

## Regional development and the impact of the commercial services upon territorial inequalities

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**Abstract.** This study explores the role of commercial services in shaping territorial inequalities across Romania's eight development regions. Economic disparities have been a persistent challenge, and understanding the impact of trade-related indicators on regional development is essential. The objective of this research is to analyze how the number of employees in trade, trade sector salaries, the number of enterprises, and regional GDP contribute to these inequalities. The methodology involves a quantitative approach, utilizing regional statistical data to examine trends and variations in key economic indicators. By assessing their evolution over time, this study identifies patterns of economic divergence and convergence among the regions. The results indicate significant disparities between the more developed regions, such as Bucharest-Ilfov and North-West, and less developed areas like North-East and South-West Oltenia. The number of enterprises and employees in trade, as well as salary levels, show a direct correlation with regional GDP, emphasizing the uneven distribution of economic activity. This research contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive, data-driven analysis of the trade sector's role in territorial inequalities. The originality of the study lies in its empirical approach, highlighting the impact of commercial services as a driver of economic polarization and regional imbalances.

**Keywords:** resilience, regional development, territorial inequalities, trade sector, Romania

**JEL classification:** R10, R50, R51, R58, R59

### 1. Introduction

Seen as a continuous and sustainable process, regional development is based on interdependent legislative and institutional elements aimed at establishing new types of relationships between various sectors and fields of activity, as well as between central and local institutions and communities, with the ultimate goal of improving living standards and ensuring the well-being of residents. At times, this ongoing process is disrupted by various global crises, with some regions being more severely affected, while others continue on their development path without significant obstacles.

Addressing territorial inequalities is also an important topic, open to all stakeholders involved (academia, universities, policymakers, theorists, and practitioners, among others). Studies focusing on this subject are diverse and significantly influence the concrete perception of how different areas develop. Some contribute to shaping relevant decisions and policies targeting specific issues, while others enrich the

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specialized literature by introducing new perspectives or refining the way facts and developments are presented.

Nearly five years after the health crisis of March 2020, the issue of territorial resilience and the magnitude of its effects remain topics of great interest and intense debate among dedicated researchers. Questions such as why some regions demonstrated greater resilience, which sectors helped certain areas stay afloat, what the most effective recovery strategies and solutions were, and so on, continue to be widely discussed in academic analyses as scholars seek the most appropriate answers.

This article falls within the broader framework of regional development studies, aiming to identify the economic and structural factors that contributed to achieving territorial resilience in Romania. The focus is placed on the commercial services sector, one of the most affected industries during the health crisis, but also one of the sectors that experienced the strongest recovery, reinventing itself through the use of the internet and digital technology. The analysis will explore the relationship between Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and key indicators characterizing the service industry, specifically the number of commercial enterprises, employees, and their earnings.

## **2. Literature review**

In Romania, the analysis of territorial resilience initially focused on general and/or sectoral approaches, oriented toward a specific type of clearly defined hazard. The concept has gained importance across various fields, becoming essential for understanding and interpreting reality in the aftermath of shocks.

The engineering sector has the longest tradition in resilience analysis in Romania, with numerous studies and articles published that examine the concept from a technical perspective (e.g., in the field of material properties, Perju et al., 2011).

In the telecommunications sector, resilience is used to assess the viability of networks and the need to detect potential nodes or segments where malfunctions may occur (Copaci & Copaci, 2011), including aspects related to internet network security (Copaci & Bacivarov, 2015).

In economics, conceptual approaches to economic resilience have been applied at both national and regional levels (Zaman & Vasile, 2014; Zaman & Georgescu, 2015), alongside more specialized financial studies analyzing, for instance, the resilience of supply chains (Popa, 2013). Other approaches focus on population resilience, examining communities' ability to cope with terrorist threats, natural disaster-induced crises, and vulnerability management (Stoican, 2015), or they analyze the unemployment rate as an indicator of regional resilience capacity (Ion, 2015).

The concept of "resilience" also appears in studies concerning regional systems, describing the adaptation of territorial systems to change, regardless of their size, structure, or functions (Cocean, 2011). It is also found in articles on spatial planning analysis at the (micro)regional scale, though such research often remains at a general level without concrete applicability (Filimon et al., 2012). From a theoretical perspective, Nemeş and Serac (2012) integrate the concept of resilience into the systemic understanding of urban organization, incorporating its subsystems within the framework of panarchy. A more in-depth theoretical approach focuses on the resilience of cultural landscapes, emphasizing the enduring values that provide them with substance and sustainability (Ianoş et al., 2014).

Simmie and Martin (2010) analyzed regional economic resilience, challenging equilibrium-based methods. They argue that businesses, organizations, and regional institutions continuously adapt to the economic environment by generating, assimilating, and capitalizing on knowledge. Subsequent research has adopted an evolutionary perspective, emphasizing the role of change and adaptability in regional economic development.

Most studies in geography grant the concept of resilience minimal applicability, mainly in relation to risk analysis. Some of these studies address the management of geomorphological risks by communities in historically distinct microregions (Goţiu & Surdeanu, 2007) or examine the social dimension in relation to the perception of earthquake risk (Armaş, 2006). Stângă (2012) not only provided a theoretical

introduction to the concept but also incorporated it as a key factor in the spatial analysis of risk within a watershed, closely linked to the human dimension of risk management.

A geographical perspective on social resilience is also promoted by Șerban and Ianoș (2014), in their study on the interactions between social adaptation and economic dynamics, as well as by Șerban and Tălângă (2015), who analyze the recent evolution of the labor market and population migration at the county level in Romania in the context of the global economic crisis. Other authors focus on the need for workforce adaptation, sometimes considering the emergence of innovative fields such as renewable energy valorization (Bănică & Istrate, 2014).

Buraga and Rusu (2014) examine regional resilience and economic development concerning the accessibility of air transport services. Another study contrasts the concepts of resilience and environmental performance to highlight recent spatially differentiated dynamics (Breabăn et al., 2013).

Several analyses focus on the resilience of metropolitan areas (Fina, Heider & Raț, 2019) or cities that have undergone significant structural and functional transformations in the post-communist period (Bănică & Șerban, 2013), while others have examined the overall resilience of habitat structures in a mountainous area (Bănică & Istrate, 2018).

Schwob et al. (2022) develop the concept of systemic resilience. The notion of systemic resilience overlaps with the territorial problems existing in France. This concept reflects the increasing complexity of our ecosystems. In the context of this approach, systemic resilience allows the promotion of a new model of resilience characterized by its circular and dynamic nature, but also by the capacity of a complex system to proactively cope with external shocks.

In most recent studies, regional resilience is measured using GDP (Chen & Groenewold, 2022; Gong et al., 2020) or with specific labour market indicators (e.g. employees, unemployment, etc.). The latter have the advantage of having a lower rate of variation compared to output during recovery cycles (Geelhoed et al., 2021) (they are indicators more suitable for analyzing the social impact of crises, often associated with specific characteristics of the workforce structure, being available on a monthly basis and having a high geographical disaggregation (Di Caro & Fratesi, 2022; Giannakis & Bruggeman, 2020; Partridge et al., 2022; Kitsos et al., 2023).

Cohesion and regional development policy is implemented at various levels of governance; therefore, development interventions must take territorial specificities into account (Antonescu, 2003). Regional policy places significant emphasis on spatial aspects and their management (Jula & Jula, 1998). Within this policy framework, certain regions receive more generous funding based on specific development criteria/indicators.

### 3. Methodology and data

This study employs a quantitative approach to analyze the impact of commercial services on regional inequalities across Romania's eight development regions. The research is based on data extracted from the Tempo-Online database provided by the National Institute of Statistics, covering the period 2000–2021. The selected indicators include: the number of employees in trade (thousands of people) – reflecting labor market dynamics in the commercial sector, the wages in trade (expressed in million lei) – illustrating wage disparities between regions, the total number of enterprises in trade – indicating entrepreneurial activity and economic density and the regional GDP (as current prices in million lei) – measuring the overall economic performance of each region. The GDP in current prices was chosen due to two reasons: first of all, there is no Real GDP computed in the database that we used and even if we tried to compute it the database offers no way of computing it correctly (there is no deflator available nor a Consumer Price index computed yearly for the trade sector that we have chosen as a topic of research) and second due to the fact that the wages are computed in current prices the GDP being at the same level the scientific literature accepts this exception: „Nominal GDP may be favorable for simpler calculations” (Investopedia, 2025) „In line with OECD reporting practices, nominal GDP is frequently used in regional analyses where no consistent regional CPI or deflator is available.” (OECD, 2018). Due to this lack of data numerous other

authors from the scientific community use the same nominal GDP (Surugiu et al., 2023; Capello, 2010; Dall’erba & Le Gallo, 2008). Moreover, our analysis is a simple one in which we tried to assess the territorial inequalities between the regions by creating simple evolution graphs and tables and analyzing the values in the selected timeframe, in which case the nominal GDP is accepted.

To assess the evolution of territorial inequalities, the data is analyzed over four distinct subperiods:

- 2000–2007 – the pre-financial crisis, a period of economic expansion;
- 2008–2010 – the financial crisis, characterized by economic downturns and structural adjustments;
- 2010–2019 – post-financial crisis recovery, marked by gradual economic stabilization and growth;
- 2019–2023 – COVID-19 crisis, which brought unprecedented disruptions to economic activity.

The article employs a comparative statistical analysis, examining trends across regions and identifying divergence patterns. The key indicators are assessed in relation to regional GDP to understand their contribution to economic imbalances. By segmenting the analysis into multiple timeframes, the study captures both the immediate and long-term effects of economic shocks, providing a comprehensive perspective on the resilience of Romania’s trade sector and its role in shaping regional disparities.

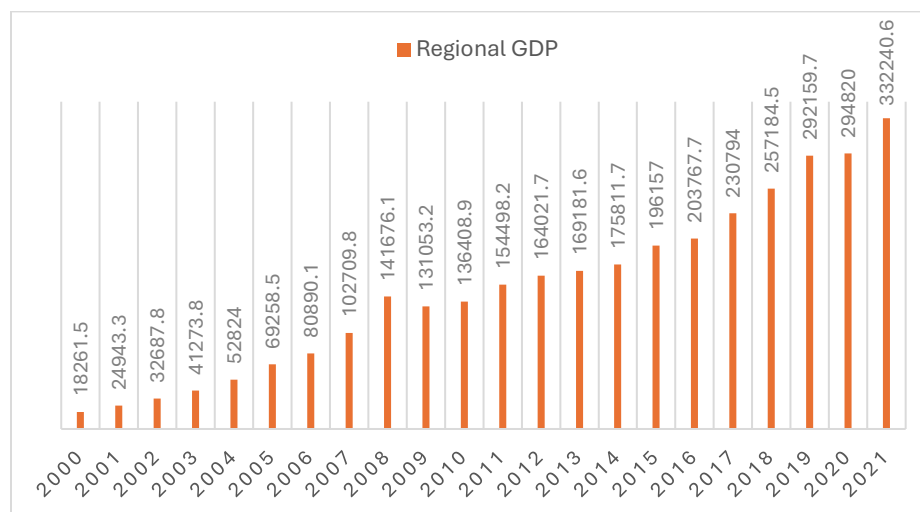
## 4. Research results and comments

### 4.1. Bucharest-Ilfov Region

A key indicator in evaluating both the level of regional development and resilience is GDP (total and per capita). Its evolution before and after the health crisis illustrates how regions managed to handle the negative effects caused by restrictions and the slowdown in the dynamics of certain sectors. The contributions of regional development to the creation of the total GDP are different and can represent starting points to the econometric analysis proposed in this article.

Regarding the Bucharest-Ilfov Region, it contributes significantly to the national GDP, approximately 27% in 2022 (European Commission, 2023). Being a region that also includes the capital, its high GDP value is supported by a high density of companies (many headquarters are located here), high salary incomes, and a significant workforce (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The evolution of the regional GDP in the Bucharest-Ilfov region during the period 2000-2021 (million lei)**

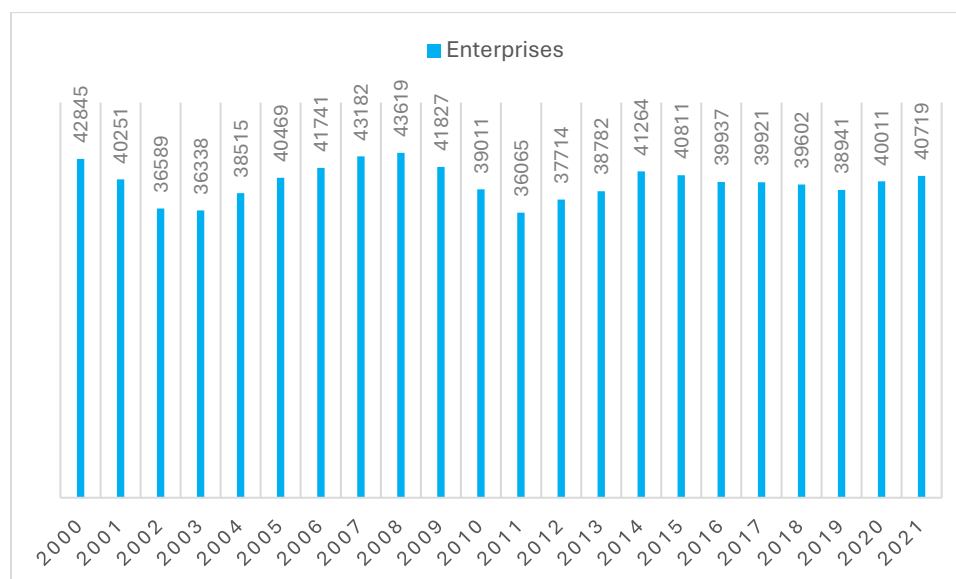


Source: Authors’ own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

Regarding the number of enterprises in the trade sector, its evolution has been similar to that of other development regions, with certain particularities reflecting the economic characteristics and dynamics of the capital region. Between 2000 and 2007, the number of commercial enterprises increased from 42,845 to 43,182. In 2009, as a result of the financial crisis, a decline was recorded, reaching 41,827—a decrease considered less dramatic than in other regions. Starting in 2010, the number of enterprises became relatively stable, with minor fluctuations and a slight upward trend, reaching approximately 39,011 firms. In the pre-crisis year of 2019, 38,941 firms were registered, highlighting the adaptability and resilience of the commercial sector.

