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Social Enterprises in Romania and the European Union: Structural Constraints, Digitalization and the Role of Emerging Technologies

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Abstract

Digital transformation and the rapid development of emerging technologies increasingly influence social enterprises, requiring them to adapt to a changing economic and social environment. Digitalization has become an important factor for improving organizational efficiency, expanding services, and strengthening social impact. This paper examines the relationship between the development of social enterprises, their structural constraints, and digital transformation at the European Union and Romanian levels. Rather than estimating a causal technological impact, the study assesses how digital tools and emerging technologies may support organizational efficiency and social impact under different institutional, financial, and human-capital conditions. The research adopts an exploratory design based on secondary data analysis. The comparative analysis examines indicators related to digitalization, employment, and the development of social enterprises. The findings show that Romanian social enterprises contribute to the professional integration of vulnerable groups and local community development, but operate in a smaller, less consolidated ecosystem than the European social economy as a whole. Their main constraints concern financial stability, institutional continuity, access to specialized human resources, and market scaling. Digitalization remains an enabling factor rather than a primary development determinant.

Keywords: Social Enterprises, Digital Transformation, Structural Constraints, Emerging Technologies, Social Economy

Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of entrepreneurs have focused their attention on social enterprises. According to previous research from the specialized literature, social entrepreneurs mainly aim to promote social change and improve sustainability at the local

level. In the academic literature, social enterprises are defined as hybrid organizations that combine entrepreneurial elements with social objectives (Ghosh et al., 2024). Their role is to identify and address social and environmental problems through market mechanisms (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). Their position at the intersection between economic logic and community interest makes the performance of social enterprises dependent both on the available financial resources and on their organizational capacity to adapt to a continuously changing environment (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Doherty et al., 2014; Battilana & Lee, 2014). A research topic that emerged in the specialty literature is social enterprises' sustainability. It is determined by their capability of harmonizing social impact and economic viability. In addition, organizational resilience and adaptation to technological changes are becoming increasingly relevant components of this process (Ghosh et al., 2024; Halsall et al., 2022; Nakpodia et al., 2024). Wu et al. (2020) stated that social enterprises have the capacity to combine innovative methods with the efficient use of resources, as well as with the identification and satisfaction of social needs, all aimed at creating value. Existing research has highlighted the contribution of social enterprises to innovation at the societal level (Hillman et al., 2018). These organizations support the development of innovative social practices, organizational models, and services that respond to social challenges (Lashitew & Rosca, 2025).

The expansion of the innovative and adaptive dimensions of social enterprises has supported the consolidation of social entrepreneurship as a distinct model of economic intervention oriented toward the sustainable resolution of societal problems. Climate change in recent years, the rapid development of technologies, and the fast transformations occurring in various markets have contributed over time to the development of the concept of *social entrepreneurship* (Castillo-Villar et al., 2025). According to the specialized literature, due to its hybrid nature, social entrepreneurship has the ability to combine social objectives with financial sustainability through innovative business models. Existing studies show that social entrepreneurship should not be understood only as an alternative mechanism for delivering social services. It also promotes institutional innovation and developing business models focused on social impact (Mair & Martí, 2006; Phillips et al., 2015; Saebi et al., 2019). Social entrepreneurs aim to create positive changes that improve the quality of life in communities (Rangsungnoen et al., 2024). The growth of social entrepreneurship has accelerated since 2016 because of the Sustainable Development Goals and the rapid progress of digital technologies (Raman et al., 2025; Pérez-Barea, 2025). Within this framework, social enterprises are increasingly analysed as organizational structures capable of connecting social inclusion, economic resilience, and institutional innovation (Pérez-Barea, 2025; Sergi et al., 2025; Raman et al., 2025; Doherty et al., 2014; Mursalzade, 2024). Both across Europe and internationally, social economy has become increasingly recognized as a strategic sector for achieving objectives such as decent work, reducing inequalities, responsible consumption, and the development of resilient communities. Consequently, it is integrated into a broader vision of an economy centered on people and sustainability (European Parliament, 2023; OECD, 2022; Social Economy Europe, 2024; United Nations, 2023). Recent studies assess social enterprises by their ability to integrate economic, social, and environmental objectives. Recent literature separately discusses both the evolution of social enterprises and the impact of digitalization on organizations. However, studies that directly investigate the relationship between emerging technologies and the performance of social enterprises remain limited. This gap is particularly evident when comparing Western and Central-Eastern European

ecosystems (Mursalzade, 2024; Nakpodia et al., 2024). In addition, the new European orientations regarding Industry 5.0 place digitalization within a broader framework focused simultaneously on resilience, sustainability, and the human factor. The digitalization of social enterprises is consistent both for the economic as well as for the social pillar (European Commission, 2021).

