
EUROPEAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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ABSTRACT

New social demands, opportunities in the green economy, opportunities opened up by digital technology, and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of remote work have again drawn attention to rural areas. In 2020, the European Commission conducted a public consultation on the long-term vision for rural areas. Support for rural areas is already provided under several EU policies, which contributes to their balanced, fair, green and innovative development. To support the implementation of the action plan, the common agricultural policy (CAP) and the cohesion policy will be of particular importance, which will be accompanied by a whole range of policies from other areas. The aim of this paper is an analysis of the EU legal framework of rural development policy, together with an analysis of the further development of the LEADER approach. Finally, a special focus is placed on the analysis of documents (long-term vision for the EU's rural areas) that deal with the future of rural development in the EU.

Introduction

According to the Article 174 of “the TFEU”, the Union must strive to reduce “the differences between the levels of development of different regions, paying special attention to certain regions, especially rural areas. The rural areas of the EU are of great importance as places for food production, forests and energy production, especially renewable energy. They make up 83% of the total European territory and that about 137 million people live there (30% of the European population). The population in rural

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areas has slightly decreased at the EU level during the past decade and significantly during the last 50 years, and that the population will probably decrease by 2050 in four out of five rural regions of the EU, whereby remote rural areas lose more inhabitants. In order to successfully respond to the main trends and challenges arising from globalization, urbanization and population aging, policies and measures adapted to each area are needed that take into account the diversity of EU regions, their specific needs and their relative advantages.

Rural development measures have a very important role in the context of key priorities and strategies of the European Commission, within “the new CAP for the period 2021-2027, especially within the framework of the European green plan and the long-term vision for rural areas”. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI)) On the basis of established drivers, scenarios and numerous consultation activities, four mutually complementary areas of action were determined, which together form a long-term vision whose foundation, inspiration and goal are stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040. In the context of the European Green Plan, the new European growth strategy, rural areas will play an important role in turning Europe into “the first climate-neutral continent by 2050”. In rural areas, for the needs of the green transition, partnerships will need to be developed in all economic activities, among companies from all sectors, local authorities, researchers and services based on innovation, knowledge exchange and collaboration, among others within the framework of smart specialization processes (EU Green Deal).

The aim of this paper is an analysis of the EU legal framework that regulates rural development policy, together with an analysis of the further development of the LEADER approach, the reliability of “the European Regional Development Fund”, “the European Network for Rural Development”. Finally, a special focus is placed on the analysis of documents (“long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas” and EU green plan) that deal with the future of rural development in the EU.

Materials and methods

Based on the set goals, the analysis of the content of secondary data sources was used as the basic methods of research. Secondary data, information on “the EU policy of rural development”, “LEADER approach” were taken mostly from “the official European Commission” documents and relevant literature (Literature reviews; in depth-analysis of rural development policy regulations and the framework for their implementation in Member States); an analysis of EU green plan regarding objectives; an analysis of “long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas”.

Results

Rural development in the EU - legal aspect

Rural development in the currently form, was not a part of the early European agricultural policy, and only at the end of the sixties of the 20th century it begin to appear as an issue within its framework as part of the so-called of the Mansholt plan. The aim of this plan was to introduce measures of rural development in order to solve the issue of reducing the number of small farms while at the same time trying to maintain a vibrant rural economy. (The Mansholt Plan, 1969)

This was followed by several directives that determine in more detail the issue of the further course of rural development. They related to: (Bogdanov, 2018)

- Modernization of farms through investment assistance in order to maintain parity income with other economic sectors (“Council Directive of 17 April 1972 on the modernization of farms (72/159/EEC”);
- program for consolidating holdings and reducing the number of employees (“Council Directive 72/160/EEC of 17 April 1972 concerning measures to encourage the cessation of farming and the reallocation of utilized agricultural area for the purposes of structural improvement”);
- “Advisory service, training, education” (“Council Directive 72/161/EEC of 17 April 1972 concerning the provision of socio-economic guidance for and the acquisition of occupational skills by persons engaged in agriculture”).

