

REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS FOR INNOVATION AND COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *A robust national regulatory and strategic framework plays a crucial role in fostering research, innovation, and sustainable economic development. This paper analyzes the extent to which national policies in the Republic of Moldova support innovation and entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on the positioning of cooperative enterprises within the innovation ecosystem. The study is based on a qualitative methodological approach, relying on the documentary analysis of key legislative and strategic documents, complemented by a comparative and interpretative perspective. The findings reveal that Moldova has developed a relatively complex policy framework aimed at promoting a knowledge-based economy, including the National Programme in the fields of research and innovation for 2024–2027, which emphasizes institutional capacity building, technology transfer, and integration into the European Research Area. However, the results indicate that the effectiveness of these policies is constrained by insufficient coherence, weak interconnections between research and business sectors, and limited operationalization of policy instruments. A significant gap identified by the study concerns the limited integration of cooperatives into innovation and entrepreneurship policies, including those targeting small and medium-sized enterprises. Additionally, although the concept of smart specialization is recognized at the strategic level, its practical implementation remains underdeveloped. The paper concludes that enhancing policy integration, strengthening implementation mechanisms, and explicitly incorporating cooperative enterprises into innovation strategies are essential for improving economic resilience, fostering inclusive growth, and supporting sustainable development.*

Keywords: *Regulatory framework, Innovation systems, Cooperative enterprises, Entrepreneurship, Smart specialization, Economic resilience.*

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1. Introduction

In the context of global economic transformations, characterized by accelerated digitalization, globalization, and the increasing complexity of the competitive environment, innovation is widely recognized as a key driver of competitiveness and sustainable development. The specialized literature emphasizes the decisive role of the regulatory framework and public policies in stimulating research, technological development, and entrepreneurial activities, considering them essential instruments for strengthening economic resilience.

At the same time, the cooperative model is addressed in economic literature as an effective mechanism for promoting economic inclusion and community development. However, existing research highlights a limited integration of cooperatives into innovation ecosystems, particularly in emerging economies, where regulatory policies are not always aligned with strategic development objectives.

The research problem of this paper consists in analyzing the extent to which the national regulatory framework contributes to fostering innovation and the development of cooperatives, as well as in identifying its level of integration within current economic and strategic policies. In this context, the main objective of the study is to assess the regulatory

framework from the perspective of its capacity to support innovation and the development of entrepreneurial and cooperative ecosystems.

The scientific approach is focused on examining the mechanisms through which public policies stimulate innovation and entrepreneurial development, while also highlighting the role of cooperative enterprises within innovation policies. Furthermore, the research aims to identify opportunities for integrating modern strategic instruments, such as smart specialization, into the existing regulatory framework, in order to enhance policy efficiency and direct innovation toward priority areas.

The research hypothesis is based on the premise that, although the national regulatory framework provides instruments for supporting innovation and economic development, its effectiveness is limited by the lack of coherence and integration between innovation policies, entrepreneurship policies, and the cooperative legal framework.

The methodology employed is based on the documentary analysis of legislative and strategic frameworks, complemented by a comparative and interpretative approach to relevant public policies, which allows for highlighting the interdependencies between regulation, innovation, and cooperative development.

Preliminary results indicate the existence of significant opportunities for the development of cooperatives through innovation policies, as well as structural gaps related to the coherence and implementation of the regulatory framework.

The significance of the study lies in emphasizing the need for an integrated approach to public policies in order to strengthen economic resilience, promote sustainable development, and fully capitalize on the potential of cooperatives within the modern economy.

2. Literature Review

The analysis of the specialized literature highlights the decisive role of the regulatory framework and public policies in fostering innovation, entrepreneurial development, and the consolidation of economic ecosystems (Foray, 2014; Şavga, 2024). In the case of the Republic of Moldova, this framework is structured through a coherent set of legislative acts and strategic documents aimed at supporting research, innovation, digitalization, and business development.

The foundation of the regulatory framework in the field of research and innovation is provided by the Code on Science and Innovation (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2004), which regulates the organization and functioning of the national research and development system. This is complemented by the Education Code (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2014), which contributes to the development of human capital and to the integration of education with research and innovation. At the same time, documents such as the National Programme in the Fields of Research and Innovation (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023c) and its related implementation plans define priority directions and support mechanisms for innovative activities.