Interestingly, despite the global economic downturn caused by the pandemic, the number of commercial enterprises in the region slightly increased compared to 2019, reaching 40,011. This was made possible through new business models such as e-commerce, digitalization, information technology, and government support measures. After a year marked by the pandemic, in 2021, the number of enterprises continued to grow slightly, reaching 40,719 (Figure 2). This reflects the recovery and stabilization of economic activities, particularly in the commercial sector, in the context of a more dynamic market and expanding domestic demand. The trade sector in the Bucharest-Ilfov region has demonstrated considerable resilience in the face of the global economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, with a trend toward stabilization and even growth in the number of commercial enterprises in recent years.

**Figure 2. The evolution of the total number of enterprises in the trade sector – Bucharest-Ilfov, 2000-2021 (no.)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

According to a report by the National Bank of Romania (NBR, 2024), enterprises in this region are more innovative and have increased access to financing, thereby attracting more foreign investments. This advantage not only fosters domestic trade but also facilitates integration into international supply chains (European Commission, 2023).

Regarding the number of employees in the trade sector, the Bucharest-Ilfov region stands out with the highest number of employees, accounting for over 30% of the national total and offering wages more than 20% higher than the national average (NIS, 2023). The number of employees has steadily increased, rising from 337,000 in 2011 to a peak of 396,800 in 2018, indicating a growing demand for labor in the commercial sector. This trend reflects the expansion of commercial infrastructure and strong domestic consumption. Economic disparities with other regions have deepened, with Bucharest-Ilfov strengthening its position as the country's economic leader. Employment figures grew moderately from 292,800 in 2000

to 338,000 in 2007, demonstrating relative labor market stability amid steady demand for skilled workers in commerce (Appendix 1). The number of employees remained stable in recent years, increasing slightly from 395,100 in 2020 to 403,700 in 2021. This trend suggests that the commercial sector in Bucharest-Ilfov was less affected than other industries, due to the consistent demand for consumer goods.

Wages in the commercial sector have recorded a significant increase, from 2,039.5 million lei in 2000 to 8,314.6 million lei in 2007 — more than a fourfold rise. This development reflects the region's rapid economic growth, benefiting from its status as the country's economic and administrative hub. Higher wages in the region attract skilled labor, though employment rates are also influenced by internal migration patterns.

The global financial crisis had a visible impact on wages, though it was less severe in Bucharest-Ilfov than in other regions. Salaries continued to rise from 12,548.1 million lei in 2008 to 14,019.7 million lei in 2010. This growth suggests the region's economic resilience, supported by sectoral diversification and its strategic position in the national economy. The number of employees remained relatively stable during this period, declining slightly from 348,400 in 2008 to 338,600 in 2010. This stability can be attributed in part to the presence of numerous multinational companies, which helped absorb economic shocks.

Following the financial crisis, the wages continued to increase, reaching 30,916 million lei in 2019 — almost double the 2010 level. This substantial growth underscores the region's ability to attract investments and sustain a favorable economic dynamic. During the pandemic crisis, wages experienced a slight decline from 30,916 million lei in 2019 to 30,821 million lei in 2020. However, they quickly rebounded in 2021, reaching 33,080.3 million lei. This recovery highlights the commercial sector's enhanced resilience in the region, supported by a swift adaptation to e-commerce and digitalization.

Bucharest-Ilfov has demonstrated high resilience in the face of both economic crises. The continuous wage growth and labor market stability emphasize the region's central role in the national economy. The significant evolution of commercial sector indicators further amplifies economic disparities compared to other regions, solidifying Bucharest-Ilfov's position as a key driver of economic growth.

#### **4.2. North-West Region**

The North-West region ranks as the second-largest contributor to Romania's total GDP (12%) (NIS, 2023). Its economic development is driven by major cities such as Cluj-Napoca and Oradea, which attract investments in trade and services. Negruțiu & Istrate-Scrădeanu (2021) highlight that a significant portion of this growth stems from retail trade and the expansion of logistical infrastructure.

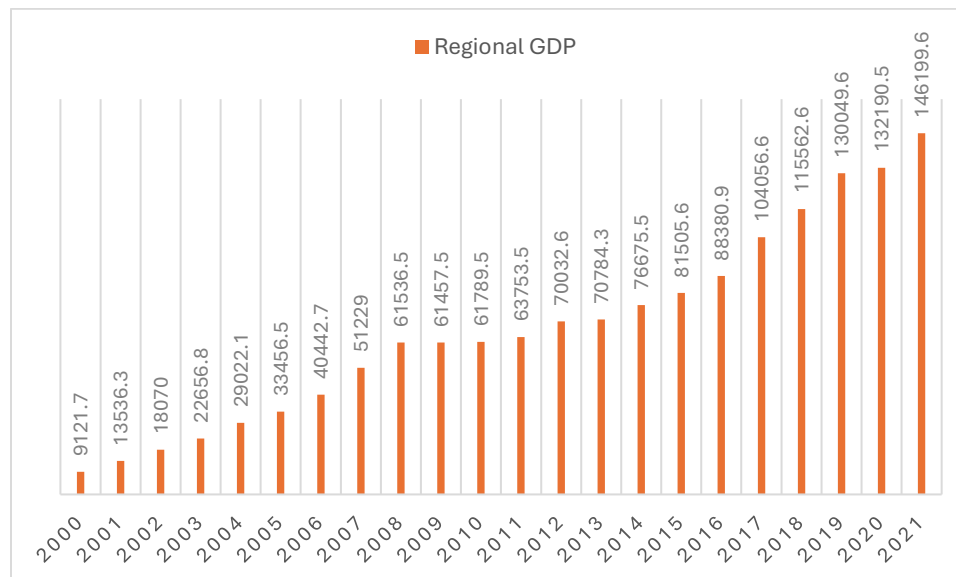
The region's GDP experienced continuous growth between 2000 and 2021, forming the foundation for sustained economic development. The most significant positive evolution occurred between 2000 and 2008, during which the North-West region saw a steady GDP increase, outperforming many other regions in Romania. This period was marked by economic diversification, with industry and commerce serving as the primary growth engines. GDP rose from 9,121.7 million lei in 2000 to 61,536.5 million lei in 2008, reflecting consistent annual growth. Despite the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, the region managed to maintain its upward trajectory, experiencing only a slight GDP decline in 2009 (61,457.5 million lei compared to 61,536.5 million lei in 2008). However, the economy quickly regained momentum, resuming its sustained growth.

The region's continuous GDP increase shows a favorable economic environment, supported by infrastructure investments and a growing number of private sector investors, particularly in commerce and manufacturing. In 2009, GDP registered a minor decline to 61,457.5 million lei, but by 2010, it had stabilized at nearly the same level (61,789.5 million lei) (Figure 3).

This stagnation can be attributed to a decline in both domestic and external demand, as well as restricted access to credit, which severely impacted various economic sectors, including trade. Retail trade, heavily reliant on domestic consumption, was directly affected by falling household incomes and the economic restrictions imposed by the financial crisis. However, the sector displayed a certain degree of resilience, gradually adapting to the new economic conditions. By 2011, the region's GDP rebounded to

63,753.5 million lei, followed by a sustained growth trend, reaching 130,049.6 million lei in 2019—an average annual increase of 6%. This recovery period was largely driven by improvements in the trade sector, which benefited from digitalization and rising domestic demand. The GDP growth was further supported by the expansion of both retail and foreign trade, contributing to regional economic stabilization. Additionally, the North-West region continued to attract investments and diversify its economic activities. Trade remained a key sector, exerting a direct influence on GDP and reinforcing the region's role as a dynamic economic hub.

**Figure 3. The evolution of the regional GDP in the North-West region during the period 2000-2021 (million lei)**

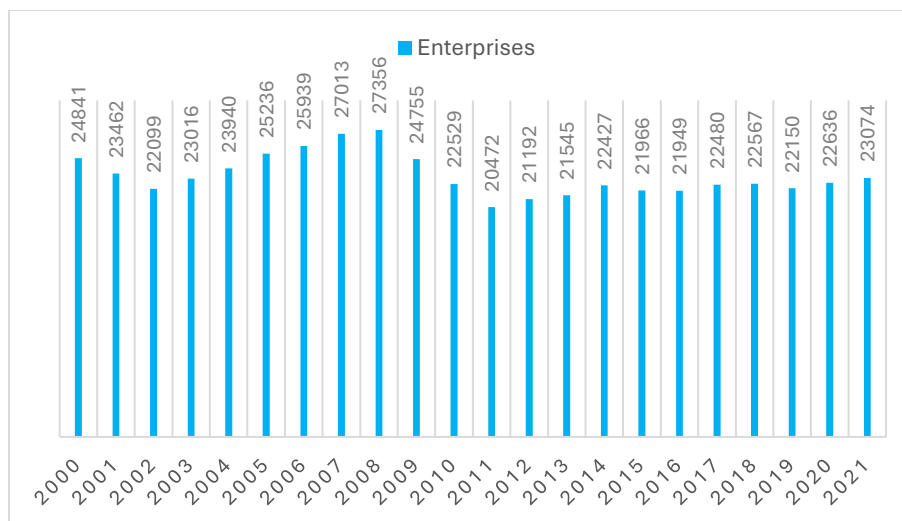


Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a notable impact on the North-West region; however, the trade sector demonstrated remarkable adaptability, particularly through accelerated digitalization and the widespread adoption of e-commerce. In 2020, the region's GDP experienced a slight decline to 132,190.5 million lei, though the contraction was not as severe as in other economic sectors. This resilience can largely be attributed to the surge in online commerce, which had a positive influence on the regional economy. Despite the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, the trade sector managed to sustain a steady economic flow, mitigating the overall GDP decline. By 2021, the region rebounded swiftly, registering a significant GDP increase to 146,199.6 million lei, marking a 10.6% growth compared to 2020. This rapid recovery stands as clear evidence of the region's economic resilience, particularly within the trade sector, which remained instrumental in stabilizing and revitalizing the economy. Once again, trade proved to be a crucial driver of economic recovery, benefiting from digital transformation and a swift adaptation to pandemic-induced changes.

Cluj-Napoca, in particular, is a center of innovation and entrepreneurship, attracting national and foreign investors due to its rapid development in fields such as IT and financial services, which have an indirect impact on the trade sector (Mihai, 2022). In 2022, this region hosted approximately 15% of trade enterprises, with significant growth in the counties of Cluj and Bihor (NIS, 2023). However, economic disparities between the more developed counties and the less developed ones, such as Sălaj, continue to be a challenge (OECD, 2021).

**Figure 4. The evolution of the total number of enterprises in the trade sector – North-West, 2000-2021 (no.)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

During the period 2000-2011, the number of trade enterprises in the North-West region showed a general downward trend, reaching a low of 20,472 enterprises in 2011, reflecting the economic difficulties following the global financial crisis of 2008-2010 (Figure 4).

Starting from 2012, the number of enterprises gradually began to increase, with minor fluctuations, reaching 23,074 enterprises in 2021. This recovery is likely supported by economic stimulus measures and the private sector's adaptation to the new post-crisis economic conditions.

Between 2020 and 2021, the number of trade enterprises was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic but did not register significant declines. This suggests that the trade sector in the North-West region was relatively resilient, possibly due to the rapid adaptation to new business models, such as online commerce, and government support.

Following the decline in 2020, the number of trade enterprises continued to grow in 2021, indicating a recovery in commercial activity, likely driven by the resumption of economic activities and the post-pandemic recovery process.

In the North-West region, the trade sector plays an important role in employment, particularly in Cluj County. Cluj-Napoca, as a rapidly expanding economic and educational center, stimulates demand for services and trade. In 2022, average wages in trade were 10% above the national average, and the number of employees steadily increased, accounting for approximately 12% of the national total (Mihai, 2022). However, there are significant differences between urban and rural areas of the region, where wages and the number of jobs is lower, according to an OECD report (OECD, 2021).