The effects of these measures were insignificant. Much better results followed the adoption of the Regulation 355/77, which referred to” support for the development of processing and marketing of agricultural and forestry and fishery products” (Council Regulation (EEC) No 355/77 of 15 February 1977 on common measures to improve the conditions under which agricultural products are processed and marketed).

It is significant to specify the strategies focused on rural areas that have been present in” the EU rural development policy” since the 1980s, when the turn from exogenous to endogenous development concept began. The key principle of these models is reliance on local development potentials and their innovative parts, that is, local structures and members of the local community.

The policy of rural development in the EU developed from a policy that deals with the structural problem “of the agricultural sector”, to a policy that deals with the multiple role of agriculture in society. (Đorđević-Milošević and Milovanović, 2012; Cvijanovic & Pantovic, 2021)

Therefore, based on the above, it can be pointed out that the EU policy of rural development is formulated and applied at two levels:

1. EU strategic guidelines,
2. National strategic plans - National strategies, programs and directives.

Based on their national priorities, which are aligned with the EU framework, MS develop plans to implement policies “at the national and regional level”. In the strategic guidelines, the EU defines the permitted support measures, and the member states choose from that list those measures that correspond to the needs of their rural areas. Most rural development programs basically refer to support in the form of grants, loans, incentives, transferred payments and fiscal policy solutions. “Support for rural development” is grouped into three groups of measures or so-called: (Tasic, 2015)

1. Growth in “the competitiveness of the agricultural sector” (highly positioned on the list of priorities of the countries of CEE that joined the EU last and whose rural areas will go through structural changes for a long time). As measures within this group, the following are mentioned: 1. Investments in the modernization of machinery and equipment on farms; 2. Giving value to agricultural and forestry products; 3. Support for cooperation between farmers, food industry and producers of raw materials; 4. Vocational training; 5. Support for young farmers; 6. Support for the use of advisory services and for the establishment of farm management systems; 7. Support for infrastructure projects.

2. Improvement of the environment and rural areas. Measures within this group include: 1. Support for non-productive investments related to the realization of agro-ecological obligations; 2. Support for regions with less favorable conditions for development; 3. Support for the protection of domestic animal welfare; 4. Sustainable use of forest land.

3. Diversification of economic activities and quality of life. Measures within this group include: 1. Support for the diversification of activities towards non-agricultural activities; 2. Support for the creation and development of new businesses; 3. Encouraging tourist activities; 4. Support for starting basic services; 5. Training and informative activities; 6. Support for acquiring new skills and animating rural areas.

The importance of the LEADER approach in EU rural development policy

It is important to point out the importance of the new approach in politics, in which the specific role of rural areas is taken as the focus. This turn in policy was marked by the European Commission’s 1988 Communication “*The Future of Rural Society*”, and support for rural development from the Structural Funds began in 1989. (COM (88) 501) After that, the first version of “the LEADER” (“Liaisons entre actions de développement de l’économie rurale”) approach was launched in 1991, which was largely compiled by European Commission official Michael Lane, who had previously worked on local employment initiatives in Mediterranean countries. The importance of these dimensions differs depending on: the degree of general development of a

given society, basic characteristics of rural areas (from completely marginalized to favor), a model of rural development that can represent a centralized, decentralized, i.e. exogenous, endogenous and mixed approach. The concept of multifunctionality emphasizes that the agricultural production system, in addition to its basic functions, also includes a strong socio-demographic component, as well as institutional solutions and implementation instruments, assessment of potential economic, ecological, social and global effects in assumed conditions for various tested local/regional case study models. (Ilic, Hafner, 2018)

In this regard, it is significant to specify two main regulations:

1. "Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)". It defines the roles and key responsibilities of the Governing Body and other institutional structures in the field of rural development, provides definitions of elements - the LEADER principle, local action groups - LAGs and cooperation.
2. "Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 679/2011 of 14 July 2011 amending Regulation (EC) No 1974/2006 laying down detailed rules for the application of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development".