Despite the growing importance of digitalization, social enterprises continue to face financial, institutional and organizational challenges. These difficulties are particularly relevant in Romania, where the social economy sector is less developed than in many other European countries. Although digital technologies can support organizational activities, their role in addressing these challenges remains insufficiently understood. In particular, it is unclear how digitalization interacts with the structural constraints affecting Romanian social enterprises. This highlights the need to examine these challenges and the potential contribution of digital technologies in the Romanian and European contexts.

The present paper analyses the development of social enterprises in Romania and the European Union, with particular attention to structural constraints and to the enabling role of digitalization. The analysis does not seek to estimate a causal impact of disruptive technologies; instead, it examines whether and how digital tools can support operational efficiency, communication, impact measurement and organizational resilience, while recognizing that stable financing, legal and institutional support, and specialized human resources remain central conditions for the social mission.

Literature Review

The development of Industry 4.0 and later Industry 5.0 has led social enterprises to focus their attention on new emerging technologies that can be used to improve their activities (Sergi et al., 2025). Whether they are used for optimizing internal processes or improving communication activities, these technologies bring several benefits to organizations (Nakpodia et al., 2024). According to the European Commission, Industry 5.0 promotes a development model based on sustainability, resilience, and orientation toward human needs, aspects that are directly aligned with the mission of social enterprises (European Commission, 2021). In this context, digitalization represents not only a process of technological modernization, but also a mechanism for strengthening organizational capacity and social impact. Among the most significant technological advantages is the supply of fast and efficient cooperation between social enterprises and beneficiaries. In this way, clients or beneficiaries can actively participate in the value co-creation process. However, digital interaction also raises questions related to trust and privacy. These aspects are particularly relevant when organizations communicate with beneficiaries through social media and other digital channels, as highlighted in earlier research on trust and privacy in social media environments (Radu et al., 2016).

In addition, these technologies contribute to improving employee performance, reducing operational costs, and supporting sustainable development (Mursalzade, 2024). Digitalization and the integration of modern technologies allow social enterprises to develop services that are better adapted to community needs and to expand their intervention capacity, contributing not only to the efficiency of organizational activities, but also to strengthening the social impact generated by these organizations (Mursalzade, 2024). From

the perspective of the use of emerging technologies within social enterprises, these technologies are implemented either to improve internal activities or to support communication and promotion processes. Digital tools can also improve interactions with users and beneficiaries. Online marketing research tools can also help organizations better understand user needs and preferences (Stoica, 2011). Research on marketing automation highlights the potential of digital platforms to support more personalized communication and customer experience throughout the buying journey (Dinu et al., 2020). Their use can contribute to maintaining competitiveness in an increasingly dynamic market, contributing to efficient resource management, cost efficiency, and the automation of organizational processes (Ali & Maelah, 2025). Disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence (Qiu et al., 2026), blockchain (Devine et al., 2021), 3D printing (Ford & Despeisse, 2016), and Internet of Things (IoT) technology (Kanchana, 2024) may support specific activities within social enterprises, contributing to community development and to improving the social impact generated by these organizations (Begum et al., 2025). The adoption of emerging technologies also has implications for workforce organization and labour-market adaptation. Research addressing the integration of industrial robots in Romanian enterprises and the labour market offers a complementary perspective on the organizational and employment-related dimensions of technological transformation (Stoica (Răpan) et al., 2022). These technologies play an important role in data gathering and analysis and in the automation of repetitive activities. In addition, they facilitate the development of innovative products and services and the real-time monitoring of processes relevant to organizational activity.

Previous studies from the specialized literature have shown that, at present, artificial intelligence is used with a certain degree of caution within social enterprises. In most cases, it is implemented to improve communication processes, both internally and externally (Steiner et al., 2025). From the perspective of applicability, artificial intelligence is used for process automation, chatbot development, or digital content generation. Recent studies show that the use of artificial intelligence can contribute to increasing operational efficiency and improving the capacity of social enterprises to respond to emerging social needs (Steiner et al., 2025; Qiu et al., 2026). Within social enterprises, disruptive technologies integrated into digital platforms allow managers to interact with a large number of people remotely and to rapidly analyse large volumes of data (Abad-Itoiz et al., 2025). In the same context, Big Data technology brings numerous benefits to social enterprises, contributing to the improvement of management and decision-making processes. Through this technology, specialists within these organizations can make predictions, identify market trends, and analyse community needs. The information obtained through data analysis allows social enterprises to provide services better adapted to the real needs of communities (Lyu, 2025). The evaluation of digital services should also consider users' experiences and satisfaction. Research examining medical students' satisfaction with e-learning platforms illustrates the relevance of user-centred assessment when evaluating digital service delivery in educational contexts (Petrescu et al., 2025). The main role of Big Data technology is to analyse large volumes of data and transform them into relevant information for analytical and decision-making processes. In this way, the technology supports entrepreneurs in optimizing organizational activities. Besides artificial intelligence, additive manufacturing can support the activity of social enterprises through the development of innovative products and services, the reduction of resource consumption, and the promotion of sustainability. Studies show that additive manufacturing technologies

can play an important role in reducing environmental impact and supporting sustainable development (Ford & Despeisse, 2016).