At the strategic level, economic development is guided by documents such as the National Development Strategy “European Moldova 2030” (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2022), the Digital Transformation Strategy of the Republic of Moldova for 2023–2030 (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023a), and the National

Development Plan 2024-2026 (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023b), which promote economic modernization, digitalization, and increased competitiveness. These documents reflect a clear orientation toward European integration and the consolidation of a knowledge-based economy.

Entrepreneurial development is supported by Law No. 179/2016 on small and medium-sized enterprises (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2016), which aims to stimulate private initiative and create a favorable business environment. At the same time, innovation infrastructure is regulated by Law No. 182/2010 on industrial parks (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2010) and Law No. 226/2018 on science and technology parks and innovation incubators (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2018), which represent important instruments for facilitating technology transfer and developing innovation ecosystems. These regulatory instruments provide the institutional framework necessary for supporting innovation activities, fostering cooperation between research organizations and businesses, and enhancing the commercialization of research results.

A relevant theoretical concept in contemporary literature is smart specialization, developed by Foray (2014), which emphasizes the need to concentrate resources in priority areas based on the competitive advantages of the economy. This concept is embedded in European policies and represents a key instrument for stimulating innovation and enhancing competitiveness.

Regarding the cooperative sector, the literature highlights its role in promoting economic inclusion, local development, and sustainability. Studies conducted by Şavga (2019, 2024, 2025) emphasize the importance of consumer cooperatives in the context of European integration, resilience, and sustainable development, as well as the need to adapt cooperative enterprises to the requirements of the modern economy. The importance of participation, collaborative governance, and stakeholder involvement in cooperative organizations has also been highlighted in international studies. According to Buang and Abu Samah (2021), active member participation and effective governance mechanisms contribute significantly to the sustainability and performance of cooperative enterprises.

However, the literature analysis reveals a gap between the existing regulatory framework and the practical valorization of the potential of cooperatives within innovation ecosystems (Şavga, 2024; Şavga, 2025).

Although a well-defined legislative and strategic framework exists, the integration of cooperatives into innovation policies and economic development instruments remains limited. In this context, the present research aims to contribute to the existing literature through an integrated approach to the regulatory framework, by analyzing the interdependencies between innovation policies, entrepreneurship, and cooperative development, as well as the role of modern strategic instruments in strengthening these relationships.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, aiming to analyze the regulatory and strategic framework governing innovation, entrepreneurship, and cooperative development in the Republic of Moldova. The choice of this approach is justified by the complexity of the topic, which requires the interpretation and correlation of an extensive body of legislative and strategic documents.

The main method employed is documentary analysis, which involves the systematic examination of relevant legal acts and public policy documents. The research includes the analysis of key legislative acts, such as the Code on Science and Innovation, the Education Code, legislation on small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as regulations related to innovation infrastructure, including industrial parks and innovation incubators.

In addition, the analysis encompasses national strategic documents, such as the National Development Strategy “European Moldova 2030”, the Digital Transformation Strategy, the National Development Plan 2024-2026, and national programs in the field of research and innovation. These documents were examined in order to identify priority development directions and the instruments used to stimulate innovation and economic competitiveness.

The documentary analysis is complemented by a comparative and interpretative approach, which allows for assessing the degree of coherence, complementarity, and integration of public policies. This method facilitates the identification of relationships between different components of the regulatory framework and highlights their impact on the development of entrepreneurial and cooperative ecosystems.

The research also incorporates elements of conceptual analysis, through the use of relevant theoretical concepts such as innovation, economic resilience, and smart specialization, which support the interpretation of findings within the current context of economic development.

The research process included the following stages: identification and selection of relevant sources, content analysis of normative and strategic documents, systematization of information, and interpretation in relation to the research objectives and hypothesis. This methodological approach ensures scientific rigor and allows for the reproducibility of the analytical process.

At the same time, the study has certain limitations, generated by the predominantly qualitative nature of the analysis and its reliance on official documentary sources. In this regard, the results primarily reflect the formal regulatory framework and may be further complemented in future research through empirical methods or case studies.