"LEADER I began as a pilot initiative (1991-1993) of the European Commission" which invited local partnerships (local action groups - LAGs) from poor rural areas from 12 EU countries to submit local action plans for funding through the distribution of integrated global grants. The European team that carried out the ex post evaluation of LEADER I, in cooperation with the LEADER II Observatory, laid the conceptual foundations of what is now called the CLLD11/LEADER "approach" or "method", defined as the combined application of seven operational principles. (Bogdanov, 2018)

LEADER II (1994-1999) LEADER I very quickly built a reputation as an innovative instrument for mobilizing the endogenous potential of marginalized rural areas. Therefore, in 1994, the European Commission decided to extend it in the form of a decentralized approach in partnership with member states. LEADER II was subsequently implemented through 102 national/regional operational programs (OPs) in 15 EU countries. (Bogdanov, 2018)

LEADER+ (2000-2006) the community initiative LEADER+ was designed in the third phase to encourage the implementation of integrated, quality and original sustainable development strategies. It had a strong focus on partnerships and networks and promoted the exchange of experiences. As indicated in the name itself, LEADER+ included additional improvements, specifically the following features: the principle of "innovation" was combined with the regulatory principle of "sustainability"; participation of public stakeholders in decision-making bodies is limited to 50%; Increased emphasis has been placed on cooperation between rural areas – including the possibility of supporting joint rural development projects between LEADER LAGs

and similar structures within the same member state. LEADER+ continued to play its role as a laboratory aimed at stimulating the emergence and testing of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development, as well as complementing other rural development programs by encouraging rural communities to design and implement integrated and innovative development strategies. The organization of LEADER+ measures in the member states that joined the EU during this period followed the same approach as in the 15 EU countries, although more emphasis was placed on initial capacity building and the implementation of pilot strategies. (Bogdanov, 2018)

LEADER (2007-2013) With the introduction of the LEADER approach in the main streams of “the rural development program” (EU25+2), LEADER was established as the fourth axis, transversal in relation to the other three and with available funds in the amount of 5% of the total budget. The member states that joined the EU in 2004 have a fixed amount of 2.5%, mostly for preparations and capacity building measures.

CLLD /LEADER (2014-2020) in this period, this method is applied to all “European structural and investment funds” (“ESI funds”) under the name Community-led local development (CLLD). CLLD is still managed under the name LEADER in the EAFRD (measure 19 within focus area 6b) as mandatory in all 118 rural development programs (28 EU countries) with a minimum allocation of 5% of “the rural development program budget” (2.5% for Bulgaria) and Romania, which joined the Union in 2007, and a specific arrangement for Croatia, which joined the program in 2014.

A new declaration calling for an improved LEADER/CLLD implementation framework resulted from a stakeholder-driven process at the Renewing LEADER/CLLD for 2020+ conference organized by the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD in November 2016 in Tartu, Estonia). ELARD’s ‘Tartu declaration’ suggests a decrease in bureaucracy and a simplified multi-funded CLLD through a single funding source managed by a one coordinating body following one unique set of rules at the EU level be part of the new framework. LEADER will be delivered through the national co-financed CAP Strategic Plan (CSP)1 for the 2023-2027 period. LEADER supported actions will contribute to achieving the aims of the CSP Specific Objective: “to promote employment, growth, gender equality, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, including bio-economy and sustainable forestry”.

European Network for Rural Development

“The European Network for Rural Development” (“ENRD”) acts as a clearinghouse on how policies, programs, projects and other initiatives for rural development work in practice and how they can be improved to make them more effective. Its goal is to bring together everyone who wants and can contribute to rural development in Europe.

