, pattern identification, and quantitative summaries of the regional model.

Table 2 – Assessment Matrix for the NotebookLM Database

Score	Explanation
0	Not mentioned
1	Briefly mentioned
2	Clearly described, but with limited operational detail
3	Well developed and operationalized

Source: analysis conducted by Urbasofia and based on the INTEGRA project methodology.

For the strategic dimension component, the assessment of the 33 selected territorial strategies from the North-West Region resulted in a regional average score of 2.54 out of 3.00, with the following classifications:

- 12 strategies (36%) were classified as high-performing (average score ≥ 2.70).
- 18 strategies (55%) were classified as intermediate (2.00–2.69).
- 3 strategies (9%) were classified as requiring support (below 2.00).

The highest average scores were recorded for Q7 – Translation of the Strategic Vision into Approved Strategies (2.94) and Q3 – Alignment with EU Frameworks (2.73), while the lowest was recorded for Q6 – Innovative Policy-Making Approaches, including co-design and foresight (1.88). Q6 recorded the lowest average score among the subquestions analyzed, indicating a lower level of use of co-design, foresight, and scenario development.

These findings are analyzed in detail in Chapter 2 and provide the basis for the conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 3. The cross-sectoral integration dimension was supplemented by a questionnaire-based consultation, followed by a workshop with representatives of the Regional Coordination Committee (RCC), convened as part of the INTEGRA project in March 2026. The workshop brought together representatives of county councils, municipalities, metropolitan associations, and sectoral departments to discuss the degree of cross-sectoral coordination in the current strategy development model and identify structural bottlenecks. Findings relating particularly to cross-sectoral integration and the functioning of coordination mechanisms were examined in greater depth.

The document analysis was supplemented by consultation with stakeholders involved in the development, coordination, and implementation of territorial strategies.

The consultation aimed to capture participants' perceptions of:

- Coordination between institutions and administrative levels.
- Integration of sectoral areas into territorial strategies.
- Use of monitoring results.
- Access to funding sources.
- Main institutional and administrative bottlenecks.
- Needs for improving the regional planning model.

The consultation results were used to contextualize the findings from the document analysis and identify situations in which the formal provisions of strategies differ from the practices or perceptions of the stakeholders involved.

The quantitative results and their interpretation are presented in Chapter 2. For each dimension, the analysis seeks to correlate the scores obtained with specific examples from the strategies assessed and with information gathered through consultations with regional stakeholders.

The results of the diagnostic analysis should be interpreted in light of the nature of the sources and methods used, as follows:

- The document assessment examines how certain elements are presented and operationalized in the strategies analyzed. It does not directly measure the quality of implementation, the actual capacity of institutions, or the impact of investments on territories.
- The selection of 33 strategies aims to capture territorial and administrative diversity but does not allow the statistical generalization of results to all localities in the North-West Region.
- Information obtained through the questionnaire and workshop reflects participants' experiences and perceptions and may be influenced by the composition of the consulted group, respondents' level of engagement, and their institutional roles.

Consequently, the scores and comparisons presented in the analysis should primarily be interpreted as indicators of the quality and level of development of strategic documents. Conclusions regarding the actual functioning of territorial mechanisms require correlation with data on implementation, administrative capacity, program results, and observable territorial developments.

From a methodological perspective, the structure of the diagnostic analysis draws primarily on *the Handbook of Territorial and Local Development Strategies* developed by the JRC. The handbook is one of the European Commission's main methodological references for developing integrated and sustainable territorial strategies, structured around six fundamental building blocks: strategic dimension, territorial orientation, governance, cross-sectoral integration, financing and financial resources, and monitoring. Each chapter of the handbook identifies a series of challenges that policymakers and territorial stakeholders are expected to address, together with operational recommendations. These elements were incorporated into the diagnostic methodology in

the form of guiding questions, translating the general principles of the JRC framework into practical analytical tools.

The methodology was also recalibrated and expanded in relation to the specific objectives of the INTEGRA project and the policy challenges identified by the European Commission. In particular, a seventh module was introduced to address the transformative capacity of strategies. This additional element makes it possible to assess the extent to which integrated territorial instruments can contribute to systemic change rather than merely incremental change, with direct reference to the European Green Deal, the green and digital transitions, and the SDGs. This module is the distinctive feature of the proposed methodology, highlighting the relevance of strategies not only in terms of governance and processes but also as sustainability-oriented mechanisms for transformation.

The added value of this approach for Interreg Europe is twofold:

- The methodology enables systematic comparability across different regions while respecting the diversity of local contexts. Adopting the six JRC building blocks as a common framework ensures methodological consistency and facilitates the dissemination of results both within and beyond the partnership.
- The integration of the transformative module directly contributes to the project's overall objective of improving the development and management of territorial instruments for cohesion. In line with the Interreg Europe program, it strengthens the capacity of European regions to address the twin transition-green and digital-in an inclusive manner adapted to local specificities. From this perspective, the diagnosis is conceived not merely as a mapping exercise but as a strategic step toward developing transformative agendas and a concrete contribution to the European debate on improving territorial cohesion instruments in the post-2027 period.

This regional analysis applies the methodological framework developed by the JRC in *the Handbook of Territorial and Local Development Strategies* [1]. The JRC approach recognizes that development trajectories differ significantly depending on geographic conditions, economic structures, and institutional capacity, requiring responses tailored to local contexts and territorial specificities [1].

Building on the six fundamental JRC building blocks, the analysis includes an additional module on transformative capacity, introduced through the INTEGRA project methodology. This module assesses the extent to which territorial strategies contribute to **systemic change** in line with the European Green Deal, the twin green and digital transitions, and the SDGs [6], [10]. It emphasizes the role of territorial strategies as governance instruments and drivers of long-term transition.

The analytical framework integrates three complementary conceptual perspectives:

- It adopts a **place-based development approach**, which emphasizes adapting policy interventions to territorial characteristics, mobilizing endogenous resources, and coordinating policies across all levels of governance [11]. Widely

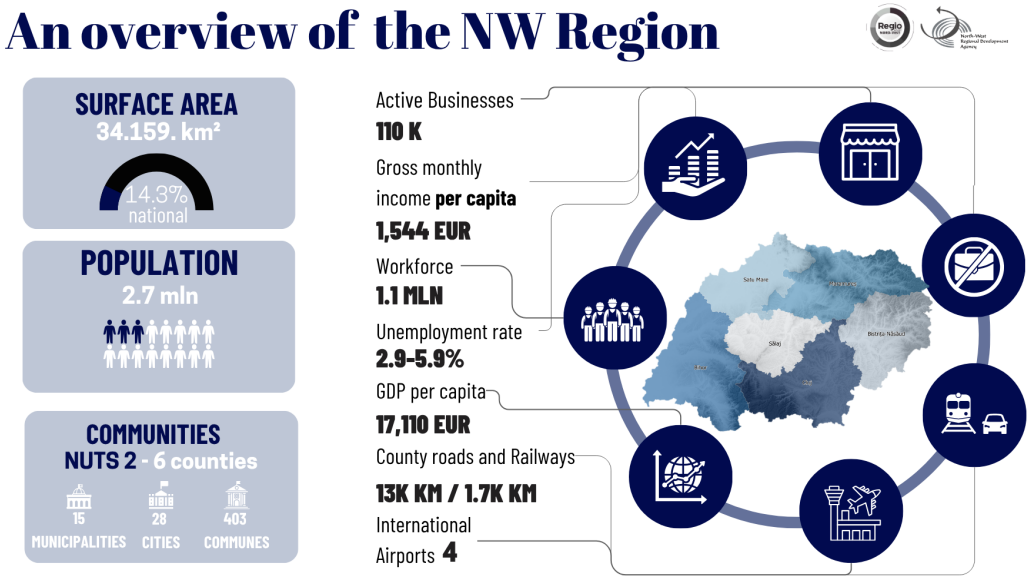
adopted in EU Cohesion Policy following the *Barca Report*, this approach highlights the importance of leveraging local resources and institutional capacity to support regional development [12].

- It incorporates the **principles of smart specialization**, which encourage regions to identify priority areas with economic potential through Entrepreneurial Discovery Processes involving public authorities, businesses, research institutions, and civil society [13], [14].
- It is based on the theory of multilevel governance, recognizing that territorial development depends on coordination among European, national, regional, and local actors, as well as cooperation across policy sectors and stakeholder groups [15], [16].

1.1. General regional context

The North-West Development Region was established under Law 151/1998 through the voluntary association of local and county authorities from the counties of Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Maramureș, Satu Mare, and Sălaj. The region covers an area of 34,160 km^2, representing 14.3% of Romania's territory and ranking fourth at the national level. According to the NUTS classification, it is a NUTS 2 region and part of Macroregion 1 (NUTS 1), bordering the West, Centre, and North-East Regions.

Figure 1 – North-West Region infographic



Source: NWRDA

1.1.1. Environmental context

The North-West Region is characterized by a diverse natural environment shaped by a varied relief structure, with mountains accounting for 28% of the territory, hills for 30%, and plains and valleys for 42%. The region benefits from a temperate continental climate, with warm summers, cold winters, and relatively abundant precipitation, ranging from approximately 550 mm in lowland areas to up to 1,500 mm in mountainous zones. Average annual temperatures vary between 3.8°C and 10.4°C.

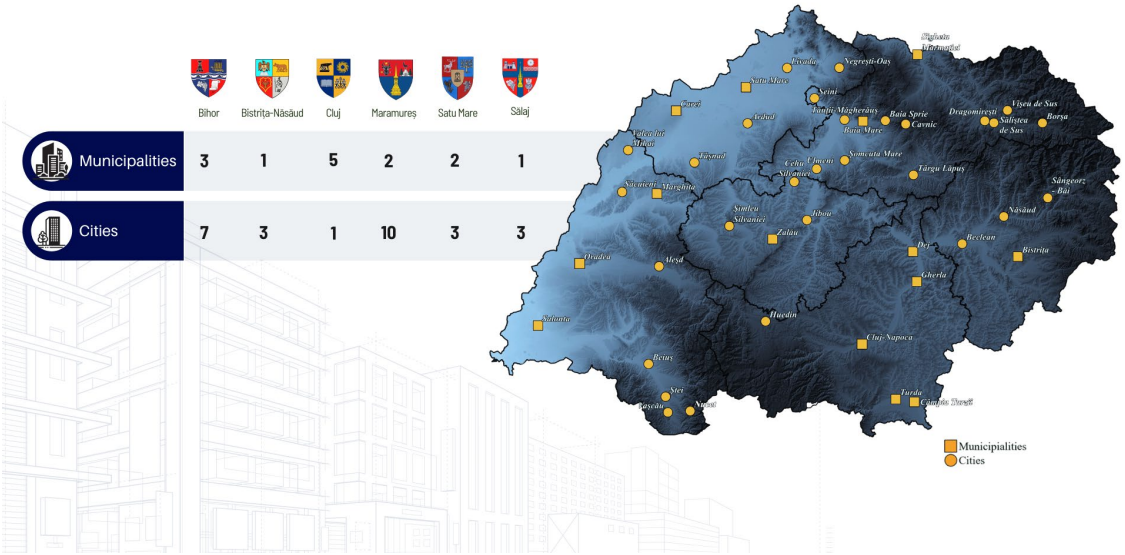
The hydrographic network is dominated by the river basins of the Tisa, Someș, Crișuri, Crasna, Tur, and Barcău. Groundwater resources in the Someș–Tisa basin are estimated at around 10 m^3 per second, while mineral and thermal water resources support spa tourism and related economic activities. Soil and subsoil resources are limited in terms of energy resources; however, the region benefits from mineral deposits, including complex and gold-silver ores, bauxite, salt, and construction materials.

Agricultural land covers approximately 61% of the regional territory, while forests account for around 30%, providing a strong natural basis for agriculture and forestry. The region also hosts a high level of biodiversity, with 88 Natura 2000 sites and 171 protected areas of national interest. These environmental assets offer important opportunities for sustainable development, while also requiring careful resource management and environmental protection.

1.1.2. Settlement system and urban–rural dynamics

The settlement structure of the North-West Region is predominantly rural. The region includes 446 local administrative units, of which 403 are communes, alongside 15 municipalities and 28 towns.

Figure 2 – North-West Region settlements



Source: NWRDA

The urban system is largely composed of very small and small towns (under 20,000 inhabitants), which account for approximately 70% of urban settlements. Only a limited number of cities perform strong regional functions.

As mentioned in Strategy of Territorial Development of Romania 2035, large urban centres such as Cluj-Napoca and Oradea function as major economic and innovation hubs within the region, concentrating universities, research institutions, and advanced services. Regional poles such as Baia Mare, Bistrița, Zalău and Satu Mare play important roles in providing employment opportunities and public services.

Although the urban population has gradually declined since 1990, the level of urbanization has remained relatively stable at around 52%, which is lower than both national and European averages. At the same time, suburbanisation processes are increasingly visible around major urban centres, reflected in population growth and residential development in peri-urban localities.

Rural territories display strong functional diversity depending on geographical conditions and agricultural profiles, ranging from intensive crop production in lowland areas to livestock farming in mountainous zones. At the same time, rural areas share development opportunities related to agri-food value chains, eco-tourism, forestry, and diversified non-agricultural activities. The strong urban-rural functional differentiation visible in the settlement system is directly reflected in the design of territorial strategies, which must address both the competitive dynamics of urban innovation poles and the structural challenges of peripheral and mountain areas.

1.1.3. Institutional context

Regional development in the North-West Region is organised through a governance framework based on voluntary cooperation between county and local authorities. As one of Romania's development regions, the North-West Region does not have administrative authority but functions as a territorial coordination structure for implementing national and European regional development policies.

Regional and territorial development in the North-West Region is supported by a system of strategic planning instruments operating at regional, county, metropolitan, and local levels. These instruments translate national and European policy objectives into territorially adapted development strategies and investment frameworks.

The institutional framework is supported by the NWRDA, which acts as the executive body of the Regional Development Council and as an intermediary institution for the implementation of EU Cohesion Policy instruments. The agency is responsible for preparing the key regional strategic documents, including the RDP, the RIS3, and sectoral strategies addressing mobility (Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities of the North-West Development Region), tourism (Regional Tourism Development Strategy), and competitiveness, and for ensuring their coherence with EU and national policy frameworks.

In its capacity as Managing Authority (MA) for the RP NW 2021-2027, NWRDA also establishes the procedural and eligibility conditions that govern how local and metropolitan territorial strategies are verified and endorsed as prerequisites for accessing EU funding. In this role, the agency contributes to strategic programming, project selection, contracting, monitoring, and support for beneficiaries, facilitating the territorialisation of national and European development priorities. The formal mechanism through which local strategic documents are verified for eligibility purposes is described in detail in section 2.1.4.

