
AN EXPLORATORY PAPER ON CIVIL SOCIETY IN JIU VALLEY. THE CASE OF COALITION ”VALEA JIULUI IMPLICATĂ”

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2023.4.04>

Abstract: *Up to this date very few empirical studies that address the civil society sector in Jiu Valley have been conducted. If they touch upon this topic, they discuss only the associational life of the miners. However, this does constitute their main objective. Thus, civil society actors beyond the miners' unions are neglected. Recognizing the scarcity of research on this topic, the paper seeks to address this gap, by taking the case of the coalition of Valea Jiului Implicată/Jiu Valley Involved. In order to find out more about this coalition and its members, I used a mixed method approach consisting of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Results show that the coalition was formed by educated individuals with an experience of migration, that managed to bring together volunteers and NGOs so that they can address different problems affecting the region.*

Keywords: *Civil Society, Jiu Valley, Coalition Jiu Valley Involved, Valea Jiului Implicată, Non-governmental organizations, civic engagement*

Introduction

By taking the case of the coalition Valea Jiului Implicată/Jiu Valley Involved, the present study aims to bring a contribution to the understudied topic of civil society in Jiu Valley. Specifically, the paper is interested in understanding (1) the reasons that contributed to the formation of the coalition, (2) their main objectives and the projects that have been undertaken to address them and (3) who are the members of this coalition, in terms of demographics and how they stand out compared to the broader population of Jiu Valley. In order to address these objectives, I used a mixed-methods approach of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. For the first 2 objectives, insights were gathered from semi-structured interviews with 2 of the 4 founding members. For the 3rd objective, I collected data from 25 members through an online questionnaire. Additionally, for comparison reasons, I used data from the 2016 IRES survey, which was carried out on a representative sample of the Jiu Valley population.

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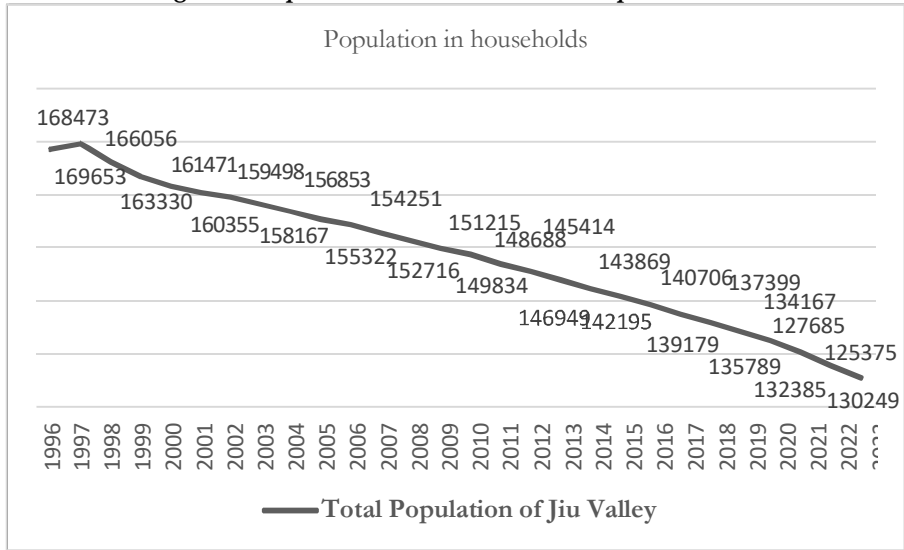
Results show that the coalition was formed by very educated individuals, with migration experience and a social network expanding outside the region. These are obvious relevant factors that helped them recognize different problems that affect the region as well as finding ways of approaching them. The coalition emerges as an alternative to politically controlled civil society entities, particularly labor unions with links to political parties; to address challenges within the local civil society of the Jiu Valley who have a potential for collective action but haven't discovered it; to fill the expertise gap within the local administration by bringing together competent experts from various fields; initiate projects for social, economic, and cultural development within the Jiu Valley; or ensuring that the needs of the community are addressed in the region's economic, social, and environmental development strategies. The rest of the members of this coalition are also very educated and relatively young, with a decent income. They stand as different from the rest of the population of the region when it comes to questions that deal with the main problems in the Valley, who should solve these problems, or trust patterns.

Moving forward, I will provide a brief contextualization and overview of the general situation in Jiu Valley, focusing on associational life in the region, particularly among the miners.

