

UDC 339.97(477)

JEL R19 R58

European approaches to rural development in Ukraine: implementation of the «SMART Village» concept and adoption of the LEADER approach

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Шуст О. А., Варченко О. М., Крисанов Д. В.,
Ткаченко К. В., Зубченко В. В., Драган О. О.
Європейські підходи до розвитку сільських територій України: реалізація концепції «SMART Village» та впровадження підходу LEADER. Економіка та управління АПК. 2026. № 1. С. 6–21.

Shust O., Varchenko O., Krysanov D.,
Tkachenko K., Zubchenko V., Drahan O.
European approaches to rural development in Ukraine: implementation of the «SMART Village» concept and adoption of the LEADER approach. AIC Economics and Management. 2026. № 1. PP. 6–21.

Рукопис отримано: 07.04.2026 р.

Прийнято: 21.04.2026 р.

Затверджено до друку: 19.05.2026 р.

doi: 10.33245/2310-9262-2026-205-1-6-21

ISSN 2310-9262

The article provides a comprehensive study of the current European Union policy in the field of sustainable rural development, with a particular focus on the strategic initiative «Long-Term Vision for EU Rural Areas up to 2040» and the accompanying Rural Action Plan. The subject of the study encompasses the institutional, economic, and socio-environmental mechanisms shaping EU rural development policy in the context of transforming rural regions into multifunctional spaces of sustainable growth. The aim of the research is to generalize the EU's strategic approaches to rural development, identify key implementation instruments, and substantiate the possibilities of adapting European experience to the Ukrainian context.

The methodological framework of the study is based on a systems approach, structural-functional and comparative analysis, as well as elements of strategic and institutional policy analysis within the EU. This allowed for a comprehensive assessment of the interrelation between policy decisions, financial instruments, and practical outcomes of rural development policies.

The study reveals that the EU rural development strategy is built around four interconnected pillars: building stronger rural areas through empowered communities and social innovation; ensuring connectivity by addressing the digital divide and improving infrastructure; developing resilient rural areas through ecological transformation aligned with the European Green Deal; and fostering prosperous territories through economic diversification and support for entrepreneurship. The Rural Action Plan is identified as a key implementation tool ensuring coordination of policies across EU Member States.

Special attention is given to the role of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Funds as primary financing mechanisms, as well as the Rural Proofing concept, which ensures that rural interests are systematically integrated into all EU policies. It is demonstrated that a transition is underway from an agriculture-centered rural development model to a multisectoral, innovation-driven, and socially inclusive paradigm.

The scientific novelty lies in the systematization of contemporary European approaches to rural development within the framework of the long-term 2040 strategy and the identification of their adaptation

potential for Ukraine. The practical significance of the study is reflected in substantiating the applicability of EU instruments for the recovery and development of Ukrainian rural and de-occupied territories.

It is established that the implementation of EU approaches, including Rural Proofing, CAP funding mechanisms, smart village practices, and renewable energy solutions, may serve as a foundation for transforming Ukrainian rural areas into competitive and innovative spaces capable of acting as drivers of national economic development.

Keywords: European rural paradigm, rural development, community resilience, energy decentralization, sustainable economy, digitalization, Common Agricultural Policy, territorial cohesion, post-war recovery of Ukraine.

Problem identification and analysis of recent research. Over recent decades, rural territories of Ukraine have undergone significant transformations affecting demographic, socio-economic, and spatial dimensions. In 1991–2022, the rural population decreased by 26.5%, reaching 12,473.6 thousand people. At the same time, the number of small villages increased (up to 13,462 settlements with fewer than 200 residents), alongside a growing share of depopulated settlements, particularly in the Chernihiv, Sumy, Poltava, and Cherkasy regions.

The main drivers of these changes include rural outmigration, especially among youth, to urban areas and abroad; a demographic crisis characterized by excess mortality over birth rates; population ageing and declining reproductive potential. Additional negative impacts stem from structural shifts in the labor market, including reduced employment in agriculture, the expansion of informal employment (until 2015), and a subsequent overall decline in rural job opportunities. In parallel, there is a progressive deterioration of social infrastructure, manifested in the reduction of educational, healthcare, cultural, and other public service facilities in rural areas.