1.2. Scope of the analysis

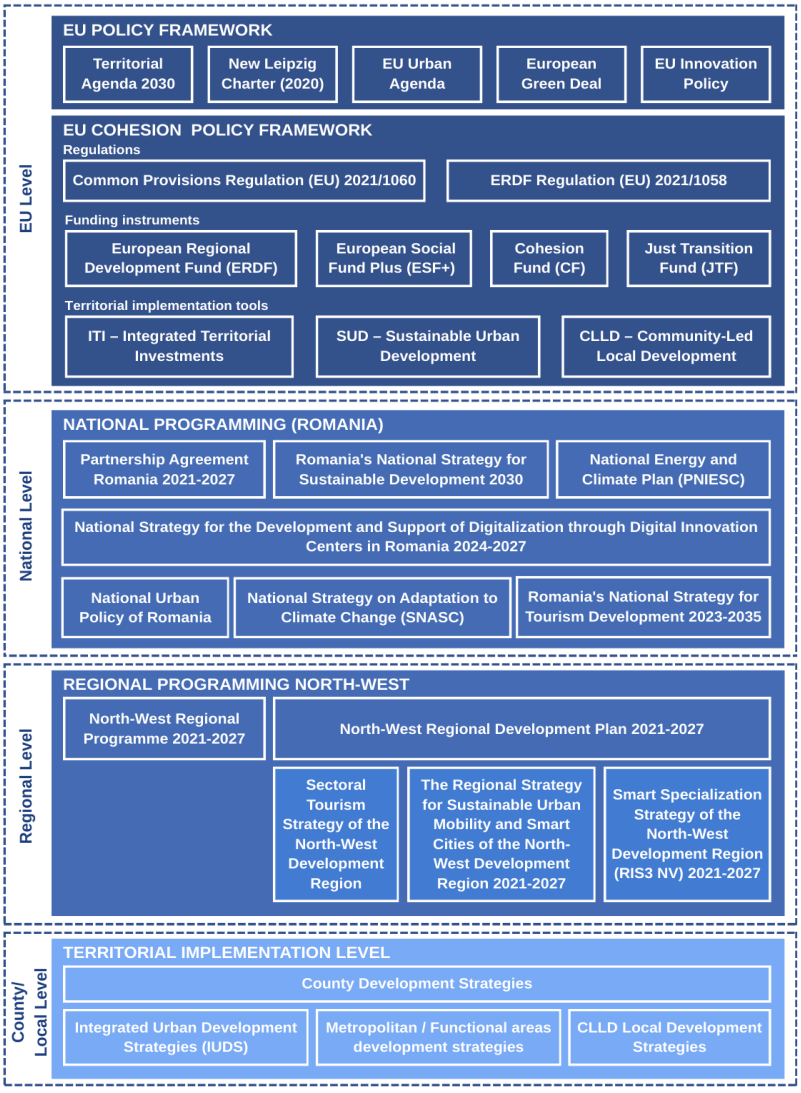
The analysis examines the regional model for developing and implementing territorial strategies in Romania's North-West Region. Particular attention is given to the types of territorial strategies used in the region, their institutional role, and their position within the

broader framework of the EU Cohesion Policy for 2021–2027 and the Regional Development Plan for the North-West Region 2021–2027.

The objective is to understand the governance model through which these strategies are developed, adopted, and implemented. This involves analyzing the institutional actors involved, coordination mechanisms across governance levels (EU, national, regional, and local), and the procedures through which territorial strategies are translated into investment portfolios.

The analysis examines the content and thematic focus of territorial strategies, including their alignment with European and national policy priorities, such as the green transition, digital transformation, innovation, and social inclusion. Particular attention is given to the extent to which strategies adopt integrated approaches and interact with other planning instruments and development programs operating at the regional and local levels.

Figure 3 - Policy and regulatory framework



Source: NWRDA and Urbasofia

The territorial strategy ecosystem in the North-West Region operates within the framework of the **EU Cohesion Policy for the 2021–2027** period, implemented under shared management between the European Commission and the Member States. Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 establishes the policy objectives, governance principles, and partnership requirements that guide the use of EU funds, including integrated territorial development approaches.

In accordance with Regulation (EU) 2021/1058, integrated territorial development can be implemented through sustainable urban development, **Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI), Community-Led Local Development (CLLD),** or **other territorial instruments defined by Member States (such as territorial strategies, IUDSs, and LDSs).** These strategies must include a territorial analysis, integrated responses to development needs, and mechanisms for stakeholder participation.

For urban areas, Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 on the ERDF requires the use of **integrated territorial strategies for sustainable urban development** and stipulates, in Article 8(1), that Member States must allocate at least 8% of ERDF resources at the national level to sustainable urban development.

At the national level, Romania implements Cohesion Policy through the Partnership Agreement with the European Commission, which establishes the framework for the use of the ERDF, ESF+, and Cohesion Fund (CF). The broader spatial and sustainable development agenda is guided by the **National Sustainable Development Strategy 2030 and the Territorial Development Strategy 2035,** which constitute the core documents of the national spatial planning system.

Regional development in Romania is organized through development regions, which function primarily as cooperation frameworks rather than administrative levels. Governance is ensured by Regional Development Councils (RDCs), composed of representatives of county and local authorities, while Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) provide the technical and operational capacity required to implement programs. In the North-West Region, the NWRDA plays a central role in coordinating regional development strategies and managing the North-West Regional Programme (RP NW) 2021–2027.

Territorial development in the North-West Region is based on a multilevel system of strategic planning instruments that guide public investment and project preparation.

At the regional level, the **RDP 2021–2027** defines the region's long-term development vision and strategic priorities and serves as the main reference framework for public investment. Economic transformation and innovation policies are further guided by **RIS3**, which directs investment toward priority economic areas identified through a place-based approach. The strategy promotes collaboration among research institutions, universities, businesses, and public authorities, contributing to economic diversification, technological modernization, and increased regional competitiveness.

Sectoral priorities are further addressed through thematic strategies, such as the **Regional Tourism Development Strategy** [17], which leverages the region's natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and spa and wellness resources. Tourism is considered a strategic sector with a strong territorial impact, supporting rural development, economic diversification, and the sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage.

The digital and mobility dimensions of regional development are addressed in the **Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities of the North-West Development Region through 2030**, which aims to create a smart territory supported by a network of interconnected and innovative cities. These cities use technology to facilitate sustainable development, interaction between citizens and public administration, and efficient resource use, all of which are key drivers of regional progress [18]. The strategy provides the strategic basis for investments in public transportation, active mobility infrastructure, smart city platforms, and digital governance in the region's urban centers.

At the county and local levels, these strategic directions are implemented through several spatial planning instruments, including **County Development Strategies, IUDSs, SUMPs, and LDSs.**

In urban areas, integrated planning is supported particularly through **IUDSs**, which promote coordinated investments in economic development, social inclusion, public services, and the urban environment. These are complemented by **SUMPs**, which focus on improving accessibility, connectivity, and sustainable transportation systems, particularly in cities facing suburbanization and increasing mobility demands.

IUDSs and SUMPs are strategic and sectoral planning instruments and do not replace spatial and urban planning documentation (General Urban Plans (PUGs), Zonal Urban Plans (PUZs), County Spatial Plans (PATJs), etc.) approved in accordance with applicable legislation.

At the local level, **LDSs** and community-led initiatives translate higher-level strategic objectives into concrete actions adapted to specific territorial contexts. These instruments support bottom-up development approaches, strengthen local governance capacity, and contribute to social cohesion and territorial identity.

1.3. Sources and stakeholders consulted

The diagnosis is based on a combination of document analysis, regulatory review, and institutional input. The documentary basis includes the main EU regulations governing Cohesion Policy 2021-2027, notably Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 and Regulation (EU) 2021/1058, as well as the Partnership Agreement Romania 2021-2027 and the RP NW 2021-2027.

Statistical and contextual information was obtained from Eurostat and the National Institute of Statistics (INS).

At regional level, the analysis draws on key strategic documents RDP 2021-2027, RIS3, RSSUMSC, and the RTDS. Additional information was derived from the methodology and

internal procedures used by NWRDA for the conformity and eligibility verification of territorial strategies submitted under the RP.

Where relevant, the analysis also refers to local planning instruments, including IUDS, SUMPs, and rural LDS, as well as to digital monitoring tools such as the regional GIS dashboard used to track endorsed territorial strategies.

The stakeholder's perspective was primarily informed by the institutional experience of the NWRDA. Additional relevant stakeholders include representatives of local authorities, metropolitan associations, and regional coordination structures involved in the preparation and implementation of territorial strategies such as county councils of Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Maramureș, Satu Mare, and Sălaj, as key actors in local planning; representatives of the CCR, consulted through a dedicated workshop on cross-sectoral integration, in March 2026. Additional expert input was provided through structured review of publicly available strategic and programme documents, analytical studies commissioned under Technical Assistance, and the digital knowledge base compiled using *NotebookLM*. The scoring analysis of territorial strategies was conducted by Urbasofia and the INTEGRA project team at NWRDA based on the analytical matrix described in section 1 above.

2. Analysis of strategies building block

2.1. Strategic dimension

The strategic dimension of territorial development in the North-West Region is organised through a multi-level planning framework in which regional strategic documents define the overall development direction, while local strategies translate this direction into territorial objectives and project portfolios. In practice, the model combines top-down alignment with European and national frameworks and bottom-up territorial articulation through local planning instruments. The regional strategic vision is therefore distributed across a set of complementary documents and procedures.

At regional level, the main strategic reference is the **RDP NW 2021-2027** [4]. Under Law 315/2004, the RDP is the core regional planning instrument and provides both the long-term development vision of the region and the analytical basis for programme and project prioritisation. In the North-West Region, the RDP was prepared by NWRDA based on a socio-economic profile, SWOT analysis, stakeholder consultation, and review within the Regional Planning Committee before approval by the Regional Development Council in 2021 [4]. It is complemented by specialised strategic documents, notably the **RIS3 NW 2021-2027** [5], the **Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities**, [18] and the **Regional Tourism Strategy** [17]. Together, these documents create a strategic architecture covering competitiveness, innovation, mobility, sustainability, territorial cohesion, and sectoral development.

This framework is closely linked to programme implementation. The **RP NW 2021-2027**, managed by NWRDA, translates regional strategic priorities into funded investment priorities and eligibility conditions. In this sense, the regional strategic model is strongly implementation-oriented: territorial strategies are expected to define a vision, and to structure project pipelines compatible with programme priorities. Long-term objectives are thus articulated across several strategies.

2.1.1. Alignment with EU, national, and regional frameworks

The strategic framework of the North-West Region shows substantial alignment with the main EU and national policy frameworks. The RDP and related regional strategies reflect the logic of **EU Cohesion Policy 2021-2027**, including the five Policy Objectives established in Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 [2]. In particular, the regional model connects strongly with Policy Objective 1, through RIS3 and innovation-led competitiveness measures [5], and Policy Objective 5, through integrated territorial development instruments and local strategy-based investments [2], [4].

The strategic framework also aligns with broader European agendas. References to the **European Green Deal** [6], **Agenda 2030**, and the principles of the **Territorial Agenda 2030** [8] are visible in the orientation of regional strategies toward sustainability, balanced territorial development, climate action, digitalisation, and quality of life. The RDP states that its preparation considered European, national, macro-regional, regional, and sub-regional strategic and planning documents, indicating a deliberate effort to embed regional planning in broader policy frameworks [4]. At the same time, the RIS3 was developed with support from the EC JRC and reflects the smart specialisation logic required as an enabling condition for ERDF investment under Policy Objective 1 [5], [7].

At the local level, this alignment is translated into approved strategies through a cascading logic: diagnosis → strategic objectives → measures → project portfolio → formal approval → use for funding applications. In most cases, local strategies explicitly position their objectives in relation to regional and EU priorities, especially where access to RP funding depends on strategic consistency.

2.1.2. Coordination mechanisms

A strength of the North-West model is that it includes several mechanisms designed to reduce fragmentation and maintain consistency across strategies, although these mechanisms do not completely eliminate overlaps:

- The RDP serves as a common regional reference and establishes a strong form of coordination through program conditionalities, as local strategies must meet formal requirements for projects to be considered eligible for funding.
- RIS3 provides thematic guidance for innovation-related investments.

Coordination is therefore achieved through the use of common reference documents, complemented by screening procedures and strategic conditionalities associated with programs. This approach creates a relatively coherent regional model, although the links between different strategic documents are not always sufficiently explicit to fully prevent overlaps or inconsistencies [13], [15].

2.1.3. Territorial coalitions and strategic vision

The regional model encourages territorial coalitions to formulate strategic visions, especially where development challenges exceed administrative boundaries. In practice, these coalitions take several forms: **Functional Urban Areas**, **metropolitan or inter-municipal cooperation structures**, **IDAs**, and **Local Action Groups (LAGs)** operating

through CLLDs. Their role is to define shared territorial priorities in relation to mobility, public services, economic development, environmental management, or social inclusion.

This makes the regional model mostly top-down. Local coalitions formulate territorial priorities within a framework already shaped by regional strategies, EU requirements, and funding rules. Formal mandates are generally established through local council decisions, association statutes, or partnership agreements, especially in the case of metropolitan areas.

2.1.4. Regional tools supporting strategic vision

At regional level, several tools support the formulation of territorial strategies. The most important are the **RDP NW** [4], the **RIS3 NW** [5], the **Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities** [18], the **Regional Tourism Strategy** [17], and the **RP NW 2021-2027**. These documents provide strategic direction, thematic priorities, eligibility logic, and investment orientation.

Their role is to establish a common reference framework for local authorities preparing territorial strategies and contribute to standardising the architecture of local documents around diagnosis, strategic objectives, measures, and project portfolios. In addition, North-West Regional Development Agency applies formal procedures for the administrative conformity and admissibility verification of IUDS, SUMPs, and Rural Territorial Strategies submitted in relation to programme funding. Although these procedures do not assess the substantive quality of local visions, they create a common procedural standard and reinforce the link between territorial strategy-making and programme implementation.

Figure 4 – Regional and local strategic tools in North West Region



Source: NWRDA

I. Regional level

➔ North-West Regional Development Plan 2021-2027

According to Regional Development Law 315/2004, the RDP is the main planning document developed at regional level and reflects relevant European and national development policies in relation to the specific needs and challenges of the region. The RDP is the strategic basis for projects initiated in the region and is a benchmark both for national authorities in terms of funding programs and for county/local authorities and potential public or private investors. The results of the socio-economic analysis will highlight strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis).

Such a document starts from the socio-economic profile of the region, achieved through quantitative and qualitative analysis of existing conditions and trends over the last years of the last programming period, covering all areas of economic and social development. Based on this information, considering the long-term development vision, the national and European planning and programming context, as well as the information and observations received from key actors during the public consultations, the Regional Development Strategy (objectives, priorities, actions or measures) is formulated. This is implemented based on an action plan, which also contains elements relating to monitoring and evaluation, as well as a portfolio of projects. To date, the NWRDA has drawn up five such strategic planning documents for the pre-accession periods 2000-2002, 2004-2006, and post-accession periods 2007-2013, 2014-2020, and 2021-2027.

➔ Smart Specialization Strategy of the North-West Development Region 2021-2027

Smart specialization is a concept promoted by the European Union to express the framework and mechanisms for the specialization of innovation processes at the level of a developing country/region. In the financial period 2021-2027, this concept is supported by the strategic investment objectives of the European Union's Cohesion Policy, in particular by Policy Objective 1 "A smarter Europe, by promoting an innovative and intelligent economic transformation".