Regarding wage revenues, the region experienced a steady increase in trade sector salaries between 2000 and 2007, rising from 679.4 million lei in 2000 to 3,073.9 million lei in 2007 (of more than 4.5 times). This evolution reflects economic expansion and Romania's gradual integration into the European economy following its accession to the European Union in 2007. On the other hand, the number of employees in the trade sector grew modestly from 173.9 thousand in 2000 to 190.9 thousand in 2007 (Appendix 2), indicating a relatively stable labor market in this sector. This stability can be explained by the diversification of job opportunities in other sectors and external migration, which are characteristic to the region.

The impact of the global financial crisis on trade sector wages became evident between 2008 and 2010. Although salaries increased from 3,964.7 million lei in 2008 to 4,258.2 million lei in 2009, they declined in 2010 to 3,795.6 million lei. This decrease reflects a severe economic contraction and a reduction in sectoral revenues. The number of employees rose to 200 thousand in 2008 but fell to 193.4 thousand in

2010. The decline in employment indicates heightened economic difficulties and restructuring within the trade sector. Regional disparities widened, with less developed regions being disproportionately affected. The North-West region demonstrated moderate resilience by maintaining a relatively stable number of employees compared to other areas of the country.

After 2010, the region began to recover its losses. Trade sector wages resumed their growth, increasing from 4,231.9 million lei in 2011 to 10,650.7 million lei in 2019, nearly tripling. This trend highlights the sector's adaptability to post-crisis economic demands.

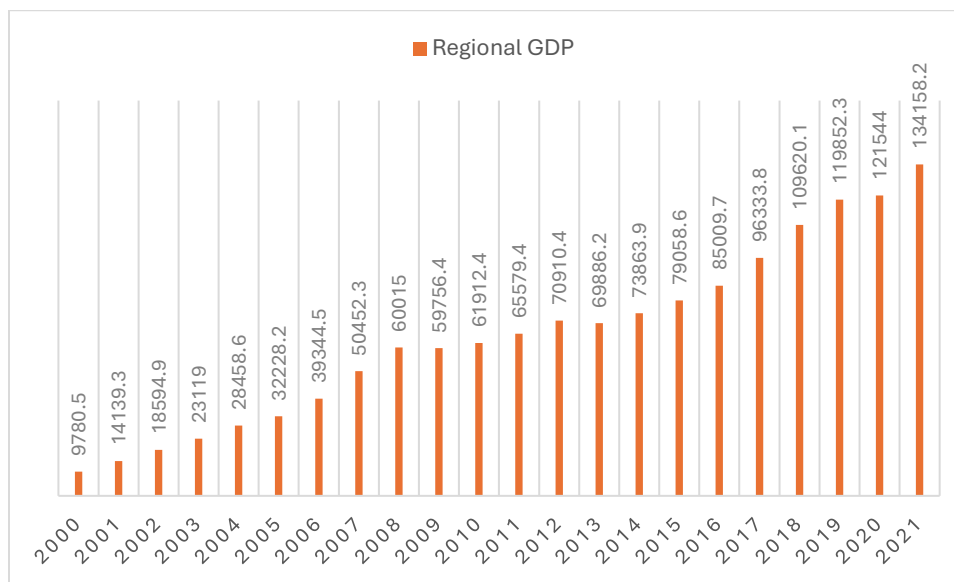
The number of employees also rose, reaching 276.9 thousand in 2019, the highest level recorded during the analyzed period. This increase in employment indicates sectoral consolidation and growing demand for labor amid an expanding economy. Regional disparities partially diminished due to infrastructure investments and the economic integration of regions into the EU's internal market.

The COVID-19 crisis introduced new economic challenges for this sector. Trade sector wages declined from 10,650.7 million lei in 2019 to 10,229 million lei in 2020, reflecting financial difficulties for enterprises and reduced consumer spending. However, by 2021, salaries resumed their upward trajectory, reaching 10,849.2 million lei, demonstrating the sector's resilience. The number of employees remained relatively stable at 276.6 thousand in 2020 and increased slightly to 297 thousand in 2021, suggesting that the sector managed the health crisis more effectively than the financial crisis.

### 4.3 Center Region

The Center Region contributes approximately 11% to the national GDP, making it one of the most economically balanced regions. Braşov and Sibiu counties are regional leaders, with well-developed trade sectors. According to the National Commission for Strategy and Prognosis (2024), the gross value added generated by trade in this region has consistently increased, driven by rising purchasing power and the region's tourist appeal.

**Figure 5. The evolution of the regional GDP in the Center region during the period 2000-2021 (million lei)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

Between 2000 and 2021, the GDP of the Center Region experienced significant growth, reflecting consistent economic expansion, albeit with fluctuations caused by major financial crises. Over this period, the region's GDP followed an upward trajectory, rising from 9,780.5 million lei in 2000 to 134,158.2 million lei in 2021. This indicates sustainable long-term economic development, with a notable average

annual growth rate. However, certain periods of stagnation and slight decline can be attributed to economic downturns. The trade sector played a crucial role in GDP growth by expanding distribution networks and improving consumer access to goods and services.

During the global financial crisis, GDP has suffered fluctuations (Figure 5). After reaching a maximum of 60,015 million lei in 2008, it slightly decreased to 59,756.4 million lei in 2009. In 2010, GDP began to recover, reaching 61,912.4 million lei. Industrial and commercial activities demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt, even in the face of declining external demand, indicating solid economic resilience in the region.

The 2011-2019 timeframe was marked by sustained growth of the regional GDP, increasing from 65,579.4 million lei in 2011 to 119,852.3 million lei in 2019. The rise in public and private investments in infrastructure, the modernization of transportation, and the expansion of the trade sector were essential factors in this evolution. The trade sector continued to be a key pillar, benefiting from adaptation to economic trends such as the integration of technological solutions and the digitalization of activities. These transformations supported a continuously growing domestic demand and contributed to strengthening the regional market.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the global economy, the Center region continued to record GDP growth, from 121,544 million lei in 2020 to 134,158.2 million lei in 2021. The acceleration of e-commerce and the diversification of services offered by companies in the trade sector were key factors in maintaining economic stability. Government support, through fiscal policies and investments in health and infrastructure, also contributed to economic recovery. The trade sector, through its adaptability, was crucial in sustaining stable domestic demand, while the shift to digital commerce represented an effective strategy in responding to the changes imposed by the pandemic.

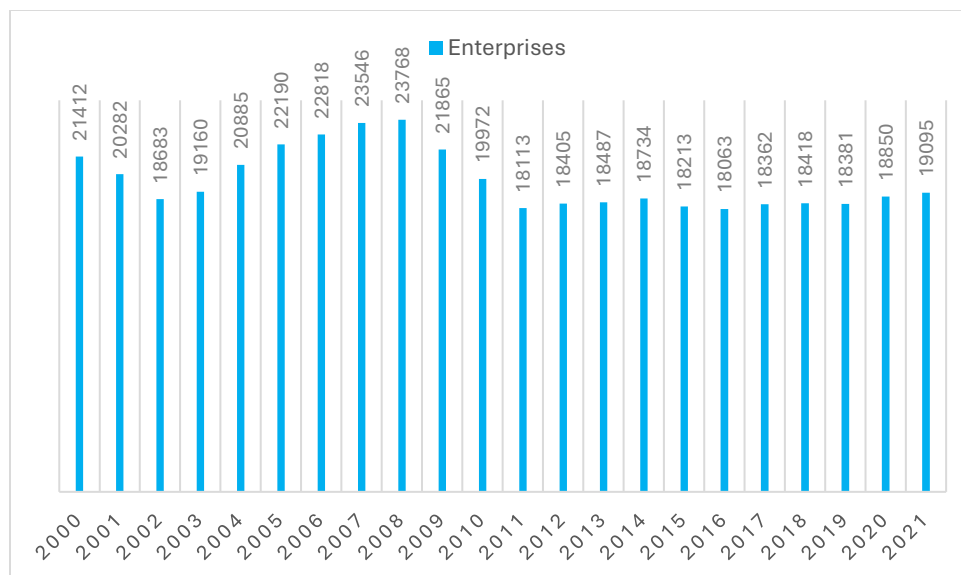
In 2022, the Center region recorded a steady increase in commercial enterprises, reaching 13% of the national total (European Commission, 2023). Infrastructure development and access to a well-qualified workforce are key factors that have supported this expansion (EC, 2023). In 2000, the region had 21,412 trade enterprises, followed by a decline to 18,683 in 2002. After this decrease, the sector began to grow, reaching 23,768 enterprises in 2008. This growth reflects an economic revival and an increased interest in developing the trade sector. The global financial crisis led to a significant drop in the number of enterprises, from 23,768 in 2008 to 21,865 in 2009, and later to 18,113 in 2011. This sharp decline suggests a high vulnerability of the region to the economic crisis.

After 2012, the number of enterprises stabilized between 18,405 (in 2012) and 18,381 (in 2019) (Figure 6). This period indicates a slowdown in economic dynamism, with a trade sector that managed to maintain relative stability but without significant growth. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the number of trade enterprises increased to 18,850 in 2020 and to 19,095 in 2021. This slight increase demonstrates the adaptability of businesses, including a shift towards e-commerce and support from economic assist measures.

The Center region stands out for its above-national-average wages and number of employees. In Braşov, tourism and commerce intertwine, driving demand for jobs. In 2022, wages in the commerce sector within this region were 8% higher than the national average, while the number of employees accounted for approximately 10% of the national total (European Commission, 2023). A stable economic environment, well-developed infrastructure, and a skilled workforce contribute to the region's attractiveness for investors (European Commission, 2023).

Wages in the commerce sector increased from 769.6 million lei in 2000 to 2,892.5 million lei in 2007, marking a growth of over 3.76 times (Appendix 3). This trend indicates sustained economic momentum and a strengthening of the regional commercial sector. Meanwhile, the number of employees rose slightly from 164.5 thousand to 187.9 thousand, suggesting a limited expansion of the labor market in this sector. Economic growth was primarily driven by productivity gains rather than job creation.

**Figure 6. The evolution of the total number of enterprises in the trade sector – Center, 2000-2021 (no.)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

Reflecting the challenges brought by the financial crisis, wages initially continued to rise, from 3,948.4 million lei in 2008 to 4,280.5 million lei in 2009, but later declined to 3,732.6 million lei in 2010. This decrease highlighted the negative impact on employees' incomes in the commerce sector. The number of employees steadily declined during this period, from 194 thousand in 2008 to 182.5 thousand in 2010, indicating a labor market adjustment to economic constraints.

Following the crisis, wages returned to an upward trajectory, reaching 9,667.5 million lei in 2019. This increase reflects both an improvement in economic conditions and a possible rise in demand for skilled labor in the commercial sector. The number of employees saw moderate growth, from 184.8 thousand in 2011 to 208.2 thousand in 2019, demonstrating a gradual recovery, yet without a significant increase in employment within this period.

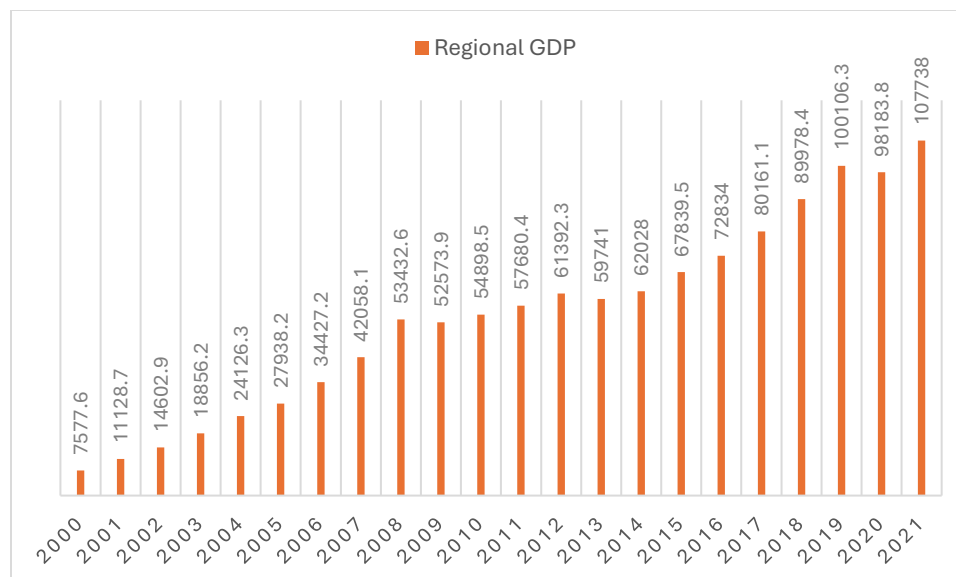
Unlike the financial crisis, the period of 2020–2021 was characterized by stability in employment and continued wage growth, reaching 9,753.3 million lei in 2020 and 10,322.1 million lei in 2021. This trend highlights the sector's ability to sustain economic growth even amid uncertainty. The number of employees remained relatively stable, slightly decreasing from 208.2 thousand in 2019 to 207.1 thousand in 2021, suggesting a maintenance of employment levels and an effective adaptation to the new challenges.

#### **4.4 West Region**

The West region contributes approximately 10% to the national GDP, with Timiș and Arad counties being economic leaders. The proximity to Romania's western borders facilitates access to European markets, which stimulates trade. Ibinceanu et al. (2021) study shows that the commerce sector is directly linked to the industrial activity in the region, contributing to economic growth.