These processes have long-term implications for rural development and create complex challenges for recovery and sustainable growth. Consequently, academic research addressing rural transformation under the influence of agricultural digitalization, urbanization processes, and global economic shifts is becoming increasingly relevant. Particular attention is also given to the justification of rural development strategies, identification of effective investment mechanisms, and implementation of innovative territorial governance models.

The issue of rural development is widely studied by the Ukrainian scholars [1–11]. However, current conditions require the formation of a coherent vision for the development of the agricultural sector and

rural communities in the context of European integration. Special emphasis should be placed on assessing the alignment of national programs with the requirements of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy, which define key approaches to sustainable territorial development.

In the context of post-war recovery, the priority is the creation of safe, comfortable, and economically attractive living conditions in rural communities. A significant step in this direction is the Government-approved Strategy for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Territories in Ukraine for the period up to 2030 (15 November 2024) [12], which defines the key benchmarks for their further development.

The purpose of the study is to examine contemporary models and policy instruments for the development of rural territories in the European Union and Ukraine, with a particular focus on the Smart Village and LEADER approaches, and to identify their role in promoting sustainable, digitally enabled, and community-driven rural transformation.

Materials and Methods. The study is based on a systematic analysis of scientific publications, policy documents, and strategic frameworks of the European Union and Ukraine in the field of rural development, with particular attention to the Smart Village initiative, the LEADER/CLLD approach, and related instruments of regional and rural policy. EU strategic documents (including the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas 2040, the Rural Pact, and the Rural Action Plan), as well as Ukrainian legislative and policy materials regulating decentralisation, territorial development, and land management, were used as the empirical and normative basis of the research.

The methodological framework combines general scientific and specialized methods of economic and spatial analysis. In particular, comparative analysis was applied to identify similarities and differences between EU and

Ukrainian approaches to rural development; the systems approach was used to examine rural territories as integrated socio-economic and spatial systems; and the institutional analysis method enabled the assessment of governance mechanisms and policy instruments. In addition, the study employs a descriptive-analytical method to systematize conceptual categories such as Smart Village, digital community, and rural resilience, as well as a structural-functional approach to evaluate the interaction between digitalization, governance, and territorial development processes.

The combination of these methods allowed for a comprehensive assessment of current trends, institutional frameworks, and development tools shaping the transformation of rural territories under conditions of digitalization, European integration, and socio-economic change.

Research results and discussion. In recent years, contemporary vectors of development of amalgamated communities and rural settlements have been accompanied and consolidated through a set of emerging concepts, including «smart community», «smart village», «digital community», «smart-community», «Climate Smart Village (CSV) », «Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) », as well as broader notions such as digital transformation and the «network society, among others.

It should be noted that in the European Union, the concept of «Smart Villages» implies that a village is not merely a place of residence, but an actively developing territorial unit that uses modern ideas and technologies to improve the quality of life of its residents [13]. In essence, a «Smart Village» represents a model of sustainable development based on several key principles. First, the rural community assumes responsibility for initiating and addressing local challenges, making maximum use of its internal potential, strengths, and available resources. Second, strategic decisions and development initiatives are generated directly by residents, who are best positioned to assess their own needs. The community jointly develops and implements strategies aimed at improving economic, social, and environmental well-being.

Third, the concept is not limited solely to digitalization. Although information and communication technologies (ICTs) are important tools for improving service delivery and connectivity, true «smartness» lies in the synergy between social, digital, and technological innovations aimed at addressing local challenges. Finally, Smart Villages do not exist in isolation; they establish sustainable horizontal linkages

and partnerships with other communities, cities, and relevant institutions in order to exchange experience and ensure joint development.

The implementation of the Smart Villages concept in the European Union is supported by a multi-channel financing system, which includes resources from the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Cohesion Policy, as well as funding from national, regional, and private funds. This approach to financial support is particularly important, as it enables rural communities to become the driving force of their own development. The application of the «bottom-up» approach facilitates the transformation of rural areas into more economically attractive, resilient, and innovative spaces, which serves as a valuable benchmark for the sustainable development of Ukrainian villages.

At the current stage, the Smart Villages concept in the EU is acquiring new dimensions through the introduction of innovative governance tools, among which the Rural Pact plays a significant role as a mechanism for real engagement of rural and other stakeholders in the development of rural territories [13].