Another technology that may support specific activities within social enterprises is the Internet of Things (IoT). It conducts real-time collection and analysis on large data amounts via an integrated system of devices connected to each other with the aid of Internet. The result of processed data is beneficial for the resource management and the decision-making process optimization. The aspects presented above highlight the fact that new emerging technologies, which have developed significantly in recent years, may support social enterprises in specific areas of their activities, helping them solve social and environmental problems more rapidly. Their contribution may include process improvement, organizational optimization, and a better understanding of societal needs. Thus, the integration of emerging technologies within social enterprises may generate benefits when these technologies respond to specific organizational or social needs. Starting from these considerations, the paper investigates how digital transformation interacts with the economic sustainability and social mission of social enterprises through a comparative reading of indicators for Romania and the European Union. Emerging technologies are treated as enabling instruments whose relevance depends on organizational needs, resources and capabilities, rather than as a necessary defining characteristic of social enterprises.

Methodology and Data

The paper adopts an exploratory research approach to analyse the development of social enterprises, their structural constraints, and the role of digitalization and emerging technologies. This research approach was selected because recent studies highlight the close relationship between social enterprises and emerging digital technologies. Recent studies show that digital transformation processes within social enterprises are heterogeneous, dependent on the institutional context, and difficult to analyse through a single standardized quantitative method, which makes an exploratory approach based on the triangulation of secondary data appropriate (Ghosh et al., 2024; Nakpodia et al., 2024; Sergi et al., 2025; Chalmers & Balan-Vnuk, 2013). In addition, substantial differences in the digitalization level, innovation capability and social development across individual states required a comparative analysis based on secondary data collected from various statistical and institutional sources. For the purpose of this research, secondary data were collected from official statistical sources and relevant databases at both European and national levels. The main sources used include Eurostat, the European Commission, Social Economy Europe reports, the National Institute of Statistics of Romania (INSSE), the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity (MoL) and additional reports on digitalization and social economy. The use of these sources allowed the development of an updated and comparable set of information necessary for supporting the analysis. In addition to aggregated statistical data, the research also included illustrative organizational examples selected from public activity reports and relevant institutional documents, with the purpose of descriptively validating the trends identified at the macro level. This triangulation approach allows the simultaneous analysis of sectoral scaling processes and deep innovation mechanisms at the organizational level (Moore et al., 2015). This category included both national administrative reports provided by the National Agency for Employment (ANOFM, 2025) and examples of good practices from representative Romanian social economy organizations, such as the *Alături de Voi* Romania Foundation (ADV Romania, 2025) and Ateliere Fără Frontiere (AFF, 2024a, 2024b).

The integration of macro-statistical data and illustrative organizational examples allows the analysis of both sectoral scaling processes and institutional adaptation mechanisms (Moore et al., 2015). Social enterprises' performance and formalization level are strongly influenced by institutional characteristics, public policies, and support mechanisms existing within each national ecosystem (Kerlin, 2017). From an operational perspective, the analysis focused on the 2019–2025 period. This interval is relevant because it captures both the consolidation of the European social economy framework and the propelling of digitalization. Within the study, social enterprises were viewed from a twofold perspective: as a European social economy integrated entity and as a formally certified entity within the Romanian administrative system. This dual perspective allowed the identification of differences between the European macro-ecosystem level and the national administrative-sectoral level (European Commission, 2019; European Commission, 2024; European Commission, 2025). The research methodology was structured into two main stages. The selection of indicators used in the analysis aimed to create an integrated perspective on sector performance. Thus, the analysis included indicators regarding the size and stability of the social economy ecosystem (number of active entities, employment, valid certifications, withdrawals), indicators regarding social impact (share of vulnerable groups, beneficiaries of services, support activities), as well as indicators regarding digital maturity and the adoption of emerging technologies (Digital Intensity Index, cloud services use, artificial intelligence use, and operational digitalization practices). This structure allows analysis of the relationship between organizational development, technological preparedness, and social innovation capacity (Mursalzade, 2024; Eurostat, 2025a; Eurostat, 2025c; Eurostat, 2026). The selection of these indicators responds to recent recommendations from the literature on digital social enterprises, which highlights the need to simultaneously evaluate digital infrastructure, technology use, and the capacity to transform social value creation models (Mursalzade, 2024; Steiner et al., 2025).

