Social Economy Ecosystems in the European Union: Institutional Frameworks, Governance and Romania's Position

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the institutional heterogeneity of social economy ecosystems across the 27 European Union Member States and situates Romania within this comparative landscape. The analysis draws on the 2021 Action Plan for the Social Economy, the 2023 Council Recommendation, the Commission's 2026 mid-term review and accompanying Staff Working Document, and the joint OECD/European Union report published in 2025. An eight-dimension analytical framework, organised along three axes (legal-strategic, intermediary infrastructure and economic integration), is used as a comparative lens. Because comparable information is strongest for legal recognition, strategy status and institutional responsibility, the proposed five-profile typology is anchored primarily in these dimensions and interpreted cautiously for the remaining ones. As of 31 January 2026, ten Member States had a social economy strategy, policy or action plan in place and ten others had one in preparation; Belgium is treated separately because competence is regional. Romania combines comprehensive legal recognition under Law No. 219/2015 with a national strategy still under preparation. The paper argues that the growing similarity of formal policy instruments across the EU should not automatically be equated with equivalent institutional depth or implementation capacity. Romania's position is discussed through the hypothesis of a 'double institutional transition', an interpretive explanation rather than a demonstrated causal mechanism.

KEYWORDS: *European Union; governance; institutional convergence; Romania; social economy.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *L31, O52, P13.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The social economy, encompassing associations, cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, foundations and social enterprises, has become an increasingly visible component of European Union policy. According to the European Commission's 2026 mid-term review of the Action Plan for the Social Economy, the sector comprises more than 4.3 million entities and provides at least 11.5 million jobs across the EU, equivalent to around 6.3% of total employment (European Commission, 2026a). These aggregate figures are substantial, but they conceal marked differences between Member States in the institutional recognition, measurement and organisation of the sector.

Despite this economic weight, the social economy remains institutionally fragmented: Member States differ substantially in how they define, regulate and support this segment of the economy, and comparative research continues to be constrained by what the CIRIEC literature terms the "statistical invisibility" of the sector (Monzón Campos, 2025). This fragmentation is not a new observation. Successive comparative studies commissioned by EU institutions, from the CIRIEC reports produced for the European Economic and Social Committee (Chaves & Monzón, 2017) to the European Commission's own mapping exercises (Borzaga et al., 2020), have repeatedly documented wide disparities in legal recognition, statistical visibility and

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institutional support across the Union. What has changed since these earlier studies is the emergence, from 2021 onwards, of a more coordinated EU policy architecture explicitly aimed at reducing this heterogeneity.

This paper addresses two related questions. First, to what extent have the 27 EU Member States converged towards a common institutional model of the social economy, following the adoption of the 2021 Action Plan and the associated 2023 Council Recommendation? Second, where does Romania, a post-communist member state with early but incomplete legal recognition of the social economy, stand within this comparative landscape? To answer these questions, the paper draws on official EU documentation, OECD comparative data and national legal and strategic texts to construct an eight-dimension analytical framework and an original five-model typology of social economy ecosystems.

The paper makes three contributions. It first updates earlier comparative work (Borzaga et al., 2020; Hazenberg et al., 2016) using the Commission's 2026 review and the joint OECD/European Union report published in 2025. It then proposes an eight-dimension framework that separates legal-strategic arrangements, intermediary infrastructure and economic integration. Finally, it uses Romania as a focused case to examine how formal legal recognition can coexist with incomplete strategic development and substantial regional differences. The typology presented below is therefore intended as a heuristic comparative instrument rather than as a definitive ranking of national ecosystems.

The timing of the analysis is relevant because the 2026 mid-term review is the first formal EU-wide stocktake of the Action Plan since its adoption in December 2021. It provides a useful basis for asking whether the post-2021 policy push has been accompanied by deeper institutional change or mainly by the spread of similar legal and strategic instruments. The Commission itself notes that the Action Plan has served as an important reference point for national reforms, while also identifying persistent weaknesses in data, monitoring and coordination (European Commission, 2026a; European Commission, 2026b). This distinction between formal alignment and institutional depth is central to the analysis developed in the following sections.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and policy framework underpinning the comparative analysis. Section 3 describes the data sources and the analytical framework. Section 4 presents the results, including the state of the social economy at EU-27 level, the proposed typology and Romania's position within it. Section 5 discusses the study's limitations. Section 6 concludes with a discussion of the paper's central argument: that the observed institutional convergence across Member States is, to a significant extent, a convergence of form rather than of substance.

2. THEORETICAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

2.1 Defining the social economy: competing traditions

The concept of the social economy lacks a single, universally accepted definition across the European Union. Two main theoretical traditions inform its study. The first is the legal-institutional approach, associated with the French and Spanish traditions and formalised through dedicated legislation (for example, the 2014 Social and Solidarity Economy Law in France or the 2011 Social Economy Law in Spain), which defines the social economy through an enumerated list of legal forms (cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations) that share common governance principles. The second is the EMES approach, developed by the EMES International Research Network, which defines social enterprises through a set of economic and social criteria, namely limited profit distribution, participatory governance and an explicit social mission, rather than legal form (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017). Drawing on the

International Comparative Social Enterprise Models (ICSEM) project, Defourny and Nyssens (2017) further show that even within the EMES tradition, at least four distinct social enterprise models can be identified across Europe (entrepreneurial non-profit, social cooperative, social business and public-sector spin-off models), suggesting that heterogeneity persists even among researchers who share a common conceptual starting point. These two traditions do not simply coexist; they generate materially different counts of the sector's size, since the legal-institutional approach can undercount unincorporated or newly emerging social enterprises, while the EMES approach can overcount entities that are only marginally oriented towards social goals.

CIRIEC-affiliated research has long emphasised that these definitional differences translate directly into statistical incomparability, since the social economy has no distinct category within the international System of National Accounts (SNA-2008; ESA-2010), rendering it, in Monzón Campos's (2025) terms, statistically invisible. This is not a minor technical point: without a shared statistical category, cross-country comparisons risk conflating genuine institutional differences with artefacts of measurement, a risk this paper addresses explicitly in Section 5.

The consequences of this statistical invisibility are visible throughout the country-level evidence discussed in Section 4. National statistical systems often capture only those parts of the social economy that correspond to established legal categories, while hybrid organisational forms can be absorbed into general business or non-profit statistics. The OECD's 2024 comparative exercise represented an important attempt to improve international comparability through a harmonised questionnaire administered to national ministries. This evidence is complemented in the present paper by the joint OECD/European Union report published in December 2025, which provides updated country notes and a common overview of institutional arrangements across the EU (OECD, 2024; OECD/European Union, 2025).

2.2 EU policy framework: from the Social Business Initiative to the 2021 Action Plan

At the policy level, the European Union's current social economy framework builds on the 2011 Social Business Initiative and, more comprehensively, on the 2021 Action Plan for the Social Economy. The Action Plan set out a policy horizon to 2030 and organised EU action around improving framework conditions, opening opportunities for social economy entities and increasing recognition of the sector (European Commission, 2021). This policy architecture was subsequently reinforced by the Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions.

The Council Recommendation, adopted on 27 November 2023, asks Member States to develop framework conditions that support the social economy and, taking national circumstances into account, to adopt or update social economy strategies or integrate the social economy into relevant policy initiatives. The Commission's 2026 review uses November 2025 as the reference point for this policy commitment and documents the different national responses that followed (Council of the European Union, 2023; European Commission, 2026b).

The 2026 mid-term review provides the most recent official assessment of implementation. Of the 63 actions included in the Action Plan, 30 had been completed, including 13 of a continuing nature, 30 were ongoing, two had been discontinued and one had been partially discontinued (European Commission, 2026b). The Commission also reports that, between 2021 and the end of 2025, 21 Member States had either adopted or were preparing national or regional strategies for the social economy, while 12 had adopted or reformed social economy laws and two were in the process of doing so (European Commission, 2026a). These figures show substantial policy activity, but they do not by themselves indicate that implementation capacity or economic integration is equally developed across Member States.

For the remainder of the Action Plan period, the Commission places particular emphasis on implementation quality, coordination across levels of government, access to finance and markets, and better data and monitoring. These priorities are relevant to the framework used in this paper because they move the assessment beyond the formal existence of legislation or a strategy and towards the institutional conditions needed for implementation (European Commission, 2026a; European Commission, 2026b).

