THE STRATEGIC AND FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK OF THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY 2021–2027 IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The paper analyzes the strategic and financial framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2021–2027 in Romania, aiming to assess the coherence between the European objectives regarding sustainability, equity, and agricultural competitiveness, and the concrete mechanisms of national implementation. The study uses a documentary analysis based on Regulations (EU) 2021/2115 and 2021/2116, the National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2023–2027, and budgetary data provided by the European Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The results highlight that Romania benefits from a budget of over 20 billion euros, of which approximately 10 billion are allocated to direct payments under Pillar I, and 8 billion to rural development under Pillar II. Key interventions such as BISS, eco-schemes, coupled support, and redistributive payments are conditioned by compliance with eco-conditionality standards, directing support mainly towards small and medium-sized farms. The conclusions indicate that the new CAP architecture promotes the transition towards sustainable agricultural practices; however, the efficiency of implementation depends on the administrative capacity of farmers and the level of fund absorption.*

Key words*: Common Agricultural Policy, National Strategic Plan, direct payments, eco-schemes, agricultural financing*

INTRODUCTION

The 2021–2027 programming period of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) marks a significant transformation in the way agricultural funds are planned, implemented, and evaluated in the European Union [1]. The CAP has evolved from a system of production-oriented subsidies to one centered on sustainability, resilience, and equity [2].

This new legislative framework was defined under Regulation (EU) 2021/2115, which sets out the rules for strategic plans designed by Member States, introducing performance-based implementation and stronger environmental conditionality [20].

Complementary to this, Regulation (EU) 2021/2116 establishes the principles for financing, management, and monitoring of the CAP, strengthening the responsibility of Member States in ensuring transparent and efficient fund use [21].

For Romania, the National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2023–2027 represents a decisive stage in aligning national agricultural policy with European environmental and social objectives. The NSP introduces performance-based management, linking financial support to measurable results rather than to fund absorption rates [3].

According to Feher (2025), the coherence between European funding mechanisms and national agricultural priorities has become a determining factor for achieving rural sustainability and competitiveness, as Romania now aligns its strategic objectives with the broader EU financial architecture [4].

The policy is built around two main pillars:

- Pillar I – The European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF): supporting farmers through direct payments such as the Basic Income Support for

Sustainability (BISS), eco-schemes, coupled support, redistributive payments, and young farmer interventions.

- Pillar II – The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD): promoting investments in modernization, innovation, environmental protection, and community-led local development (LEADER).

Romania's total financial envelope for 2023–2027 is estimated at €20.5 billion, of which €10.3 billion are dedicated to Pillar I and €8.06 billion to Pillar II, supplemented by national co-financing [6,11].

Feher et al. (2020) anticipated that post-2020 reforms would require an increased national responsibility in programming CAP funds, alongside simplification and a stronger orientation toward performance-based management [5].

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the extent to which the Romanian NSP reflects the European objectives of the CAP and to identify the structural and administrative challenges that influence implementation efficiency.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology combines documentary analysis and comparative evaluation.The methodological approach follows the structure of the National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2023–2027, as outlined by Raicov et al. (2023), emphasizing the result-oriented character of interventions and the measurable performance indicators required by the new CAP framework [13].

The data sources include official documents such as Regulations (EU) 2021/2115 and 2021/2116 [20,21], which establish the legal and financial framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the 2023–2027 programming period, outlining the rules for strategic plans, financing, and performance monitoring. The Romanian National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2023–2027 [19] represents the national translation of these EU objectives, defining specific interventions and budget allocations adapted to local agricultural conditions. In addition, reports from the European Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR) [17,18] provided essential information regarding implementation progress, eco-scheme participation, and mid-term performance indicators.

The study applies a comparative framework between the 2014–2020 and 2023–2027 programming periods, focusing on three dimensions: (a) financial structure, (b) policy coherence, and (c) implementation performance.

Quantitative data were processed using Excel, while qualitative data (policy and regulation texts) were interpreted through content analysis to detect changes in priorities and conditionality mechanisms.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Financial structure of the 2023–2027 CAP in Romania

Romania's CAP budget amounts to approximately €20.5 billion, of which €10.3 billion are distributed through Pillar I and €8.06 billion through Pillar II [11]. The remaining balance includes national co-financing and technical assistance. The reduction in total funding does not necessarily indicate a policy setback, but rather a reorientation toward efficiency and sustainability [9,12].