General context

Prior to the mining exploitation started by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the region, the population of Jiu Valley consisted primarily of peasants whose main focus was on agriculture and animal husbandry (Burlacu et al., 2019). The local economy was initially dominated by pastoral activities, but it later shifted to coal mining (Burlacu et al 2019). Economic and social life were organized around coal production (Țoc and Alexandrescu, 2022), coal mining becoming the region's identity (Kideckel, 2018). As mining operations began, followed by urbanization and industrialization during the communist period, the population of Jiu Valley experienced substantial growth (Baron, 1998).

Figure 1 (below) shows the evolution of the population in households in all 6 cities of Jiu Valley. The peak was attained in 1997, with a total of 169653 inhabitants. Starting with the year 1998, the population is in continuous decline until today, with a total of 44278 of inhabitants that left the region and with an average of 1703 of inhabitants that left per year. Such a trend started with mass layoffs and closing of the mines without creating alternatives, without long term programs of professional reconversion of the dismissed miners (Burlacu et al 2019) and due to corruption (Rus, 2007). The greatest decrease in population can be found from 1997 to 1998, with a decrease of 3597 inhabitants. The second decrease is from 1998 to 1999 when Jiu Valley lost 2726 inhabitants, third decrease from 2021 to 2022 with 2564 lost inhabitants, and fourth in 2022 from 2023 with 2310 fewer inhabitants. Along with demographic decline, other social problems such as aging of the population, unemployment or reduced opportunities for employment, poverty, inadequate living conditions, declining quality and attractiveness of urban life, all contribute to the characterization of these cities as shrinking cities (Țoc and Alexandrescu, 2022).

Figure 1. Population in households in the period 1996-2023

Source: National Institute for Statistics Romania

Although the social context in the region is characterized by economic, housing, infrastructure, demographic and identity crises due to the closing of the mines (Țoc and Alexandrescu, 2022), Jiu Valley is not a poor region compared with other similar urban zones in the country (Sandu and Stănculescu, 2004). It's very vulnerable when it comes to poverty, considering high rates of unemployment and dependencies which are comparatively higher than in other similar zones (Sandu and Stănculescu, 2004). While corruption is the same as in other cities under 50.000 inhabitants, higher levels can be found within the business environment and interactions with county authorities (Sandu and Stănculescu, 2004).

Shifting the attention from structures to individuals, a social category that was extremely affected by the closing of the mines we're the miners. They share a common perception of their lives, marked by stress, dangers and a sense of detachment from both society and the community (Kideckel, 2010). While their image as miners was exalted in the communist period (Rus, 2007; Cesereanu, 2016), it slowly started to decline after the fall of the regime (Rus, 2007). They became discredited, defamed or even considered worthy of pity by others, such a perception being influenced by the militancy and questionable acts of labor unions, and by the negative and exaggerated manner in which the press painted them (Kideckel, 2010; Kideckel, 2018; Rus, 2007; Cesereanu, 2016). The questionable actions of the labor unions we're most visible in the mineriads, but they can be seen even in their relationship with the management of the mining company (Ciocodeică and Prodanciuc, 2010). In one example, recognizing that the financial requests made to the company will only be addressed when the unions assert themselves forcefully, the union's leadership adopts a stance akin to that of the company's leadership,

and also arrange work-related meetings with government officials to address the company's financial challenges (Ciocodeică and Prodanciuc, 2010). Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the labor unions did not always promote the interests of the miners, with many miners sharing such a view (Ciocodeică and Prodanciuc, 2010). At the same time, the unions movements became more fragmented due to internal divisions and because of the pride of the union leaders', many whom wished to become big personalities (Stegar, 2014). The case of the last mineriad stands as an ideal example of these aspects. The president of the league of unions and miner's leader Miron Cozma, along with the other union leaders under his command, started the march towards Bucharest in order to prevent the authorities from carrying out the arrest warrant issued under his name and due to his deteriorating image as a leader (Rus, 2007).