2.3 Prior comparative typologies

Previous comparative research has produced several typologies of national social economy or social enterprise ecosystems, each built on a different set of criteria. Chaves and Monzón (2017), in the CIRIEC study commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee, classified Member States along a continuum of institutional development, using categories such as "highly developed", "moderately developed" and "developing" ecosystems, based primarily on legal recognition and the weight of the sector in national employment. Borzaga et al. (2020), in the European Commission's comparative synthesis report "Social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe", mapped 35 European countries individually, documenting considerable variation in legal forms, public support measures and access to finance, but stopped short of proposing a compact typology. Working from a different methodological angle, Hazenberg et al. (2016), drawing on 258 stakeholder interviews across ten European countries, proposed a four-type typology of social enterprise ecosystems (Statist-macro, Statist-micro, Private-macro and Private-micro), organised along two axes capturing the degree of state involvement and the scale of stakeholder networks.

This paper builds on this literature in two respects. First, it separates institutional development into eight dimensions instead of treating it as a single continuum. Second, it uses the most recent comparable official evidence available for the legal and strategic dimensions, especially the 2025 OECD/European Union report and the Commission's 2026 mid-term review. The aim is not to produce a definitive league table of Member States, but to identify recurring institutional profiles and to show where formal policy convergence coexists with different levels of implementation and supporting infrastructure.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data sources

The analysis draws on four categories of sources. First, European Union documents: the 2021 Action Plan for the Social Economy, the 2023 Council Recommendation, the 2026 mid-term review (COM(2026) 138 final) and its accompanying Staff Working Document (SWD(2026) 94 final). Second, the joint OECD/European Union report Social Economy in Europe: Contributing to Competitiveness and Prosperity, published in December 2025, including its country notes and comparative table on national institutional arrangements. Third, the OECD 2024 LEED paper on social and solidarity economy data. Fourth, national-level evidence, including Romania's Law No. 219/2015 and the author's published analysis of POCU 2014–2020 funding in the North-West and North-East development regions (Morișcă, 2026).

Where sources use different definitions or reference years, the paper does not merge the figures into a single harmonised indicator. Instead, differences in scope are retained and stated explicitly. This is particularly important for entity counts, employment shares and the distinction between a general social economy framework and legislation limited to social enterprises or work-integration social enterprises.

3.2 The eight-dimension analytical framework

Building on these sources, the paper applies a qualitative content analysis of strategic and legislative documents across the 27 Member States, organised around eight comparison dimensions grouped into three analytical axes.

The first axis, legal-strategic, comprises: (1) legal recognition of the social economy, understood as the existence of a dedicated legal act defining the sector or its constituent forms; and (2) the existence of an active national strategy, understood as a government-adopted, time-bound policy document setting objectives and monitoring mechanisms for the sector.

The second axis, intermediary infrastructure, comprises: (3) institutional architecture, i.e., the ministries or agencies formally responsible for social economy policy; (4) support services, i.e., the existence of dedicated incubators, umbrella networks or advisory structures; and (5) statistical capacity, i.e., the existence of a dedicated register or satellite account capable of producing comparable data on the sector.

The third axis, economic integration, comprises: (6) regional and local integration, i.e., the extent to which sub-national authorities are formally involved in social economy governance; (7) access to finance, i.e., the existence of dedicated financial instruments beyond general EU structural funds; and (8) socially responsible public procurement, i.e., the existence of national mechanisms encouraging or requiring public buyers to favour social economy providers.

The eight dimensions are used as a structured comparative lens rather than as a mechanically weighted index. Comparable evidence is strongest for dimensions 1 to 3 (legal recognition, strategy status and institutional responsibility), which are documented across all Member States in the 2025 OECD/European Union report and the 2026 Commission review. Evidence for dimensions 4 to 8 remains less uniform. For that reason, the five profiles presented in Section 4.2 are anchored primarily in the first three dimensions, with the remaining dimensions used to interpret and qualify the classification. This choice avoids assigning numerical scores where the underlying evidence is not sufficiently comparable.