It supports the effective implementation of the rural development programs of the EU member states by spreading knowledge and developing new knowledge and by

facilitating the exchange of information and cooperation among rural communities across Europe. In addition, (ENRD) is a rich source of information on the implementation of rural development programs in the EU, including:

- Project database: a detailed list of projects financed by “the EAFRD and implemented through the rural development programme”,
- Rural development in numbers: statistical data and summaries related to rural development programs, focus areas and data obtained from monitoring,
- Thematic work within ENRD: thematic working groups, seminars, workshops and publications,
- Frequently asked questions related to rural development.

Support for the implementation of these activities is provided by the ENRD contact point and “the European Rural Development Evaluation Support Service”.

European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development

“The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development” (“EAFRD”) is the funding instrument of the second pillar of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). It aims to reinforce the ‘first pillar’ of income supports and market measures by strengthening the social, environmental and economic sustainability of rural areas. (“Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 – support for rural development”; “Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013 on the financing, management and monitoring of the common agricultural policy and repealing Council Regulations”). „The EAFRD is an integral part of the European Structural and Investment Funds - ESI, i.e. one of the five instruments for achieving the goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy”. The European Fund for Regional Development is one of the most important factors in strengthening the Union’s economy. Its fundamental task is to finance development projects with the aim of reducing regional differences in development and strengthening social cohesion and inclusiveness.

All projects are implemented on the basis of the structural adjustment of the economic systems of the member countries and the support of cross-border cooperation in terms of the transfer of labor and means of production. Also, this fund is the most important instrument in achieving the goals envisioned by the cohesion policy of the Union. This policy enables quick and effective assistance to countries that are exposed to natural disasters. Furthermore, the aid is manifested through the financing of projects to improve the demographic picture of border and mountain regions, which are characterized by a low rate of population density. Furthermore, with the aim of correcting regional differences in development, the Fund finances the development and structural adjustment of the economic systems of less developed member countries. The neutralization of differences in development should have been achieved by transforming industrial branches in underdeveloped regions to ones based on knowledge, technologies and innovations.

The legal framework of the operation of the European Fund for Regional Development defines that each member state must allocate at least 5% of financial resources to the Union budget. These funds, from the European and structural funds are further channeled for the needs of integrated action in terms of sustainable urban development. This refers to all those environmental, climatic, economic, demographic and social issues and challenges that affect social and regional partners. In accordance with the operational development programs that each member state defines according to its own needs, within the framework of the EAFRD there is the possibility of direct financing of investments in companies on the territory of the Union. Small and medium-sized enterprises are intended to play a key role in creating sustainable jobs, increasing the competitiveness of Union companies on the world market, developing infrastructure related to the efficiency of research and development, telecommunications networks, environmental protection and sustainable development, and the transition to green energy (Fernández-González et al., 2022). Also, the Fund's investment in growth and employment - with the aim of strengthening the labor market and regional economies European territorial cooperation - with the aim of strengthening cross-border transnational and interregional cooperation within the European Union, provide financial instruments to support local and regional development in terms of overcoming risky business and financial losses. Therefore, this fund can certainly be a significant source of funds for small and medium-sized enterprises, considering that it is possible to finance almost half of the project amount through it. Acceptable activities within such projects are, for example, the acquisition of new technologies, investment in innovative production, introduction of research and development, etc.

In conclusion, “the main activities of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development” include financial support for projects intended for small and medium-sized enterprises, which contribute to the preservation and creation of new jobs, investments for the construction of an infrastructure system whose primary goal is to provide effective services to the population of the Union in the field of energy, environmental protection and sustainable development, better traffic connections and quality supply of information and communication technologies. Furthermore, it is important to note the large amount of money allocated for the development of social and health care that is, the construction of educational infrastructure, and the creation of preconditions for neutralizing economic differences between individual regions of the EU.