Overall, the adopted methodology provides an appropriate framework for the complex analysis of the relationships between regulation, innovation, and cooperative development, contributing to highlighting the role of the regulatory framework in supporting sustainable economic development.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the regulatory and strategic framework in the Republic of Moldova reveals that, over the past decade, a relatively complex system of regulations has been developed to support economic growth based on research, innovation, and entrepreneurship. This evolution reflects a clear strategic orientation toward the transition to a knowledge-based economy, supported by a broad set of legislative acts and policy documents aimed at strengthening human capital, fostering innovation processes, and enhancing overall economic competitiveness. At the same time, this framework demonstrates an increasing alignment with European development directions, particularly in terms of digitalization, innovation-driven growth, and sustainable development.

The foundation of the regulatory framework in the field of research and innovation is established by the Code on Science and Innovation No. 259/2004 (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2004), which enshrines the strategic importance of scientific research and technological development in socio-economic progress. The provisions of this legal act emphasize the necessity of valorizing scientific knowledge and transforming research outcomes into competitive products and services capable of contributing to economic growth. In addition, the Education Code No. 152/2014 (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2014) reinforces the role of the education system as a fundamental pillar of sustainable development, ensuring the formation of human capital and creating the institutional conditions necessary for integrating research and innovation activities within higher education institutions.

Despite these formal provisions, the analysis highlights a limited degree of coordination between the academic environment and the business sector, particularly in relation to technology transfer mechanisms. The insufficient development of structured cooperation channels between universities, research organizations, and enterprises constrains the practical capitalization of research results and weakens the functioning of the knowledge triangle (education-research-innovation). This gap indicates that, although the institutional framework exists, its operational effectiveness remains constrained by weak interconnections among its components.

With regard to entrepreneurial development, the national regulatory framework places particular emphasis on supporting micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are widely recognized as a key driver of economic growth, employment creation, and adaptability to technological changes. Law No. 179/2016 on SMEs (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2016) aims to enhance their competitiveness and performance while facilitating their integration into a dynamic and innovation-oriented economic environment. The law explicitly encourages innovation and technology transfer by introducing a range of support instruments designed to strengthen the innovative capacity of enterprises.

Among these instruments are measures aimed at facilitating the adoption of new technologies and products, supporting internal research and development activities within SMEs, and promoting the development of innovation-related competencies. Additionally, the legal framework provides for the development of innovation infrastructure, including science and technology parks, business incubators, research laboratories, production platforms, and information and consultancy centers. These elements are intended to create a supportive ecosystem for innovation and to facilitate interaction between different actors involved in the innovation process.

The law also includes financial support mechanisms such as credit guarantee schemes for SMEs, improved access to financing, incentives for attracting capital investments, including through business angel investors, and the provision of fiscal facilities. These instruments are designed to reduce financial barriers and encourage entrepreneurial initiative, particularly in sectors with high innovation potential.

However, the analysis indicates that the effectiveness of these instruments is constrained by insufficiently developed implementation mechanisms and by the lack of strong functional integration between innovation policies and entrepreneurial development policies. In particular, the mechanisms governing interaction between the research sector and the business environment in terms of technology transfer remain insufficiently defined.

Furthermore, the innovation component is not adequately reflected in the objectives of state programs dedicated to SME development, which limits the ability of enterprises to actively participate in innovation ecosystems and to benefit from research outcomes.

The regulatory framework governing innovation infrastructure, including industrial parks and science and technology parks, provides a favorable institutional basis for supporting technological development and the valorization of research results. Nevertheless, the practical utilization of these instruments remains below their potential, primarily due to their limited integration into broader economic policies and the absence of effective coordination mechanisms among responsible institutions.

At the strategic level, national policy documents such as the “European Moldova 2030” Strategy (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2022), the Digital Transformation Strategy of the Republic of Moldova 2023-2030 (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023a), and the National Development Plan 2024–2026 (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023b) outline key directions for modernization, digitalization, and sustainable economic development. These strategies reflect a long-term vision aligned with European integration objectives and the transition toward a more competitive and innovation-driven economy. However, the analysis shows that the objectives formulated in these documents are often general in nature and not sufficiently linked to concrete priorities in research and innovation. This limits the effectiveness of resource allocation and reduces the measurable impact of public policies on economic transformation.