The North-West Regional Development Agency developed the Smart Specialization Strategy of the region with the support of European Commission experts and with financial assistance received within the 2014-2020 ROP Technical Assistance Project during 2016-2018. The support from the EC Joint Research Center was funded by a preparatory action of the European Parliament and is part of the pilot project of DG Regio and Urban Policy for less developed regions "Lagging regions" [7]. The document was updated during 2020, taking into account the new legislative package on the implementation of European funds related to the 2021-2027 financial framework, launched by the European Commission (EC), which provides for a series of "favoring conditions" that replace the related ex-ante conditionalities period 2014-2020, these being stricter and consolidated in the context of the targeted European fund, EU funding being restricted by their non-fulfilment according to the provisions of the draft General Regulation (EC). This regulation provides in Annex III, 4 horizontal favorable conditions (CO) on the fulfilment of which depends the financing of all specific objectives related to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund (CF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and in Annex IV , 15 sectoral favorable conditions (CS) on the fulfilment of which depends the financing of one or more specific objectives aimed at certain intervention sectors. Fulfilling the criteria related to the enabling condition "Good governance of the national or regional smart specialization strategy" is essential for the programming exercise for the period 2021-2027, considering

the funding related to Policy Objective 1 (OP1) of the European Union - "A Smarter Europe , by promoting an innovative and intelligent economic transformation", with impact on several Operational Programs (Regional Operational Programme, Intelligent Growth Operational Programme, Digitization and Financial Instruments, Health Operational Programme). Also, the development of Smart Specialization Strategies at the regional level is a condition for Policy Objective 1-related funding granted within the Regional Operational Programs in the period 2021-2027.

➔ **Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities of the North-West Development Region 2021-2027**

The digital and mobility dimensions of regional development are addressed through the Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities (RSSUMSC) of the North-West Development Region 2021–2027, developed by the NWRDA based on a comprehensive territorial audit and an assessment of smart city maturity covering all towns and cities in the region.

The strategy aims to transform the North-West Development Region into a smart territory supported by a network of interconnected and innovative cities that use technology to facilitate sustainable development, with innovation, the relationship between public administration and citizens, and efficient resource use as key drivers. It is the only systematic regional approach that assesses the smart city maturity of all cities in the region and proposes a project inventory based on the size and priorities of each city.

The strategy provides the investment framework for sustainable urban mobility infrastructure, including the modernization of public transportation, the development of bicycle lane networks, and the implementation of on-demand transportation, as well as for smart city platforms, IoT-based urban management systems, e-governance tools, and digital public services in the region’s urban centers.

The supporting documents include a territorial audit, a strategic agenda, a Smart City Maturity Model, individual profiles for all cities in the region, and a consolidated project inventory, making this one of the most detailed sectoral strategies within the regional planning framework.

The strategy directly contributes to the investment priorities of the North-West Regional Programme 2021–2027, particularly under the priorities dedicated to sustainable mobility and smart cities, and provides the regional reference framework against which local Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs) are aligned.

➔ **Tourism Strategy of the North-West Development Region 2021-2027**

The study on the inventory, evaluation, and prioritization of investments for the valorisation of tourism resources in the North-West Development Region, carried out in 2019 by the North-West Regional Development Agency, served as a key analytical foundation for shaping the regional sectoral tourism strategy for the 2021–2027 programming period. The study included a comprehensive inventory and assessment of tourism resources across the region and formulated proposals for prioritizing investments aimed at their sustainable tourism-based valorisation. The results of this analysis provided the evidence base for

defining strategic priorities, development directions, and intervention areas that informed the preparation of the regional tourism strategy for the 2021–2027 period [17].

Tourism is vital to the success of many economies around the world, if properly understood and applied; it can improve the standard of living in the host communities by creating jobs and capitalizing on products and local identity, provided that the approach is towards sustainability, authenticity/uniqueness, attractiveness/ competitiveness and, predominantly, export.

At the level of the North-West Development Region, the focus is on the following guidelines, in terms of tourism:

- Identifying the elements of authenticity, uniqueness and attractiveness of the destination (for positioning – identity and branding).
- Attracting and involving local communities, producers and products in the tourism offer within the destination, to benefit from attractive and competitive tourism products both for residents and for domestic tourism and the international market, to increase the quality of life of the local community, through:
    - Increasing the number of arrivals of foreign tourists in the destination and/or increasing the amount of money spent by them in the destination;
    - Decrease in the number of departures of residents outside the destination and/or decrease in the amount of money spent by them in other destinations;
    - Attracting residents to consume local products.

Also, at the horizontal level, North-West Regional Development Agency considers the following aspects:

- Digitization of tourist attractions and services in the region;
- Making the region accessible (for people with impairments/disabilities);
- Integrated, coherent and sustainable tourism development, positioning and capitalization, considering the specifics of adjacent micro-destinations;
- Specialization of personnel in the tourism and hospitality industry;
- The sustainability of the region (local communities, gastronomy and local products, protecting the environment and biodiversity, at the level of each micro-destination).

➔ **Sectoral plans and strategies**

The sectoral documents and studies developed or coordinated by the NWRDA are essential tools for informing territorial development strategies in the North-West Development Region, guiding development priorities and supporting the efficient use of European, national, and international funds. These include regional strategies, action plans, sectoral programming documents, and thematic studies that analyze the region's socioeconomic potential, inventory and assess territorial resources, and identify priority areas for investment and intervention.

Through socioeconomic analyses, SWOT assessments, participatory processes, and consultations with institutional, economic, and academic stakeholders, these documents help define strategic development directions for the short, medium, and long term, ensuring alignment between regional policies and national and European objectives and supporting the preparation of funding programs.

Overall, these documents provide the analytical and programming basis for formulating and implementing territorial development strategies, contributing to increased economic competitiveness, human capital development, the sustainable use of regional resources, and stronger territorial cohesion within the region.

II. Local level

➔ URBAN - Integrated Urban Development Strategies and Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans in the North-West region

During the 2021–2027 programming period, sustainable urban development and urban mobility investments in the North-West Region are implemented under a structured strategic framework that conditions access to funding on the existence of approved local strategic documents, **Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDS/SIDU)** and **Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP/PMUD).** These documents constitute the primary territorial planning instruments underpinning project selection under the North-West Regional Programme, particularly for interventions related to green transition, sustainable mobility and integrated urban regeneration.

The North-West Regional Development Agency, acting as Managing Authority for the Regional Programme 2021–2027, established a formal administrative compliance and admissibility verification mechanism for these strategic documents. This mechanism was introduced to ensure procedural robustness, strategic traceability of investments, and alignment with EU regulatory requirements regarding integrated territorial development, as set out in Regulation (EU) 2021/1060.

Within this framework, the regional-level endorsement process does not represent a qualitative assessment of local policy choices or a substantive validation of the strategic vision adopted by local authorities. Rather, it functions as an operational eligibility filter designed to confirm that minimum regulatory, procedural and structural requirements are met so that projects included in these strategies may be considered eligible under relevant funding calls. Local strategies were therefore submitted to North-West Regional Development Agency strictly for the purpose of obtaining administrative conformity and admissibility clearance linked to funding eligibility, not for strategic content evaluation.

The verification methodology applied at regional level establishes a standardized procedural workflow and documentation checklist. The review process is carried out by designated expert committees and is based on structured compliance grids. The assessment focuses on the formal completeness and admissibility of the documents, including the existence of the full strategy document, formal approval through Local Council decisions, evidence of partnership arrangements where functional urban areas are concerned, completion of the Strategic Environmental Assessment procedure, documented public consultation processes, and formal declarations of legal responsibility. A central requirement is the inclusion of a clearly defined priority project list embedded within each strategy.

A key operational principle underpinning the funding architecture is the strategic conditionality of projects. Only projects explicitly included in the priority project lists attached to the endorsed IUDS and/or SUMP documents are considered eligible for submission under the dedicated urban development and urban mobility calls. This

requirement ensures consistency between strategic planning and investment decisions, strengthens the integrated nature of interventions, and improves transparency and traceability in project prioritisation. It also reduces fragmentation of investments and supports a programmatic rather than opportunistic project pipeline.

The regional verification mechanism also serves an important implementation efficiency function. By front-loading the compliance verification of strategic documents, the Managing Authority reduces administrative risk and shortens the verification timeline at project application stage, thereby contributing to more predictable and streamlined contracting processes.

At the level of the North-West Region, strategic coverage among urban authorities is high, indicating strong institutional responsiveness to programme conditionalities and a relatively mature local planning landscape. Integrated Urban Development Strategies have been endorsed for 37 out of the 43 cities and municipalities in the region, and 6 strategies at the county level, while 35 Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans have received conformity and admissibility clearance. This high coverage rate supports the development of a robust and strategically anchored project pipeline and increases the region's capacity to effectively absorb EU funds allocated for sustainable urban and mobility investments.

At the same time, it should be noted that the regional endorsement mechanism is designed primarily as an administrative and eligibility instrument rather than a qualitative benchmarking tool. While it effectively ensures procedural compliance and strategic anchoring of investments, differences in analytical depth, methodological rigor and strategic ambition across local strategies may persist. Nevertheless, the mechanism provides a coherent minimum standard and a functional gateway linking local planning instruments with regional funding implementation.

➔ **RURAL - Rural Territorial Strategies**

Alongside the urban strategic framework, the North-West Region has established a dedicated territorial planning and eligibility architecture for investments implemented in rural areas. Under the North-West Regional Programme 2021–2027, access to funding for integrated rural development interventions is conditional upon the existence of formally adopted Rural Territorial Strategies developed by local administrative units and inter-municipal partnerships. These strategies function as the strategic reference framework for projects submitted under Objective of Policy 5 - *A Europe closer to citizens,* specifically under Priority 7 "An Attractive Region," targeting non-urban territories.

This conditionality reflects the EU regulatory requirement that territorially integrated investments must be grounded in documented territorial strategies that define the geographic scope, development needs, integrated intervention logic, and partnership arrangements. In response, the Managing Authority for the North-West Regional Programme, within North-West Regional Development Agency, introduced a formal methodology for the administrative conformity and admissibility verification of Rural Territorial Strategies, ensuring procedural consistency and funding eligibility traceability.

The regional verification mechanism is designed as an administrative and regulatory compliance instrument rather than a qualitative policy evaluation. Its purpose is to confirm that rural territorial strategies meet minimum structural, procedural and documentary standards so that projects included in their priority portfolios may be considered eligible under programme calls. The process therefore serves as a strategic eligibility gateway

linking territorial planning with funding access, while respecting local autonomy in strategic design.

The conformity and admissibility verification process applies specifically to rural territorial strategies developed by local authorities intending to submit projects under Priority 7 intervention fields related to cultural heritage conservation, sustainable tourism infrastructure, and balneary and balneoclimatic tourism development. The methodology establishes a standardized submission and review workflow, including a defined submission window, formal registration procedure, and electronic transmission requirements. Strategy packages must be submitted in non-editable format and formally assumed through electronic signature by the legal representative.

The required submission package includes the full territorial strategy document and its embedded priority project list, formal Local Council approval decisions, proof of public consultation, and a declaration of commitment confirming that at least one project will be submitted for funding under the relevant Priority 7 calls. The strategy must also demonstrate a defined implementation horizon extending at least through the programme eligibility period and must include evidence-based territorial analysis, integrated development logic, partner involvement, project prioritisation methodology, financing source identification, implementation arrangements, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Verification is carried out by formally appointed expert committees within the Managing Authority structure. Review teams are established by management decision and include designated evaluators and reserve members to ensure continuity. Strategies are assessed in order of submission and recorded in dedicated internal registers and repositories. The assessment is performed using standardized conformity and admissibility grids derived from EU regulatory requirements and national territorial planning methodologies. These grids verify, among other elements, territorial relevance, analytical robustness, integrated approach, partner participation, portfolio coherence, climate and digital transition considerations, implementation capacity, and monitoring arrangements.

The procedural timeline is structured to support implementation efficiency. The standard verification period is limited to a short working-day window from file allocation, with the possibility for evaluators to request clarifications. Beneficiaries are given a defined response period, with limited extensions permitted under justified circumstances. The methodology also includes a formal appeals mechanism, allowing a single contestation round reviewed by a separate verification team to ensure procedural fairness and consistency.

A specific flexibility mechanism has been introduced regarding Strategic Environmental Assessment compliance. The Managing Authority may issue a conformity endorsement based on the intermediary environmental screening decision where the final SEA decision is not yet available at submission stage. This conditional endorsement is subject to binding beneficiary obligations: project-level environmental approvals must be submitted at project evaluation and contracting stage, and the final SEA decision for the territorial strategy must be provided no later than project implementation completion. This staged compliance approach balances regulatory rigor with pipeline continuity.

As with the urban strategic framework, a core operational rule applies to rural investments: only projects explicitly included in the priority project list attached to an endorsed Rural Territorial Strategy are considered eligible for submission under the corresponding funding

calls. This ensures strategic coherence, investment traceability, and alignment between territorial needs assessment and funded interventions.

Overall, the rural territorial strategy verification mechanism complements the urban SIDU and SUMP endorsement framework and extends strategic conditionality across the full territorial spectrum of the region. It supports integrated rural investment planning, strengthens inter-administrative coordination, improves project pipeline maturity, and enhances predictability and procedural efficiency in programme implementation.

➔ **Regional Platform for Territorial Strategies and SUMPs**

The GIS dashboard[1] developed by the NWRDA functions as a digital monitoring tool for territorial strategies approved within the Managing Authority of the Regional Programme for the North-West Development Region. Its role is to centralize and visualize, in a geospatial format, the local strategic documents that received regional endorsement, particularly Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans and other territorial planning instruments required for funding eligibility. The platform allows the Managing Authority to track territorial coverage, monitor the status of endorsed strategies, and assess the strategic readiness of cities and municipalities. By providing an interactive overview of approved plans, the tool supports transparency, coordination, and the alignment between local strategic planning and investments financed through the regional programme.

2.1.5. Innovative policy-making approaches

The strongest documented example of innovative policy-making in the region is the **Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP)** used for the preparation of the RIS3 [5]. The strategy was developed through workshops, calls for project ideas, prioritisation exercises, and the involvement of quadruple helix actors from public administration, academia, business, and civil society. Its governance system includes a Steering Committee, Scientific Committee, and Working Groups, coordinated by North-West Regional Development Agency [5]. This makes RIS3 the regional example of a structured, iterative, and multi-actor approach to defining long-term priorities.

Beyond RIS3, the evidence suggests that participation in most territorial strategies is generally **consultative rather than fully co-designed**. The RDP preparation included public consultation linked to the socio-economic profile and SWOT analysis [4], while consultation materials are also visible in sectoral strategies such as the regional mobility strategy. However, continuous co-design, foresight, and scenario-building do not appear to be systematically institutionalised across all strategy types. The model therefore supports stakeholder consultation and thematic input, but more advanced innovation methods remain unevenly developed.

The methodology for the Regional Development Plan (RDP) for the North-West Region establishes a robust framework for public consultation and partnership. This process is designed to ensure transparency and the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders,

[1] *https://adrn-v.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/dd67f6519c374835bf85f287e36339c3*

ranging from public authorities and the academic environment to the private sector and civil society.

Core Structures: GTR and GLSR. The consultation is structured around two types of consultative bodies:

- **Regional Thematic Groups (GTR):** These operate at the regional level and provide expert advice on specific investment priorities.
- **Subregional Working Groups (GLSR):** Established in each of the region's six counties, these groups ensure that local needs and county-level strategies are integrated into the regional vision.