In the first stage, a descriptive analysis regarding the social enterprises' development was conducted. It comprised a series of indicators as the number of active enterprises, generated jobs and the number of services' beneficiaries. The evolution of the social economy trends and its importance in the current context were analysed. In the second stage, the research focused on the degree of digitalization and the use of emerging technologies within social enterprises. In this regard, relevant indicators concerning organizational digitalization, the use of information technologies, access to digital infrastructure, digital skills, the use of artificial intelligence, Big Data tools, digital platforms, and other innovative technological solutions were analysed. At the same time, barriers and challenges associated with the adoption of these technologies were also considered, such as high implementation costs, the lack of digital skills, and limited access to financial resources. Although the research uses exclusively secondary data and does not allow the formulation of strict causal relationships, the main advantage of this approach is the possibility of aggregating heterogeneous statistical, administrative, and institutional sources within a unitary comparative framework. In addition, the triangulation of information from Eurostat, the European Commission, ANOFM, and organizational reports contributes to increasing interpretative consistency and to developing a more nuanced image regarding the current stage of social enterprises and their level of digitalization. Data analysis was conducted through descriptive statistical methods, namely the comparison of data series, trend analysis, and the identification of differences between Romania and the European Union average. The interpretation of

quantitative results was supported, where relevant, by qualitative information extracted from activity documents and annual reports of representative social enterprises, in order to illustrate how statistical trends are reflected in organizational practice. The obtained results were interpreted from the perspective of the relationship between digital adoption, organizational performance, operational efficiency, and the capacity of social enterprises to respond to community needs. Because the study relies on secondary and non-harmonized data, these relationships are interpreted descriptively and no causal technological impact is claimed. Qualitative information from annual reports and activity documents was used to illustrate how the identified trends appear in organizational practice, digitalization strategies, and mechanisms for generating social impact (ADV Romania, 2025; Ateliere Fără Frontiere, 2024a, 2024b). Through this methodological approach, the paper aims to provide a clear image of the current stage of development of social enterprises and of the perspectives regarding the integration of emerging technologies, highlighting both the opportunities and the challenges associated with the digital transformation of this sector.

Research Results

The comparative analysis between Romania and the European Union allows the formulation of two major conclusions, relevant both from an institutional and a digital perspective. The first conclusion is that Romania has an existing and active social economy sector, but one that is much smaller and more fragmented than the European social economy viewed as a whole. Recent European data confirm that this fragmentation is characteristic of social ecosystems that are still in the consolidation stage, where funding mechanisms, support networks, and institutional representation capacity remain insufficiently developed (European Parliament, 2023; Social Economy Europe, 2024). This orientation confirms that contemporary social enterprises are no longer analysed exclusively through the perspective of social inclusion, but also as innovation niches capable of contributing to the transition toward circular economic models with reduced environmental impact (Hillman et al., 2018). This difference is consistent with recent literature, which shows that social entrepreneurship ecosystems in Central and Eastern Europe tend to be less institutionally and financially consolidated than mature Western European models (Pérez-Barea, 2025; Sergi et al., 2025). In addition, the literature highlights that in such emerging contexts, the maturation process of social enterprises depends largely on the existence of institutional intermediaries, public support policies, and stable mechanisms of economic legitimacy, elements that remain only partially developed in many transition ecosystems (Lashitew & Rosca, 2025).

The second conclusion is that, from a digital perspective, the gap between Romania and the European Union average remains substantial, especially regarding enterprise digitalization and the adoption of emerging technologies. This comparison requires caution, since European figures refer to the broader social economy, while Romania records certified social enterprises separately. Therefore, the indicators used for the Romania–EU comparison are relevant, but not perfectly symmetrical (European Commission, 2019; European Commission, 2025; ANOFM, 2025). At the level of the European Union, the share in employment varies between countries, with a range between approx. 0.6% and 9.9%. These values show that the social economy can no longer be regarded as a marginal sector, but rather as a relevant economic segment with an important role in employment, inclusion, territorial cohesion, and the provision of services of general interest (European Commission, 2025). According to the European Commission country report on the social economy

ecosystem, Romania had approx. 6,000 social economy entities and over 19,000 workers in 2019 (Table 1). Additionally, according to administrative data from ANOFM, a total of 2,936 legal entities had received social enterprise certificates, of which 1,780 still held valid certificates at the end of 2024 (European Commission, 2019; ANOFM, 2025).