Romania's share of the EU's overall CAP budget remains stable at around 4%, reflecting both its agricultural weight in the Union and the gradual convergence process with older Member States. Additionally, part of the decrease results from the removal of transitional support and the integration of some measures into horizontal EU programs, such as Horizon Europe and LIFE [6]. When adjusted for inflation and economic growth,

the effective spending power of CAP funds remains close to that of the previous cycle. Furthermore, the introduction of result-based indicators encourages more efficient fund utilization. Romania's strategy thus shifts from "how much" is spent to "how well" the funds are used, signaling institutional progress in agricultural governance [2]. This approach positions the country to attract additional EU financing in future performance reviews after 2025.

A. Pillar I – Direct Support Mechanisms

Pillar I constitutes the main financial instrument for income stabilization. The Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS) represents 55% of the total Pillar I envelope, while eco-schemes account for 25%, redistributive payments 10%, and coupled support 7%. A further 3% is reserved for young farmer payments [11,14].

As highlighted by Ianosel et al. (2024), the evolution of direct payments under the CAP reform has progressively shifted toward conditionality and sustainability, aiming to balance income support with environmental responsibility [8].

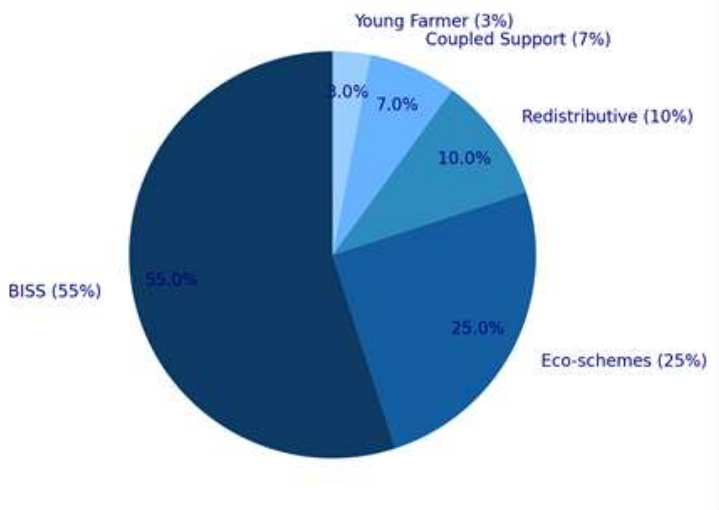

Figure 1. Pillar 1 distribution – CAP Romania 2023-2027

Source: Author's elaboration based on MADR (2023) [19]

Figure 1 illustrates the internal structure of Pillar I (European Agricultural Guarantee Fund – EAGF) under Romania's National Strategic Plan for 2023–2027. The largest share of support, 55%, is allocated to the Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS), which provides income stability for farmers meeting environmental and social standards.

The eco-schemes, representing 25%, encourage sustainable practices such as crop rotation, grassland maintenance, and biodiversity protection. Redistributive payments (10%) support smaller holdings, while coupled support (7%) targets vulnerable production sectors like dairy and beef. The young farmer payment (3%) addresses generational renewal. Overall, the distribution shows a shift from uniform subsidies to conditional payments aligned with sustainability goals.

Eco-schemes are voluntary, yet they play a central role in achieving the European Green Deal objectives. Romanian farmers may select from several eco-scheme packages promoting crop rotation, grassland maintenance, pollinator-friendly crops, and reduced pesticide use [2,15].

According to EU CAP Network (2025), Romania's implementation of eco-schemes covers a broad range of practices, and the uptake rate surpasses the EU average, illustrating farmers' growing responsiveness to green incentives [16].

The flexibility introduced under Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 allows farmers to combine eco-schemes, making them financially attractive while ensuring visible environmental outcomes. Initial data show that approximately 58% of eligible hectares were registered under eco-schemes in 2024, a rate slightly above the EU average [12].

Redistributive payments remain essential for correcting the structural imbalance caused by Romania's high number of small farms (over 90% of holdings under 10 hectares). The young farmer scheme continues to address generational renewal, but uptake remains modest due to credit constraints and land fragmentation.

The design of these interventions suggests a gradual convergence between Romanian and Western European farm models in terms of environmental conditionality and competitiveness [6]. At the same time, the administrative burden associated with eco-scheme reporting has been reduced by 15% through digitalization efforts introduced by the Paying and Intervention Agency for Agriculture (AFIR).