Between 2000 and 2007, the West region experienced significant economic growth, with the GDP increasing from 7,577.6 million lei in 2000 to 42,058.1 million lei in 2007 (Figure 7). This growth was driven by the modernization of local industry, particularly in the production and processing of materials, as well as by the expansion of regional infrastructure. Commerce played a central role in stimulating domestic demand, and the attraction of foreign direct investments strengthened the economic competitiveness of the region.

**Figure 7. The evolution of the regional GDP in the West region during the period 2000-2021 (million lei)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The global economic crisis affected the West region, but it demonstrated relative resilience. The GDP slightly decreased in 2009 to 52,573.9 million lei but showed a marginal increase in 2010, reaching 54,898.5 million lei. The industrial and commercial sectors were impacted by the decline in external demand and investments; however, support provided by government programs and the stability of the domestic market helped limit the negative effects of the crisis.

Between 2011 and 2019, the GDP of the West region grew steadily, from 57,680.4 million lei in 2011 to 100,106.3 million lei in 2019. This period was marked by the diversification of the local economy, the development of the trade sector, and the modernization of transport infrastructure. The region benefited from its strategic position, which facilitated increased trade with neighboring countries. At the same time, the rise in population incomes and the expansion of e-commerce helped sustain domestic demand.

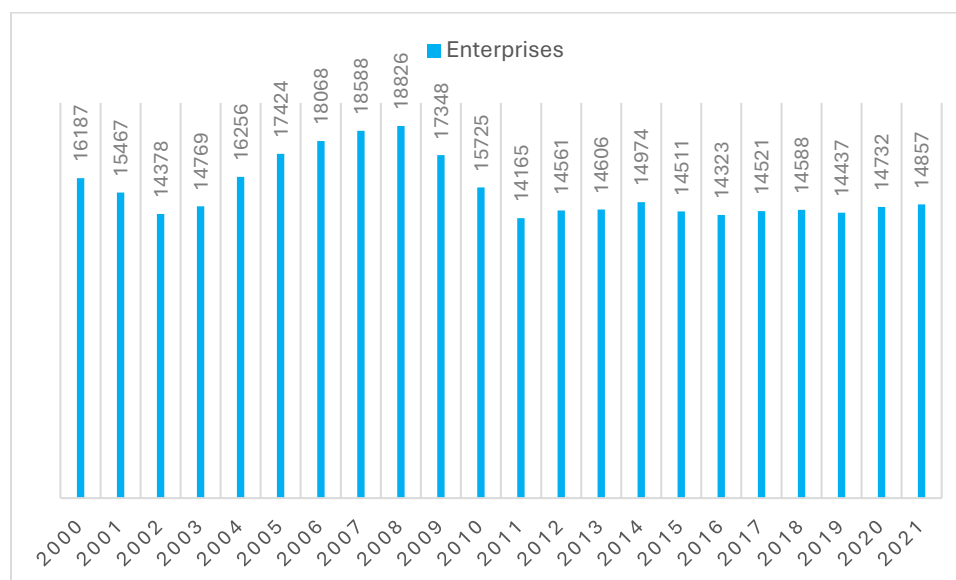
The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges to the West region, leading to a slight decrease in GDP in 2020, to 98,183.8 million lei. However, the region's economy demonstrated adaptability, and GDP increased again in 2021, reaching 107,738 million lei. Trade continued to be a key pillar of the economy, while the transition to digitalization and the growth of online commerce contributed to the recovery. Financial support through EU funds and government programs also played a crucial role in revitalizing economic activities.

The West region, with counties such as Timiș and Arad, benefits from a favorable geographic location, being well-connected to the markets of Central and Western Europe. This connectivity has stimulated the development of cross-border trade and facilitated the growth of the number of active businesses in this area (OECD, 2021). In 2022, the West region hosted approximately 12% of the commercial enterprises in Romania, especially in Timiș County, where the trade sector is closely linked to industrial activity (NIS, 2023). Studies show that proximity to the markets of Hungary and Serbia contributes to the competitiveness of businesses in this region (European Commission, 2023).

For the West region, the number of businesses in trade reflects a dynamic influenced by economic crises and subsequent adaptation to new economic conditions, highlighting a relatively stable sector but with modest growth in recent years (Figure 8). Starting with 16,187 businesses in trade in 2000, the West region experienced a decline to 14,378 in 2002, followed by a gradual recovery, reaching 18,826 in 2008.

This period reflects both the economic adjustments after the transition from the planned economy and the economic growth of the pre-crisis period.

**Figure 8. The evolution of the total number of enterprises in the trade sector – West, 2000-2021 (no.)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

After the growth in 2008, the number of enterprises decreased significantly in 2009 to 17,348, and then continued to decline until it reached 14,165 in 2011. This sharp decrease indicates a high vulnerability of the trade sector to the global economic crisis.

Starting in 2012, the number of businesses in trade stabilized within a narrow range, fluctuating between 14,323 in 2016 and 14,606 in 2013. This period suggests an adaptation to the new economic conditions and a maintenance of a less dynamic trade sector compared to other regions.

In 2020, the number of enterprises slightly increased to 14,732, and in 2021, it reached 14,857, indicating the sector's rapid adaptation to the new challenges brought about by the pandemic, such as e-commerce and economic support measures. In conclusion, the West region experienced a relatively stable evolution in the number of businesses in trade after the 2008-2009 crisis, demonstrating a moderate adaptation to economic challenges and a slight increase in recent years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The West region, especially the counties of Timiș and Arad, records a significant number of employees in the retail sector, ranking second after Bucharest-Ilfov in terms of attractiveness for employers. In 2022, approximately 11% of retail employees nationwide were in this region, and the average salaries in the sector were comparable to those in the North-West region, being 5% above the national average (NIS, 2023). A report of PwC made by ABSL (2019) suggests that the proximity to the borders with Hungary and Serbia facilitates cross-border trade, thus creating new employment opportunities in retail and related services.

Wages in retail grew from 542.2 million lei in 2000 to 2,310.4 million lei in 2007, marking an increase of over 4.26 times (Appendix 4). This growth indicates a steady economic consolidation of the region in the period leading up to the global financial crisis. The number of employees fluctuated, rising from 129.4 thousand in 2000 to 138.6 thousand in 2007. Although the workforce in retail increased, the pace was slower than in other regions, suggesting a more limited labor market or a less developed retail sector.

Wages continued to rise slightly, from 3,149.8 million lei in 2008 to 3,274.8 million lei in 2009, but decreased in 2010 to 3,184.2 million lei, reflecting the effects of the financial crisis on the region's

economy, with stagnation in economic progress during this period. The number of employees dropped from 143 thousand in 2008 to 133.3 thousand in 2010, indicating a decline in retail employment, demonstrating the region's vulnerability to global economic shocks.

Following the financial crisis, wages in retail steadily increased, reaching 7,672.8 million lei in 2019, which represents a more than 2.4-fold increase compared to 2010. This trend indicates a slow but robust economic recovery process. The number of employees showed a gradual increase, from 144.4 thousand in 2011 to 163 thousand in 2019, suggesting a moderate capacity to absorb the workforce, yet lower compared to other regions, such as Bucharest-Ilfov.

In 2020, compared to 2019, wages experienced a slight decline, from 7,672.8 million lei to 7,590.8 million lei. However, they quickly rebounded in 2021, reaching 8,285.5 million lei, signaling that the region managed to adapt to the new economic conditions. The number of employees saw a significant increase in 2020 and 2021, rising from 163 thousand in 2019 to 178.2 thousand in 2020 and 186 thousand in 2021. This growth indicates a strong resilience of the retail sector, which succeeded in attracting more workforce amid the pandemic.

#### **4.5 North-East**

The North-East region is the least economically developed, contributing only 7% to the national GDP. This outcome is influenced by low wages and a reduced number of businesses in the retail sector. The region requires significant investments in infrastructure and workforce training to enhance its economic competitiveness.

Between 2000 and 2007, the North-East regions experienced sustained GDP growth, similar to the evolution of other regions in Romania (Figure 9). The GDP increased from 9,553.5 million lei in 2000 to 57,192.1 million lei in 2008, marking a consistent and significant rise.

This growth can largely be attributed to improvements in infrastructure, the attraction of investments, and the development of the commerce sector. The region began to integrate more and more into both national and international economies, with trade playing a key role in accelerating this process. During this period, the North-East regions benefited from a stabilization of the labor market and an increase in the number of employees in commerce, which had a positive contribution to the region's GDP.

The global financial crisis of 2008-2010 also impacted the North-East region, but not as severely as in other parts of the world. The region's GDP stagnated in 2009-2010, remaining at 57,159.4 million lei in 2009 and seeing a slight increase in 2010 (57,759.6 million lei). This was a period during which trade, in particular, felt the effects of the decline in domestic demand and the challenges posed by the global economic downturn.

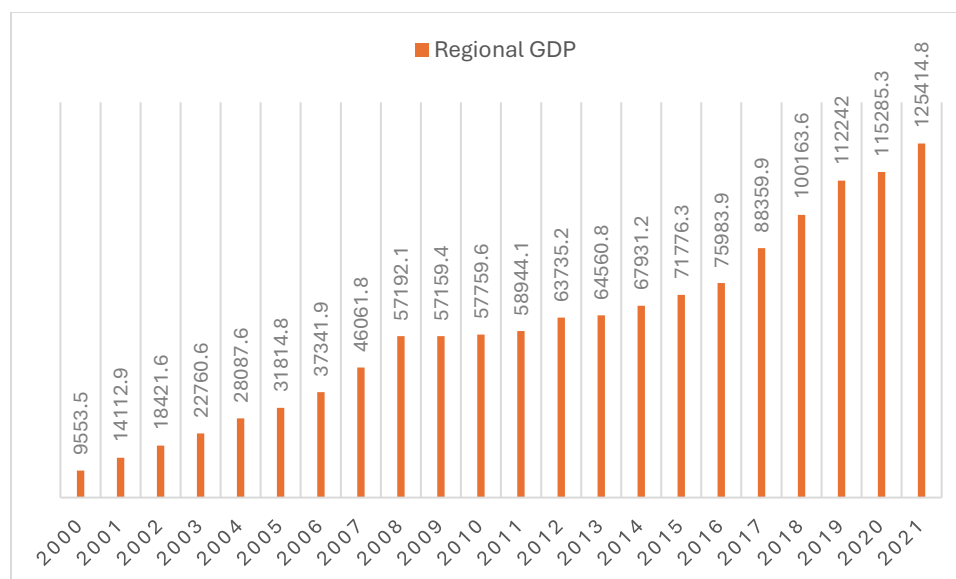
However, the trade sector managed to demonstrate a certain level of resilience by adjusting its business model and shifting focus towards both domestic consumption and external markets. Additionally, economic support measures, such as tax incentives and support for small and medium-sized enterprises, helped mitigate the impact of the crisis on the region's GDP.

After the global financial crisis, the North-East regions recorded a significant recovery in GDP, rising from 58,944.1 million lei in 2011 to 112,242 million lei in 2019, with an average annual growth rate of approximately 6.4%.

This period of recovery and expansion was supported by the rebound in consumption and economic activities, especially in the retail and service sectors. The retail trade and services had a significant impact on economic growth, while infrastructure development and the attraction of new investments contributed to strengthening the regional economy. The increase in wages and the improvement in living standards also supported domestic demand, thereby stimulating activity in trade (Figure 9).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the global economy, and the North-East region was no exception. In 2020, the region's GDP increased to 115,285.3 million lei, despite the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and the decline in international demand.

**Figure 9. The evolution of the regional GDP in the North-East region during the period 2000-2021 (million lei)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The trade sector was directly affected by the health crisis but demonstrated great adaptability, especially through the rapid transition to online commerce and adjusting the business model. Even under lockdown conditions, online commerce and trade in essential products allowed a significant part of the economic activity to be maintained. This fast adaptability of the trade sector had a positive impact on the stabilization of the region's GDP.

In 2021, the regions in the North-East continued to record a rapid economic recovery, with a significant GDP growth reaching 125,414.8 million lei, representing an increase of approximately 8.8% compared to 2020. This was a period in which the trade sector made an important contribution to GDP growth, through the continuation of digitalization and the adaptation of the business model to the post-pandemic market demands.

Additionally, government economic aid and support for small and medium-sized enterprises played a significant role in maintaining a stable economy and in the region's rapid recovery.