In the financial perspective for the period from 2021 to 2027, the Fund foresees tasks, the implementation of which would make the Union and its regions more competitive on the world market in terms of innovation and support for small and medium-sized enterprises, i.e. their digitization and Internet connectivity. Also, the transition to a “green” and low-carbon way of doing business, better mobility of the labor force, better education, greater social inclusion and equal access to social and health care systems, as well as stronger investment in science and culture, and sustainable tourism should help the implementation of the stated goals. The characteristic of this fund is divided management. The creation of projects that should be adapted to their own needs is invited by local authorities, and it is governed by the Regulation on Common Provisions

“From 2023 onwards, rural development actions will be included under the framework of national CAP strategic plans. Each EU country will design a CAP Strategic Plan, combining funding for income support, rural development, and market measures. When designing their strategic plans, EU countries will contribute to the nine specific objectives through a toolbox of broad policy measures provided by the Commission, which can be shaped around national needs and capabilities. Within this framework, the Commission aims to make rural development actions more responsive to current and future challenges such as climate change and generational renewal, while continuing to support European farmers in a sustainable and competitive agricultural sector”.

A path for “the future of rural areas for 2040”

“European Commission communication sets out a long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas up to 2040 to ensure that rural areas can continue to play these essential roles”. “It identifies areas of action towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas and communities”. “A Rural Pact and an EU Rural Action Plan with tangible flagship projects and new tools will help achieve the goals of this vision”. The European Parliament’s motion voted captures the complex economic and social challenges Europe’s rural areas are facing. It presents a number of important solutions to ensure that rural communities are brought along the green transition. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI))

While rural areas in Europe are profoundly diverse from an historical, geographical, and economic perspective, they often face similar social and economic challenges. For instance, access to high-quality services of general interest, demographic decline and ageing, vulnerability to the impacts of crisis, and political underrepresentation are just some of the challenges affecting rural communities. (Miller and the others, 2022)

It was based on foresight exercises, background research and analysis of data relating to rural areas, and consultations with citizens and other rural actors. It recognizes the challenges and concerns (e.g. shrinking and aging population, lack of connectivity, absence of diverse employment opportunities) of rural areas, and aims to address these by using the most promising opportunities in rural areas (e.g. the EU’s green and digital transitions, lessons learnt from the COVID 19 pandemic, potential for economic growth). The Vision proposed a Rural Pact and a Rural Action Plan which are to be key elements of making rural areas stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous: (Miller and the others, 2022;)

- Rural Pact: The Pact aims to engage actors from multiple governance levels to support the goals of the Vision, facilitate cohesion in the area of the economy, society, and territory, and participate in the common aspirations of rural communities.
- Rural Action Plan: The Action Plan, aims to stimulate sustainable, cohesive and integrated rural development via various EU policies that will jointly support turning the Vision into a reality.

“Rural communities must have equal access to services of general interest to ensure inclusive and fair conditions of life and well-being, in particular health services, education, training and retraining” and lifelong learning, social care, care for children and the elderly, connectivity and mobility and housing, as well as postal and banking services, places for social gatherings and cultural activities and infrastructure; in this regard, he emphasizes the importance of public investments and public partnerships, as well as the improvement of cross-border and rural-urban cooperation; highlights the potential of decentralized and multi-purpose service centers and adapted repurposed buildings, as well as innovative approaches to service delivery. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI))

Targeted interventions to support young people and encourage effective generational renewal should be a priority in order to encourage the permanent presence of young people in rural areas and solve the problem of demographic decline; stresses that special attention should be paid to overcoming the main challenges and removing existing barriers, such as access to higher education and knowledge transfer, employment opportunities, acquisition of business skills and access to land and capital; stresses the need for high-quality agricultural education systems to train young professionals; in this regard, he emphasizes the important role of young farmers in modernizing EU agriculture and creating more opportunities in rural areas; stresses that it is necessary to support their successful integration, especially by facilitating the purchase and leasing of agricultural land, emphasizing in this regard the potential of agricultural incubators. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI))

The EU Green Deal, including a farm-to-table strategy and digital transformation, opens up new opportunities in rural areas, new dynamics for a more resilient future and opportunities for sustainable jobs; stresses the need to ensure a just and inclusive transition, promoting rural economic vitality and territorial and social cohesion, and to provide adequate support and resources to face the challenges in this regard, especially in light of the current crisis. The areas covered by the European Green Plan and the goals foreseen within them are: (EU Green Deal)