Priority Domains: The working groups are organized into five key thematic areas:

- Smart Specialization, Innovation, and Economic Competitiveness: Focusing on SMEs, start-ups, clusters, and digitalization.
- Urban Development and Sustainable Mobility: Addressing urban infrastructure and eco-friendly public transport.
- Rural Development, Agriculture, and Connectivity: Enhancing rural attractiveness and inter-community links.
- Human Capital, Education, and Health: Developing vocational training, public health, and social inclusion.
- Environment, Climate, and Sustainability: Promoting renewable energy, the circular economy, and climate adaptation.

Member identification and selection

The selection process is rigorous and transparent. It begins with the identification of representative organizations (such as universities, chambers of commerce, and clusters) followed by a four-week public call for expressions of interest. Candidates are evaluated by a Validation Committee based on their expertise (60%) and capacity to contribute (40%). Each thematic group typically consists of 15 to 25 members, ensuring a balance between geographical representation and sector diversity.

To maximize participation, the North-West Regional Development Agency (NWRDA) employs several consultation formats:

- Plenary Meetings: Held at least twice a year in physical or hybrid formats.
- "Caravan" Sessions: Meetings organized in each county to map specific local needs.
- Digital Interaction: A permanent online platform, "North-West 2034 – Contribute to your future!", allows the general public to submit proposals and feedback.
- Thematic Workshops: Specialized sessions for in-depth discussions on complex technical topics.

Through these stages, the regional authority ensures that every proposal is analysed and synthesized, ultimately legitimizing the investment decisions that will shape the region's future.

2.1.6. Translation of strategic vision into approved territorial strategies

The strategic vision of territorial coalitions is translated into approved territorial strategies through a relatively standardized process. Strategies generally begin with a territorial diagnosis and the identification of problems, continue with the formulation of strategic and specific objectives, and then define priority measures and projects. Project proposals are

usually screened using prioritization criteria, resulting in an approved portfolio aligned with funding opportunities. Formal adoption through local council decisions transforms the document into an operational public commitment and, in many cases, a prerequisite for funding eligibility.

This translation process is particularly evident in **IUDSs, SUMPs, and Rural Territorial Strategies** developed in connection with the Regional Programme. Only projects explicitly included in the priority lists of endorsed strategies are eligible for submission under the relevant calls, strengthening the link between the strategic vision and investment selection. The model thus encourages a shift from general territorial planning to a structured intervention approach and programmatic project preparation.

Illustrative examples from the strategies analyzed reveal different levels of maturity. For example, the Cluj-Napoca Metropolitan Area strategy includes extensive thematic consultations and institutionalized mechanisms for civic engagement and expert input; the Oradea Metropolitan Area strategy is based on a formal intercommunity cooperation structure through an IDA and links the strategic document to the implementation of joint projects. In contrast, strategies such as that of the Municipality of Sighetu Marmației indicate a more compliance-oriented approach, with limited evidence of active territorial coalition-building or operationalized partnership structures.

2.1.7. Summary assessment

Overall, the strategic dimension of the North-West regional model can be described as multilevel, policy-aligned, and implementation-oriented:

- Multilevel • the vision is distributed across regional, sectoral, and territorial documents.
- Policy-aligned • the main strategies are explicitly linked to European and national frameworks.
- Implementation-oriented • local strategies are designed to generate project portfolios that can be funded through the Regional Programme.

Its main strengths are the existence of a clear regional strategic architecture, strong alignment with Cohesion Policy and smart specialization requirements, and the use of formal strategic conditionalities to connect planning with investment.

Its main limitations are the uneven quality of local strategies, the limited use of advanced policy innovation methods beyond RIS3 and the RDP, and the still incomplete articulation of coordination between strategies and transformative change [10], [13].

From a quantitative perspective, the assessment of the 33 strategies conducted for this diagnosis, based on the seven subquestions, confirms this pattern: the regional model consistently achieves high scores for alignment with the EU framework (Q3: average score of 2.73) and the translation of strategies into approved plans (Q7: average score of 2.94). These findings are analyzed in detail in the preceding subsections and provide the basis for the recommendations presented in Chapter 3.

Example of a Territorial Strategy Reflecting the Regional Vision

North-West RDP 2021–2027 • A Structured Regional Strategic Framework Linking Vision to Investment

The North-West RDP 2021–2027 is the most comprehensive example of integrated territorial strategy development in the region and serves as the main methodological and thematic reference for all lower-level territorial strategies. Developed by the NWRDA through a multi-stage process combining a socioeconomic profile, SWOT analysis, stakeholder consultation, and review by the Regional Planning Committee, the RDP constitutes the main regional strategic framework for guiding investments supported through the Regional Programme and other programs, and for aligning regional priorities with other relevant public investments.

The relevance of the RDP as a good practice lies not only in its content but also in its governance function and its role as a strategic cascading mechanism. The document was developed through a structured participatory process involving county councils, municipalities, business associations, universities, civil society organizations, and national authorities, ensuring that the regional vision reflects both European public policy requirements (top-down) and local territorial realities (bottom-up). The document translates the five Policy Objectives of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 into regionally adapted priorities, with particular emphasis on Policy Objective 1 (smart economic transformation through RIS3) and Policy Objective 5 (integrated territorial development closer to citizens). It covers all relevant dimensions of development—competitiveness, innovation, infrastructure, mobility, the green transition, social inclusion, and territorial cohesion—within a single integrated framework, accompanied by a monitoring system and a structured project portfolio.

What makes the RDP model readily transferable is the institutional conditionality mechanism it establishes for lower-level strategies. Local authorities developing IUDSs, SUMPs, and rural territorial strategies must demonstrate that these documents are aligned with RDP priorities, and this alignment is a condition for accessing funding through the Regional Programme. This cascading alignment mechanism—from the RDP to the program, from the program to the local strategy, and from the strategy to the project—gives the North-West regional model its vertical coherence and distinguishes it from contexts in which regional and local planning operate in parallel without a clear structural connection.

The RDP also demonstrates institutional continuity: the NWRDA has developed five consecutive regional development plans for the periods 2000–2002, 2004–

2006, 2007–2013, 2014–2020, and 2021–2027, thereby building substantial analytical and strategic capacity that is itself a transferable asset.

2.2. Territorial focus

2.2.1. Territorial characteristics and challenges

The territorial coverage of the strategic ecosystem is extensive. The North-West Development Region covers approximately 34,160 km^2, representing about 14.3% of Romania's territory, and includes six counties and 446 administrative-territorial units [4].

Strategies operate at several territorial scales (Table 3):

- Regional strategies cover the entire development region.
- County strategies address NUTS 3-level territories.
- Metropolitan and Functional Urban Area (FUA)-based strategies cover major urban centers and the surrounding communes.
- Local development strategies address individual cities, towns, and communes.

Table 3 – Territorial Scales and Types of Strategies in the North-West Region

Territorial Scale	Main Strategy Types	Main Actors Responsible	Territorial Coverage	Role in the Regional Development Model
Regional (NUTS 2)	Regional Development Plan (RDP); Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3); Regional Programme North-West; sectoral regional strategies (e.g., tourism, mobility, innovation)	Regional Development Agency North-West (ADR Nord-Vest); Regional Development Council; regional stakeholders	Entire North-West Development Region (6 counties)	Defines the **overall development vision, priorities, and investment logic** for the region. Provides the analytical framework and strategic orientation for territorial strategies implemented at lower levels.
County (NUTS 3)	County Development Strategies; sectoral county plans	County Councils	One county (Bihor, Cluj, Maramureș, Satu Mare, Bistrița-Năsăud, Sălaj)	Coordinates **sub-regional development priorities**, infrastructure planning, and territorial cohesion between urban centres and rural areas.
Metropolitan / Functional Urban Area	Integrated Urban Development Strategies (SIDU/IUDS); metropolitan development strategies; Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (PMUD/SUMP)	Municipalities ; IDA; metropolitan partnerships	Functional Urban Areas around major cities (e.g., Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Baia Mare, Satu Mare, Zalău)	Supports **integrated planning across urban and peri-urban territories**, addressing mobility, infrastructure, economic development, and environmental challenges beyond administrative boundaries.
Local (municipal / town / commune)	Local Development Strategies; sectoral plans; community-led strategies (CLLD)	Local Councils; Local Public Authorities; LAGs	Individual municipalities, towns, or communes	Translates higher-level strategies into **specific projects and investment pipelines**, reflecting local development needs and opportunities.

Source: Urbasofia and NWRDA analysis

The territorial focus of the regional development model in Romania's North-West Region reflects the region's pronounced internal diversity and the uneven spatial distribution of economic activity, infrastructure, and services. Each of the region's six counties (Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Maramureș, Satu Mare, and Sălaj) has distinct development trajectories and territorial characteristics [4].

- Cluj County, particularly the Cluj-Napoca metropolitan area, functions as the region's main economic and innovation hub. Its development model is supported by high-value-added services, information technology, advanced manufacturing, and a strong university-based innovation ecosystem that attracts investment and skilled labor [20], [21].
- In contrast, other counties have more diversified or traditional economic structures. Bihor County, centered on Oradea, benefits from cross-border economic integration and a diversified industrial base, but has not achieved the same level of innovation-driven growth as Cluj [20].
- Maramureș, Bistrița-Năsăud, Satu Mare, and Sălaj counties have a more pronounced rural character, with economies largely based on agriculture, traditional industries, and natural resource-related sectors. They face challenges such as population decline, population aging, and more limited access to services [4].

These structural differences shape the territorial focus of regional strategies. The region exhibits a pronounced urban-rural divide, with significant disparities in infrastructure quality, access to services, employment opportunities, and administrative capacity between major urban centers and rural municipalities [20]. Research on EU fund absorption in rural areas of Romania shows that administrative-territorial units with declining populations, limited fiscal capacity, or limited experience in managing European funds face significant barriers to accessing development resources [22]. As a result, rural areas often depend on nearby urban centers for jobs, services, and economic opportunities.

The region also includes several specific territorial typologies that influence development strategies. Mountainous areas in Maramureș and Bistrița-Năsăud counties face constraints related to accessibility, economic diversification, and service provision, requiring development approaches that balance tourism, local products, and services with efforts to strengthen economic resilience [23]. At the same time, the region's location along the borders with Hungary and Ukraine creates both challenges associated with a peripheral location and opportunities for cross-border cooperation, trade, and cultural exchange [4], [24].

The settlement structure reinforces these dynamics. A limited number of larger cities (Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Baia Mare, Bistrița, and Satu Mare) function as regional or subregional service centers, while a broader network of small and medium-sized towns provides services to surrounding rural areas. These towns play an important intermediary role in territorial cohesion, although many face challenges related to economic restructuring, population decline, and infrastructure deterioration [4]. Analyses of territorial

development clusters suggest that strengthening functional links between small towns and surrounding municipalities can improve regional development outcomes [25].

2.2.2. Definition of Territorial Boundaries and Functional Territorial Logic

In the North-West Region, the territorial boundaries of development strategies are defined through a combination of administrative boundaries and functional territorial relationships. From a legal perspective, strategies must be formally adopted by recognized administrative entities, such as counties, municipalities, towns, communes, or Intercommunity Development Associations (IDAs), as these structures hold decision-making authority and are eligible beneficiaries of public investment programs.

In practice, the effective territorial scope of many strategies extends beyond the boundaries of a single administrative-territorial unit. This is particularly evident in the case of **SUMPs**, where the planning area frequently includes neighboring communes that are functionally connected to the urban center through commuting flows, residential development, infrastructure networks, and service provision. As a result, the strategic territory often corresponds more closely to the functional urban system than to the administrative boundaries of the municipality.

The identification of these larger territories has been supported at the national level through the definition of **Functional Urban Areas (FUAs)**, using the OECD–European Commission methodology. Under this approach, urban cores are defined as centers of attraction, while surrounding localities are included in the functional area when a share of their employed population, generally more than 15%, commutes to the central city.

This functional perspective is evident in metropolitan planning structures around the cities of **Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Baia Mare, and Satu Mare,** where intercommunity cooperation mechanisms coordinate development priorities across multiple administrative-territorial units. These arrangements recognize that economic activity, transportation systems, real estate markets, and environmental management operate at a broader territorial scale than that of a single municipality [1].

These functional relationships also illustrate the **urban-rural interdependencies** that characterize the region. Major cities concentrate jobs, higher education institutions, specialized medical services, and administrative services, while neighboring rural communes provide residential areas, agricultural production, and access to natural resources. Daily commuting patterns highlight these connections, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Cluj-Napoca, where neighboring communes have experienced rapid residential growth as households relocate outside the city while remaining integrated into the metropolitan labor market. Similar dynamics can be observed around Oradea and Baia Mare.

Urban-rural links are addressed primarily through **metropolitan cooperation frameworks and FUA-based planning**, which enable municipalities and neighboring communes to coordinate infrastructure investments, mobility systems, and development priorities. At the same time, the region's network of small and medium-sized towns plays an important intermediary role by providing services and employment opportunities for nearby rural areas.

The territorial focus of the North-West regional model is characterized by a well-structured multiscalar planning framework that progressively incorporates functional territorial approaches beyond administrative boundaries. Its main strength is the use of the Functional Urban Area framework and metropolitan cooperation structures around the region's major cities, which enable planning to reflect actual interdependencies related to commuting, economic activity, and infrastructure. The main limitation is the uneven application of functional approaches: while the metropolitan areas around Cluj-Napoca and Oradea demonstrate an advanced level of functional planning, most small towns and rural communes remain anchored in administrative boundaries. The urban-rural divide, both in economic terms and in the quality of strategies, represents the most significant structural territorial challenge for the next programming period.

Despite these developments, functional territorial approaches are not applied consistently across all types of strategies. Many local strategies remain anchored in administrative boundaries due to governance structures and funding procedures. Therefore, the regional territorial model can be characterized as administratively anchored but progressively integrating functional and place-based perspectives.

2.2.3. Cross-border and interregional cooperation

The North-West Region's location along the border also influences its territorial focus. Cross-border cooperation with Hungary and Ukraine is facilitated primarily through European Territorial Cooperation programs, particularly Interreg initiatives. These programs support joint projects in areas such as infrastructure connectivity, environmental management, tourism development, and institutional cooperation [24]. Although cross-border cooperation is not always integrated into local territorial strategies, it represents an important complementary dimension of territorial development, particularly in border counties such as Bihor and Satu Mare.

Cross-border cooperation remains a complementary dimension that is insufficiently integrated into the development of local strategies, with considerable potential for further strengthening.

2.2.4. Flexibility of territorial perimeters

The regional planning model allows a relatively high degree of flexibility in defining territorial boundaries. Strategies can be developed at multiple spatial scales, including regional, county, metropolitan, urban, and local levels, depending on the development issue being addressed and the institutional arrangements between authorities. Strategies targeting municipalities emphasize that sustainable urban development should take place within a metropolitan context, based on a complex network of functional interdependencies. This allows intervention areas to be adjusted according to the specific objective being pursued. At the same time, most strategies are described as dynamic documents.