One of the most important findings of the analysis was represented by the friction between "broad ecosystem" and "formal certified core". Aggregated indicators at the European level regarding the social economy are generally used, while in Romania administrative data describe a relatively narrow and unstable legalized sector. Only in 2024, 21 new social enterprise certificates and 5 new work integration social enterprise certificates were issued, while during the same year 672 certificates and 78 social labels were withdrawn. The ANOFM report shows that most withdrawals were caused by voluntary renunciation of status, indicating that the problem of the Romanian sector is not only the creation of new entities, but also their long-term institutional and economic sustainability (ANOFM, 2025).

Table 1
Key Romania–European Union Social Economy and Enterprises Relevant Indicators

Indicator	Romania level	EU level	Methodological observation
Social economy entities or enterprises	6,000 (2019)	2,8 million	broad comparability, ecosystem level
Employment within social economy	19,000 workers (2019)	13,6 million	broad comparability, ecosystem level
Social enterprises with valid certification	1,780 (2024)	n.a.	Romanian administrative indicator
Work integration social enterprises with valid social label	56 (2024)	n.a.	Romanian administrative indicator
Employees in certified social enterprises	2,847 (2024)	n.a.	ANOFM data, without harmonized EU series
Cooperative members in social enterprises	12,865 (2024)	n.a.	specific to the Romanian structure
Employed persons at risk of poverty	10,9% (2024)	8,2% (2024)	macro-level proxy for employment vulnerability
WISEs: persons from vulnerable groups	141 out of 281, monthly average (50.1%)	n.a.	Romanian sectoral indicator
SMEs reaching at least a basic level of digital intensity	27%	73% (2024)	values reported under different methodological frameworks, mainly useful for highlighting the gap
Enterprises using cloud services	24,9% (2025)	52,7% (2025)	enterprises with 10+ employees
Enterprises using AI technologies	5,2% (2025)	20% (2025)	enterprises with 10+ employees

Source: European Commission (2019, 2024, 2025), Eurostat (2025a, 2025b, 2026), ANOFM (2025).

The results illustrate the importance of adding social enterprises in the integration of professionally vulnerable persons and in reducing social exclusion. The concept of "vulnerable employees" can be analysed in two ways. At the macro level, a comparable indicator between Romania and the European Union is the share of employed persons showing the risk of poverty. The EU average for the year 2024 was 8,2%, while Romania registered a percentage of 10,9%, highlighting a higher vulnerability level even in the case of employed persons. In what regards Romanian work integration social enterprises, ANOFM data show that in 2024 there was a monthly average of 281 employees or cooperative members, of whom 141 belonged to vulnerable groups, representing 50,1% of the total (Table 2). Moreover, the share of working time corresponding to vulnerable groups was 52%, showing that this segment, although numerically limited, remains strongly focused on its mission of socio-professional integration (Eurostat, 2025b; ANOFM, 2025). This aspect is also confirmed by the literature, which emphasizes the fact that work integration social enterprises play an important role in transforming employment into an inclusion and social value creation mechanism (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Halsall et al., 2022).

Table 2
Professional Integration and the Social Impact of Work Integration Social Enterprises in Romania Indicators, 2024

Indicator	Value
Average monthly number of employees / cooperative members in WISEs	281
Persons from vulnerable groups	141
Share of vulnerable persons in total	50,1%
Share of working time corresponding to vulnerable groups	52,0%
Number of entities reporting volunteers	101
Total number of volunteers	1.214
Beneficiaries of professional information and counselling	158
Beneficiaries of workplace adaptation and accessibility measures	128
Beneficiaries of vocational training	93
Beneficiaries with access to training	75
Beneficiaries of mediation services	63

Source: ANOFM (2025).

Structural Constraints and Organizational Priorities

The evidence indicates that the main constraints of Romanian social enterprises cannot be reduced to technological gaps. Their hybrid position between market activity and social mission creates a structural vulnerability: they must maintain commercial viability while delivering social value, often with limited financial reserves and fragmented support mechanisms. The large number of withdrawn certifications reported by ANOFM reinforces the importance of institutional continuity and long-term financial sustainability (ANOFM, 2025; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Doherty et al., 2014). These constraints can be grouped into three closely connected categories. Financial and capital constraints include unstable hybrid revenues, limited access to patient or impact-aligned capital, and dependence on grants, sponsorships or project-based funding. Market constraints include difficulties in scaling context-specific social services and in communicating both product quality and social value.

Human-capital and organizational constraints concern the scarcity and retention of profiles that combine business management, social work, community engagement and

impact measurement. For work-integration social enterprises, access to personnel able to work effectively with vulnerable groups, together with legal and administrative counselling, may be more immediately important than investment in advanced technologies. Digital constraints should therefore be interpreted as a secondary but relevant layer. Low digital capacity, weak data systems and the cost of CRM, analytics or automation tools can reduce efficiency and make impact measurement more difficult, but they do not define the social mission itself. This distinction is important for setting investment priorities: basic digital tools can support delivery and reporting, whereas advanced technologies should be adopted selectively when they solve a concrete organizational or beneficiary-related problem.