- Clean energy
- Biodiversity – implementation of ecosystem conservation measures
- Sustainable industry – encouraging a more sustainable, environmentally friendly production cycle
- Construction and renovation – implementation of measures to achieve a cleaner construction sector
- Sustainable agriculture – sustainability in EU agriculture and rural areas thanks to the common agricultural policy
- “From field to table” strategy - encouraging the development of more sustainable food systems

- Elimination of pollution – implementation of measures for quick and efficient reduction of pollution
- Sustainable mobility – promoting more sustainable means of transport
- Climate – make the EU climate neutral by 2050.

Furthermore, the importance of supporting cooperation initiatives in agriculture and social economy as a tool for rural development is highlighted; draws attention to the role of agro-food cooperatives in “the environmental, economic and social sustainability of rural areas, adding value to products, creating jobs and diversifying the local economy; encourages the Commission and Member States to encourage and promote cooperatives in rural areas”. The importance of access to adapted investments, research and innovation for sustainable agriculture is emphasized; notes the success of the European Innovation Partnership on Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability and calls for the continuation and expansion of this bottom-up innovation approach to find tailored solutions designed by local stakeholders, as well as other rural innovation partnerships and innovation hubs multi-stakeholder; believes that innovation should be aligned with traditional practices and knowledge, especially those adapted to the characteristics of each area, as well as diversification and innovation in the rural economy, with a more territorial approach based on local potential and characteristics, key to exploiting opportunities from the digital and green transition. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI))

Member States should introduce measures that support the just transition and diversification of the rural economy and support the creation of quality jobs in rural areas; emphasizes the potential of biodistricts, ecoregions, carbon sequestration and ecotourism for the diversification of the rural economy; reminds that sustainable agriculture, forestry and fishing can also offer opportunities for business diversification in rural areas. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI)).

Tourism will represent an important source of income for rural communities, highlighting the potential of diverse models of sustainable tourism; highlights the often underutilized potential of recreational fishing and angling tourism for attracting tourists throughout the year; calls for efforts to strengthen the position of rural tourism, such as wine tourism, in strategies for the diversification of the rural economy, together with the agricultural and food sectors. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI)).

In the upcoming period, the Commission and MS will promote the involvement of women in agriculture, especially by researching the possibility of supporting co-ownership of European agricultural farms; demands that the work of women in agricultural activities, especially the work of spouses and partners who help in agriculture, be fully recognized by granting legal recognition and full access to rights from the social security system; emphasizes the role of women in rural areas in the transition to sustainable agriculture and in the green transition. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI)).

Initiatives in rural areas, such as the development of renewable energy infrastructure, must effectively contribute to the economic, social and environmental vitality of those areas and take into account the need for social acceptance at the local level; insists that food production targets and the protection of areas of high ecological value, such as Natura 2000 network areas, should be a priority. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI)).

It is necessary to plan infrastructure that does not neglect any region, especially by strengthening public investments and quickly implementing EU funds and national funds that contribute to connectivity in rural areas, by supporting and developing integrated and intermodal transport systems, and by giving priority to isolated and disconnected areas in the trans-European transport network. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI))

The digital transition opens up new opportunities for rural areas, which are only available if there is adequate, stable, fast and affordable broadband coverage, which has not been completed in all rural areas; points out that digital development increases the attractiveness of rural areas, reduces problems related to remoteness, improves access to services and facilitates digitization in agriculture; calls for the creation of high-speed local “digital centers” adapted to remote work. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI)).

The risks of widening the digital divide in rural areas due to the lack of coverage of 5G technology must be taken into account and Member States are invited to mobilize all available instruments to improve the full deployment of 5G networks and remove administrative obstacles, with special support from EU cohesion policy funds and member states’ plans for recovery and resilience, as well as private investments; stresses the need for a timely revision of the relevant guidelines on state aid for non-market rural areas; the comparative lack of digital skills in rural areas can prevent rural communities from taking advantage of digitization opportunities and hamper the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI)).