In practice, flexibility is operationalized primarily through Intercommunity Development Associations (IDAs). These entities provide a stable yet flexible framework for administrative-territorial units to collaborate in pursuit of specific integrated or thematic objectives.

However, once strategies are linked to funding under the North-West Regional Programme (RP NW) 2021–2027, their structure and territorial scope must comply with the program's eligibility conditions. Investments in sustainable urban development require formally adopted Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDSs) or Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs).

2.3. Governance

The North-West Region operates within a complex multilevel governance architecture involving the European, national, regional, county, and local levels [15], [16]. At the European level, Cohesion Policy regulations [2], [3] and related EU policies establish the framework and requirements for regional development. At the national level, Romanian legislation, particularly Law No. 315/2004 on regional development, as subsequently amended, establishes the institutional framework for RDAs and RDCs [4].

The NWRDA is the main institutional actor in regional development, with responsibilities that include strategic planning, program management, support for project implementation, and coordination among stakeholders [4]. The Agency operates under the authority of the North-West Regional Development Council (NWRDC), which includes representatives of county councils and is responsible for approving regional strategies and major decisions [4]. This governance structure provides a mechanism for inter-county coordination and collective decision-making on regional priorities.

At the county level, county councils are responsible for county-level development planning and the implementation of certain development programs [4]. Counties serve as important intermediaries between the regional and local levels, although their role in integrated territorial development could be strengthened. At the local level, municipalities (towns and communes) have primary responsibility for local development, service provision, and spatial planning [4]. However, municipalities' administrative capacities vary significantly: large cities have substantial planning and implementation capacity, while many smaller municipalities face constraints in these areas [22].

The governance architecture includes various coordination mechanisms intended to ensure coherence across levels and sectors. These include interministerial committees at the national level, RDCs at the regional level, and various thematic working groups and partnerships [4]. However, research on multilevel governance in Cohesion Policy implementation suggests that formal coordination structures often function imperfectly, with difficulties including unclear responsibilities, insufficient information exchange, limited stakeholder involvement, and weak implementation of coordination agreements [15], [16].

- **Vertical coordination across governance levels** presents specific challenges in the North-West Region. The most significant challenge is that Romania's development regions, including the North-West Region, do not have administrative authority or legal personality as planning bodies; instead, they serve as cooperation frameworks. The NWRDA exercises coordination through consultation and technical assistance, procedural requirements associated with the program, and the linking of access to funding to the existence of approved strategic documents. In practice, this model has

worked relatively well where program funding creates clear incentives, as in the case of the endorsement of IUDSs and SUMPs, but less effectively in areas where regional coordination is not supported by a financial instrument, such as inter-county infrastructure planning or joint spatial development initiatives.

- **Horizontal coordination** across policy sectors remains the most difficult dimension of the governance model to operationalize. A concrete example is the relationship between the Regional Programme (funded by the ERDF and managed by the NWRDA) and national sectoral programs for transport, education, social inclusion, and agriculture (managed by various ministries based in Bucharest). Local territorial strategies in the North-West Region are designed to mobilize multiple funding sources, but in practice, beneficiaries must navigate separate eligibility criteria, application timelines, and reporting systems for each program. The RDP and local IUDS documents attempt to map this complementarity, but the absence of a common programming mechanism in the form of a formally established ITI means that cross-sectoral coherence depends largely on the voluntary coordination efforts of local authorities.

Partnership principles are operationalized in the North-West Region through several institutionalized structures, including the RDC (with representation from county councils), the Regional Planning Committee responsible for preparing the RDP, the Regional Programme Monitoring Committee, and the quadruple-helix Working Groups within the RIS3 governance system. In practice, the quality of partnership varies significantly depending on the instrument. RIS3 governance comes closest to genuine co-decision, with businesses, universities, and innovation intermediaries exerting substantial influence over priority-setting through the EDP process. By contrast, consultation during the preparation of IUDSs and SUMPs is generally limited to public debates and written submissions, with no clear evidence that input from civil society or the private sector systematically influences the final investment portfolios. Strengthening feedback mechanisms by demonstrating how stakeholder contributions have influenced strategic choices has been identified as a priority for improvement in the next generation of territorial strategies.

2.3.1. Stakeholder Engagement Mechanisms

The North-West Region has established several mechanisms for stakeholder involvement in regional development processes [4]. These include consultation processes during strategy development, thematic working groups addressing specific issues, and partnership structures bringing together business associations, universities, civil society organizations, and other actors [5]. The RIS3 development process involved stakeholders through Entrepreneurial Discovery Processes (EDPs) [5], [13].

However, stakeholder involvement faces several challenges:

- Participation is often concentrated among well-positioned and adequately resourced actors (large companies, prestigious universities, and established civil society organizations), while smaller actors, marginalized groups, and citizens from rural or disadvantaged areas have a limited voice [7]. This can lead to strategies that narrowly reflect the interests of these groups [19].

- Involvement is often episodic rather than sustained, concentrated during the strategy development phases but declining during implementation [13]. Research on smart specialization governance emphasizes that continuous stakeholder involvement throughout strategy implementation is essential for success, enabling adaptive learning, problem-solving, and course correction [19].
- Feedback mechanisms through which stakeholders can see how their contributions have influenced decisions are often insufficient [1]. When stakeholders provide input but receive no information about how it was considered or why certain suggestions were adopted or rejected, involvement can become a formality and motivation to participate declines [26].
- The capacity for meaningful participation varies considerably among stakeholders [7]. Effective involvement requires them to understand complex policy frameworks, analyze technical information, and articulate their positions in formal settings. Many potential participants, particularly small businesses, community organizations, and citizens, lack the capacity required for this level of involvement without adequate support [7]. Strengthening stakeholders' capacity to participate is an often-overlooked dimension of governance [1].

The region has made progress in certain areas of stakeholder involvement. The Entrepreneurial Discovery Process for smart specialization [5], [13] represents a relatively sophisticated approach to engaging businesses, research organizations, and public-sector actors in identifying innovation priorities. Cluster organizations in sectors such as agro-industry [27] provide platforms for business cooperation and collective action.

Table 4 – Governance actors and responsibilities

Level	Institution / structure	Role in strategy-making
National	Parliament / Government of Romania; national ministries	Define the legislative and policy framework for regional and territorial development, including Law 315/2004 and national strategic frameworks.
Regional	**Consiliul pentru Dezvoltare Regională Nord-Vest (CDR)**	Deliberative regional body; approves regional strategic documents and regional priorities.
Regional	**North-West Regional Development Agency (ADR Nord-Vest)**	Executive and technical body; prepares strategies, ensures secretariat for CDR, coordinates consultations, acts as Managing Authority for PR Nord-Vest.
Regional	**Regional Planning Committee (RPC)**	Consultative body for elaboration and endorsement of the RDP.
Regional	**Executive Consortium RIS3 / Scientific Committee / working groups**	Governance and coordination of RIS3 and Entrepreneurial Discovery Process.
Regional	**North-West RP Monitoring Committee 2021–2027**	Partnership body with strategic role in programme implementation and monitoring.

Territorial	**County councils, municipalities, local councils**	Prepare, adopt, and implement county and local strategies; approve them through formal decisions.
Territorial	**IDA (Intercommunity Development Associations)**	Permanent legal structures for inter-municipal cooperation and joint implementation at metropolitan / service scale.
Territorial	**Local management units for SIDU / PMUD**	Ad-hoc internal teams for coordination, implementation, and monitoring of integrated strategies.
Territorial	**LAGs (Local Action Groups)**	Local public-private partnerships for CLLD implementation. CPR recognises CLLD as a territorial tool.

Source: North-West Regional Development Agency

2.4. Cross-Sectoral Integration

Cross-sectoral integration in the North-West Development Region is promoted primarily through the **alignment of regional strategic frameworks and programme procedures linking funding to integrated territorial strategies**. Rather than relying on complex multi-fund territorial instruments, the regional model encourages integration by coordinating multiple sectoral strategies and by requiring local investments to be embedded in integrated planning documents.

2.4.1. Integration through regional strategic frameworks

The principal mechanism supporting cross-sectoral integration is the **Regional Development Plan North-West 2021–2027 (RDP)** [4], which functions as the overarching strategic framework for regional development. The RDP addresses a broad set of policy domains including economic development, transport and technical infrastructure, digitalisation, education and health services, environmental protection, climate transition, and territorial cohesion. By integrating these policy fields within a single planning framework, the document aims to ensure that regional development interventions are coordinated across sectors rather than implemented through isolated sectoral policies.

The **Smart Specialisation Strategy North-West (RIS3 NV) 2021–2027** represents another important mechanism for cross-sectoral integration [5]. RIS3 connects innovation policy with economic development, research capacity, education systems, and industrial transformation. The strategy was developed through the **Entrepreneurial Discovery Process**, which involved representatives of public administration, business, academia, and civil society following a **Quadruple Helix governance model** [13]. Through this process, regional innovation priorities were identified based on economic strengths and collaborative dialogue across sectors.

RIS3 promotes integration through a **value-chain perspective**, which inherently requires coordination between different sectors involved in production, research, and innovation processes. For example, the bioeconomy priority area encompasses activities ranging from agriculture and food processing to biotechnology and environmental services. At the same time, the strategy promotes the development of **innovation ecosystems**, bringing

together research institutions, firms, public authorities, and intermediary organisations to support innovation processes across sectors.

Other regional strategies also demonstrate cross-sectoral linkages. The **Regional Tourism Strategy 2021–2027** combines tourism development with cultural heritage management, environmental protection, digital services, and local economic development [17]. Similarly, the **Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities** [18] connects transport policy with environmental sustainability, digital transformation, and quality of life improvements in urban areas.

2.4.2. Integration embedded in programme design

Cross-sectoral integration is also promoted through the **design of the Regional Programme North-West 2021–2027 (PR Nord-Vest)**. The programme is structured around a set of priorities that span multiple policy areas, including competitiveness, smart localities, environmental transition, mobility, accessibility, education, and territorial attractiveness. By placing these priorities within a single investment framework, the programme encourages complementarities between different policy domains.

Integration is further reinforced through programme procedures linking funding eligibility to integrated territorial planning. In line with **Regulation (EU) 2021/1060**, certain investments financed through ERDF must be included in formally adopted territorial strategies such as **Integrated Urban Development Strategies (SIDU)** or **Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (PMUD)**. Integration is further reinforced through programme procedures linking funding eligibility to approved territorial strategies, a mechanism described in full in section 2.1.4. This requirement encourages municipalities to design project portfolios that combine multiple policy areas, since only interventions explicitly included in an endorsed strategy are eligible for submission under the relevant funding calls.

2.4.3. Translation into territorial strategies

The integrated approach promoted at regional level is reflected in the structure of **territorial strategies prepared by municipalities and metropolitan areas**. Integrated Urban Development Strategies typically combine interventions addressing several policy domains within a single territorial framework.

For example, the **Integrated Urban Development Strategy of the Oradea Metropolitan Area** covers twelve administrative units and includes measures related to urban regeneration, sustainable mobility, economic development, environmental protection, and social infrastructure. Similarly, the **Integrated Urban Development Strategy of Baia Mare** integrates mobility planning, environmental protection, tourism development, and economic competitiveness across the functional urban area surrounding the city.

In Cluj-Napoca, the preparation of the urban strategy involved structured consultation across institutional, academic, private, and civil society actors, applying at local level the same quadruple-helix participation logic that underpins the RIS3 governance model (see section 2.1.5) and facilitating coordination between sectors in defining development priorities.

2.4.4. Stakeholder and civil society involvement in cross-sectoral integration

Effective cross-sectoral integration requires not only aligned strategic frameworks and programme procedures, but also active involvement of stakeholders across different policy domains. In the North-West Region, the most advanced example of multi-actor cross-sectoral engagement remains the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process underpinning RIS3, which brought together actors from economic development, research and innovation, education, and public administration within a structured dialogue forum. This model demonstrates that when cross-sectoral integration is institutionalised through a dedicated governance structure, it can generate genuine alignment between policy domains rather than merely formal co-reference in strategic documents.

Consultation with civil society and the private sector during strategy preparation is generally episodic and does not systematically involve actors from across multiple policy domains. Environmental organisations, social service providers, healthcare institutions, and transport operators, all whose interests cut across sectoral boundaries, are rarely integrated as active co-designers of territorial strategies. Strengthening this dimension of cross-sectoral integration would require moving from consultative participation to structured co-production processes, supported by dedicated capacity-building and facilitation resources within the Regional Programme's technical assistance framework.

2.4.5. Structural constraints to integration

Despite the existence of these integration mechanisms, several structural factors continue to limit the depth of cross-sector coordination.

First, **funding structures remain largely organised along sectoral lines**, with separate calls for proposals, eligibility criteria, and evaluation procedures for different policy areas [1]. This institutional organisation can make it difficult to combine investments addressing multiple dimensions of territorial challenges.

Second, the governance of development programmes at national level is fragmented across different ministries managing separate funding streams and policy programmes [15]. This fragmentation complicates coordination between policy domains and reduces the flexibility needed to design fully integrated interventions.

Finally, while instruments such as **Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI)** are designed to facilitate multi-sector investment packages, they have not been widely applied in Romania [1]. As a result, cross-sectoral integration in the region relies more heavily on **coordinated planning frameworks** than on integrated financial instruments.

2.4.6. Monitoring of integrated implementation

Monitoring frameworks exist for the Regional Programme and for the implementation of regional strategies. However, these systems generally track **sector-specific indicators linked to programme priorities**, rather than measuring cross-sectoral integration as a distinct outcome. While monitoring allows performance to be assessed across multiple thematic areas, it does not explicitly capture whether integrated interventions generate combined territorial benefits.

Consequently, integration is most clearly embedded in **strategy design and investment programming**, while evaluation frameworks remain largely organised along sectoral lines.

2.5. Funding and Finance

The financial framework of the North-West regional model is structured around a combination of EU Cohesion Policy funding, national co-financing, local public budgets, and complementary national and European programmes. In practice, the model relies primarily on grant-based financing, with the Regional Programme North-West 2021–2027 (RP North-West) serving as the main financial vehicle for territorial investments, while the preparation, coordination, and monitoring of strategies are financed mainly through technical assistance.

2.5.1. Main funding sources

The legal basis for the financial framework is provided by Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, which establishes common rules for the ERDF, ESF+, CF, the Just Transition Fund, and related instruments, including provisions on technical assistance and financial instruments [2]. At the fund-specific level, Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 requires Member States to allocate a share of ERDF resources to sustainable urban development implemented through territorial strategies [3].

At the regional level, the main source of funding for territorial investments is the **North-West Regional Programme (RP NW) 2021–2027**, managed by the NWRDA in its capacity as Managing Authority (MA). The program is funded primarily by the ERDF and national public co-financing and covers competitiveness and innovation, digitalization, the green transition, sustainable mobility, accessibility, education, and territorial attractiveness, thereby constituting the main financial framework for implementing both regional and local strategies.

During the 2014–2020 programming period, the **Administrative Capacity Operational Programme (POCA)** was the main funding option available to local authorities for preparing development strategies for the 2020–2030 period.