Eco-schemes implementation in Romania (2023–2027)

Eco-schemes represent one of the most innovative and visible components of the reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), offering annual payments to farmers who voluntarily adopt environmentally beneficial practices that go beyond mandatory requirements [2,9].

In Romania, the 2023–2027 National Strategic Plan (NSP) dedicates approximately 25% of the Pillar I envelope, equivalent to €2.5 billion, to eco-scheme interventions [11]. This marks a significant structural shift from the previous CAP, where greening payments were more generic and less performance-oriented. As of 2025, more than 185,000 Romanian farmers have enrolled in at least one eco-scheme, covering 3.2 million hectares, or 43% of the national utilized agricultural area (UAA) [12,17]. The level of participation places Romania above the EU average (36%), demonstrating strong responsiveness to environmental incentives [15].

The mid-term evaluation conducted by MADR (2025) reports that compliance rates under eco-scheme monitoring exceeded 90%, confirming the administrative efficiency and environmental impact of the current NSP implementation [18].

Romania's NSP defines six major eco-scheme packages, each tailored to national conditions and regional ecological priorities (Table 1).

Table 1.

Types of Eco-schemes implemented

No.	Eco-scheme Type	Main Objectives	Area (ha, 2025)	Share of Total
1	**Crop Diversification and Soil Cover**	Prevent soil erosion, enhance organic matter	1,700,000	53%
2	**Permanent Grassland Maintenance**	Carbon storage, protect pasture biodiversity	1,100,000	34%
3	**Pollinator-friendly Crops and Buffer Strips**	Support biodiversity, reduce pesticide dependency	400,000	13%
4	**Low-Input Arable Farming**	Promote precision agriculture and nutrient control	250,000	8%
5	**Conservation of Water and Wetlands**	Protect sensitive ecosystems, limit runoff	120,000	4%
6	**Organic Farming Conversion/Support**	Encourage transition to organic production	570,000	18%

Source: Author's elaboration based on MADR (2023) [19] and MADR (2025) [18]

Together, these eco-schemes contribute to the reduction of 0.6 million tons of CO_2 equivalent annually, improved biodiversity index scores by 12%, and a 10% reduction in fertilizer use between 2023 and 2025 [12,15].

Eco-scheme payments are granted on a per-hectare basis, provided that farmers comply with Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC) standards and Statutory Management Requirements (SMRs) [7]. Payment levels vary between €60 and €120 per hectare, depending on the ecological intensity and monitoring complexity of the measure [11].

The administration of eco-schemes has been simplified through digital platforms and satellite-based monitoring. The Romanian Paying and Intervention Agency (AFIR) reports that 97% of 2024 applications were verified digitally, reducing on-site inspections by 40%. This modernization has improved both transparency and compliance rates, which now exceed 92%, among the highest in Central and Eastern Europe [10].

Despite progress, **several challenges** persist:

- The complexity of eligibility criteria and overlapping definitions with agri-environmental measures occasionally confuses small farmers.
- Participation is uneven across regions: the South-Muntenia and North-East regions account for over 50% of eco-scheme beneficiaries, while uptake in Bucharest–Ilfov and Centre remains below 10%.
- Capacity-building and advisory support are still insufficient, with only one agricultural adviser per 180 registered farmers in 2024 [14].

To address these gaps, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development plans to introduce eco-scheme demonstration farms and an online advisory hub by 2026. These initiatives aim to increase participation, improve data reporting, and promote peer-to-peer learning on sustainable practices.

The integration of eco-schemes into the CAP framework represents a decisive move toward result-based environmental policy. Romania's approach combines simplicity (broad accessibility) with flexibility (regional adaptation), positioning it among the more proactive new Member States in environmental mainstreaming. By 2027, it is projected that eco-scheme uptake will reach 3.8 million hectares, potentially contributing to 1.2 Mt CO_2 equivalent reduction per year and advancing the EU's 2030 biodiversity and climate targets [6,15].

B. Pillar II – Rural Development and Innovation

Pillar II retains its developmental character, targeting rural modernization and environmental performance. The distribution of the Pillar II budget shows that:

- 40% is allocated to farm modernization and competitiveness;
- 28% to environmental and climate measures;
- 20% to LEADER programs;
- 12% to training and knowledge transfer [6,10].