Measures are needed at EU and national, regional and local levels to ensure digital inclusion, especially in the context of an aging population, and promote adapted digital skills while supporting an enabling environment for innovation and the development of adapted digital solutions; highlights the potential of digital tools for sustainable agriculture and smart agriculture, for developing a local, short supply chain and for increasing the attractiveness of the agricultural sector for young farmers. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI)).

In the upcoming period, smart villages stand out as a leading project of the EU action plan for rural areas in order to better promote their development after 2020; stresses the importance of balanced public-private partnerships in this context; highlights the potential of smart city technologies, which should be adequately financed, and considers that the digital platform “Smart City Market” could serve as a model for the further development of the ecosystem of smart villages; stresses that the rural economy and

the LEADER development method and community-led local development financing instruments should also be used for the further development of smart villages. (European Parliament resolution 2021/2254(INI)).

Conclusions

“Europe’s rural areas are home to 137 million people representing almost 30% of its population and over 80% of its territory”. The motion includes important recognition of game management and its social, economic, cultural and biodiversity benefits as well as a key request to reduce conflicts with large carnivores (Sagić et al., 2019).

By the middle of 2023, the European Commission will analyze the measures taken by EU member states in rural areas and prepare a public report based on this in early 2024. This will play a key role, especially in identifying areas that still need increased support and funding. The report will pave the way towards a rural strategy for the programming period 2028-2034.

In the upcoming period, a strong rural dimension is expected in the cohesion policy regulations, which should include dedicated funds for this purpose. The European Commission will launch a study on the possibility of allocating part of the European Fund for Regional Development and the Cohesion Fund for rural areas, along with other useful investments, with special emphasis on regions with special geographical features such as mountains, remote areas, islands and outermost regions. The future and well-being of rural areas is crucial for Europe’s food security, autonomy and resilience, as well as for a sustainable energy mix that contributes to the EU’s energy independence, as the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have clearly shown.

In the coming period, the long-term vision is expected to develop into a concrete and measurable true rural strategy at the EU level, including strategic dialogue on cooperation with urban areas, and coordination of the contribution of all EU funds and policies to rural areas; stresses that this strategy must be fully integrated into future programming periods; calls on all member states to develop rural strategies at the national and regional level that will define the ways and means needed to solve the problems facing rural areas.

In conclusion, the Vision highlights four specific themes under which action will be taken, supported by flagship initiatives: “Stronger: Rural areas should be home to empowered and vibrant local communities, involving a broad range of stakeholders and networks as well as all levels of governance, is key to developing tailor-made, place-based and integrated policy solutions and investments; Connected: Maintaining or improving public transport services and connections, as well as deepening digital infrastructures, are essential to ensure better-connected EU rural areas; Resilient: Preserving natural resources, restoration of landscapes (including cultural), greening of farming activities and shortening supply chains to make rural areas more resilient to climate change, natural hazards and economic crises; Prosperous: Diversifying economic activities to new sectors with positive effects on employment, and improving the value added of farming and agri-food activities”.(Miller and the others, 2022).

Member States should support community-led local development, including LEADER, by encouraging participation in local action groups, facilitating and promoting multi-fund approaches and ensuring the effective autonomy of local action groups in terms of their composition and decision-making; considers that a meaningful allocation of aid for CLLD within all relevant funds at EU level, similar to the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EPFRR), would contribute to stronger integrated strategies and more sustainable and resilient territorial development;

In the coming period, the European Commission should improve synergies and coordination between EU funding instruments such as cohesion policy, CAP and the Next GenerationEU recovery instrument, as well as with national instruments, for successful rural development in the EU, as well as pay special attention implementation of “Article 174 of the TFEU” and to guarantee that the principle of “doing no harm to cohesion” is applied in all EU policies, especially in rural areas.

Conflict of interests

“The authors declare no conflict of interest”.

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