In this context, the concept of smart specialization (Foray, 2014) becomes particularly relevant as a strategic tool for guiding innovation toward priority domains with high competitive potential. Developed within the European policy framework, smart specialization emphasizes the need to concentrate resources in areas where economies possess comparative advantages. Although this concept is acknowledged in national strategic documents, its practical implementation in the Republic of Moldova remains limited. This is mainly due to the absence of clearly defined priority domains and the lack of operational mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. As a result, the potential benefits of concentrating resources and developing specialized value chains are not fully realized.

An important dimension of the analysis concerns the cooperative sector, which, despite its significant potential for fostering economic inclusion and supporting local development, remains insufficiently integrated into innovation ecosystems. Cooperatives operate under a distinct regulatory framework governed by the Law on Consumer Cooperation No. 1252/2000 (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2000). From an economic perspective, however, they can be considered associative entities closely related to SMEs, as they share similar characteristics in terms of scale, flexibility, and contribution to local economic activity.

Cooperatives play an important role in mobilizing local resources, creating employment opportunities, and supporting community development. In this regard, the Strategy for the Development of Consumer Cooperation for the period 2025–2030 (Moldcoop, 2024) represents a relevant policy document that aligns the cooperative sector with national development priorities and European integration objectives. This strategy is consistent with broader national frameworks such as the “European Moldova 2030” Strategy, digital transformation programs, green economy objectives, and EU integration priorities, reflecting a modern approach focused on competitiveness, digitalization, and sustainability.

Despite these strategic efforts, the effective integration of cooperatives into innovation policies and support mechanisms for research and entrepreneurship remains limited. Cooperatives are not explicitly included in policy instruments designed for SMEs, which restricts their access to financing opportunities, innovation infrastructure, and development programs. This institutional separation reduces potential synergies between the cooperative sector and SMEs and limits their combined contribution to the development of innovation ecosystems.

From the perspective of innovation-driven development, this represents a significant constraint, particularly in the context of smart specialization, which requires the involvement of all relevant economic actors in identifying and developing priority areas. Both SMEs and cooperatives have the potential to contribute to this process through the valorization of local resources, participation in value chain development, and the stimulation of innovation at regional and local levels. In particular, cooperatives, due to their associative and collaborative nature, can facilitate the dissemination of innovation and support the inclusion of smaller economic actors in complex innovation processes.

The analysis of research priorities and resource allocation mechanisms also reveals several structural limitations, including broadly formulated objectives, the absence of clearly defined technological niches, and the dispersion of financial resources across multiple directions. These issues are closely related to policy fragmentation, limited interaction between research, innovation, and economic development domains, and insufficient involvement of the business sector in policy formulation processes.

In this context, the research findings confirm the initial hypothesis that the main challenge does not lie in the absence of a regulatory and strategic framework, but rather in its insufficient coherence, coordination, and operationalization. Although Moldova possesses a relatively well-developed set of policies and regulations, their effectiveness is constrained by the lack of functional mechanisms ensuring integration across different policy domains.

The National Programme in the Fields of Research and Innovation for 2024–2027 (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023c) represents an important step toward strengthening the innovation system by aiming to enhance the economic and social impact of research activities. Nevertheless, its effectiveness largely depends on the degree of integration among policies and the existence of efficient implementation mechanisms.

Structured around three main objectives, the Programme focuses, first, on strengthening the research and innovation system by improving institutional capacities, developing human resources, and enhancing access to research infrastructure. This includes measures such as the evaluation of research organizations, increasing competitive funding, supporting scientific excellence, and promoting young researchers. Second, it aims to increase the contribution of research and innovation to economic development by strengthening linkages between academia and the business sector, promoting technology transfer, developing dedicated transfer offices and networks, organizing project competitions in smart specialization areas, and implementing financial instruments such as innovation vouchers and grant schemes. Third, it supports integration into the European Research Area through international cooperation, participation in European programs such as Horizon Europe, institutional capacity building, and alignment with European standards and practices.

Overall, the Programme reflects a strategic orientation toward modernization, European integration, and the promotion of smart specialization. However, challenges persist in terms of

practical implementation, particularly regarding the inclusion of SMEs and cooperatives in innovation processes and technology transfer mechanisms. This limits their potential contribution to innovation ecosystems and underscores the need for improved policy coherence.