Such images showcase that the associational life of the miners was marked by personal and social struggles and manipulations. Most studies that refer to Jiu Valley discuss these aspects, but they do not constitute their main objective (see for example Rus, 2007; Kideckel, 2010; Kideckel, 2018, Larionescu, Rădulescu and Rughiniş, 1999; Fulger, 2007; Stegar, 2007; or Stegar, 2014). The authors most often write about labor unions and miners, and barely or don't refer at all to the civil society located beyond unions. One exception could be considered Constantinescu, Dascălu and Sucală's (2017) paper, which describes from an activist perspective the struggle encountered by the actors involved in saving the Petrila mine from demolition. Their initiative and the movie they made about this, called Petrila Planet, later influenced the forming of the NGO with the same name. This NGO was one of the 4 which founded the coalition of Valea Jiului Implicată/Jiu Valley Involved. Until the end of 2023, there are no scientific studies that address this coalition.

Methodology

To address this issue, I set to find out why the coalition formed in the first place, what are their objectives, what projects have been undertaken and who are their members. Thus, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 2 of 4 founders of the coalition, as their insights regarding why they have come together to form a coalition, what objectives they have set for themselves and what type of projects have been implemented to address these objectives will offer a more nuanced responses to these questions. To find out who the rest of the members of the coalition are, I was specifically interested in:

- assessing the demographic profile of the members. What is their education level? What is their income? In what domains do their NGOs activate?
- identifying their attitudes regarding different matters that encompass Inglehart's self-expression values (Inglehart, 2019). The reason for choosing attitudes aligned with self-expression values is due to the fact that these are considered civic values or a civic form of modern individualism (Welzel, 2010). They are also interpreted as a sign of altruism and strong social capital. Welzel (2010) shows, with evidence from the World Values Survey, that the data supports a civic view on self-expression values, and that

they are associated with altruism, high levels of trust in people and peaceful collective action, characteristics which define civil society;

- explore what differences exist between the members of the coalition and the rest of the population of Jiu Valley on matters such as trust, what are the problems of the region and who should solve them. For such a comparison to be made, I used data from IRES 2018 study on Jiu Valley and included some of the questions from there in the survey aimed at the members of the coalition.

To address these additional objectives, I collected data through an online survey which was distributed via the Coalition's WhatsApp group and by e-mail. The sample consisted of a total of 25 subjects. Since the coalition is not formally founded, there is no information on how many members are there and how many people are active.

Results

Qualitative analysis

In 2019 the first civil society coalition that gathers multiple non-governmental organizations and volunteers formed. It was formed by the decision of 4 individuals, members of Jiu Valley Development Society Project, Caritas Petroșani, Planeta Petrila (Petrila Planet) and Noi Orizonturi (New Horizons Foundation) organizations, and it gathers until 2023, 27 non-governmental organizations, according to the founders, but no real track of how many volunteers. The coalition does not have a formal status and is not officially registered. It was established through a project submitted to a call for projects for the consolidation of civil society, initiated by the French Embassy in Romania.

According to the founders, the coalition sets out 3 objectives: (1) strengthening civil society in the Jiu Valley by encouraging civic engagement, sharing the best practices, and enhancing collaboration among its members. (2) promoting the principles of good practice in the sustainable development of the Jiu Valley and highlighting civil society in the region as a particularly significant factor in the process of formulating strategic development documents for the area. (3) fostering collaboration between civil society in the Jiu Valley and public authorities from local, county, regional, national, European, and international level as well as the private sector and academia.

Prior to its formation, the local civil society was regarded as small and less united than it is now. Very few actors interacted with each other and the interactions that occurred were limited to similar domains, primarily social work and arts. When one of the founders of the coalition started her NGO, her knowledge of other organizations was limited and the absence of openly engaged individuals in the community, prompted her to involve her family members in its creation: *"When I founded Valea Jiului Society, I didn't know about any organizations that are now members, even if I was firstly trying to find an existent NGO to support [...] I was then trying to identify people motivated to be involved, but finally I founded Valea Jiului Society with my mom, dad and sister, because I couldn't find by then any person that was open and involved"*. Such aspects we're present and continue to be present even within the coalition itself, where many members initially did not know about each other or their NGOs area of activity.

Furthermore, labor unions were the most spread forms of associational life in the Valley, and the solidarity among its members was not as strong as it was often portrayed (Rus, 2007). Unions did not always represent the interests of the miners and at the same time had manipulative leaders with ties to political parties (see Rus, 2007; Fulger, 2007; Ciocodeică and Prodanciuc, 2010). Aware of such aspects, one of the founders argued that a reason for forming this coalition, was also to present an *"alternative to politically controlled civil society, in the form of labor unions"*. To strengthen the idea, they have set as a primary condition to join the coalition, to not be a member of a political party.