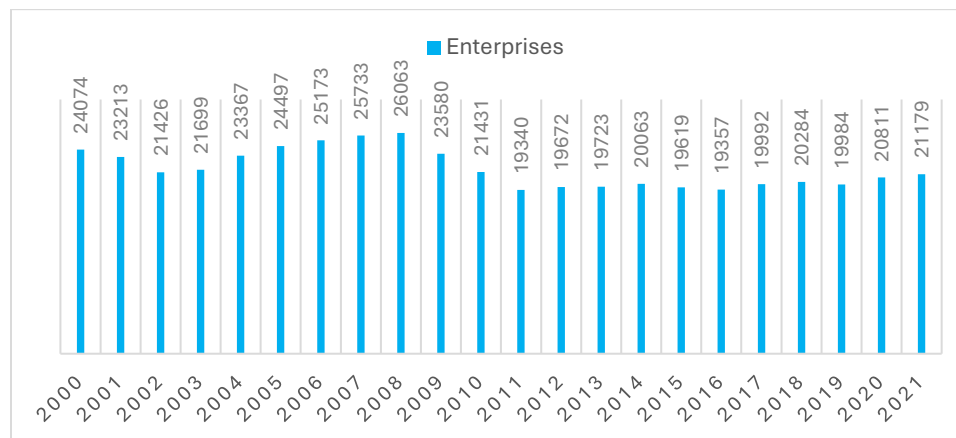
For the North-East region, the number of enterprises in the trade sector has evolved in a manner reflecting both the impact of the 2008 global economic crisis and the subsequent economic adjustments, including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 10). Starting in 2000, the number of trade enterprises increased from 24,074 in 2000 to 26,063 in 2008. However, in 2009, this number dropped significantly to 23,580, highlighting the financial crisis's impact on the establishment of new businesses.

Following the 2008–2009 economic crisis, the number of enterprises continued to decline, reaching 19,340 in 2011 and 19,619 in 2015. These decreases suggest an adjustment period in which many trade enterprises struggled to withstand economic pressures. From 2015 onward, the number of enterprises began to stabilize and even increase slightly, reaching 20,179 in 2019. This indicates a gradual recovery of the trade sector in the North-East region, amid a mildly recovering economy.

In 2020, despite the global economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of trade enterprises in the North-East region rose to 20,811, reaching 21,179 in 2021. This trend suggests the sector's ability to adapt quickly, facilitated by the transition to online commerce and the implementation of government support measures. Thus, the trade sector in the North-East region has experienced a volatile trajectory, marked by a significant decline during the financial crisis, followed by a slow yet steady recovery

in the post-crisis period and during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a moderate increase in the number of trade enterprises in recent years.

**Figure 10. The evolution of the total number of enterprises in the trade sector – North-East, 2000-2021 (no.)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The North-East region, one of the poorest regions in Romania, has a relatively low number of employees in commerce and wages below the national average. In 2022, the number of employees in commerce in this region represented approximately 8% of the national total, while wages were 15% below the national average (NIS, 2023). A report by the European Commission (2023) highlights that limited economic development and the lack of adequate infrastructure hinder the development of the commerce sector, which is reflected in employment opportunities and the standard of living.

Wages in the trade sector increased significantly, from 639.5 lei in 2000 to 2,279.7 lei in 2007, marking a growth of over 3.5 times (Appendix 5). This trend reflects the gradual development of the region, albeit at a slower pace compared to more developed regions such as Bucharest-Ilfov. The number of employees saw a modest increase, from 163,000 in 2000 to 181,100 in 2007, indicating relative stability in the labor market within the trade sector. However, this growth was lower than in other regions, suggesting a less dynamic economy.

Wages continued to rise during the financial crisis, from 2,962.9 lei in 2008 to a peak of 3,386.4 lei in 2009, followed by a slight decline to 3,071.8 lei in 2010. This reflects both companies' efforts to maintain competitiveness and the region's economic vulnerability to external shocks. The number of employees slightly declined, from 187,000 in 2008 to 177,000 in 2010. This decrease indicates an impact on the trade sector; however, the effect was not dramatic, demonstrating a certain level of regional resilience.

After the crisis, wages in the trade sector steadily increased, reaching 7,980.6 lei in 2019, which represents a 2.6-fold increase compared to 2010. This trend suggests an improvement in economic conditions and a gradual convergence with more developed regions. The number of employees grew from 178,900 in 2011 to 261,800 in 2019, marking a significant increase. This trend indicates an expansion of the trade sector and an enhanced capacity to absorb labor in response to rising demand for goods and services.

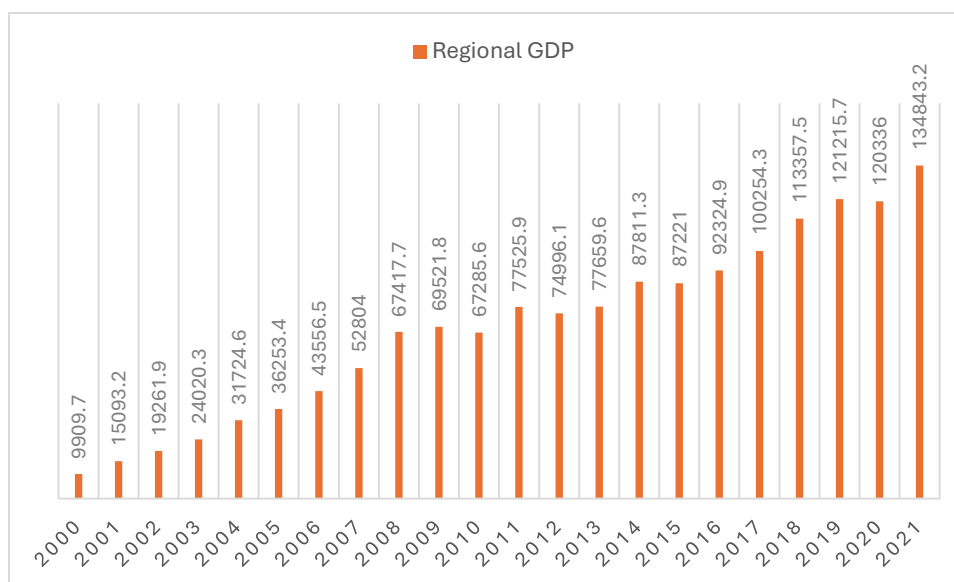
During the pandemic crisis, wages slightly declined from 7,980.6 lei in 2019 to 7,828.9 lei in 2020 but quickly rebounded in 2021, reaching 8,323.4 lei. This reflects the relatively rapid adaptation of the trade sector to new conditions, including the adoption of e-commerce. The number of employees slightly decreased in 2020, from 261,800 to 258,900, but significantly increased in 2021, reaching 288,300, indicating a strong recovery and growing labor demand in this sector. The North-East region demonstrated

relatively good economic resilience; however, wage and employment growth lagged behind more developed regions. Although wages in the trade sector have increased significantly, they remain among the lowest at the national level, highlighting the persistent economic disparities between the North-East and other regions of Romania.

#### 4.6 South Muntenia Region

The South Muntenia region contributes approximately 8% to the national GDP, but economic performance is uneven across its counties. Prahova and Argeş are regional leaders due to their developed industries, which stimulate commerce. The NIS report (2023) indicates that economic development is concentrated in urban areas, while rural areas remain underdeveloped.

**Figure 11. The evolution of the regional GDP in the South Muntenia region during the period 2000-2021 (million lei)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The South Muntenia region recorded steady and accelerated GDP growth between 2000 and 2007, from 9,909.7 million lei to 67,417.7 million lei, equivalent to an average annual growth of approximately 23% (Figure 11). This period was marked by rapid economic development, facilitated infrastructure investments, and growth in the commerce sector, which supported domestic consumption and contributed to the regional economic dynamics. The development of wholesale and retail trade in the large cities of the region was a key driver of this growth.

The impact of the global financial crisis was evident during the 2008-2010 period, when the region's GDP fluctuated. In 2009, GDP increased to 69,521.8 million lei, but decreased in 2010 to 67,285.6 million lei, indicating a moderate economic contraction.

The retail sector felt significant pressure, especially due to the decline in domestic consumption and the financial difficulties faced by the population. However, certain segments, such as the trade in essential goods, mitigated the negative impact on the overall economy.

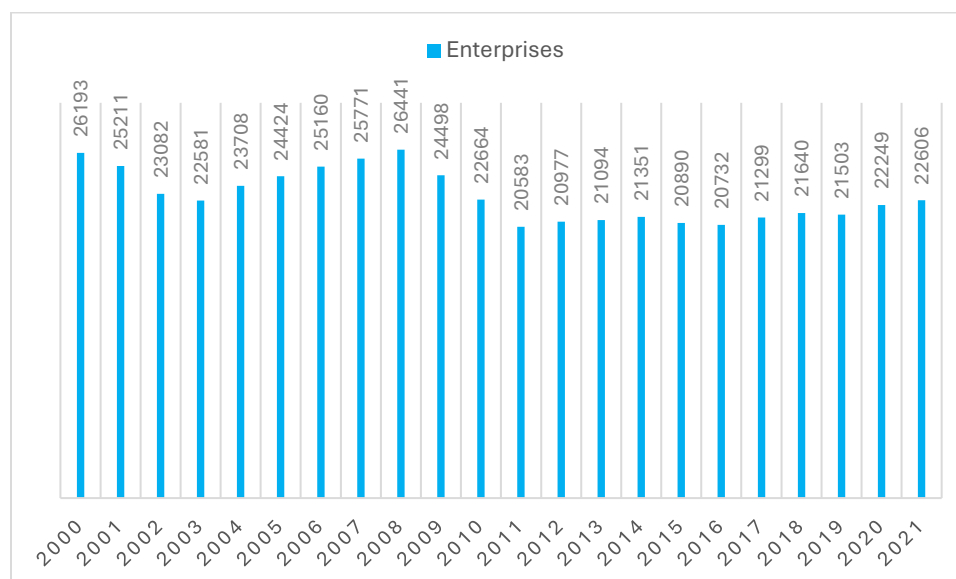
Between 2011 and 2019, the region's GDP grew from 77,525.9 million lei to 121,215.7 million lei, reflecting an average annual growth of 5.8%. The region benefited from a period of solid economic growth, driven by investments aimed at improving local infrastructure and energizing the trade sector. The economic recovery was accompanied by an increase in the population's income, which stimulated domestic

demand. Trade played a decisive role in strengthening the local market, providing a favorable environment for business development and job creation.

In 2020, the region's GDP slightly decreased to 120,336 million lei, compared to the 2019 level, reflecting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This moderate decline was due to both the economic restrictions imposed and the reduction in domestic consumption and mobility. The retail sector was affected by the temporary closure of physical stores and the decrease in demand for non-essential goods. However, online trade increased significantly, and the food and pharmaceutical segments remained resilient, contributing to the maintenance of relative stability.

In 2021, the GDP of the South Muntenia region increased to 134,843.2 million lei, marking a significant recovery with a 12% growth compared to the previous year. This reflects the region's ability to recover quickly after the pandemic shock, benefiting from the easing of restrictive measures and the growth in domestic demand.

**Figure 12. The evolution of the total number of enterprises in the trade sector – South Muntenia, 2000-2021 (no.)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The evolution of the number of trade enterprises in the South Muntenia region reflects both the general economic context and regional specificities, marking distinct phases influenced by major economic events (Figure 12). In 2000, the region had 26,193 trade enterprises, but this number declined to 23,082 in 2002. Starting in 2004, the sector experienced a steady recovery, reaching a peak of 26,441 in 2008, just before the global economic crisis took its toll.

Following the 2008–2009 financial crisis, South Muntenia witnessed a gradual but moderate recovery. The number of trade enterprises fell from 26,441 in 2008 to 24,498 in 2009 and further to 22,664 in 2010, reflecting the significant economic difficulties faced by small and medium-sized enterprises in the trade sector during the crisis.

After a further decline to 20,583 in 2011, the number of enterprises began to rise slowly, reaching 21,503 in 2019. This period indicates a gradual stabilization, albeit with a slower recovery pace compared to other regions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of trade enterprises increased from 21,503 in 2019 to 22,249 in 2020 and 22,606 in 2021. This suggests the sector's adaptation through activity diversification and a potential shift toward online commerce. Amid the pandemic, the trade sector demonstrated resilience

and an ability to adjust to new economic conditions, reaching levels close to those recorded before the financial crisis in 2021.

Trade was a key factor in this recovery, supported by digitalization, the expansion of online commerce, and the reopening of physical stores. Increased consumption and government support measures stimulated the regional economy, allowing the region to reach a new economic peak.

Wages in trade increased significantly, from 639.5 million lei in 2000 to 2,279.7 million lei in 2007, marking an increase of over 3.5 times (Appendix 6). This evolution reflects the gradual development of the region, but at a slower pace compared to more developed regions such as Bucharest-Ilfov. The number of employees saw modest growth, from 163 thousand in 2000 to 181.1 thousand in 2007, indicating a relative stability in the labor market within trade. However, this progress is smaller than in other regions, suggesting a less dynamic economy.

The wages continued to rise during the financial crisis, from 2,962.9 million lei in 2008 to a peak of 3,386.4 million lei in 2009, followed by a slight decrease to 3,071.8 million lei in 2010. This reflects both companies' efforts to maintain competitiveness and the region's economy's vulnerability to external shocks. The number of employees decreased slightly, from 187 thousand in 2008 to 177 thousand in 2010. This decline indicates an impact on the trade sector, but the effect was not dramatic, demonstrating a certain degree of regional resilience.

After the crisis, salaries in the trade sector steadily increased, reaching 7,980.6 million lei in 2019, which represents a 2.6-fold increase compared to 2010. This trend suggests an improvement in economic conditions and a gradual convergence with more developed regions. The number of employees grew from 178.9 thousand in 2011 to 261.8 thousand in 2019, marking a significant increase. This trend indicates an expansion of the commercial sector and an increased capacity to absorb labor in the context of growing demand for goods and services.