3.3 Methodological validation

To reduce the risk of misclassification, the legal-recognition column in Table 2 follows the common categories used in the 2025 OECD/European Union comparative table, while strategy status follows the Commission's Staff Working Document as of 31 January 2026. National examples are used only where they are consistent with these common sources. Where a Member State has a sector-specific framework rather than a comprehensive social economy law, this distinction is retained. Belgium is treated separately because competence for social economy strategy lies mainly at regional level. This approach is deliberately conservative and gives priority to comparable official classifications over broader interpretations found in individual country sources.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The social economy at EU-27 level: scale and implementation

According to the Commission's 2026 mid-term review, the social economy across the EU comprises more than 4.3 million entities and provides at least 11.5 million jobs, representing around 6.3% of total EU employment (European Commission, 2026a). By the end of 2025, 21 Member States had either adopted or were preparing national or regional strategies, while 12 had adopted or reformed social economy laws and two were in the process of doing so. The more detailed Staff Working Document shows that, as of 31 January 2026, ten Member States

had a strategy, policy or action plan in place and ten were preparing one; Belgium is reported by region because responsibility lies at regional level (European Commission, 2026b).

These aggregate indicators should be interpreted with care. The Commission and OECD both underline that national data differ in scope and methodology, and that institutional recognition does not necessarily correspond to the same economic weight or implementation capacity. The relevant comparison is therefore not simply between countries that 'have' or 'do not have' a law or strategy, but between different combinations of legal recognition, policy coordination, institutional responsibility and support mechanisms.

4.2 A typology of five ecosystem models

Using the eight dimensions as a comparative lens, five recurring institutional profiles can be distinguished. These should be read as heuristic profiles, not as an ordinal ranking from 'best' to 'worst'. Table 1 summarises the profiles using the two most comparable elements across all Member States: the scope of legal recognition and the status of a national strategy, policy or action plan. Belgium is included as a regionalised case because the Commission reports strategy status separately for its regions.

Table 1. A typology of five social economy ecosystem models in the EU-27

Institutional profile	Legal recognition	Strategy / policy status (31 Jan. 2026)	Illustrative Member States
Comprehensive legal framework + policy in place	Comprehensive national recognition	In place	Greece, Poland, Slovakia, Spain
Comprehensive legal framework + policy in preparation	Comprehensive national recognition	In preparation	Bulgaria, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania
Policy-led without comprehensive social economy law	No comprehensive national law; broader or sector-specific recognition	In place	Czechia, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Finland, Slovenia
Emerging formalisation	No comprehensive social economy law; sector-specific recognition may exist	In preparation	Croatia, Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta
Fragmented, regional or limited national formalisation	No comprehensive national framework, or predominantly regional arrangements	No national policy reported / regionalised case	Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Netherlands, Sweden

Source: author's own elaboration based on OECD/European Union (2025) and European Commission (2026b).

The first profile combines a comprehensive national legal framework with a strategy, policy or action plan already in place. Greece, Poland, Slovakia and Spain are clear examples in the two common datasets used here. These countries differ in the age and design of their legislation, so the category does not imply identical institutional performance; it indicates that the core legal and strategic elements are simultaneously present.

The second profile includes Member States with comprehensive legal recognition but a strategy or policy still under preparation at the Commission's January 2026 reference date. Bulgaria, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal and Romania fall into this group. This profile shows that a developed legal framework and an active national strategy do not necessarily emerge at the same time.

A third profile is policy-led: a strategy, policy or action plan is in place even though the country does not have a comprehensive national social economy law. Czechia, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Finland and Slovenia illustrate this pattern. In these cases, policy development may rely on broader frameworks, sector-specific legislation or social-enterprise definitions rather than on a single social economy law.

A fourth profile covers countries where strategy development is under way but legal recognition remains sector-specific or incomplete. Croatia, Cyprus, Lithuania and Malta fit this pattern in the common sources. Their inclusion underlines that strategic formalisation can precede the adoption of a comprehensive legal framework.

The fifth profile groups Member States without a comprehensive national social economy law and with no national strategy, policy or action plan reported as either in place or in preparation in the Commission's January 2026 overview: Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden. Belgium is a special regionalised case: the 2025 OECD/European Union report records legal recognition at regional level, while the Commission reports a strategy in place in Flanders and one in preparation in Wallonia. This heterogeneity is precisely why the typology is used as a descriptive device rather than as a single maturity score.