The establishment of the coalition was also motivated to address such issues within the civil society in Jiu Valley, while recognizing the potential of these actors for collective action, given their relatively limited influence when operating individually. Acting together will benefit the entire community in the region, because collaboration is perceived as a vital aspect which will lead to increased visibility of civic initiatives and a more significant impact in the region. As one of the founders explains: *"A united and engaged civil society is essential for the development of the local community and the region. In a smaller, close-knit community like Jiu Valley, individual civic initiatives are less visible. This is where the importance of a coalition of local NGOs comes into play, providing a framework for common action and collaboration within the local civil society. This allows these NGOs to support each other, implement joint projects with shared resources, and make community-driven initiatives more visible, resulting in a greater impact on the community"*. At the same time, their intention was to bring the necessary expertise that can address the lack of capacity within the local administration. Important to note here is that all 4 members that formed the coalition are experts in their professional areas, 3 of them obtaining their skills and education from universities outside the valley. This also contributed in expanding their networks beyond the region and even outside the country, through which they managed to bring experts from abroad. Moreover, the coalition is composed of NGOs with competent experts in various fields such as social work, urban regeneration, architecture or sociology. As the quantitative part of this papers shows, many members are highly educated individuals, further emphasizing the significance of this need for expertise.

The context of their formation is relevant to mention and the founding members also acknowledge this. During that period, the strategy for economic, social and environmental development (for 2022-2030) began to take shape. Understanding the importance of such a strategy, they managed to get involved in its development, with the objective of ensuring that it resonated closely with the aspirations and needs of the local community. Building further on their involvement, they managed to mobilize and implement one of their first projects, that aimed to revitalize a part of the center of Petroșani city and simultaneously bringing into discussion the post-coal future of the region. The project was centered around the first mural painting done in Jiu Valley, an idea initiated by Greenpeace organization (which also provided the funds), but implemented by the coalition together with the town hall of Petroșani. The event inspired one of the founders of the coalition to continue and extend the idea of revitalizing spaces in the area. Thus, Vibrant Jiu Valley project was born, one that is directed at revitalizing not only spaces, but also the communities in Jiu Valley, through art and culture. Vibrant Jiu Valley first started in august 2022, as a pilot project with an initial aim of *"restoring spaces to the community, through the creation of three mural paintings"*. Consequently, around these

murals were organized different activities for people of all ages. Part of the expenses were covered through the Functional Areas in the EU project, by the World Bank and the European Commission. After the success of the pilot project, at the end of April 2023, the 1st official edition of Vibrant Jiu Valley took place. Over the span of a week, a number of events unfolded across various locations in the region, encompassing activities such as debates, workshops, hikes or visits to museums. This time, the project was made possible with funds from the Transformative Action Award 2022, won by Jiu Valley Development Society Project association, and smaller projects won by other NGOs members of the coalition. During the same year at the beginning of August, the 2nd edition of Vibrant Jiu Valley started. It included a new project under the name of Vibrant Communities in Jiu Valley, with support from the program "In a state of well-being" (În stare de bine), funded by Kaufland Romania and coordinated by Civil Society Development Foundation in Romania (Fundăția pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile). Its aim is to activate marginalized communities through art and culture. More specifically "*three spaces within these communities will be arranged and redesigned through art, in collaboration with the residents, so that the people in the area will have a place where they can more easily organize various community activities*". The project will last 7 months, and is marked by a diversity of activities such as artistic works, workshops dedicated to painting, drawing, craftsmanship, recycling through art and development through theater; first aid courses, robotics competitions or rides with bicycle trolley and velocipede.

As the most representative project of the coalition, the Vibrant Jiu Valley manages to bring together not only the intended beneficiaries of these projects, but also some of the organizations from the coalition, each of the involved organization offering support to this project by realizing different activities. Outside this project, the NGOs involved in the coalition usually carry out their activities under the coalition's banner or connect their activities with the Vibrant Jiu Valley project. Other projects and activities of the coalition worth mentioning are: a podcast started by one of the founders and 2 volunteering members, which had various experts from diverse fields to speak about the problems of Jiu Valley; several workshops for the community on subjects like public speaking or financial education; different activities to support the local community during the pandemic (communication activities about the Covid 19, support for the medical staff, for elderly and marginalized communities); the mural painting in Lonea mine (not connected to Vibrant Jiu Valley) or the Urban Talks Jiu Valley conference organized together with the University of Petroșani, the University of Liège, the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine from Timișoara in partnership with UrbanizeHub, Climate Kic Hub, and Bankwatch Romania. Many of these events brought experts from the founder's social networks, some of which were involved or later on participated in different projects and activities initiated by the coalition (as the Vibrant Jiu Valley, the mentioned workshops and conference or the podcast).