Currently, strategy development and governance rely primarily on **Priority 8 – Technical Assistance under the North-West Regional Programme**. This priority supports the preparation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, communication, and management activities required to run the program. The 2025 evaluation of Priority 8 reports funding for institutional capacity, studies, beneficiary support, communication activities, and staff costs, including 70 information and training activities, 7 studies, and 140 full-time positions. This demonstrates that the strategic and administrative foundations of the regional model are funded primarily through ERDF-supported technical assistance, supplemented by national co-financing.

2.5.2. Complementarity and multi-fund logic

Beyond PR Nord-Vest, the regional model is designed to operate in complementarity with a broader national and European funding architecture. The **Partnership Agreement 2021–2027** and PR Nord-Vest documents position the regional programme alongside other instruments such as **Programul Dezvoltare Durabilă (PDD – Durable Development)**, **Programul Transport (PT - Transport Program)**, **Programul Educație și Ocupare (PEO –**

Education and Employment), **Programul Incluziune și Demnitate Socială (PIDS – Inclusion and Social Dignity)**, **Programul Creștere Inteligentă, Digitalizare și Instrumente Financiare (PCIDIF – Intelligent Growth, Digitalization and Financial Instrument)**, **Programul Asistență Tehnică (PAT – Technical Assistance)**, and the **CAP Strategic Plan / FEADR-LEADER**. Programme documents also refer explicitly to complementarity with the **Planul Național de Redresare și Reziliență (PNRR - National Recovery and Resilience Plan)** in fields such as digitalisation, mobility, accessibility, education, and heritage.

This means that the regional model is **multi-fund in orientation**, but not in the sense of formal pooling of several funds into a single operation. In practice, territorial strategies generate project portfolios in which different projects may be financed from different programmes: some through PR Nord-Vest, others through PNRR, national sectoral programmes, or FEADR/LEADER. The logic is therefore based more on **complementarity and sequencing** than on fully integrated multi-fund delivery mechanisms.

2.5.3. Simplification and accessibility

The regional system includes mechanisms to reduce administrative burdens and improve access to funding, although these primarily involve program management simplifications rather than financial simplifications in the strict sense.

The most significant change is the decentralization of the Managing Authority (MA) function to the regional development agencies, including the NWRDA, for the 2021–2027 period. Beneficiaries interact directly with the regional authority regarding calls for proposals, contracting, implementation instructions, and strategy verification. This reduces dependence on centralized national management and shortens the institutional chain between applicants and program administration.

Additional simplification measures include standardized applicant guidelines, beneficiary manuals, implementation instructions, digital submission and reporting systems, and formal methodologies for verifying the compliance and admissibility of territorial strategies and SUMPs. For territorial strategies, this verification procedure serves as a pre-selection mechanism before projects enter funding calls. It does not eliminate bureaucracy, but places compliance checks at the beginning of the process, making the funding pathway more predictable.

At the same time, access to funding remains unequal across territories. Larger municipalities and counties are generally better positioned to prepare projects and secure co-financing, while smaller or poorer local authorities face greater administrative and fiscal constraints [22].

2.5.4. Financial instruments and private co-financing

From a formal perspective, the regional framework allows the use of **financial instruments**. Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 explicitly provides for the possibility of offering loans, guarantees, equity investments, and combinations of grants and financial instruments [2]. At the regional level, the NWRDA adopted a specific methodology in 2024 for operations involving financial instruments under the North-West Regional Programme, indicating that such instruments are formally supported by the program.

In practice, however, the available evidence shows that the regional model remains predominantly **grant-based**. Published program and territorial strategy documentation provides limited evidence that revolving funds, guarantees, loans, or public-private partnerships currently play a significant operational role in financing territorial strategies. Financial instruments appear to be permissible but have not yet become a central element of the implementation model. Furthermore, although private investment is recognized as important, particularly in relation to RIS3 priorities and business development, the main implementation approach for territorial strategies remains centered on public grant funding rather than systematic blended finance.

2.5.5. Adequacy of resources

Overall, the resources available to the model are **substantial but only partially adequate in relation to strategic ambition**. RP North-West provides a large financial allocation, and technical assistance gives North-West Regional Development Agency real capacity to support strategy preparation, beneficiary guidance, monitoring, and programme administration. This gives the regional model a relatively strong institutional and financial backbone.

At the same time, the breadth of the regional and local strategy portfolios exceeds the capacity of any single programme envelope. This is precisely why strategies are designed in complementarity with other funding sources such as PNRR, FEADR/LEADER, and national programmes. The financing model is therefore coherent, but also highly dependent on the continued availability of **EU grants and national co-financing**.

This dependence is particularly visible at beneficiary level. Many RP North-West calls follow a standard public co-financing structure of **maximum 85% ERDF, maximum 13% state budget, and minimum 2% applicant contribution**. While this improves access for local authorities, it also confirms that most territorial strategies cannot be implemented from local resources alone. Local and county budgets remain necessary for co-financing and ineligible costs, but they are rarely sufficient to sustain large strategic portfolios independently.

2.6. Monitoring

The monitoring and evaluation framework of the North-West regional model operates as a **multi-level system combining programme monitoring, strategy monitoring, and territorial-level monitoring arrangements**. A key analytical distinction must be made between **monitoring individual funded operations**, which is mandatory and relatively well institutionalised, and **monitoring territorial strategies as integrated development frameworks**, which remains more complex and less standardised.

2.6.1. Monitoring of operations versus monitoring of strategies

Monitoring of individual operations financed through EU programmes is embedded in the broader monitoring architecture of Cohesion Policy programmes. Within the **Regional Programme North-West 2021–2027 (RP North-West)**, implementation is monitored through standardised programme management systems that track financial execution, project progress, and the achievement of predefined output and result indicators.

These monitoring activities rely on centralised programme management tools and reporting systems such as **MySMIS**, which record information on project contracting, payments, outputs delivered, and beneficiary performance. Indicators typically follow the standard EU intervention logic, distinguishing between:

- **Output indicators (RCO)**, such as the number of supported enterprises (RCO01), value of research infrastructure investments (RCO08), or infrastructure delivered.
- **Result indicators (RCR)**, such as jobs created (RCR01) or SMEs introducing product or process innovation (RCR03).

This monitoring layer is primarily designed to ensure **financial accountability, regulatory compliance, and progress tracking** at programme level.

Monitoring territorial strategies themselves presents a different challenge. Strategies such as the **Regional Development Plan (RDP North-West)** or the **Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3 NW)** are intended to guide long-term structural transformation rather than only deliver discrete projects. Their monitoring therefore requires tracking broader socio-economic dynamics, such as improvements in innovation performance, competitiveness, or territorial cohesion. In the case of RIS3, monitoring includes **periodic Strategic Monitoring Reports and a final impact-oriented assessment**, aimed at measuring progress in the region's transition toward a stronger innovation ecosystem.

2.6.2. Regional monitoring systems

At the regional level, monitoring activities are coordinated primarily by the NWRDA, which combines the roles of RDA, program MA, and strategic coordinator.

Monitoring frameworks exist for several major strategic instruments, including the **RDP, RIS3 NW, and RP**, although these systems operate with different objectives and levels of integration. Program monitoring focuses primarily on implementation performance, while strategy monitoring aims to assess structural development trends and policy effectiveness.

The NWRDA also maintains analytical and visualization tools that support monitoring processes. One example is the regional GIS dashboard, which maps the territorial coverage and status of endorsed planning instruments, such as **IUDSs and SUMPs**. This tool enables regional authorities to track the distribution of planning capacity and the level of territorial preparedness across the region.

The monitoring system remains more consolidated for program implementation than for integrated territorial strategies, which often rely on more fragmented monitoring mechanisms.

2.6.3. Monitoring at territorial level

At the territorial level, monitoring mechanisms are generally incorporated into strategic documents prepared by municipalities, metropolitan associations, and local partnerships. Strategies such as IUDSs, SUMPs, and Local Development Strategies (LDSs) usually include monitoring sections that define indicators, implementation responsibilities, and reporting mechanisms.

Local coalitions, such as **IDAs and LAGs**, play an important role in implementing and monitoring territorial strategies. LAGs, in particular, have significant autonomy in selecting interventions and monitoring indicators within their LDSs. These strategies often address place-specific challenges, such as rural depopulation, diversification of the local economy, or agricultural productivity.

However, the level of sophistication of monitoring varies considerably across territories. Larger municipalities and metropolitan areas generally have stronger administrative capacity, better access to statistical data, and more developed GIS or analytical tools. In smaller municipalities and rural areas, monitoring systems are often more limited, reflecting constraints related to technical expertise and institutional capacity.

The regional model thus combines top-down monitoring frameworks linked to program requirements with bottom-up territorial monitoring mechanisms, without fully harmonizing them across the region.

2.6.4. Indicators and data infrastructure

Indicator systems used in the region combine **EU programme indicators, regional strategic indicators, and locally defined monitoring indicators**.

At programme level, indicators largely follow the EU results framework, focusing on outputs and short-term results associated with funded operations. At strategic level, broader indicators are used to track structural regional performance, including:

- **GDP per capita relative to the EU average;**
- regional innovation performance within the **Regional Innovation Scoreboard;**
- competitiveness indicators such as the **Regional Competitiveness Index.**

Data collection relies on several sources. These include **administrative programme data**, national statistical data from the **Romanian National Institute of Statistics (INS)**, European statistics from **Eurostat**, and specialised analytical tools such as regional innovation monitoring platforms. These sources allow regional authorities to monitor both programme performance and broader territorial trends.

However, several limitations remain. Monitoring systems often focus on **outputs and immediate results rather than long-term impacts**, and indicators are frequently organised along sectoral programme priorities rather than integrated territorial outcomes. In addition, data availability at **municipal level** remains uneven, limiting the capacity of smaller local authorities to perform evidence-based monitoring.

2.6.5. Capacity for monitoring and analysis

At regional level, monitoring capacity is relatively strong due to the institutional role and technical resources of **North-West Regional Development Agency**. Technical assistance under the Regional Programme supports analytical studies, monitoring activities, programme evaluations, and the operation of monitoring systems.

At territorial level, however, analytical capacity varies significantly. Larger cities such as **Cluj-Napoca** and **Oradea** have developed stronger analytical and monitoring capacities, including access to specialised staff and data infrastructure. In contrast, smaller

municipalities often face constraints related to limited staff, weaker statistical databases, and underdeveloped GIS systems. This uneven capacity affects the ability of local authorities to transform monitoring data into strategic insights that can guide policy adjustments.

2.6.6. Evaluation and stakeholder involvement

Beyond routine monitoring, some strategies are subject to evaluation procedures. Program-level evaluations are conducted in accordance with the Regional Programme's evaluation plan and often involve external evaluators who assess effectiveness, efficiency, and impact.

Stakeholder involvement in monitoring and evaluation reflects the quadruple-helix approach promoted in regional innovation governance. Through structures such as **Regional Thematic Groups (RTGs) and EDP** workshops, businesses, research institutions, and civil society organizations contribute to assessing the relevance and implementation of strategic priorities.

Citizen involvement is more limited and may take place through participatory mechanisms implemented at the local level. For example, **participatory budgeting initiatives** in cities such as Cluj-Napoca and Oradea allow residents to propose and vote on local investment priorities. Although these processes primarily influence project selection rather than formal monitoring frameworks, they demonstrate that channels exist through which citizen feedback can inform strategic adjustments.

2.7. Transformative Capacity

The transformative capacity of the North-West regional strategy-making model refers to its ability to **generate systemic change in governance, economic development, and territorial management**, rather than only incremental improvements through individual projects. In practice, the regional model combines elements of **incremental policy improvement with emerging initiatives aimed at experimentation, digitalisation, and innovation governance**, particularly through the Smart Specialisation framework and the digital transformation of regional administration.

2.7.1. Orientation of the regional model: incremental change with emerging transformative elements

Overall, the regional strategy development model remains primarily oriented toward incremental improvements in territorial development, largely driven by the programming cycle logic of the EU Cohesion Policy. Strategic documents such as the RDP and the North-West Regional Programme define priorities aimed at improving regional competitiveness, infrastructure, and quality of life through a portfolio of EU-funded projects.

However, some strategic instruments introduce elements that go beyond policy adjustments. In particular, **RIS3 NW** seeks to stimulate the structural transformation of the regional economy by concentrating investment in priority innovation areas, such as ICT, advanced manufacturing, and the bioeconomy. Through this approach, the region aims to strengthen innovation ecosystems and support the transition toward higher value-

added economic activities. Furthermore, policy priorities related to the green transition and digitalization introduce systemic objectives that require transformations across multiple sectors, including energy systems, mobility, industrial processes, and public administration. Although these objectives are recognized in regional strategies, their operationalization is still largely achieved through incremental projects rather than fully integrated transformation programs.

2.7.2. Experimentation and pilot initiatives

The regional model includes some elements of **experimentation and pilot initiatives**, although these are not yet organised as a formal experimentation framework.

Within the **Regional Programme North-West**, pilot initiatives are foreseen in areas related to digital infrastructure and governance innovation. One example is the development of a **Regional Cloud**, which aims to improve digital infrastructure and data management capacities for regional public administration. Such initiatives represent early attempts to modernise regional governance systems through digital technologies.

At institutional level, North-West Regional Development Agency has also introduced several **digital analytical tools** supporting policy experimentation and evidence-based governance. These include:

- a **GIS dashboard** used for visualising territorial planning instruments and development indicators,
- **Power BI analytical reports** supporting monitoring and programme management,
- **API-based data connections** facilitating integration between administrative databases.

These tools contribute to improving policy experimentation capacity by enabling more dynamic data analysis, spatial monitoring, and evidence-based decision-making. However, experimentation currently occurs mainly through **administrative innovation and pilot digital tools**, rather than through structured policy experimentation programmes.

2.7.3. Green transition & climate adaptation as drivers of transformative change

The green transition is one of the main external drivers requiring adaptation of the regional planning model, alongside the digital transition, demographic changes, and changing funding conditions. The region's territorial strategies are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only compliance with EU climate and sustainability frameworks but also a tangible contribution to Romania's decarbonization pathway. In this context, several strategies, particularly the IUDS documents for Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, and Vișeu de Sus, explicitly refer to the 17 SDGs, the targets of the European Green Deal, and the principles of climate neutrality by 2050. However, the depth of this commitment varies considerably. In stronger strategies, green transition objectives are operationalized through specific measures targeting the energy renovation of public buildings, the expansion of cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, urban greening, and green public procurement. In weaker strategies, references to sustainability remain at the level of general aspirations, without corresponding investment portfolios or measurable targets.

Climate change adaptation is a dimension that is largely absent from current territorial strategies. Although mitigation measures, particularly in the transport and energy sectors, feature in many strategies, adaptation to climate risks such as increasing flood frequency, prolonged drought, the urban heat island effect, and infrastructure vulnerability is rarely addressed systematically. The North-West Region's significant exposure to these risks, particularly in lowland areas along the Someș and Crișuri river basins and in mountain communities dependent on precipitation patterns, makes this gap particularly important to address in the next generation of territorial strategies. Integrating climate risk assessments and nature-based solutions into the standard strategy model would represent a significant step toward genuinely transformative territorial planning from a climate adaptation perspective.

2.7.4. Demographic change, social resilience, and inclusive transformation

Demographic change, characterized by population aging, rural depopulation, and the selective emigration of working-age residents, represents one of the most significant structural challenges facing the North-West Region. Truly transformative territorial strategies must address this challenge not merely as a contextual constraint, but as a factor that reshapes investment prioritization.