Table 2 presents the underlying legal and strategic information for all 27 Member States. The legal-recognition categories reproduce the distinction made by OECD/European Union (2025) between comprehensive social economy recognition, social-enterprise-specific recognition, regional recognition and no comprehensive law. Strategy status follows European Commission (2026b) as of 31 January 2026.

Table 2. Legal recognition and national strategy status across the EU-27

Member State	**Legal recognition (OECD/EU 2025)**	**Strategy / policy / action plan status (31 Jan. 2026)**
Austria	No comprehensive law	Not reported as in place or in preparation
Belgium	Regional recognition only	Regional: Flanders in place; Wallonia in preparation
Bulgaria	Yes	In preparation
Croatia	No comprehensive law; social-enterprise definition only	In preparation
Cyprus	Social-enterprise-specific law	In preparation
Czechia	No comprehensive social economy law	In place
Denmark	Social-enterprise-specific recognition	Not reported as in place or in preparation
Estonia	No	Not reported as in place or in preparation
Finland	No current law; social-enterprise definition only	In place
France	Yes	In preparation
Germany	No comprehensive law; social-enterprise definition only	In place
Greece	Yes	In place
Hungary	No	Not reported as in place or in preparation
Ireland	No comprehensive law; social-enterprise definition only	In place
Italy	Yes	In preparation
Latvia	Social-enterprise-specific law	In place

Member State	Legal recognition (OECD/EU 2025)	Strategy / policy / action plan status (31 Jan. 2026)
Lithuania	No	In preparation
Luxembourg	Yes	In preparation
Malta	Social-enterprise-specific law	In preparation
Netherlands	No comprehensive law; social-enterprise definition only	Not reported as in place or in preparation
Poland	Yes	In place
Portugal	Yes	In preparation
Romania	Yes	In preparation
Slovakia	Yes	In place
Slovenia	Social entrepreneurship law	In place
Spain	Yes	In place
Sweden	No law; recognised concept	Not reported as in place or in preparation

Source: author's own elaboration based on OECD/European Union (2025), Table 3.1, and European Commission (2026b), Section 3 (status as of 31 January 2026).

Table 2 shows why the headline figure of 21 Member States with a strategy adopted or in preparation should not be interpreted as evidence of a single institutional model. Ten Member States had a strategy, policy or action plan in place, while ten had one in preparation. Six Member States were not listed in either category, and Belgium followed a regional path. The table also shows that legal recognition and strategic development do not move in a fixed sequence: Germany and Czechia had policy frameworks in place without a comprehensive social economy law, whereas France, Italy, Portugal and Romania had comprehensive legal recognition while a strategy was still being prepared. The observed convergence is therefore real at the level of policy attention, but remains heterogeneous in institutional form.

4.3 Romania's position: an early law without an active strategy

Romania occupies a distinctive position in this comparison. Law No. 219/2015 established a comprehensive national legal framework for the social economy, defining the social economy, social enterprises and work-integration social enterprises and creating the Single Register of Social Enterprises (RUEIS). However, at the Commission’s reference date of 31 January 2026, Romania's national social economy strategy was still in preparation. The Staff Working Document notes that the strategy-development project has been under implementation since April 2025 and that a proposal was expected in 2026, followed by public consultation and interministerial approval (European Commission, 2026b). Romania therefore illustrates a clear sequencing gap between legal recognition and strategic consolidation.

The regional dimension can be examined using a previously published study of POCU 2014-2020, Specific Objective 4.16. Using the official 'Contracted Projects' dataset, the North-West region recorded 71 projects with a total value of approximately 747 million lei, while the North-East recorded 55 projects with approximately 526 million lei (Morișcă, 2026). The difference was driven mainly by the number of projects rather than by project size: the average value per project differed by about 10.2%. These results provide a verified sub-national comparison without assuming that current 2021-2027 allocations have already produced final outcomes.

The same study also identified a different beneficiary structure across the two regions. NGOs accounted for 43.7% of beneficiaries in the North-West, whereas public institutions represented 58.2% in the North-East (Morișcă, 2026). This finding is consistent with differences in the organisational composition of the two regional ecosystems, but it should not be treated as direct

proof that one region is institutionally 'mature' and the other is not. It is more appropriately interpreted as evidence of distinct regional capacities and beneficiary structures.