During the pandemic crisis, salaries slightly decreased, from 7,980.6 million lei in 2019 to 7,828.9 million lei in 2020, but quickly rebounded in 2021, reaching 8,323.4 million lei. This reflects the relatively quick adaptation of the trade sector to the new conditions, including the adoption of e-commerce. The number of employees slightly decreased in 2020, from 261.8 thousand to 258.9 thousand, but increased significantly in 2021, reaching 288.3 thousand, indicating a strong recovery and a rise in demand for labor in this sector. The North-East region demonstrated relatively good economic resilience, but the evolution of wages and employment was slower compared to more developed regions. Although wages in the trade sector increased significantly, they remain among the lowest at the national level, highlighting the persistent economic disparities between the North-East and other regions of Romania.

#### **4.7 South-East Region**

The South-East region, which includes Constanța County, contributes approximately 9% to the national GDP. The Port of Constanța plays a key role in generating added value in trade, and tourism activities support the region's economic performance (European Commission, 2023). A study conducted by Ibinceanu (2021) highlights the untapped potential of the region, suggesting that investments in infrastructure could increase its contribution to GDP (Figure 13).

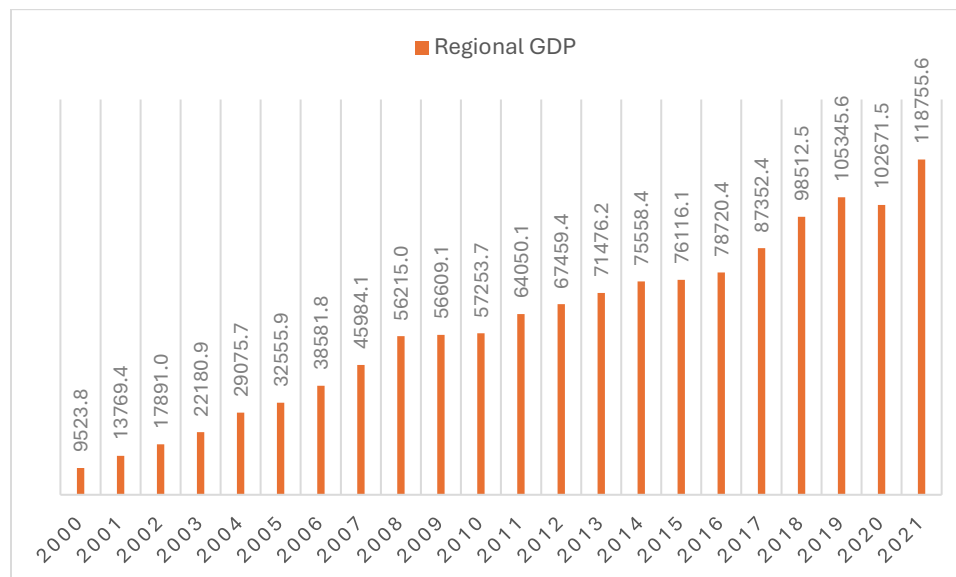
Between 2000 and 2007, the South-East region experienced continuous GDP growth, increasing from 9,523.8 million lei in 2000 to 56,215 million lei in 2008 (Figure 13). This reflected a significant rise in economic activity, supported by improvements in infrastructure, the development of the trade sector, and the integration of the regional economy into both domestic and external markets.

This pre-crisis period was marked by the expansion of the trade sector, particularly in urban areas, where new shopping centers emerged, and the number of employees in the retail sector grew significantly. This progress had a significant impact on the region's GDP, which benefited from a balanced development of economic sectors.

In the 2008-2010 timeframe, the global financial crisis had a negative impact on the South-East region, and the region's GDP stagnated or grew at a slower pace. In 2009, the GDP was 56,609.1 million

lei, almost the same as in 2008, and in 2010, the GDP reached 57,253.7 million lei, showing a slight increase compared to the previous year.

**Figure 13. The evolution of the regional GDP in the South-East region during the period 2000-2021 (million lei)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The retail sector was affected by the decline in domestic demand and limited consumption, but it was also a period in which trade in basic goods and the online retail sector managed to sustain part of the economic activity. The region demonstrated moderate resilience, supported by the economic measures taken at the national level to support SMEs and consumption.

After the global financial crisis, between 2011 and 2019, the South-East region recorded sustained GDP growth, increasing from 64,050.1 million lei in 2011 to 105,345.6 million lei in 2019, with an average annual growth rate of approximately 5.2%.

This period of growth was marked by the development of infrastructure and the commerce sector, as well as an increase in the number of jobs and wages in the commerce sector. Additionally, the attraction of both domestic and foreign investments, along with the strengthening of the domestic consumer market, supported the expansion of the region's GDP.

Commerce continued to play a major role during this period, with adaptation to economic changes and the growing importance of online retail contributing to the region's GDP growth. The South-East region experienced relatively good economic stability compared to other areas of the country.

In 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the GDP of the South-East region decreased to 102,671.5 million lei, a significant decline compared to the 2019 levels. This reflects the impact of the health crisis on the economy, with reduced domestic demand and a slowdown in economic activities. However, compared to other regions of Romania, the decline was not drastic, and recovery began swiftly.

During this period, the retail sector demonstrated moderate resilience, with a rapid adaptation to online commerce and a focus on essential products. Additionally, the government implemented support measures to reduce the economic impact of the pandemic, and some segments of retail, such as the trade in food and pharmaceuticals, even experienced growth.

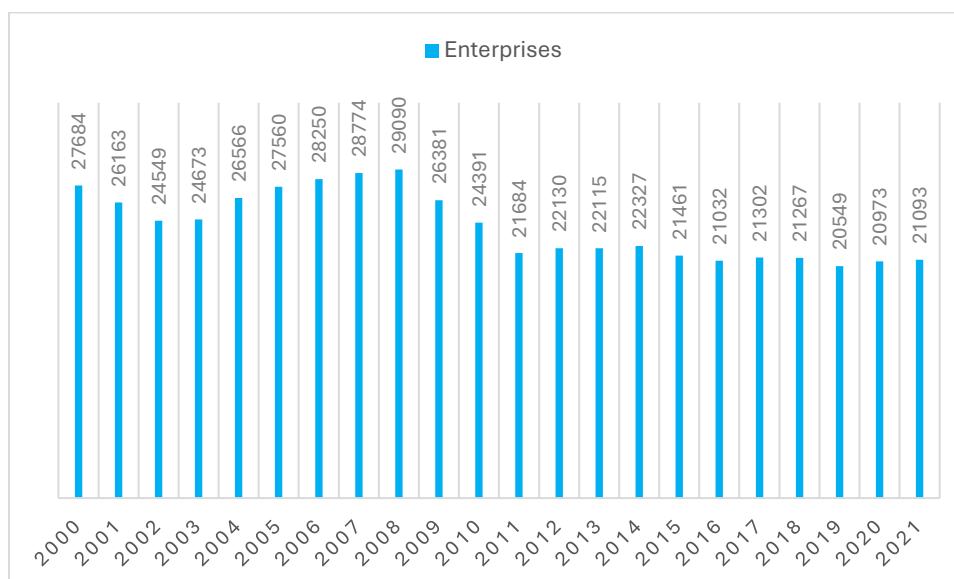
In 2021, the GDP of the South-East region increased to 118,755.6 million lei, marking a significant recovery compared to the previous year, with a growth of approximately 15.6% compared to 2020. During

this period, the retail sector played a crucial role in the economic recovery, and the urban areas in the South-East benefited from the digitalization of retail and a rebound of the domestic demand.

Thus, despite the economic challenges caused by the pandemic, the retail sector demonstrated the ability to quickly adapt, transition to online commerce, and respond to the changing market demands. The economic recovery in 2021 was supported by the increase in wages, government economic measures, and the increased demand for consumer goods.

The South-East region includes maritime counties such as Constanța and Tulcea, where trade is closely linked to port activities and tourism. The Port of Constanța, the largest port on the Black Sea, plays a crucial role in stimulating international trade, facilitating the growth of the number of commercial enterprises. In 2022, this region hosted approximately 12% of the national commercial enterprises (European Commission, 2023). However, economic disparities between coastal regions or cities and more isolated areas remain a structural issue (European Commission, 2023) (Figure 14).

**Figure 14. The evolution of the total number of enterprises in the trade sector – South-East, 2000-2021 (no.)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

In the South-East region, the dynamics of the number of commercial enterprises highlight the influence of significant economic factors and the resilience of this sector in the face of crises (Figure 14). In 2000, the number of enterprises stood at 27,684, but it declined to 24,549 in 2002, reflecting the economic difficulties of that period. After 2004, the sector experienced a steady recovery, reaching a peak of 29,090 enterprises in 2008, before the impact of the global financial crisis.

In 2009, the number of enterprises decreased to 26,381, and this downward trend continued, reaching 24,391 in 2010. These values demonstrated the vulnerability of the trade sector in the face of the economic crisis.

In the post-crisis period, between 2011 and 2019, the number of enterprises decreased from 21,684 in 2011 to 20,549 in 2019, indicating difficulties in revitalizing the sector, with a general downward trend.

In 2020, the number of enterprises slightly increased to 20,973 and to 21,093 in 2021. This growth, although modest, suggests an adaptation to the new economic conditions, such as the shift towards online commerce and the implementation of support measures.

The South-East region, with Constanța county as its main economic center, has a relatively high number of employees in trade due to tourism and port activities. In 2022, approximately 10% of employees

in trade were in this region, and the wages were comparable to the national average (European Commission, 2023). The Port of Constanța plays an important role in economic development, facilitating international trade and creating well-paid jobs in the wholesale and retail trade sectors (European Commission, 2023).

Between 2000 and 2007, the South-East region recorded significant increases in average wages in trade, from 870.7 million lei in 2000 to 2,877.8 million lei in 2007 (Appendix 7). This progress highlights the economic development of the region and the expansion of the commercial sector before the global financial crisis. At the same time, the number of employees remained relatively stable, increasing from 179.3 thousand in 2000 to 189.3 thousand in 2007. This indicates a moderate expansion of the labor market in trade.

During the financial crisis, wages experienced fluctuations. After a peak of 4,588.2 million lei in 2009, average wages decreased to 4,101.6 million lei in 2010. This decrease reflects the economic impact of the recession on the commercial sector. The number of employees decreased significantly, from 195.2 thousand in 2008 to 178 thousand in 2010, indicating difficulties in maintaining jobs.

Between 2011 and 2019, the region experienced a solid economic recovery. Average wages increased continuously, rising from 4,484.6 million lei in 2011 to 9,441.9 million lei in 2019. Additionally, the number of employees gradually grew, reaching 221.6 thousand in 2019, reflecting a strengthening of the labor market in trade.

The pandemic brought challenges, but the South-East region demonstrated resilience. Average wages continued to rise, reaching 9,885.5 million lei in 2021, with a slight increase from 9,385.3 million lei in 2020. Regarding the number of employees, it grew slightly, from 224.7 thousand in 2020 to 227.1 thousand in 2021, suggesting an ability of employers to adapt to the new economic conditions.

#### **4.8 South-West Oltenia Region**

The South-West Oltenia region has the smallest contribution to the national GDP, approximately 6%. Factors limiting economic development include the small number of businesses and low wages. The development of trade is hindered by the lack of infrastructure and the migration of the workforce (ADR South-West Oltenia, 2021) (Figure 15).

Between 2000 and 2007, the GDP of the South-West Oltenia region recorded significant growth, increasing from 7,036.1 million lei in 2000 to 34,016.9 million lei in 2007 (Figure 15). This advance was supported by the modernization of the local industry, particularly in the energy sector and natural resource processing, as well as the expansion of the domestic trade market. Public investments in infrastructure and the region's connectivity with other parts of the country contributed to economic growth. During this period, the trade sector played a role in diversifying the economy, stimulating domestic demand, and generating new jobs.

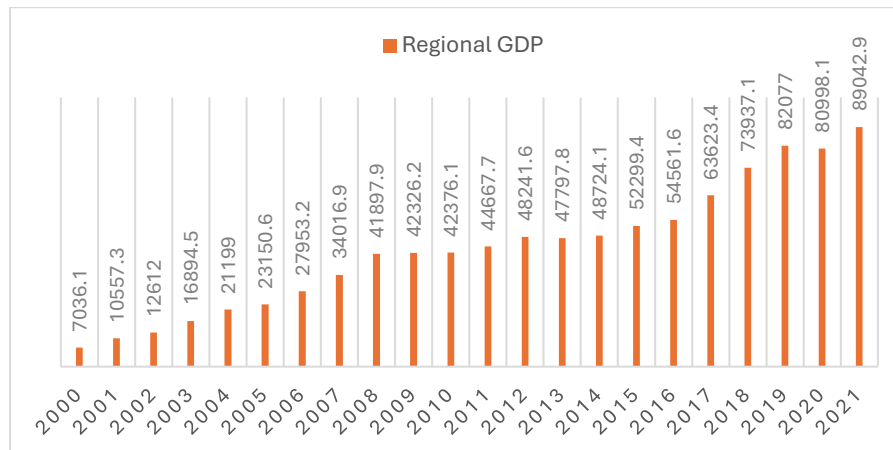
The global financial crisis affected the economy of the South-West Oltenia region, yet GDP remained relatively stable: 41,897.9 million lei in 2008, 42,326.2 million lei in 2009, and 42,376.1 million lei in 2010. Despite a decline in external demand and reductions in industrial investments, the region managed to maintain a certain level of economic stability due to domestic trade and support from government programs.