Strategies that adopt a genuinely transformative approach to demographic decline go beyond maintaining existing services in response to population contraction. They redesign service delivery models, invest in digital connectivity as compensatory infrastructure, promote remote-work-friendly environments to attract return migration, and develop care ecosystems that support active aging at home. A limited number of strategies in the database show early evidence of this approach, particularly those for Vișeu de Sus and Năsăud.

2.8. SWOT analysis of the regional territorial tools

Strengths (Internal)	Weaknesses (Internal)
Structured multi-level governance system. The regional model is supported by a clear institutional architecture involving North-West Regional Development Agency, the Regional Development Council, county authorities, and local governments, facilitating coordination of EU Cohesion Policy implementation.	Uneven administrative and implementation capacity across municipalities. Large cities such as Cluj-Napoca or Oradea have strong planning and analytical capacity, while smaller municipalities and rural areas face significant staff and expertise limitations.
Strong alignment with EU Cohesion Policy frameworks. Strategies such as the Regional Development Plan (RDP) and RIS3 align with EU regulations and priorities (Green Deal, smart	Moderate cross-sectoral integration of strategies across sectors and governance levels. Despite multiple strategies, coordination between sectoral policies and territorial strategies remains partially fragmented.

specialisation, Policy Objectives 1 and 5), ensuring policy coherence.	
Implementation-oriented strategic model. The requirement that projects be included in approved strategies (e.g., SIDU, PMUD, rural strategies) strengthens the link between planning and investment pipelines.	Predominantly procedural evaluation of strategies. The regional endorsement process verifies administrative compliance rather than assessing the quality or ambition of local strategic visions.
High coverage of territorial strategies. Most municipalities have adopted Integrated Urban Development Strategies and Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans, enabling a broad territorial project pipeline.	Stakeholder engagement is often consultative rather than co-creative. Participation processes exist but tend to involve consultation rather than sustained co-decision with stakeholders.
Strong regional coordination capacity through Nord-Vest RDA. As Managing Authority for the Regional Programme 2021–2027, RDA provides strategic planning, programme management, and technical support to beneficiaries.	Monitoring systems focus mainly on outputs rather than territorial impacts. Monitoring frameworks capture project delivery but less effectively track integrated territorial outcomes. Weak monitoring feedback loop and accountability in the monitoring phase.
The emerging functional territorial approach. Through the use of the Functional Urban Area concept and metropolitan cooperation frameworks around cities such as Cluj-Napoca and Oradea, planning increasingly reflects commuting patterns, economic linkages, and urban–rural interdependencies.	Limited use of financial instruments. Revolving funds, guarantees, and blended finance mechanisms play only a marginal role in the current funding architecture, while implementation relies heavily on ERDF allocations complemented by national co-financing.
Digital monitoring tools. The GIS dashboard provides a transparent geospatial overview of strategic coverage across the region, enhances visibility of territorial readiness for funding, and supports improved coordination and traceability between local planning documents and regional programme implementation.	Heavy dependencies on EU funds, with PPPs and private investment being rarely used.
Visible innovation dynamism. Digitalisation of public administration and climate transition projects are active in all counties.	Insufficient reflection of functional territorial relations.

Opportunities (External)	Threats (External)
Strengthening transformative capacity. The acceleration of the European Green Deal and the twin green and digital transition creates a significant opportunity to strengthen the transformative dimension of territorial strategies in the North-West Region. The RIS3 ecosystem, in particular, offers potential to evolve into a platform for green innovation clusters that align economic competitiveness with environmental transition objectives.	Potential changes in future EU Cohesion Policy funding levels. Reductions or reforms in EU funding after 2027 could weaken the financial backbone of the regional development model.
Leveraging cross-border position. The border location of the North-West Region offers opportunities to deepen cooperation with neighbouring territories in Hungary and Ukraine. Strengthening cross-border functional linkages and developing joint initiatives in climate action, tourism, and innovation could enhance economic resilience, territorial cohesion, and international visibility.	Widening territorial capacity divide. If differentiated support is not provided, weaker municipalities will fall further behind larger urban centres, undermining territorial cohesion objectives and deepening uneven implementation quality.
Post-2027 Cohesion Policy reform. The region's experience as a decentralised Managing Authority positions it well to engage proactively in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy reform process. The North-West Region could pilot more advanced integrated tools, contribute to national territorial governance reform debates, and advocate for stronger place-based and multi-level policy mechanisms at European level.	Political instability and policy discontinuity. Changes in national political priorities or administrative leadership may disrupt coordination mechanisms and weaken multi-level cooperation. Policy discontinuity can affect funding allocation, institutional stability, and long-term strategic coherence, introducing uncertainty into regional development processes and potentially slowing implementation.

3. Conclusions

The regional model for developing territorial strategies in Romania's North-West Region reflects a **relatively mature and structured approach to territorial governance**, shaped by the progressive institutionalization of strategic planning requirements within the EU Cohesion Policy and national programming frameworks. Over recent programming cycles, the region has developed a coherent strategic environment in which regional, county, metropolitan, urban, and rural strategies increasingly operate within a shared framework of policy alignment, funding conditionality, and procedural coordination. The NWRDA plays a central role in this process, acting not only as the MA for the RP but also as the main

strategic coordinator, capable of connecting European priorities, regional development objectives, and local planning processes within a common territorial framework.

One of the most relevant findings emerging from the diagnosis is that **the regional model performs particularly well in terms of institutional coherence**. The existence of a solid regional strategic foundation, built around the RDP, RIS3, and sectoral planning instruments, provides local authorities with a stable reference framework for developing their own territorial strategies. This has contributed to a relatively high degree of consistency between local strategic documents and broader policy objectives related to competitiveness, sustainable mobility, the green transition, and territorial cohesion. The formal requirement for local projects to derive from approved strategies has further strengthened this coherence, making strategic planning a necessary condition for investment eligibility rather than merely a formal administrative exercise.

At the same time, the analysis shows that **the model's effectiveness remains uneven** when moving from formal strategic alignment to actual strategic quality and implementation capacity. Although most territorial actors now prepare strategic documents that comply with program requirements, substantial differences remain in their analytical depth, operational realism, and transformative ambition. Large urban centers, with stronger technical capacity, generally succeed in developing more integrated and forward-looking strategic frameworks, while smaller municipalities and rural territories often approach strategy development primarily from the perspective of accessing funding opportunities. Consequently, the strategic system functions effectively as a framework for organizing investments, but less consistently as a mechanism for generating long-term territorial transformation.

Another lesson concerns the growing importance of **regional coordination mechanisms**. The procedures developed by the NWRDA to verify administrative compliance and admissibility have contributed significantly to reducing fragmentation and anchoring local interventions in formally approved territorial priorities. However, these procedures remain primarily focused on formal compliance rather than the substantive quality of strategic choices, the realism of implementation pathways, or the expected territorial impact of proposed interventions. As a result, procedural robustness is relatively high, while strategic selectivity remains less developed.

Strategy monitoring does not generate significant territorial impact. Although 65.2% of survey respondents are involved in monitoring or evaluation processes, only 13.3% of this group report frequently using monitoring results to inform strategic decisions, while 26.7% acknowledge the absence of formal monitoring mechanisms. These figures confirm the diagnosis that the monitoring system captures program outputs but does not systematically inform strategic reorientation. Workshop findings also highlight a lack of accountability during the monitoring phase, rooted in insufficient initial commitment from all actors involved.

Cross-sectoral integration represents another structural challenge confirmed by empirical data. A total of 60.9% of survey respondents rate the level of integration across

policy areas (economy, mobility, environment, social services, and digitalization) as moderate, with a combined 69.6% rating it as moderate or low. The policy areas most frequently addressed in territorial projects, economic development and innovation (13 mentions), transport and mobility (12), and tourism and cultural heritage (11), suggest a focus on established sectoral portfolios rather than genuinely integrated approaches. Workshop discussions confirmed that, in the absence of shared objectives, collaboration among actors during implementation remains fragile.

The funding architecture reveals a structural vulnerability. Dependence on EU funds is almost total: 87% of respondents rely primarily on ERDF and ESF+ funding, while public-private partnerships and private investment received only one mention each. The most frequently cited barrier to strategy implementation is the difficulty of securing co-financing (14 mentions), followed by insufficient financial resources (13) and administrative complexity (12). This pattern of dependence raises serious concerns about resilience in a post-2027 scenario, particularly if EU Cohesion Policy allocations are reduced or redirected.

The regional model therefore demonstrates **a high degree of procedural maturity,** while also revealing the need for a next stage of development in which strategic planning becomes more adaptive, more focused on quality, and more closely connected to measurable territorial outcomes. Future improvements will need to address capacity gaps between authorities, deepen cross-sectoral integration, strengthen monitoring feedback loops, and reduce structural dependence on a single source of funding.

3.1. Implications for INTEGRA Future Activities

3.1.1. Good Practices and Policy Improvement Priorities

The North-West Region offers relevant good practices for future activities within the INTEGRA partnership.

The local strategy verification mechanism established by the NWRDA for local strategic documents creates a direct link between the approval of territorial strategies and the eligibility of investment proposals under the Regional Programme. Consultation results indicate broad recognition of the NWRDA's coordination role: 95.7% of respondents identified the Agency as a central actor, and coordination received an average score of 3.8 out of 5. These results reflect a predominantly favorable perception but do not, in themselves, measure institutional effectiveness.

Another important practice concerns **the use of regional strategic documents as methodological anchors for lower territorial levels**. The survey confirms widespread familiarity with the main strategic instruments: LDSs/LEADER (13 mentions), SUMPs (8), the RDP (7), and IUDSs (6), indicating that vertical coherence is widely embedded within the institutional ecosystem. The Entrepreneurial Discovery Process applied during RIS3 development remains the region's most advanced example of institutionalized participatory governance, although it contrasts sharply with the governance innovation gap identified across the remainder of the strategy database.

The use of digital tools, including territorial dashboards and GIS-based monitoring tools, represents a promising practice that aligns well with the main innovative initiatives identified by respondents. Public administration digitalization ranked first, with 15 mentions, confirming a shared institutional interest in digital governance tools. The workshop also identified the need for guidance on impact monitoring and evaluation as a concrete output priority, with participants expressing strong interest in leveraging the project's results.

3.1.2. Orientation for Mutual Learning activities

The context of the North-West Region demonstrates that strategic conditionality, when supported by a capable intermediary institution, can improve coherence without limiting local autonomy. The region offers useful experience in connecting broad regional strategic visions with more specific local investment priorities, particularly through the intermediary role played by regional thematic strategies.

The regional analysis also highlights opportunities for learning from other European contexts, particularly in territorial qualitative assessment, adaptive governance, and integrated impact monitoring. Exchanging experience with regions that use advanced methods to assess territorial transformation could contribute to improving future territorial strategies.

Specifically, the North-West Region can offer INTEGRA partners three distinct contributions:

- **The strategic conditionality model**, through which the NWRDA links the endorsement of territorial strategies to investment eligibility, has proven effective in strengthening discipline and coherence in local planning without eliminating local flexibility. This model is particularly relevant for partner regions in contexts where MAs seek to strengthen the link between planning and program implementation.
- **Experience in GIS-based territorial monitoring,** including the dashboard tool that maps endorsed strategies across the region and tracks planning readiness in real time. For regions that lack systematic spatial oversight of their strategy portfolios, this represents a low-cost, highly visible, and readily transferable innovation.
- **The governance model of the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process** applied within RIS3, which provides a replicable framework for structured dialogue among multiple actors and sectors. This model is relevant not only to innovation policy but also to any thematic area requiring cross-sectoral coordination.

Conversely, the North-West Region stands to benefit substantially from learning from European partners in four areas:

- **Qualitative strategy assessment:** Regions with well-established quality assessment frameworks that go beyond administrative compliance can provide concrete methodological tools that could be adapted to the NWRDA's verification process.

- **Climate-adaptive planning**: Regions with more advanced experience in integrating climate risk assessments, nature-based solutions, and adaptation scenarios into territorial strategies can provide models for updating the content requirements of local IUDSs and rural strategies.
- **Governance innovation:** Regions with institutionalized co-design, foresight, or scenario-building processes, particularly at the local level, can offer inspiration for addressing the governance innovation gap identified in the scoring analysis.
- **Integrated impact monitoring:** Regions that have developed frameworks for tracking territorial transformation beyond project outputs, capturing social, environmental, and governance effects, can provide models adaptable to the North-West context.

3.2. Lessons Learned and Preliminary Recommendations for Policy Improvement

3.2.1. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Regional Model

Strengths. The North-West regional model rests on five structural strengths that distinguish it and make it a relevant reference case within the INTEGRA partnership:

- The NWRDA operates as a capable, multifunctional intermediary institution, simultaneously performing roles in regional planning, program management, beneficiary support, and strategic verification, reducing fragmentation and ensuring a coherent link between strategy design and investment delivery.
- The administrative compliance and admissibility verification mechanism for IUDSs, SUMPs, and rural territorial strategies has achieved near-universal strategic coverage.
- The RIS3 governance model demonstrates that genuinely participatory, multi-actor policymaking is institutionally feasible in the Romanian context and offers a replicable model for other policy areas.
- The model demonstrates strong vertical coherence: local strategies consistently refer to regional and European frameworks, and the cascading logic from the RDP to the program and project portfolio functions reliably.
- GIS-based monitoring tools and Power BI analytical reports represent concrete steps toward data-driven territorial governance, enhancing transparency and coordination.

Weaknesses. Five weaknesses limit the model's effectiveness and define the agenda for its next stage of development:

- The verification mechanism is a procedural gateway, not a quality filter: it confirms administrative completeness but does not assess the strategic ambition, analytical depth, or transformative potential of local strategies, creating an incentive structure that rewards compliance over quality.
- Governance innovation is the weakest dimension across the entire strategy database (Q6 average: 1.88/3.00), indicating that co-design, foresight, and

scenario-building remain marginal in most territorial strategy development processes.

- A pronounced territorial capacity gap exists: strategies developed by large cities demonstrate substantially higher quality than those of small towns and rural areas, while the model's universal procedural requirements do not address these underlying disparities.
- The monitoring system captures program outputs but does not systematically measure integrated territorial outcomes, limiting the model's ability to demonstrate transformation rather than activity alone.
- Cross-sectoral integration is weakened operationally by sector-specific funding structures and the limited use of integrated financial instruments such as ITI.

3.2.2. Preliminary Recommendations for Future Strategic Development

Recommendation 1: Add a qualitative assessment layer to the strategy endorsement process. The current administrative compliance and admissibility verification conducted by the NWRDA should be complemented by a proportionate assessment of strategic quality, based on a limited number of clear and verifiable criteria. These should assess the coherence of the territorial diagnosis, the realism of the intervention logic, the robustness of partnership mechanisms, and the alignment of the investment portfolio with transformative objectives.

Recommendation 2: Establish a differentiated technical assistance program for less-developed territories. The territorial capacity gap identified in the current analysis, in which strategies from Sighetu Marmației and Borșa score significantly below the regional average, while Cluj-Napoca and Oradea consistently achieve maximum scores, reflects underlying disparities in institutional capacity that the current uniform procedural framework does not address.