Taken together, the POCU evidence suggests that national-level comparisons can conceal relevant territorial differences within Member States. For Romania, the North-West/North-East contrast is useful not because it mechanically replicates the EU-level typology, but because it shows that access to social-economy funding and the profile of beneficiaries vary substantially across regions. This supports the inclusion of regional and local integration as a separate dimension in the analytical framework.

Table 3. North-West and North-East development regions: POCU 2014–2020 social economy funding comparison

Indicator	North-West region	North-East region
Number of contracted projects	71	55
Total contracted value	≈ 747 million lei	≈ 526 million lei
Average project value	≈ 10.5 million lei	≈ 9.6 million lei
Dominant beneficiary pattern	NGOs: 43.7% of beneficiaries	Public institutions: 58.2% of beneficiaries
Interpretation	Higher project volume and total contracted value	Lower project volume; different beneficiary structure

Source: author's own elaboration based on Morișcă (2026), using the official data.gov.ro 'Contracted Projects' dataset for POCU 2014–2020, Specific Objective 4.16.

The regional evidence therefore complements, rather than reproduces, the EU-level typology. The North-West contracted more projects and a higher total value, while the difference in average project size was comparatively modest. Differences in beneficiary structures also suggest that regional institutional configurations matter for how funding is accessed and implemented. These findings justify further sub-national research, but they do not support a deterministic claim that funding necessarily reinforces existing strengths in every case.

4.4 Convergence of form, not of substance

The first explanation considered in this paper concerns the distinction between formal convergence and substantive institutional development. Since 2021, Member States have faced a stronger common EU policy framework through the Action Plan and, from 2023, the Council Recommendation. The Commission's review states that the Action Plan has served as a central reference point for national reforms and that the Recommendation has helped legitimise and accelerate them (European Commission, 2026a; European Commission, 2026b). On this basis, the spread of strategies and legal reforms can reasonably be interpreted as policy convergence. It is more difficult, however, to attribute this convergence primarily to EU funding conditions. The evidence available here supports the more cautious conclusion that EU-level policy coordination and funding opportunities have reinforced incentives for formal alignment, while the depth of implementation still varies across countries.

Bulgaria illustrates why formal recognition should not be used as a proxy for economic scale. The country has a national definition and a law on the social and solidarity economy, but the 2025 OECD/European Union country note reports 8,609 social economy entities, including seven entities counted as social enterprises in the underlying dataset, 33,812 people employed, and social and solidarity economy value added equivalent to 0.3% of gross value added. The OECD explicitly cautions that these figures draw on different sources and reference years. The Bulgarian case therefore supports a narrower point: legal recognition can coexist with limited

statistical visibility and a relatively small measured economic footprint, but the figures should not be compared with an unsupported EU-wide GVA average (OECD/European Union, 2025).

4.5 The double institutional transition hypothesis

A second explanation is proposed specifically for Romania and, more cautiously, for other post-communist Member States: the 'double institutional transition'. The concept refers to two overlapping processes. The first was the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy after 1989, which transformed cooperative structures and the wider relationship between the state and civil society. The second is Europeanisation associated with EU accession and subsequent policy coordination, including the post-2021 social economy agenda. In Romania, these processes may help explain why legal recognition emerged before a fully consolidated strategic framework. This is an interpretive hypothesis, not a causal finding, and it requires testing against a broader set of national cases.

4.6 A comparison with other post-communist Member States

Comparison with other post-communist Member States shows why the hypothesis should remain qualified. Poland and Slovakia combine comprehensive legal recognition with a strategy or policy in place, despite adopting their current social economy laws later than Romania. Czechia, also a post-communist Member State, has a policy framework in place without a comprehensive social economy law, while Croatia had a strategy in preparation at the Commission’s January 2026 reference date. Bulgaria combines comprehensive legal recognition with a strategy still in preparation. These different trajectories show that a shared historical transition does not lead to a single institutional outcome.

The comparison instead points to the importance of domestic institutional capacity, policy sequencing, stakeholder organisation and the way EU-level initiatives are translated into national arrangements. The proposed double institutional transition may provide useful historical context for Romania, but it cannot by itself explain the differences between Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Czechia, Croatia and Bulgaria. Further comparative work would be needed to identify which domestic factors account for these divergent paths.