The period 2011–2019 was characterized by a sustained GDP growth, rising from 44,667.7 million lei in 2011 to 82,077 million lei in 2019. This economic expansion was driven by the modernization of regional infrastructure and economic diversification, with a focus on the development of trade and services. Foreign direct investments contributed to strengthening the industrial sector, while trade remained a key factor in sustaining domestic demand. The modernization and expansion of commercial markets, including the integration of digital solutions, further stimulated the region's economic development.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges to the economy of the region, but it demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation. The GDP slightly decreased in 2020 to 80,998.1 million lei but recovered in 2021 to 89,042.9 million lei. Electronic commerce increased significantly, and the support provided by government and European programs contributed to economic recovery. The economic

activities in the trade sector played a key role in maintaining domestic demand and reducing the economic impact of the pandemic on the region.

**Figure 15. The evolution of the regional GDP in the South-West Oltenia region during the period 2000-2021 (million lei)**

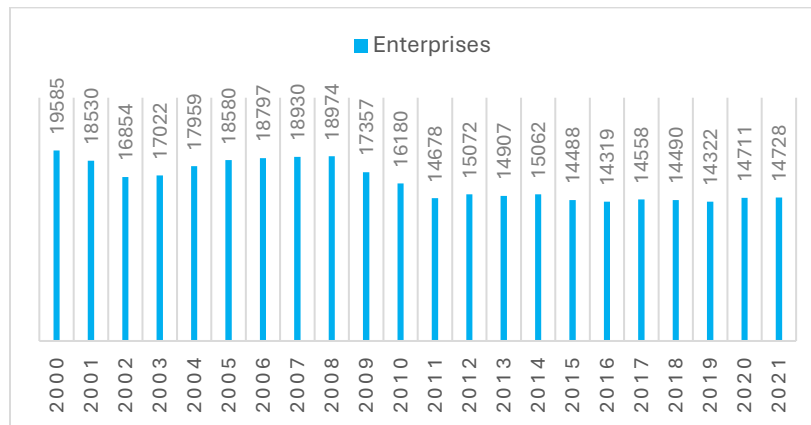


Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The South-West Oltenia region, particularly the counties of Dolj and Gorj, faces significant economic challenges, as reflected in the low number of enterprises in the trade sector. Although cities such as Craiova have experienced some economic improvements, the region as a whole is characterized by an economy dominated by the agricultural sector and a lack of major investments in commercial infrastructure (NIS, 2023). In 2022, South-West Oltenia recorded one of the lowest densities of commercial enterprises in the country, accounting for less than 8% of the national total (European Commission, 2023) (Figure 16).

For the South-West Oltenia region, the evolution of the number of enterprises in the trade sector has been marked by significant fluctuations, influenced by economic crises and local conditions (Figure 16). In 2000, the number of trade enterprises stood at 19,585. This was followed by a decline to 16,854 in 2002, after which the sector gradually recovered, reaching 18,974 in 2008. This growth reflects the region's economic consolidation and the expansion of the trade sector up until the global financial crisis of 2008–2009.

**Figure 16. The evolution of the total number of enterprises in the trade sector – South-West Oltenia, 2000-2021 (no.)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The number of enterprises decreased significantly during the crisis, dropping from 18,974 in 2008 to 17,357 in 2009 and further to 14,678 in 2011. This reduction highlights the region's high vulnerability to external economic shocks.

After reaching a low point in 2011, the number of enterprises fluctuated slightly between 15,072 in 2012 and 14,322 in 2019. This period reflects difficulties in revitalizing the trade sector, with a tendency towards economic stagnation.

The trade sector in the South-West region was severely affected by the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 and faced difficulties in recovering in the following years. However, the signs of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate an ability of businesses to adapt, although levels remain below those of the pre-crisis period.

Between 2000 and 2007, the average wages in the trade sector for the South-West Oltenia region increased from 495.5 lei to 1,637.5 lei, marking a growth of over 3 times (Appendix 8), indicating an improvement in remuneration within the sector, supported by both regional and national economic dynamics.

In contrast, the number of employees remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 109,200 and 114,000 people. This suggests that economic growth was driven more by productivity increases rather than labor force expansion.

During the financial crisis, the wages followed a mixed trajectory: after an initial rise from 2,184.6 lei in 2008 to 2,326.3 lei in 2009, they declined to 2,072.6 lei in 2010. On the other hand, the number of employees remained stable, fluctuating slightly around 115,000. This indicates that the trade sector managed to limit job losses despite economic challenges.

After 2010, the region experienced steady progress. Average wages rose significantly, reaching 5,180.2 lei in 2019. At the same time, the number of employees increased from 113,100 in 2011 to 158,600 in 2019. This growth reflects an expansion of the trade sector, associated with a higher demand for labor.

In the context of the pandemic, average wages continued to grow moderately, from 5,198.5 lei in 2020 to 5,542.2 lei in 2021. This suggests significant resilience of the sector in the face of this shock. Regarding the number of employees, a slight decline was observed compared to 2019, stabilizing at approximately 157,700 in 2021.

#### ***4.9 Recent evolutions at regional level***

In order to provide an overview of the evolution of the two indicators analyzed in 2022 and 2023 (the most recent years identified in official statistics, NIS), a comparative analysis of the evolution of the structures by development regions was carried out (the value of the total regional GDP was reported to the total national GDP). Thus, the years 2014 and 2022 (respectively 2023) will be compared for the indicators of total GDP and number of active local firms in the trade sector.

##### **a. Total GDP Analysis**

- North West Region – in this region, the share of total regional GDP in the national one increased from 11.47% to 12.12%, with a maximum point of 12.39% in the year of the pandemic crisis; in this case, resilience (comparing 2022 with 2020) did not occur, the value of the indicator being below that recorded during the crisis, but also below that of 2019;

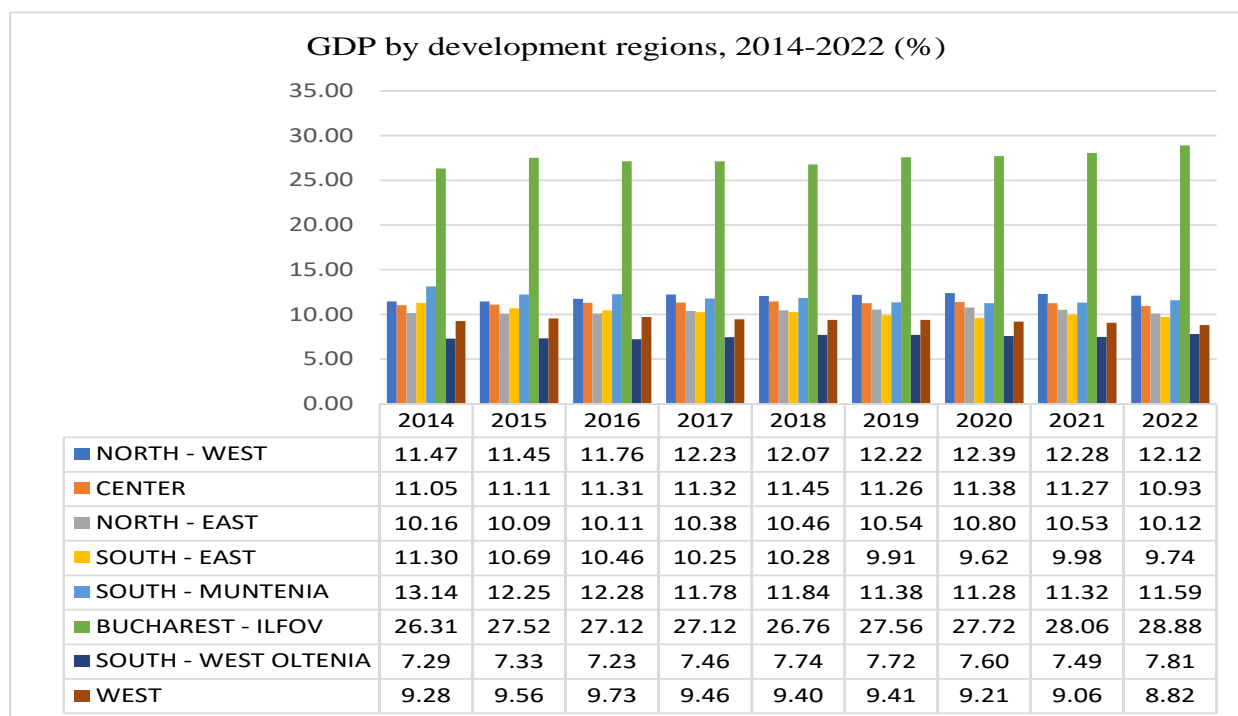
- Center Region – the share of regional GDP decreased in the total value at national level, from 11.05% to 10.93%; this region did not reach the level reported in 2020 (11.38%), nor did it reach the level in 2019 (11.26%);

- North East Region – the share of the indicator value in 2014 is close to that in 2022 (10.16%, respectively 10.12%); resilience from the perspective of the share of regional GDP in the national one has not been achieved;

- South East Region – the indicator's share registered a significant decrease in the analyzed period, from 11.30% to 9.74%; resilience was slightly achieved, but, compared to 2019, it was not at the reported value (10.54% compared to 9.74%);

- South Muntenia Region – in this case too, the indicator's share registered a decrease in its importance at the national level, from 13.14% to 11.59%; from a resilience perspective, this was achieved if we compare the values in 2022 with those in 2019 and 2020;
- Bucharest-Ilfov Region – the capital region has recorded a continuous increase in its importance at the national level, from 26.31% to 28.88%; even in the years of the pandemic, this share has recorded an increasing evolution;
- West Region – the indicator value compared to the national total decreased from 9.28% to 8.82%, and resilience was not achieved; after 2019, the indicator share registered a continuous downward trend (Figure 17).

**Figure 17. The evolution of the regional GDP, 2014-2022 (%)**

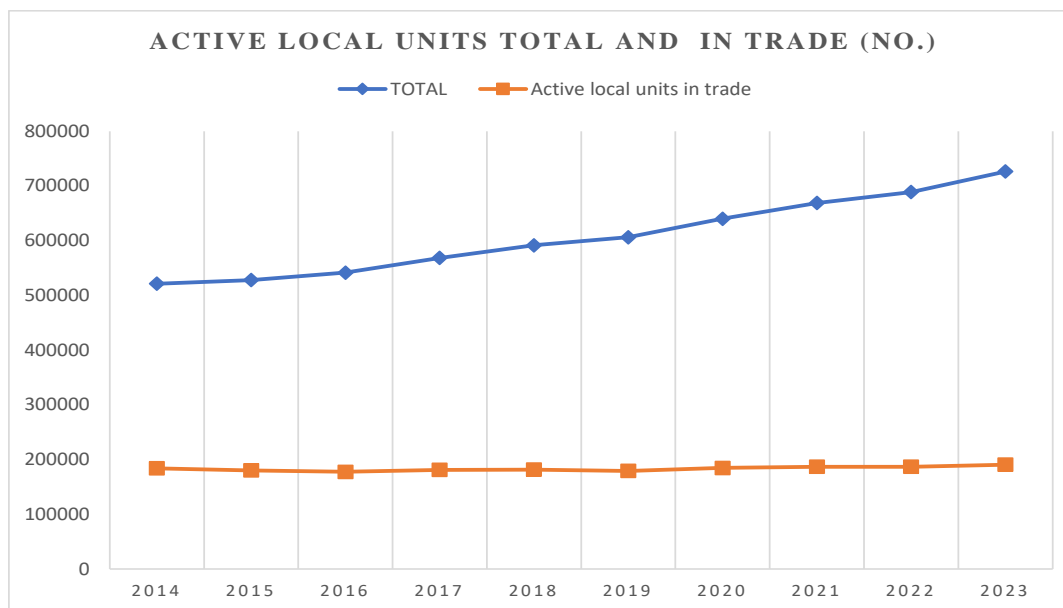


Source: own computation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

#### b. Analysis of the total number of active firms

At the national level, the total number of companies had a continuous growth trend, from 521,381 active companies to 726,508. Even during the health crisis, this growth trend was maintained. In the trade sector, this number increased from 184,176 companies to 190,833 companies, maintaining the growth trend during the pandemic period (Figure 18).