But even after more than 3 years of existence, the founders acknowledge that the coalition's work is still at the beginning. The realization that "*we still have a lot of work to do*" reflects their recognition of the ongoing challenges that lie ahead. Moreover, they argue that the coalition hasn't reached a level of consolidation, but remains at a phase of proposing ideas and courses of action, as well as verifying and validating them. Although some challenges they sought to address in the beginning are still present, there is a dose

of optimism. What is important for them is that they should continue in the right direction so they can improve through their actions the quality of life at the local level. To do this, it is important to remain active and united because: *"An active civil society is relevant in any context and in any community. Even more so in the Jiu Valley, after a long period of unjust and poorly planned transition, a period that has left behind a lot of pessimism and mistrust in the Valley"*.

Quantitative analysis

The survey results indicate a nearly even split between genders, with 12 males and 13 female respondents. The age of respondents spans from 22 to 62 years, with an average age of 38 years, capturing insights from different generations. When considering income, the average stands at 2682 lei, ranging from a minimum of 0 lei to a maximum of 8700 lei. The median income value is 2900 lei. The educational profile of the respondents is predominantly characterized by higher education. A significant portion (17) possess university degrees. A smaller number hold post-university qualifications (7), showcasing a commitment to continued learning and professional development. Considering occupation, 3 are students, 3 are pensioners, 1 is unemployed, 4 of them own a business and 14 are employed. Concerning the areas of activity of their organizations, only 19 provided an answer. Out of those that answered, the domains of their organizations are as follows: 4 of the organizations are businesses, 6 organizations are focused on social services, 3 focused on tourism and sport, 2 in education, 2 in culture, 1 in youth, and 1 in local development.

Figure 2. Attitudes

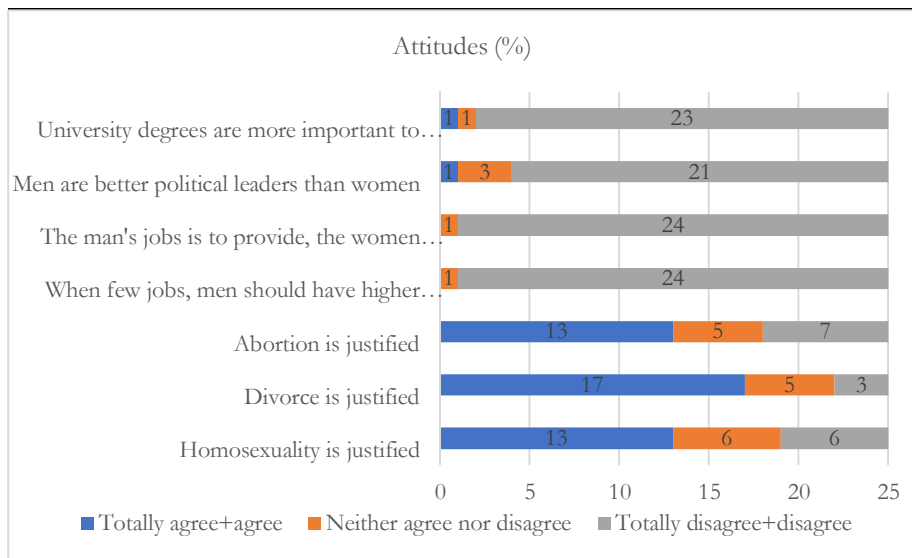
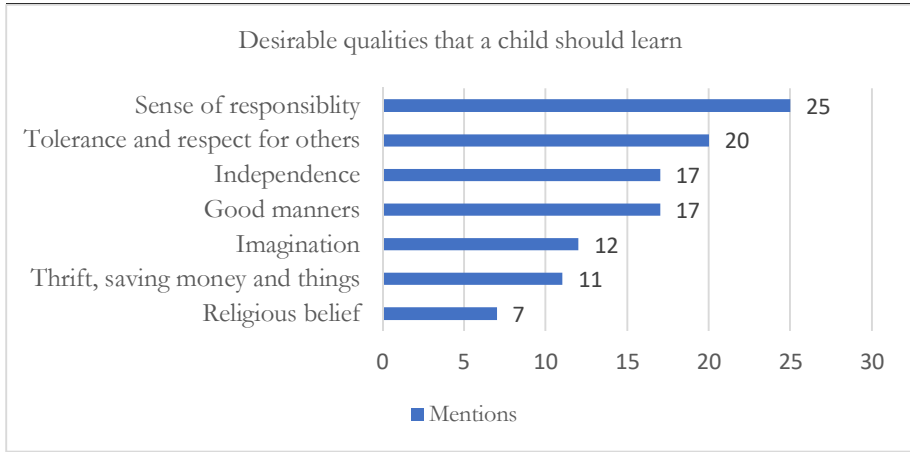