In the European Union, rural development is regarded as a shared responsibility of communities, public authorities, businesses, and civil society. To implement the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas until 2040, the European Commission launched the Rural Pact as a platform that brings together efforts at different levels- from local initiatives to national policy frameworks. This approach is based on the «bottom-up» principle, where rural development is initiated by communities that best understand their own needs and take responsibility for territorial development. The Rural Pact is not a separate funding program; however, its implementation is supported by the European Commission through existing EU policy instruments.

The analysis of the implementation of the Smart Village concept in EU countries demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of this approach to national contexts. For instance, in the Netherlands, communities develop «village plans» in which they define development priorities ranging from public spaces to local services. After approval by the municipality, these plans acquire official status and are implemented with the active participation of local residents.

In Scotland, the Local Place Plans (LPP) mechanism ensures the formal involvement of residents in spatial planning. Such plans must be taken into account by public authorities when

making decisions on infrastructure and urban development. The initiative to develop these plans lies exclusively with local communities, thereby ensuring real influence of residents on territorial development.

In Catalonia (Spain), communities, municipalities, farmers, entrepreneurs, and cultural organisations have signed the Landscape Charter, a voluntary agreement aimed at environmental protection, support for local production, and preservation of cultural heritage. It also contributes to the diversification of territorial development funding sources through the involvement of various programs.

The methodological foundations of the Rural Pact, particularly the “bottom-up” principle, represent an important benchmark for shaping rural development policy in Ukraine. Its practical implementation is supported by the EU4SmallFarms project, which involves piloting Smallholder Innovation Groups (SIGs) in more than 20 communities across seven regions of Ukraine. SIGs represent a new model of local cooperation that ensures: collective identification and resolution of agricultural development challenges; interaction between farmers, communities, and experts; and the preparation of high-quality project proposals for national and international support programs. This approach transforms passive expectations of assistance into a strategy of self-driven community development.

In response to contemporary environmental challenges, the Smart Village concept is evolving toward strengthening climate resilience. The Climate Smart Village (CSV) approach is considered an important tool for community adaptation to climate change. Its foundation lies in the integration of Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) technologies into production processes, testing and demonstration of innovative farming methods, minimization of the negative impact of climate change on food security, and scaling up effective practices in vulnerable communities.

The Smart Village concept implies the strategic development of settlements based on local potential, including economic restructuring, increased household incomes, expanded employment opportunities, and improved quality of life [14]. It represents a modern vision of community development that takes into account the long-term and sustainable use of local resources.

Within the digital economy, territorial development increasingly takes the form of a «digital community». Effective governance and strategic planning are only possible through

the implementation of IT-based solutions. The advantages of digitalization lie in the accessibility of technologies for all residents, enhanced opportunities for exercising social, economic, and cultural rights, and broader citizen participation in territorial development processes. The formation of a «smart community» therefore requires the integration of digital technologies across all spheres of life – from public utilities to civic engagement.

According to I. P. Dynnyk [15, p. 204], the main directions for implementing the «smart community» concept include: the introduction of modern technologies in agriculture to increase productivity and reduce production costs; ensuring access to modern telecommunication services; creating conditions for the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly through infrastructure for tourism activities; transitioning to alternative energy sources; rational use of land, water, and energy resources; modernization of education, healthcare, and social protection systems; as well as the use of ICT tools to ensure equal access of the population to information and public services.

A broader interpretation of a «smart community» [15, pp. 202–203] defines it as a modern form of community based on the use of internet technologies to improve quality of life across various domains, including healthcare, housing and communal services, urban infrastructure, and social services. The formation of such an environment implies maximum utilization of telecommunications and digital business potential, ensuring: comfortable living conditions through access to high-speed connectivity and online services; the development of new forms of economic activity with an emphasis on automation and digital technologies; and the implementation of managerial decisions based on big data analytics (Big Data).

A digital community [17, p. 43] is considered a system of local self-government that operates on the basis of digital governance through the use of digital technologies, big data, and artificial intelligence. It presupposes the interaction of key stakeholders – population, public authorities, business, and academic institutions – for the joint development of territories. The main instruments include electronic communication platforms, open data, and decision-making analytics, as well as the creation of favorable conditions for innovative business development.

Thus, the implementation of the Smart Village concept and the digitalization of local self-government bodies (LSGs) are focused

on the following directions: the use of ICT in strategic planning for sustainable development; transformation of administrative processes within LSGs; implementation of digital services for citizens; support for local business through innovation; and modernization of infrastructure and improvement of quality of life.