**Figure 18. The evolution of the total number of local active units and of the trade sector in Romania, 2014-2023 (%)**

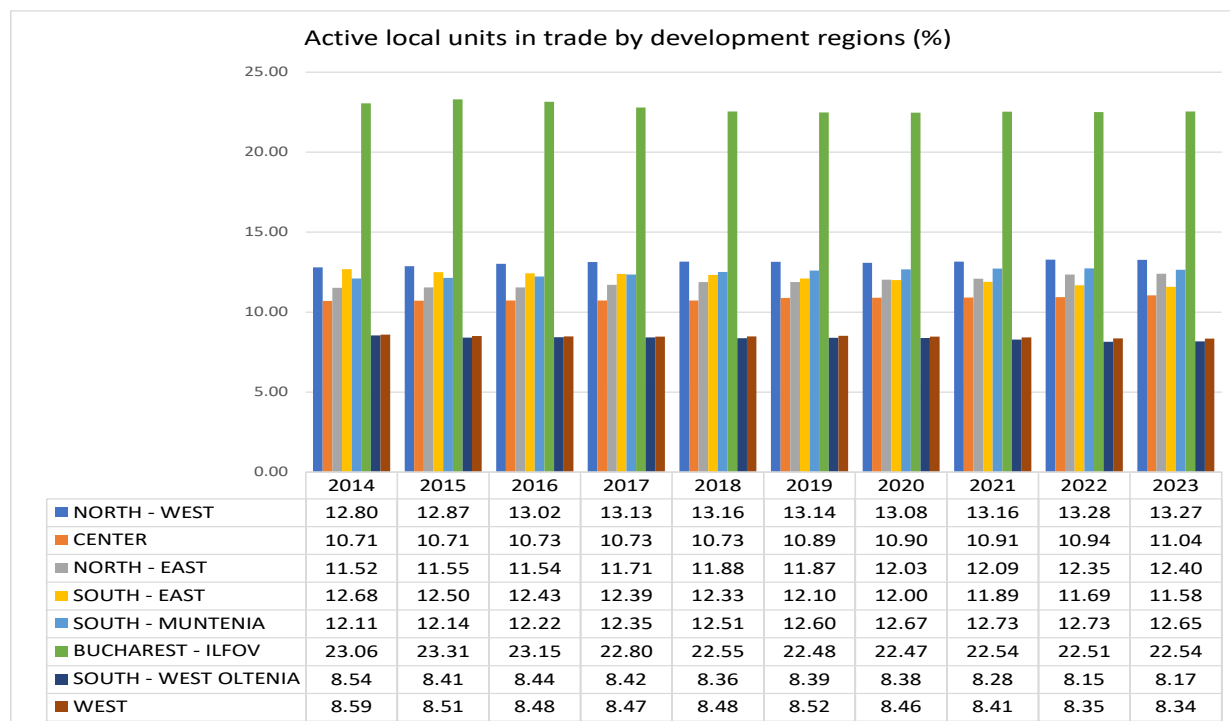


Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

The analysis of the importance of regionally active firms at the regional level is carried out in the following:

- North-West Region –the region increased from 12.8% to 13.27%; resilience has been achieved, the value in 2023 being higher than those in 2019 and 2020 (13.27% compared to 10.89% and 13.08%, respectively);
- Center Region – in this case, the evolution was increasing, from 10.71% to 11.04%; resilience was not reached;
- North-East Region – the trend was one of growth, from 11.52% to 12.40%; resilience was achieved;
- South-East Region – in this case, the trend was decreasing, from 12.68% to 11.58%, while resilience was not reached;
- South-Muntenia Region – recorded a slight increase, from 12.11% to 12.65%, resilience not being reached;
- Bucharest-Ilfov Region – the capital region recorded a decrease in the importance of active trade firms in the national total, from 23.06% to 22.54%; slight resilience was achieved in 2023, compared to 2019 and 2020;
- South-West Region – recorded a slight decrease, from 8.54% to 8.17%, without reaching resilience;
- West Region – this region decreased its importance as well, from 8.59% to 8.34%; regarding resilience, it was not reached (Figure 19).

**Figure 19. The evolution of the total number of active locale units in the trade sector, 2014-2023 (%)**



Source: Authors' own representation based on data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of the number of employees and wages in the trade sector across Romania's eight development regions highlights significant economic disparities. More developed regions, such as Bucharest-Ilfov, West, and North-West, benefit from higher wages and a substantial number of employees, whereas regions like North-East and South-West Oltenia face various economic challenges that impact both employment and salaries.

A noteworthy aspect is that the varying evolution of the number of employees across regions is closely tied to investment levels and local economic dynamics. Economically developed regions, such as Bucharest-Ilfov, have attracted a significant number of companies, leading to both wage increases and higher employment in the trade sector. In contrast, less developed regions have faced negative effects on the workforce due to economic restructuring and population migration, which have further impacted employment in this sector.

Analyses have revealed a stark contrast between Romania's developed and less developed regions regarding the trade sector's contribution to regional GDP. Economic disparities are driven by differences in the number of enterprises, employment levels, and wage rates. Trade has played a central role in economic growth, particularly during recovery periods. Rising household incomes, the expansion of online commerce, and strengthened domestic demand have supported economic performance. All regions experienced significant GDP growth between 2000 and 2021, marking notable economic progress backed by infrastructure investments, economic diversification, and trade expansion.

The distribution of the number of trade enterprises across Romania's regions reflects economic development levels and access to resources. Leading regions such as Bucharest-Ilfov, West, and North-West host a high number of enterprises, while economically weaker regions like North-East and South-West Oltenia lag significantly behind. This uneven distribution is shaped by factors including infrastructure,

foreign direct investment, and access to international markets, further deepening economic polarization. Consequently, proactive measures are needed to stimulate entrepreneurship in less developed areas.

For instance, Bucharest-Ilfov demonstrated superior resilience to economic crises, maintaining high enterprise numbers with moderate fluctuations—from 42,845 in 2000 to 40,719 in 2021. The North-West, North-East, and Center regions experienced notable fluctuations but lacked strong post-crisis growth. South-East and South Muntenia were more impacted by crises but stabilized after 2015, showing clearer recovery trends during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the West region, despite having the lowest absolute values, exhibited relative stability in the number of enterprises.

The financial crisis of 2008-2010 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to temporary GDP declines in most Romanian's regions. However, regional economies demonstrated resilience, swiftly recovering losses and resuming an upward trajectory. Economic disparities among Romania's development regions are evident in GDP analysis, with more developed areas—such as Bucharest-Ilfov, North-West and Center—leading economically due to their higher number of enterprises, employees, and wages. In contrast, North-East and South-West Oltenia face significant economic challenges that limit their contribution to national GDP.

Bucharest-Ilfov has exhibited the most dynamic economic growth, driven by resource concentration and substantial investments. The West, Center, and North-West regions have stood out due to their strategic positioning and attractiveness to foreign investments. Meanwhile, South and South-East have benefited from infrastructure modernization and economic diversification. The number of active trade enterprises varies significantly across regions, with Bucharest-Ilfov maintaining a dominant position in the national trade sector due to its high enterprise density and strong economic performance.

The disparities among Romania's eight development regions are also shaped by factors such as infrastructure, industrial development, and the economic attractiveness of each region, all of which have a direct influence on employment levels and wages in this sector. Less developed regions require additional investments and policies aimed at fostering economic convergence with more developed areas, particularly by enhancing competitiveness and reducing wage disparities.

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## Annexes

**Annex 1. The evolution of employees  
(thousands of people) and wages  
(millions of lei) in trade in the  
Bucharest-Ilfov region, during the  
period 2000-2021**

Year	Wages	Employees
2000	2039.5	292.8
2001	2981.7	294.9
2002	3518.1	306.1
2003	4115.1	294.5
2004	5123.7	294.4
2005	6808.8	302.6
2006	7887.3	326.5
2007	8314.6	338
2008	12548.1	348.4
2009	13209.1	347.7
2010	14019.7	338.6
2011	14484.4	337
2012	15804.1	344.1
2013	15893.4	353.1
2014	16355.9	355.9
2015	17372.3	381.3
2016	21028	383.9
2017	24781.8	377.3
2018	27939.4	396.8
2019	30916	388.2
2020	30821	395.1
2021	33080.3	403.7

**Annex 2. The evolution of employees  
(thousands of people) and wages  
(millions of lei) in trade in the North-  
West region, during the period 2000-  
2021**

Year	Wages	Employees
2000	679.4	173.9
2001	1057.7	175.2
2002	1364.8	182.3
2003	1670.2	175.6
2004	2074.7	174.6
2005	2451.4	170.9
2006	2810.7	184
2007	3073.9	190.9
2008	3964.7	197
2009	4258.2	200
2010	3795.6	193.4
2011	4231.9	203.6
2012	4363.8	214.8
2013	4715.8	220.4
2014	5315.2	230.9
2015	5642.7	246.5
2016	7106.9	251.3
2017	8469.3	256.6
2018	9707.9	274.2
2019	10650.7	276.9
2020	10229	276.6
2021	10849.2	297

Source: data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

**Annex 3. The evolution of employees (thousands of people) and wages (millions of lei) in trade in the Center region, during the period 2000-2021**

Year	Wages	Employees
2000	769.6	164.5
2001	1033.5	165.7
2002	1403.3	172.3
2003	1694.8	165.9
2004	2052.1	164.8
2005	2346.8	168.4
2006	2779.4	181.1
2007	2892.5	187.9
2008	3948.4	194
2009	4280.5	192.3
2010	3732.6	182.5
2011	4173	184.8
2012	4209.7	185
2013	4550	191.7
2014	5039.5	183.5
2015	5412	196.5
2016	6990.6	197.1
2017	7679.5	202.8
2018	9147	201.4
2019	9667.5	208.2
2020	9753.3	207.9
2021	10322.1	207.1

**Annex 4. The evolution of employees (thousands of people) and wages (millions of lei) in trade in the West region, during the period 2000-2021**

Year	Wages	Employees
2000	542.2	129.4
2001	815.1	130.3
2002	1090.5	135.3
2003	1345	130.4
2004	1565.6	122.8
2005	2031.2	124.3
2006	2277.3	134.1
2007	2310.4	138.6
2008	3149.8	143
2009	3274.8	141
2010	3184.2	133.3
2011	3510.7	144.4
2012	3536.5	141.6
2013	3830.2	142.8
2014	3927.9	143.8
2015	4375.7	155.4
2016	5239.6	154.6
2017	6249.1	155.5
2018	7139.7	165.5
2019	7672.8	163
2020	7590.8	178.2
2021	8285.5	186

Source: data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

**Annex 5. The evolution of employees  
(thousands of people) and wages (millions  
of lei) in trade in the North-East region,  
during the period 2000-2021**

Year	Wages	Employees
2000	639.5	163
2001	946.8	164.2
2002	1140.9	171.2
2003	1302.7	165
2004	1624.6	160.9
2005	1963	161.4
2006	2138.2	174.2
2007	2279.7	181.1
2008	2962.9	187
2009	3386.4	185.9
2010	3071.8	177
2011	3225.2	178.9
2012	3205	187.5
2013	3450.6	194.6
2014	3725.6	215.6
2015	3930.6	217
2016	5314.3	224.3
2017	6342.4	236.8
2018	7044.6	252.5
2019	7980.6	261.8
2020	7828.9	258.9
2021	8323.4	288.3

**Annex 6. The evolution of employees  
(thousands of people) and wages  
(millions of lei) in trade in the South  
Muntenia region, during the period  
2000-2021**

Year	Wages	Employees
2000	689.9	162
2001	979.8	163.2
2002	1269.1	169.9
2003	1417.6	163.7
2004	1633.1	157.1
2005	2104.1	159.4
2006	2289.6	171.8
2007	2361	178
2008	3158.6	183.9
2009	3833.8	184.1
2010	3349.9	174.7
2011	3471.2	163.5
2012	3472.7	177.6
2013	3932.5	177.9
2014	4071.8	186.2
2015	4344.3	200.9
2016	5597.3	207.3
2017	6538.4	229
2018	7433.6	238.6
2019	8003.2	240.3
2020	8267.5	246.4
2021	8996.5	238.8

Source: data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).

**Annex 7. The evolution of employees (thousands of people) and wages (millions of lei) in trade in the South-East region, during the period 2000-2021**

Year	Wages	Employees
2000	870.7	179.3
2001	1290.9	180.6
2002	1373.7	187.1
2003	1808.3	180.1
2004	2173.7	168.9
2005	2577.9	170.9
2006	2929.3	183.5
2007	2877.8	189.3
2008	4071.4	195.2
2009	4588.2	191.3
2010	4101.6	178
2011	4484.6	176.9
2012	4396.8	172.1
2013	4790.2	173.3
2014	5080.8	169.7
2015	5349.8	200.8
2016	6436.3	211.2
2017	7576.8	213.8
2018	8351.1	220.8
2019	9441.9	221.6
2020	9385.3	224.7
2021	9885.5	227.1

**Annex 8. The evolution of employees (thousands of people) and wages (millions of lei) in trade in the South-West Oltenia region, during the period 2000-2021**

Year	Wages	Employees
2000	495.5	109.2
2001	735.9	110
2002	944.8	114.5
2003	1044.5	110.1
2004	1167	100
2005	1406.7	100.8
2006	1636.1	109.2
2007	1637.5	114
2008	2184.6	116.9
2009	2326.3	114
2010	2072.6	115
2011	2331.4	113.1
2012	2324.2	116.7
2013	2441.5	118.2
2014	2627.9	122
2015	2677.9	113.4
2016	3507.2	124.1
2017	4117.3	137.4
2018	4716.2	139.7
2019	5180.2	158.6
2020	5198.5	157.5
2021	5542.2	157.7

Source: data retrieved from the Tempo-online database (NIS, 2024).