From a comparative perspective, the experience of European Union member states demonstrates a more integrated approach to innovation policy, characterized by the alignment of research, entrepreneurship, and regional development instruments, as well as the consistent application of smart specialization principles. Within this context, cooperatives are increasingly recognized as important actors in the social economy and innovation ecosystems, benefiting from dedicated support mechanisms, funding opportunities, infrastructure, and institutional partnerships. In contrast, in the Republic of Moldova, the integration of cooperatives into innovation policies remains limited, and synergies between research institutions, businesses, and associative structures are insufficiently exploited.

In this context, the degree of coherence and integration of the regulatory and strategic framework emerges as a key determinant of economic resilience. The ability of the system to effectively harness innovation, involve all relevant stakeholders, including cooperatives, and allocate resources toward priority areas directly influences the sustainability, adaptability, and long-term competitiveness of the national economy in the face of ongoing global transformations.

5. Conclusions

The present research has highlighted the essential role of the regulatory and strategic framework in stimulating innovation and economic development, demonstrating that the Republic of Moldova possesses a relatively complex set of policies and instruments aimed at consolidating a knowledge-based economy. The analysis confirms that the fields of research, innovation, and entrepreneurship are recognized at the strategic level as key determinants of competitiveness and sustainable development, forming an integral part of the national development agenda.

The findings of the study indicate that the National Programme in the Fields of Research and Innovation for the period 2024–2027 represents an important policy instrument for modernizing the national innovation system. Through its provisions, the Programme supports the strengthening of institutional capacities, the development of human resources, the stimulation of technology transfer processes, and the facilitation of integration into the European Research Area. At the same time, it creates the necessary premises for the application of smart specialization principles and for directing innovation efforts toward priority areas with high development potential.

However, the research also confirms the initially formulated hypothesis, emphasizing that the main limitation does not lie in the absence of a regulatory or strategic framework, but rather in its insufficient coherence, alignment, and operationalization. The fragmentation of public policies, the limited interaction between the academic environment and the business sector, as well as the lack of efficient implementation mechanisms, significantly reduces the overall impact of existing instruments. These shortcomings hinder the translation of strategic objectives into tangible economic and social outcomes.

A particularly relevant aspect revealed by the study is the insufficient positioning of the cooperative sector within innovation policies. Although cooperatives have significant

potential in promoting economic inclusion, supporting local development, and valorizing local resources, they are not explicitly integrated into policy mechanisms supporting innovation and entrepreneurship, including those targeting small and medium-sized enterprises. This institutional gap limits the contribution of the cooperative sector to the development of innovation ecosystems and reduces opportunities for synergy between different categories of economic actors.

Furthermore, the research highlights that, although the concept of smart specialization is acknowledged at the strategic level, its practical application remains limited. This limitation is mainly due to the absence of clearly defined priority domains, as well as the lack of concrete operational mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. As a result, the potential of smart specialization to guide resource allocation, foster targeted investments, and enhance economic competitiveness is not fully exploited.

From a comparative perspective, the analysis underscores notable differences between the Republic of Moldova and European Union member states, where innovation policies are characterized by a higher degree of integration and coordination across sectors. In the EU context, innovation ecosystems are supported by coherent policy frameworks that actively involve all relevant economic actors, including cooperatives, in research, innovation, and regional development processes. This integrated approach ensures better alignment between strategic objectives, funding mechanisms, and implementation instruments, thereby increasing policy effectiveness.

In this regard, the comparative analysis highlights the need for Moldova to further align its national practices with European models, particularly in terms of policy integration, stakeholder involvement, and the development of functional innovation ecosystems. Strengthening cooperation between academia, industry, and associative structures is essential for enhancing knowledge transfer, increasing innovation uptake, and ensuring a more efficient use of available resources.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the development of a functional and competitive innovation ecosystem in the Republic of Moldova largely depends on the adoption of an integrated public policy approach, the strengthening of implementation mechanisms, and the effective valorization of the potential of all economic actors. The inclusion of the cooperative sector in innovation policies and the practical application of smart specialization principles can serve as key strategic directions for enhancing economic resilience, fostering innovation-driven growth, and promoting sustainable development in the context of ongoing global transformations.

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