Figure 3. Traits

Figures 1 and 2 show the items by which self-expression values are measured and the members the attitudes towards the matters invoked. On figure 1, the first 4 items relate to the equal opportunity component of self-expression values, in the area of gender equality. Agreeing with most items taps to a certain degree into traditional and survival values, while disagreeing taps into self-expression values (Welzel, 2010). The last three items relate to sexual freedom. Agreeing with all items taps to a certain degree into self-expression values, while the opposite into traditional and survival ones (Welzel, 2010). On figure 2, the items relate to an emphasis on personal autonomy in educating children. The items independence and imagination are interpreted as positive indications of an emphasis on personal autonomy, while obedience and faith are interpreted as inverse indications and tapping into survival and traditional values (Welzel, 2010). All items encompass Inglehart's self-expression values (Inglehart, 2019), as part of the theory of existential security. What this theory argues is that processes of modernization and post-modernization bring cultural changes at the values level. In short, we see a shift from traditional and survival values that put emphasis on physical survival, to self-expression values which prioritize the emancipation of the individual. Such change is driven by high levels of existential security, defined as decreased vulnerability in face of natural and man-made dangers, and where survival is assured. Individuals socialized in secure conditions will develop self-expression values and will prioritize individual freedom, creativity, education, will have active and democratic political orientations and will be more civically engaged (Inglehart, 2019; Welzel, 2010)

In Figure 2, for the first set of items addressing equal opportunities in the area of gender equality, most members disagree with all statements. The only exceptions, with one individual each in agreement, are the statements about men being better political leaders than females, and the significance of university degrees being higher for boys than girls. Notably, both agreeing individuals are males. Regarding statements concerning sexual freedoms, even though most people agree, we find more people that disagree than in

previous statements or have a neutral position. This situation can be partially explained by ongoing discourses within Romania's public and political spheres, particularly those concerning LGBTQ communities, as well as the emphasis on traditional values centered around family, faith, and national identity.

In figure 3, relating to desirable qualities a child should learn, while half of the mentioned responses gravitate towards imagination, and more than half lean towards independence, these two desirable qualities do not stand as the foremost priorities. In contrast, a strong sense of responsibility garners nearly all the mentioned responses. The relatively lower prioritization of independence and imagination in comparison with responsibility and tolerance suggests that some members may not strongly uphold self-expression values. This could stem from various reasons such as cultural influences that prioritize responsibility over personal expression, or individual inclinations towards conforming to social norms and societal expectations.

Figure 4. What are the main problems in Jiu Valley (open question)