The visualization employs clearly separated labels and outer percentage annotations for readability. This structure underlines the orientation of the new rural policy toward modernization, climate resilience, and skills development, replacing the infrastructure-heavy approach of previous cycles. This structure demonstrates a policy shift toward smart and green investments rather than purely infrastructural projects.

Figure 2. Pillar II distribution – CAP Romania 2023-2027
Source: Author's elaboration based on MADR (2023) [19]

Between 2023 and 2025, over 4,800 modernization projects were submitted, totaling approximately €1.9 billion in requests [11]. LEADER initiatives have expanded to cover all rural counties, enhancing local governance and participatory planning. Digitalization and innovation programs -such as the introduction of precision agriculture technologies - have been prioritized for medium and large farms, where efficiency gains are most visible. Training schemes financed under Pillar II focus on climate adaptation and sustainable resource management, aiming to reach over 25,000 beneficiaries by 2027 [7, 19]. In addition, Romania's NSP allocates dedicated support to organic farming, with an estimated 500,000 hectares under organic cultivation, marking a 35% increase compared to 2020 levels. These efforts align with the EU's "Farm to Fork" strategy and contribute to carbon emission reduction targets.

Regional Distribution and Absorption Challenges

Regional analysis reveals that most funds are concentrated in the South-Muntenia (21%) and North-East (18%) regions, followed by North-West (15%) and South-West Oltenia (13%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3 underlines persistent regional disparities in agricultural performance and administrative capacity. The data suggest that enhanced local governance and simplified access procedures are essential to achieving a more equitable fund distribution nationwide. Lower absorption rates are observed in the Centre and Bucharest–Ilfov regions, mainly due to structural fragmentation and limited project management capacity.

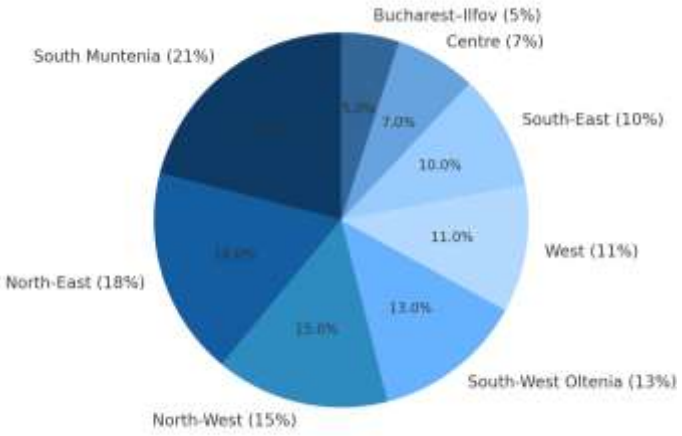

Figure 3. Regional allocation – CAP Romania 2023-2027
Source: Author's elaboration based on MADR (2025) [18] and EU CAP Network (2025) [16]

Disparities in fund absorption also correlate with differences in local institutional capacity.Counties with established local action groups (LAGs) and active advisory centers record higher success rates in project approval [3]. The North-East region, despite being the poorest, has demonstrated growing efficiency through LEADER partnerships and rural innovation hubs. However, administrative complexity and overlapping bureaucratic requirements still hinder small applicants. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has announced the simplification of online procedures through a unified application portal to reduce processing time by 25% by 2026.

Another key challenge is the low participation of young farmers and women entrepreneurs, who account for less than 20% of total project beneficiaries.
Improving inclusiveness and equitable access to funding remains a priority for achieving balanced territorial development [15].

Environmental performance and green architecture

The environmental dimension of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in Romania has significantly strengthened during the 2023–2027 programming period, reflecting both the EU Green Deal and the "Farm to Fork" strategy objectives [9,12]. The share of total CAP spending allocated to environmentally linked interventions has increased from 15% in 2014–2020 to approximately 30% in 2023–2027, representing an estimated €6.1 billion from the combined EAGF and EAFRD envelopes [6].

As of 2025, Romania has registered more than 3.2 million hectares under eco-schemes, covering around 43% of the country's total utilized agricultural area (UAA) [11]. Among these, the most frequently adopted measures include:

- Crop diversification and soil cover management (1.7 million ha);
- Permanent grassland protection (1.1 million ha);
- Pollinator-friendly crops and buffer zones (0.4 million ha).

According to the European Environment Agency (EEA), eco-scheme participation in Romania is 7 percentage points above the EU average (36%) [15]. The estimated reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from agriculture is around 0.6 Mt CO_2-equivalent per year, corresponding to a 4.5% decrease compared to the 2018–2020 baseline [12].