Recommendation 3: Introduce innovative elements into strategy development and governance. Governance innovation, encompassing co-design, foresight, participatory budgeting, and scenario-building, is the least developed dimension of the regional strategy model (Q6 average: 1.88/3.00, the lowest score across all dimensions).

Recommendation 4: Include climate adaptation and demographic resilience as mandatory components of strategies. The next generation of territorial strategies in the North-West Region should include explicit sections on climate vulnerability assessment and adaptation measures, as well as demographic scenarios and their implications for service provision and investment prioritization.

Recommendation 5: Develop a harmonized framework for monitoring territorial outcomes. The current monitoring architecture of the regional model is functional for tracking program outputs (through MySMIS and the North-West Regional Programme's reporting systems), but is insufficient for measuring integrated territorial outcomes and the social, environmental, governance, and economic changes that strategies are ultimately intended to produce.

4. Guide for Integrated Strategic Territorial Planning

The strategies developed in the North-West Region operate within a multi-layered regulatory framework, as reflected in the table below.

Table 5 - Regulatory framework

Level	Key References / Instruments
European Union	Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 (Common Provisions); ERDF Regulation; Urban Agenda for the EU; EU Rural Action Plan; European Green Deal; Farm to Fork Strategy; Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union; Handbook of Sustainable Urban Development Strategies; Handbook of Territorial and Local Development Strategies;
National	Romania Partnership Agreement 2021–2027; National Urban Policy; National Climate Adaptation Strategy; NSS Romania 2030; SDTR 2035;
Regional	North-West Regional Programme 2021–2027; RIS3 North-West; Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities of the North-West Development Region; The Regional Tourism Strategy;
Local	IUDS; SUMP; Local Development Strategies (CLLD); Metropolitan Area strategies; FUA spatial plans;

Source: Urbasofia and NWRDA analysis

4.1. Key challenges

The table below maps the seven INTEGRA dimensions to the key challenges identified in this diagnostic analysis of the North-West Region and proposes the main optimization pathways for each dimension. The seven dimensions should be used as a structured self-assessment tool at three points in the strategic cycle: (I) before strategy preparation, as a checklist for identifying administrative capacity gaps and priority needs; (II) during strategy preparation, as a content validation guide to ensure that all dimensions are adequately addressed before submission; and (III) at the endorsement stage.

Table 6 - Key challenges mapped against INTEGRA dimensions

Dimension	Key Challenge (North-West context)	Possible Path
Strategic Dimension	Strategic visions exist but rarely include foresight or co-design processes; alignment with Green Deal and SDGs is formal rather than operational.	Require evidence of a theory of change and at least one participatory/foresight exercise; reward substantive EU framework alignment through the quality scoring layer.
Territorial Focus	Territories are delineated along administrative boundaries; functional urban area logic is applied inconsistently; urban-rural interdependencies are underanalysed.	Adopt FUA-based delineation for all poles; develop a North-West FUA Atlas; require a functional dependency map as part of the territorial diagnosis.
Governance	Multi-level coordination remains weak in smaller territories; stakeholder participation is often a one-off consultation	Introduce differentiated capacity support; make documented participatory processes a condition for endorsement; develop a regional repository of governance tools.

	rather than embedded co-production.	
Cross-Sectoral Integration	Investment portfolios are thematically fragmented; synergies across ERDF, ESF+, and other funds are not systematically exploited.	Require an explicit multi-fund integration narrative in all strategies; use policy mix analysis as a standard element of the quality assessment layer.
Funding and Finance	Strategies rely almost exclusively on grants; financial instruments and PPP models are rarely mobilised; resource adequacy is not verified systematically.	Introduce a resource adequacy check in the endorsement process; promote revolving funds and financial instruments; support blending of EU and national funds.
Monitoring	Monitoring focuses on programme outputs (MySMIS); integrated territorial outcome monitoring is absent; feedback loops to strategy revision are weak.	Develop a Harmonised Territorial Outcome Monitoring Framework integrated into the regional GIS dashboard; shift from output to impact indicators.
Transformative Capacity	Strategies tend to replicate past investment patterns; experimentation and pilot approaches are rare; transferability of innovative practices is not systematically supported.	Introduce a transformative ambition criterion in the quality scoring; fund co-design pilots; build a regional repository of transferable practices.

4.2. Public policy recommendations

Recommendation 1: Add a qualitative assessment layer to the strategy endorsement process

Challenge: Administrative compliance checks alone cannot distinguish strategies with genuine strategic depth from those that merely meet procedural requirements. The current uniform endorsement process provides no incentive for higher-quality preparation.

Proposals:

- Supplement the current approval review with strategic quality assessment criteria that evaluate strategies across the seven dimensions proposed by INTEGRA.
- The integrated assessment should function as a quality signal: strategies that exceed a defined threshold would benefit from simplified endorsement procedures and priority access to capacity-building support programs.

North-West example: The strategies developed by Cluj-Napoca and Oradea demonstrate what maximum-score performance looks like: a coherent theory of change, an evidence-based diagnosis, formalized multi-actor partnerships, and geographically mapped investment portfolios using GIS. These can serve as good-practice models for the assessment tool.

Idea: Strengthen the procedure for evaluating local strategies based on the scoring methodology developed by Urbasofia in collaboration with the NWRDA, drawing on the INTEGRA framework.

Recommendation 2: Establish a differentiated technical assistance program for less-prepared territories

Challenge: Strategies from Sighetu Marmației and Borșa score significantly below the regional average due to structural administrative capacity gaps that a uniform procedural framework cannot address. Without targeted support, the capacity gap widens with each programming cycle.

Proposals:

- Design a dedicated technical assistance program for small towns, communes, and rural territories.
- Provide tailored strategy preparation methodologies, facilitation support for stakeholder engagement, and methodological guidance from RDA staff or contracted experts.
- Establish inter-county mentoring partnerships to facilitate the transfer of expertise from municipalities that have developed exemplary strategies to less-prepared local authorities.

Reference model: The JASPERS program (Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions) provides an established model of specialized territorial technical assistance. A regional-scale equivalent, delivered by the RDA with support from contracted experts, could replicate this approach for territories in the North-West Region.

Recommendation 3: Institutionalize governance innovation in the strategy preparation process

Challenge: Governance innovation is the weakest dimension of the regional model, encompassing co-design, foresight, participatory budgeting, and scenario-building. Consultation processes exist but rarely evolve into structured co-design between authorities and communities. As a result, strategies lack the community ownership needed for effective implementation.

Proposals:

- Require documented evidence of at least one co-design or participatory process as a condition for strategy endorsement.
- Organize pilot co-design workshops to prepare the next generation of IUDSs, facilitated by the NWRDA and drawing on methods developed through the INTEGRA partnership.
- Develop a regional observatory of participatory governance tools tested in the North-West context, including participatory labs, citizens' assemblies, digital consultation platforms, and foresight workshops.

Why it matters: EU Cohesion Policy is progressively encouraging stronger requirements for citizen and stakeholder involvement. Building these capacities positions the North-West Region favorably for post-2027 requirements and emerging instruments such as urban Community-Led Local Development (CLLD).

Recommendation 4: Make climate adaptation and demographic resilience mandatory components of strategies

Challenge: Climate and demographic dimensions appear in most strategies as contextual background rather than strategic drivers. Climate references are limited to mitigation measures, such as energy efficiency and sustainable mobility, while adaptation is absent. Demographic decline is acknowledged but rarely translated into redesigned service delivery or investment reprioritization.

Proposals:

- Include a checklist in the strategy preparation methodology requiring: (i) a climate risk profile aligned with the National Strategy on Climate Change Adaptation and (ii) an analysis of demographic scenarios using NIS and Eurostat projections.
- Require strategies to include an explicit section on climate vulnerability and adaptation measures, as well as demographic trends and their implications for investment.
- Reward substantive commitment to these dimensions through the quality scoring system.

Specific considerations for the North-West Region:

- Mountain areas (Borșa, Vișeu): high exposure to floods, landslides, and ecosystem degradation, requiring adaptation investments.
- Western plains: increasing drought risk, requiring adaptation in water management and agriculture.
- Demographic decline in rural communes in Maramureș and Sălaj: requires the resizing of public services and infrastructure.
- Growth pressures in the Cluj-Napoca FUA: requires strategic capacity to scale infrastructure and services.

Recommendation 5: Develop a harmonized framework for monitoring territorial outcomes

Challenge: The current monitoring architecture is robust for tracking North-West Regional Programme outputs through MySMIS, but provides little insight into integrated territorial outcomes. There is no common framework for measuring the social, environmental, economic, and governance changes that strategies are ultimately intended to produce, making it difficult to assess their relevance and impact.

Proposals:

- Develop a Harmonized Territorial Outcomes Monitoring Framework applicable to all types of endorsed strategies: IUDSs, SUMPs, and rural development strategies.
- Integrate the Harmonized Framework into the regional GIS dashboard already operational at the RDA, enabling longitudinal tracking.
- Establish a feedback loop so that monitoring results inform strategy review cycles.

***Impact** of the proposed approach: From "how much have we spent?" to "what have we transformed?"*

4.3. Recommended instruments

4.3.1. Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI)

ITI allows the grouping of multiple EU funds and programme priorities to address the specific, multi-dimensional needs of a defined territory. It is managed by an intermediate body with delegated functions, enabling a more holistic and place-based use of Cohesion Policy resources.

Design Element	Guidance for North-West Practitioners
Territorial delineation	Define the ITI perimeter on functional criteria (commuting sheds, economic interdependencies, ecological units)
Intermediate body	The intermediate body must have sufficient legal status, administrative capacity, and a clear mandate
Investment strategy	Map ERDF, ESF+, EMFAF, and EAFRD objectives against territorial needs; use a complementarity matrix to prevent duplication
Governance	Establish a multi-stakeholder Territorial Committee with a formal consultative role in project selection

Potential areas:

- Apuseni Mountain Area: concentration of vulnerabilities, underutilized natural and cultural heritage, and inter-county coordination needs.
- Baia Mare–Satu Mare Industrial Corridor: focused on post-industrial transition, labor market restructuring, and mining/brownfield sites with environmental impacts.

4.3.2. Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)

CLLD is an instrument used primarily in rural areas and implemented through LAGs. Its extension to urban and peri-urban contexts (urban CLLD) is increasingly supported by EU regulations and aligns with the governance innovation objectives of this guide.

- Urban CLLD enables communities to design and manage small-scale participatory investment programs within an urban neighborhood or a defined sub-area.

- It fosters local ownership, activates civil society actors, and strengthens participatory governance capacities.
- Strategies associated with urban CLLD should be integrated into city-level IUDSs to ensure coherence and avoid duplication.
- The NWRDA could develop an enabling framework for urban CLLD in the future.

4.3.3. Metropolitan Areas (MA) and Functional Urban Areas (FUA)

Metropolitan areas in the North-West Region (Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Baia Mare) and the broader functional urban areas around them represent the most significant territorial scale at which investment synergies can be realised.

Challenge	Recommended Action
IUDS of core city not always aligned with peri-urban commune strategies	Introduce a FUA coherence section in IUDS; support joint territorial diagnosis
Metropolitan governance structures are voluntary and informal	Develop formal Functional Cooperation Agreements with defined planning competences and shared monitoring obligations
FUA boundaries not systematically defined	Commission a North-West FUA Atlas based on OECD/Eurostat commuting criteria; update every 5 years using INS data

4.3.4. Participatory Governance

Moving from consultation to co-production is both a quality improvement and a regulatory trend. The following process steps are recommended for embedding participatory governance in strategy preparation:

Process Step	Key Actions and Tools
Early stakeholder mapping	Map all relevant actors (public, private, civil society, research) before strategy preparation begins; distinguish between informants, consultees, and co-producers
Diagnostic co-design	Invite community representatives into the territorial diagnosis phase; use participatory mapping, focus groups, and community surveys to complement statistical data
Vision building workshop	Facilitate a structured visioning exercise using scenario planning or futures wheel tools; document outcomes as an annex to the strategy
Priority-setting	Use participatory prioritisation methods (e.g., dot voting, multi-criteria scoring with stakeholders) to rank strategic objectives and investment areas

Draft strategy review	Open the draft strategy to public comment with a dedicated minimum 30-day consultation period; log and respond to all material comments
Ongoing participation	Establish a Territorial Forum or Strategy Monitoring Committee with civil society representation; meet at least once per year during implementation

4.4. Good practices for integrated approach

- **Strategic coherence and evidence-based investment, Cluj-Napoca**

The IUDS for Cluj-Napoca serves as the regional benchmark for strategic quality. Its distinguishing features include a territorial diagnosis grounded in robust quantitative and qualitative data; a strategic vision developed through consultation with multiple stakeholders from academia, business, and civil society; and an investment portfolio explicitly linked to RIS3 priorities and ERDF Specific Objectives. The strategy's cross-sectoral logic, connecting economic development, social inclusion, sustainable mobility, and digital infrastructure, makes it a transferable model for medium-sized cities in the region.

- **Urban regeneration program with economic impact in Oradea / multiplier effect on attracting private investment**

Oradea has demonstrated that urban strategies can generate significant multiplier effects when investment decisions are grounded in genuine competitive advantages and market dynamics. The historic center regeneration program, coordinated with medical tourism development and private investment attraction, has produced measurable economic and quality-of-life outcomes. The lesson for other cities is that strategic selectivity—investing where a genuine competitive base exists—is more effective than dispersed, sector-neutral portfolio approaches.

- **Participatory co-design and governance, Oltenia de sub Munte, Vâlcea**

Beyond the analysis of examples from the North-West Region, an innovative approach to participatory co-design and governance was identified in the ethnographic area of Oltenia de sub Munte, focused on establishing a collaborative framework for shaping development directions. The process actively involved local stakeholders, public authorities, community members, NGOs, and private-sector actors. Through a series of workshops, consultations, and interactive sessions, participants contributed to identifying local needs, co-creating solutions, and prioritizing interventions tailored to the territory's cultural and natural assets.

The process emphasized transparency, inclusion, and iterative feedback, enabling stakeholders to move from consultation to genuine co-decision-making. This approach strengthened local ownership, improved the relevance of proposed actions, and

supported the development of a shared governance model capable of guiding sustainable, place-based development in the region.

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Annex 2. Results database of regional and local strategies

	I. Strategic Dimension							II. Territorial Focus						III. Governance							IV. Cross-Sectoral Integration							V. Funding and Finance					VI. Monitoring							Transformative Capacity			
Question	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27	Q28	Q29	Q30	Q31	Q32	Q33	Q34	Q35	Q36	Q37	Q38	Q39	Q40	Q41	Q42
SIDU Oradea	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
SIDU Marghita	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	1	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	1	3	2	3	2
SIDU Beiuș	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	1	3	3	3	2	1	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	1	1	2	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	2
SIDU Salonta	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	1	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	1
SIDU Sacueni	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	2	3	2
SIDU Alesd	3	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
SDL Borș	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	1	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	1	3	2	3	1
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SIDU Năsăud	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	1	2	1	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	0	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	3
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SDD Ocna Șugatag	2	3	3	3	2	1	3	3	2	2	1	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	2	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	1	2	2	3	2	2	3	2	2	3	1	2	1
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SIDU Negrești-Oaș	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	1	2	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	2	3	2
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