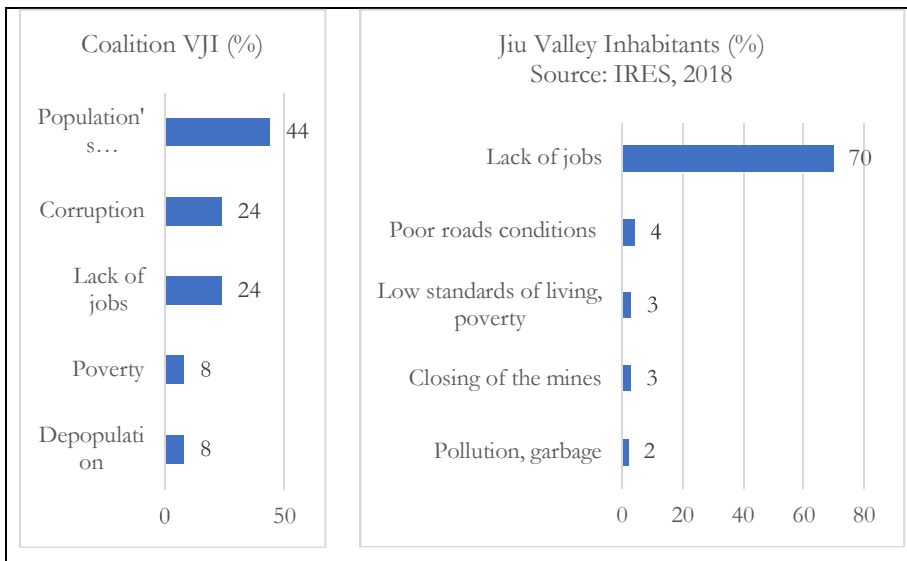


Figure 4 shows that the primary concern among most Jiu Valley's inhabitants (70%) is the lack of jobs. This problem stands out significantly as the most pressing problem and appears to be the only issue on which a consensus has been reached, as all other responses each account for less than 5% of the total. Conversely, the coalition members attribute less significance to this problem, with only 24% acknowledging it as a concern, thus being ranked third in the Valley's list of problems in the members perception. The main problem for most coalition members is considered the mentality, lack of vision and

citizen involvement from the population, accounting for 44% of their responses. Following closely is the issue of corruption, cited by 24% of the members.

Results from Figure 5 indicate another discrepancy in perceptions, this time regarding who is responsible for solving the region's problems. The majority of the inhabitants attribute the primary responsibility to the local authorities or government, considering them the principal agents in solving the issues. Among the coalition members there is a more comprehensive viewpoint, as their answers reveal that a collective effort would be necessary. 68% of the members consider that all entities mentioned in the survey should contribute to solving the region's problems.

Figure 5. Who should solve the problems in the community

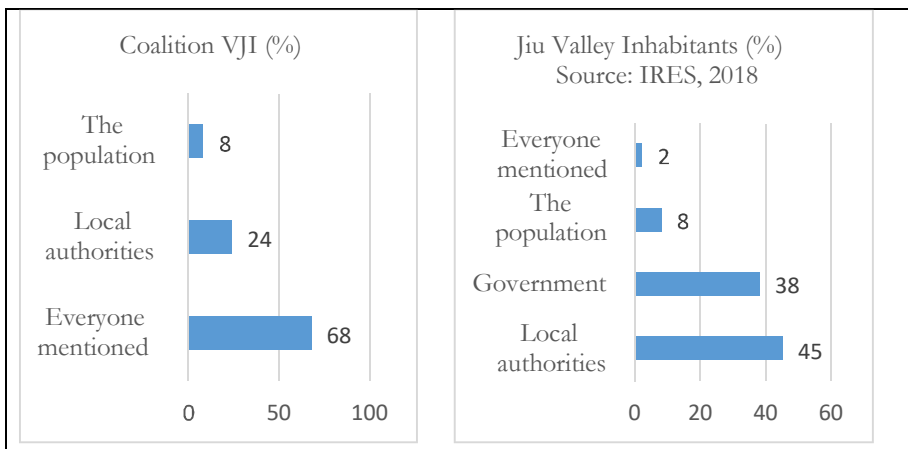
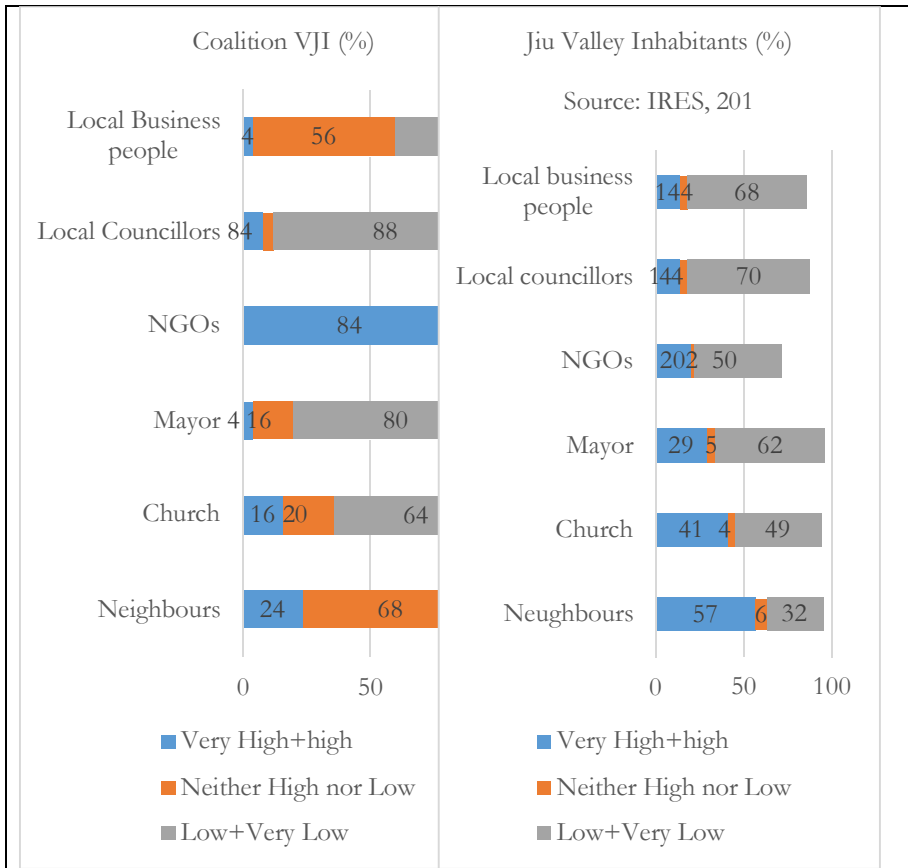