4.7 Summary of findings

The results support three main observations. First, social economy policy has clearly gained institutional visibility across the EU since 2021, but legal recognition and strategy status still occur in different combinations. Second, the five profiles show that there is no simple East-West divide: some post-communist Member States have strategies in place, while several older Member States continue to rely on fragmented, sector-specific or non-legislative arrangements. Third, Romania combines comprehensive legal recognition with a strategy still under preparation, while the verified POCU 2014–2020 comparison shows substantial differences between its North-West and North-East regions. These findings support the paper's central distinction between convergence in formal policy attention and continuing variation in institutional depth.

5. LIMITATIONS

Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, the absence of a fully harmonised statistical category for the social economy means that cross-country figures on entities, employment and value added are not always based on identical definitions or reference years. The OECD/European Union (2025) country notes explicitly warn that differences in scope, methodology and year can produce differences between national headline indicators. For this reason, the paper avoids constructing a single quantitative ranking from these data.

Second, information is not equally comparable across all eight dimensions. Legal recognition, strategy status and institutional responsibility can be mapped consistently across the 27 Member States using common official sources, but information on support services, statistical capacity, regional integration, dedicated finance and socially responsible public procurement is more uneven. The five profiles are therefore anchored in the better-documented dimensions, while the remaining dimensions are used for interpretation rather than formal scoring.

Third, the Romanian regional comparison refers to POCU 2014–2020 and cannot be used to infer final effects for the ongoing 2021-2027 programming period. The regional evidence is included to demonstrate sub-national variation in access to social-economy funding and beneficiary structure, not to claim that the same pattern necessarily persists unchanged under ESF+.

A related limitation concerns statistical harmonisation. The Commission's 2026 review identifies more robust and comparable data as a continuing priority, and the 2025 OECD/European Union report likewise shows that national systems remain heterogeneous. Until a more consistent EU-wide statistical infrastructure exists, comparative studies will continue to depend on triangulation between European, OECD and national sources rather than on a single uniform dataset.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has used an eight-dimension, three-axis framework to compare social economy ecosystems across the EU-27 and has proposed five heuristic institutional profiles. The updated evidence shows significant convergence in policy attention: by the end of 2025, 21 Member States had adopted or were preparing national or regional strategies, while 12 had adopted or reformed social economy laws and two were in the process of doing so. At the same time, the more detailed January 2026 overview shows different combinations of comprehensive law, sector-specific recognition, policy frameworks and regional arrangements. The evidence therefore supports the conclusion that formal convergence is growing, but institutional development remains uneven.

Romania illustrates this distinction particularly clearly. It has had a comprehensive social economy law since 2015, yet its national strategy was still under preparation at the beginning of 2026. The Romanian regional evidence adds another layer to the analysis: under POCU 2014–2020, the North-West region had 71 projects contracted, worth approximately 747 million lei, compared with 55 projects worth approximately 526 million lei in the North-East, while the beneficiary structures also differed. These findings do not establish a general causal mechanism, but they show why national averages should be complemented by territorial analysis.

From a policy perspective, monitoring the Action Plan should therefore continue to move beyond the existence of laws and strategies towards indicators of implementation, coordination, data quality, access to finance and territorial reach. The Commission's own emphasis on stronger multi-level governance and more robust data is consistent with this need. Future research could apply the same framework to a smaller number of Member States using deeper case-study evidence, which would allow the relationships between formal recognition, institutional capacity and economic outcomes to be tested more systematically.

For Romania, three implications follow. First, the national strategy currently under preparation should incorporate a clear regional dimension, because the POCU evidence demonstrates that funding patterns and beneficiary structures differ between development regions. Second, the statistical capacity of RUEIS could be strengthened through more systematic links with employment and fiscal data, which would improve the measurement of active social enterprises and their economic contribution. Third, the fact that Romania still lacked an adopted national

strategy eleven years after Law No. 219/2015 points to a gap in implementation and sequencing. The proposed 'double institutional transition' may help interpret this gap historically, but it should be treated as a hypothesis requiring further comparative testing rather than as an exculpatory explanation.

DECLARATION ON THE USE OF AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used artificial intelligence tools for language editing and improving clarity and readability. All factual information, sources, interpretations and conclusions were independently reviewed and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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