From the perspective of enterprise digitalization, the differences between Romania and the European Union average are significant. The DESI framework was integrated into the Digital Decade mechanism, and for the business component, a relevant indicator is the Digital Intensity Index. For the year 2024, Eurostat shows that at the European level, a percentage of 73% of SMEs reached at least a basic level of digital intensity. While, for the Romania's case, the European Commission country report highlighted that enterprises' level of digitalization, especially SMEs, remains below the European average, with 27% of SMEs reaching a basic level of digital intensity. Even though these values originate from reporting frameworks that should be compared with caution, they are consistent with a substantial digital gap (European Commission, 2024; Eurostat, 2025a). The same gap can also be observed in the use of emerging technologies. In 2025, 52.7% of enterprises in the European Union used paid cloud services, while in Romania the share was only 24.9%. In the same year, 20.0% of European enterprises used artificial intelligence technologies, while in Romania only 5.2% of enterprises reported such use (Table 3). These differences indicate a significant structural gap regarding digital skills, organizational infrastructure, and investment capacity. Similar findings are also highlighted in recent studies regarding the digitalization of social organizations and SMEs in emerging economies, where the adoption of advanced technologies is influenced by financial resources, digital skills, and managerial maturity (Nakpodia et al., 2024; Mursalzade, 2024). For social enterprises, the implication is direct: they operate in a national environment where the adoption of digital technologies is already reduced at the level of the entire economy, which decreases the probability of rapid absorption within the social sector as well (Eurostat, 2025c, 2026).

The national average also masks territorial heterogeneity. The Digital Decade/DESI framework does not provide a separate urban–rural DESI score for Romanian social enterprises, so a direct city-versus-rural DESI comparison would be methodologically inappropriate. Nevertheless, complementary indicators show why location matters. Romania is among the EU leaders in fixed connectivity, including in rural and sparsely populated areas, while basic digital skills and business technology uptake remain weak at national level (European Commission, 2025, 2026). Eurostat data based on degree of urbanisation likewise show persistent urban–rural differences in digital participation and skills across the EU; for Romania, information and data literacy is lower in rural areas than in towns and suburbs (Eurostat, 2025d). Consequently, social enterprises located in major urban centres such as Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca or Iași may benefit from denser ICT labour markets and innovation networks, but the available evidence does not justify treating these cities as having a distinct DESI score or as uniformly exceeding the EU average.

Table 3
Digitalization Indicators: Romania–European Union

Indicator	Romania	European Union
SMEs reaching at least a basic level of digital intensity	27%	73%
Enterprises using paid cloud services	24,9%	52,7%
Enterprises using AI technologies	5,2%	20,0%

Source: European Commission (2024), Eurostat (2025a, 2025c, 2026).

Regarding the use of emerging technologies in social enterprises, it should be mentioned that there is currently no distinct harmonized Eurostat series for social enterprises. For this reason, the analysis must be constructed indirectly, by combining indicators regarding the digitalization of enterprises in general with administrative and qualitative information related to social enterprises. ANOFM data for 2024 show that social enterprises in Romania have already reported activities involving a certain level of digital integration, such as electronic archiving, the development of online stores, the use of digital promotion channels, and concerns regarding the development of skills related to new technologies. Thus, it can be observed that the digitalization of Romanian social enterprises is already emerging, although it remains mainly focused on functional and incremental adjustments, not yet being associated with advanced and radical transformations (ANOFM, 2025). This intermediate stage of adoption is frequently encountered in social organizations undergoing early digital transformation processes, where technology is initially used for operational optimization and communication before becoming an instrument for strategic innovation and organizational redesign (Steiner et al., 2025; Mursalzade, 2024).

According to the Eurostat provided data, the objective of the EU is to have more than 90% of SMEs to reach at least a basic level of digital intensity and 75% of companies to use AI, Big Data analysis or cloud computing by 2030. From the social economy perspective, reaching a basic level of digital transformation can support organizational development and efficiency. In the case of Romania, the problem is not only access to technology, but also the capacity to transform technology into scalable business models and into more robust mechanisms for measuring social impact (Eurostat, 2025a). Recent literature shows that this transition from the instrumental use of technology to its integration into the business model represents one of the main challenges of contemporary social entrepreneurship (Qiu et al., 2026; Sergi et al., 2025).