Figure 6 deals with trust. The residents of the region exhibit the highest levels of trust in their neighbors, followed by the church. In the case of the coalition members, NGOs gather most trust, with no respondents expressing low levels of trust. Such a finding is expected due to the fact that the respondents are themselves members of NGOs. Still, 16% of the respondents have neither high, nor low levels of trust. Similarities can be found between the 2 groups when it comes to local authorities. Both the coalition members and inhabitants have low levels of trust in the mayor and the local councilors.

Figure 6. How much trust do you have in



Conclusions

The present research paper wishes to bring a contribution to the topic of civil society in the region of Jiu Valley, by moving beyond the associational life of the miners, which constitute the main point of interest in studies that address with this subject. The results are of interest not only to those interested researchers, but also to the coalition itself or other civic organizations in the region. The paper's aim is exploratory, striving to lay the groundwork for future empirical research on the subject of civil society in the Jiu Valley region. By establishing a foundational understanding of the Coalition of Valea Jiului Implicată and its members, future studies can delve deeper into the specificities of this coalition or other civic groups, contributing to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of their role and impact in the region.

The study has revealed a sample that consisted of relatively young and very educated individuals, with half of them that have an income which is close to the average income in Romania. Moreover, regarding attitudes, we can observe some specific differences between the respondents. While most agree on matters relating to equal opportunities in the realm of gender equality, what qualities a child should learn or the sense of responsibility and tolerance towards others, we see divergent attitudes when it comes to matters that relate to sexual freedom and the presence of a desirable quality such as religious faith which taps into traditionalism. This suggests that only a portion of members may hold self-expression values, while for some others it may be in an incipient stage since we still see some pieces of traditionalism. There are larger differences between the surveyed members of the coalition and the rest of the population of Jiu Valley.

Other important aspects should be noted. One deals with the founder's experience of migration. This can be regarded as an important element in the establishment of the coalition. Obtaining skills and knowledge from different social settings could have motivated them to envision and actualize the coalition as a means of bringing change in the Jiu Valley. Furthermore, the experience of migration helped them create networks which played an important role in the coalition's projects. Because of their networks, which expand beyond the region, they managed to attract experts and garner financial resources, both to support several of their projects. A perspective focused on social networks, values and experience of migration could be starting points to future empirical studies that treat the topic of civil society, how it functions or its role in the development of the region.

Nevertheless, the paper has certain limitations. The use of quantitative methods permits comparison between the members of the coalition and the rest of the population, but the sample is small. The same problem rests with qualitative methods, a small sample consisting of 2 of 4 founding members which were available for interviewing. Future studies can focus mainly on qualitative methods by interviewing most of the members, not only the founders, for more nuanced findings on who are they, where do they work, what are their values and so on. Determining the value profile of the members considering Inglehart's self-expression values needs to be assessed by confirmatory factor analysis, but such a statistical analysis is not fit for a small sample consisting of 25 people. Further research is necessary to determine self-expression values but should be extended to encompass the entire civil society sector in Jiu Valley.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflicting interests.

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