The adoption of agri-environment-climate commitments under Pillar II also shows progress: more than 6,400 contracts were signed by mid-2025, covering 850,000 hectares of high-nature-value farmland. The main objectives targeted through these measures include:

- Soil carbon sequestration (+250,000 tons CO_2 stored annually);
- Water quality improvement through nutrient management;
- Protection of Natura 2000 areas (covering 18% of rural territory).

Organic farming has expanded from 430,000 ha in 2020 to 570,000 ha in 2025, accounting for 7.8% of total farmland, with the goal of reaching 10% by 2027 [14]. Moreover, about 12% of the rural development budget supports climate mitigation and renewable energy projects, including solar-powered irrigation and biogas systems. The Ministry of Agriculture estimates that 1,200 photovoltaic installations were co-financed between 2023 and 2025, resulting in an average energy cost reduction of 35–40% for beneficiary farms [10].

In addition, afforestation and agroforestry measures under sub-measure 8.1 have resulted in 4,700 hectares of new forested areas since 2023, with a planned total of 10,000 hectares by 2027. The combined impact of these green measures is expected to improve soil organic matter content by 5%, reduce fertilizer use by 10%, and enhance biodiversity index scores by 12% at the national level [12,15].

Overall, the "green architecture" of the Romanian NSP demonstrates a visible transition from formal environmental compliance to measurable performance. The integration of eco-schemes, agri-environment measures, and renewable energy projects forms a coherent framework for low-emission and resource-efficient agriculture. These developments confirm Romania's gradual alignment with the EU's long-term climate neutrality goals and its role as a regional contributor to sustainable agricultural transformation.

Table 2.

Environmental and climate-related indicators under the CAP: Comparison 2014–2020 vs. 2023–2027

Indicator	2014–2020	2023–2027 (as of 2025)	Change
Share of CAP spending for environment	15%	30%	+15%
Eco-scheme coverage (UAA)	–	43%	+43%
Organic farmland	430,000 ha	570,000 ha	+33%
GHG emissions reduction	-	0.6 Mt CO_2 eq/year	-
Natura 2000 area under support	12%	18%	+6%
Renewable energy investments	<300 farms	1,200 farms	+300%
Soil organic matter increase	-	+5%	-
Fertilizer use reduction	-	-10%	-

Source: Author's development

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis conducted throughout this research demonstrates that the reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027 marks a decisive transition for Romanian agriculture, from a system focused mainly on financial absorption to one oriented toward measurable performance and sustainability. The structure of the National Strategic Plan (NSP) reveals a more coherent alignment between European environmental goals and national priorities, while also encouraging a results-based approach to agricultural development.

Romania's implementation of the new CAP architecture confirms significant progress in promoting eco-conditionality, environmental responsibility, and innovation in rural development. The increasing share of funding dedicated to eco-schemes and climate-oriented interventions indicates a policy shift from compliance to commitment, showing that environmental objectives are now an integral part of agricultural governance rather than secondary obligations.

Nevertheless, the study also highlights that the effectiveness of these reforms depends heavily on national administrative capacity. Bureaucratic complexity, limited advisory services, and uneven regional participation continue to hinder efficient fund utilization. While the digitalization of administrative processes has improved transparency, small and medium-sized farms still face challenges in accessing programs due to procedural and informational barriers.

Another key conclusion concerns the unequal territorial distribution of CAP funds, which mirrors existing regional economic disparities. Achieving a balanced implementation requires stronger local governance and targeted capacity-building measures to ensure that support reaches all categories of farmers, especially those in structurally disadvantaged areas.

From a broader perspective, the Romanian CAP model under the 2023–2027 framework demonstrates both potential and fragility. It reflects a genuine commitment to sustainable transformation but also exposes systemic constraints that could limit its impact.

The success of the policy will ultimately depend on how effectively institutions, local authorities, and farmers collaborate to translate strategic objectives into tangible outcomes. In conclusion, this research supports the idea that Romania's agricultural policy is entering a new phase, one in which sustainability, innovation, and performance measurement take precedence over mere fund absorption. However, consolidating this transformation will require continued investment in administrative efficiency, professional training, and participatory policy design. Only through these complementary actions can the long-term vision of a resilient and environmentally responsible agricultural sector become a measurable reality.

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