The fields of activity reported by Romanian social enterprises highlight a diversified structure, but with a visible concentration around social and community functions: education and vocational training, employment, social services, healthcare, home care, personal well-being, food production, local services, environmental activities, trade, and recreational activities. The quality and accessibility of educational and healthcare-related services are also relevant when assessing the social value generated by service-oriented organizations. Previous research on healthcare education services financed through the European Social Fund provides a complementary perspective on user satisfaction in publicly supported service provision (Radu et al., 2017). In the case of work integration social enterprises, the mission is even more clearly oriented toward the socio-professional integration of vulnerable persons, including people with disabilities, individuals coming from foster care centers, elderly people, homeless persons, and individuals at risk of social exclusion (ANOFM, 2025).

This activity profile also qualifies the role attributed to advanced technologies. In labour-intensive services such as care, counselling, vocational integration and support for persons with disabilities, service quality depends primarily on stable funding, qualified staff, continuity of relationships and appropriate legal and institutional support. Artificial intelligence, blockchain, additive manufacturing or IoT may be useful in selected cases, for example, for administrative automation, traceability, assistive solutions, resource monitoring or impact measurement, but they should not displace investment in frontline capacity. The relevant question is therefore not whether every social enterprise should adopt disruptive technologies, but whether a specific technology produces a clear operational or social benefit relative to its cost and implementation burden.

Administrative data also highlight the existence of a broad portfolio of concrete social actions. These include home care services, socio-medical interventions, educational activities, employment and training programs, as well as environmental actions. This result is significant because it shows that Romanian social enterprises do not operate exclusively as providers of traditional social services, but as hybrid organizations combining production, trade, and services with a clear mission of inclusion and community development (ANOFM, 2025). At the level of case studies, public data confirm the same combination between economic sustainability and social mission. ADV Romania Group reported total revenues of EUR 3,18 million for 2024, of which 70,6% originated from economic activity, together with the payment of EUR 626,205 in taxes and the full reinvestment of profit. In addition, *Ateliere Fără Frontiere* is focusing on the relationship between people, education, and environment, with an accent on green jobs, refurbishment, and reducing negative environmental impact. These examples are relevant because they show that, in practice, social impact is increasingly reported together with economic and environmental indicators, bringing social enterprises closer to the logic of integrated reporting (ADV Romania, 2025; Ateliere Fără Frontiere, 2024b).

The reports of the two organizations indicate that the professionalization of the social economy in Romania is accompanied by a clear tendency toward the simultaneous quantification of economic performance, social inclusion, and environmental impact, suggesting a gradual alignment with European models of integrated reporting and impact-oriented management (ADV Romania, 2025; Ateliere Fără Frontiere, 2024a). This tendency indicates an increasing proximity to the logic of hybrid organizations capable of combining economic performance with social legitimacy and explicit mechanisms for measuring impact (Yunus et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2017). Regarding the financial resources used, ANOFM data indicate a mixed structure specific to hybrid organizations: own revenues, members' social funds, statutory reserves, sponsorships, contributions from beneficiaries or relatives, donations, partners' resources, and European or external funds. This structure confirms that Romanian social enterprises are supported neither exclusively through the market nor exclusively through grants, but rather operate by combining several resource flows in order to maintain their activity and social mission (ANOFM, 2025).

In Romania, the large number of withdrawn certifications indicates that maintaining the formal status of social enterprises remains a challenge, while the relatively small number of certified work integration social enterprises reflects the limited size of this segment. In the longer term, European reports regarding Romania show that the social economy has broader

historical and organizational foundations than the current formal register, including associations, foundations, cooperatives, mutual aid societies, and sheltered workshops. Consequently, the evolution of the sector should not be interpreted exclusively through the number of ANOFM certifications, but also through the expansion of a broader field of organizations with a social purpose (European Commission, 2019; ANOFM, 2025). Regarding impact-related changes, three important transformations can be observed. The first is the transition from an approach focused exclusively on assistance toward one that combines employment, training, production, and inclusion. The second trend is the growing integration of environmental objectives into social organizations through refurbishment, circular economy, and waste reduction initiatives. The third is the gradual emergence of a logic of impact digitalization through online stores, digital communication tools, electronic archiving, and more structured reporting of results. These transformations suggest that Romanian social enterprises are evolving beyond the traditional model of isolated social intervention and increasingly integrating economic, social, environmental, and digital dimensions more clearly (ANOFM, 2025; ADV Romania, 2025; Ateliere Fără Frontiere, 2024a).

Overall, the Romania–European Union comparison shows that Romania is closer to the ecosystem consolidation stage than to the scaling stage (Pérez-Barea, 2025; European Commission, 2025; ANOFM, 2025). From this perspective, the evolution of the sector can be interpreted as a transition from predominantly reactive forms of social intervention toward more formalized and strategically oriented entrepreneurial models (Zahra et al., 2009; Teasdale, 2012). At the European level, the social economy already has a critical mass in terms of entities and employment. In Romania, the sector is real and generates measurable social impact, but it remains modest in scale within its formally certified component and vulnerable in terms of institutional continuity and financial maturity. However, this smaller structure may become an advantage if supported by appropriate public policies, financial instruments, and digital capabilities (European Commission, 2025; ANOFM, 2025). From the perspective of digitalization, Romania shows a substantial gap relative to the European Union in basic digital intensity and in the uptake of cloud and AI. For social enterprises, however, this gap should not be interpreted as evidence that advanced technology is their principal development constraint. In the short term, the more realistic priority is basic operational and commercial digitalization—reliable data systems, electronic administration, communication channels and accessible digital services—combined with stronger financing, specialized human resources and institutional support. Advanced analytics, artificial intelligence or automation become relevant where organizational scale, data availability and a clearly defined use case justify the investment (European Commission, 2024, 2025, 2026; Eurostat, 2025a, 2025c, 2026; Nakpodia et al., 2024; Steiner et al., 2025).

However, the data regarding vulnerable groups, support measures, diversity of activity fields, and the reinvestment of resources show that Romanian social enterprises already generate concrete and measurable social impact. Even if they are fewer in number, financially more fragile, and less digitalized than the European benchmark would suggest, Romanian social enterprises continue to fulfil essential functions related to professional integration, the provision of social services, and the support of local community development. This confirms that their relevance is determined primarily by their social mission and their capacity to generate collective value, not exclusively by economic scale. In this sense, the major difference between Romania and the European Union is not one of social relevance,

but rather one of scale, institutional formalization, and digital capacity (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; European Commission, 2025; ANOFM, 2025).

Conclusions

The research confirms that social enterprises are becoming increasingly relevant in contemporary transformations. Against the background of climate change, increasing social vulnerabilities, pressures on the labour market, and the acceleration of digitalization, these organizations have become important mechanisms for responding to community needs. Their specificity lies in the permanent pressure to simultaneously maintain financial viability and social relevance within an increasingly competitive economic and technological environment. The comparative analysis conducted between Romania and the European Union shows that, although the Romanian social economy sector is smaller in scale and less consolidated than the European average, it already has a concrete and measurable role in both the economy and society. The analysed data highlight that Romanian social enterprises actively contribute to the professional integration of vulnerable persons, the provision of social services, and the implementation of relevant community interventions.

Particularly, work integration social enterprises, although limited in number, demonstrate a clear orientation toward the mission of socio-professional inclusion through the employment and support of categories at risk of exclusion. At the same time, the results highlight several structural vulnerabilities affecting the sustainable development of the sector in Romania. These vulnerabilities include the limited number of formally certified enterprises, dependence on external funding, and financial instability. Taking these considerations into account, the main challenge for Romania is to strengthen the long-term viability and development capacity of existing social enterprises, rather than focusing exclusively on the creation of new ones. Thus, the social economy ecosystem maturation requires not only quantitative expansion, but also increased organizational resilience, management professionalization, and the diversification of funding sources.

An important result of the research is the identification of a significant national digital gap relative to the European Union average, alongside substantial structural constraints within the Romanian social-economy ecosystem. The analysis suggests that financial stability, institutional continuity, access to specialized personnel and organizational capacity are more immediate determinants of continuity for many social enterprises, while digitalization acts mainly as an enabling factor. Practices such as electronic archiving, online platforms, beneficiary-relationship management and digital-skills development indicate an ongoing adaptation process, but not a sector-wide transition toward advanced disruptive technologies. In this context, emerging technologies should be viewed as selective instruments rather than as universal requirements. Artificial intelligence, data analysis, digital platforms, automation and other technologies can improve internal processes, service accessibility and impact measurement when they address a concrete need and when the organization has the financial, human and data capacity to use them responsibly. In labour-intensive social services, investment in qualified staff, stable financing, legal support and direct beneficiary relationships may generate greater value than technologically sophisticated solutions.

In the medium and long term, digital capabilities can strengthen organizational sustainability, but their contribution will depend on the wider support framework. Dedicated public policies, accessible and predictable funding, management and digital-skills training, legal and advisory services, and mechanisms supporting social innovation are needed alongside technology investment. Territorial differences should also be considered: strong connectivity does not automatically eliminate gaps in skills, organizational maturity or access to innovation networks. Overall, Romanian social enterprises already generate relevant social impact despite financial, institutional and digital constraints. Compared with the broader European ecosystem, the main differences concern scale, organizational maturity, formalization and transformation capacity. Digital technologies can support consolidation and efficiency, but the future of the sector depends on a balanced combination of stable resources, skilled people, institutional support and context-appropriate technological adoption.

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