Digitalization of LSGs is a flexible process that depends on the specific needs of a community and its level of readiness for automation. Its key objectives include strengthening the long-term development of rural areas; improving governance and supporting innovation; ensuring transparency of public authorities; and establishing systems for monitoring the quality of social services. The effectiveness of digital transformation depends on the combination of financial resources for ICT implementation and the availability of qualified personnel capable of maintaining and developing these systems. A detailed overview of the role of digital technologies in municipal governance is presented in Table 1.

The sustainable development of territorial communities is currently inseparably linked to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals of Ukraine for the period up to 2030 (SDGs-2030). According to the Decree of the President of Ukraine, the achievement of 17 interrelated goals is a key condition for improving the quality of life of the population and ensuring constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens.

The digitalization process creates additional opportunities for the effective implementation of most SDGs. A positive effect is generated not only through the transition of local self-government bodies (LSGBs) to a digital format, but also through the active use of modern ICT

tools by municipal staff in their daily practice. Thus, digital transformation acts as an important catalyst for the implementation of national strategies at the community level.

The conducted analysis demonstrates the direct impact of digitalization on the achievement of 11 Sustainable Development Goals (in particular Goals 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16, and 17). At the same time, the dynamics of technological progress indicates a further expansion of ICT applications and the emergence of new innovative areas for their implementation in the activities of local self-government bodies (Table 2).

The current state of rural areas in Ukraine is characterized by a critical decline in population and a reduction in the size of villages. These processes are driven by long-term negative trends that intensified in the 2000s and became particularly acute in the context of full-scale war: mortality exceeding birth rates, population migration to cities and abroad, as well as territorial losses and occupation. As a result, small settlements are disappearing (more than one thousand villages have effectively ceased to exist). At the same time, the share of very small villages with populations of up to 200 people is increasing (by 1.6 times over 1970–2022), despite the overall contraction of the settlement network.

Additional factors include the reduction of employment opportunities in rural areas, which stimulates labor migration, as well as the downsizing of educational, healthcare, and cultural infrastructure. This leads to the outflow of qualified personnel and a deterioration in the quality of life. Taken together, these processes contribute to the degradation of the rural settlement system and the formation of depopulated territories.

Table 1 – The role of digitalization in the modernization of local government activities

№	The role of digitalization
1	Digitalization as a tool for modernization of local government provides automation of management, simplification of decision-making, acceleration of data processing, optimization of resource use and systematic monitoring of community development
2	Digitalization of local government in the context of European integration ensures accountability of authorities, simplifies citizens' access to quality administrative services and creates conditions for e-democracy in the field of local development
3	Digitalization is a tool for adapting local government to military challenges and migration processes, ensuring operational management through the availability of technologies and maximum involvement of the population in digital interaction
4	Digitalization strengthens the competitiveness of communities, stimulates investment attractiveness and an innovative economy, allowing the implementation of smart governance models to improve the quality of life and social cohesion of residents

Source: systematized and supplemented [17, p. 40; 18, p. 265].

Table 2 – Main directions of implementation and benefits of digitalization in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs-2030)

№	Directions of implementation and benefits of digitalization
1	Promoting sustainable development of territorial communities (SDGs 8, 9): Digitalization minimizes bureaucratic barriers and optimizes business processes, which significantly reduces the costs of entrepreneurship, stimulates the development of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), increases labor productivity and contributes to the creation of new jobs in the community; the introduction of transparent and fast administrative procedures through digital services activates the attraction of investors, which directly stimulates investment activity and ensures sustainable economic growth of the community; the development of digital services and open access to data form a competitive environment that increases the efficiency of the labor market, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to automate production processes and manage inventories ensures increased productivity in accordance with SDG 8; the introduction of innovative digital solutions (Smart-City, Smart-Community, Climate Smart Village, Climate Smart Agriculture, e-services) contributes to the development of modern infrastructure and increases the investment attractiveness of territorial communities; The development of digital infrastructure allows businesses to instantly respond to market changes, quickly adjust development strategies, and achieve maximum optimization in the use of community resources
2	Ensure quality education and develop human potential (SDG 4): Digital technologies allow expanding access to educational services, including through the development of distance education and online platforms, to improve the skills of local government employees
3	Promoting an inclusive and just society (SDGs 10, 16): the development of e-democracy (petitions, consultations, public budgets) expands the participation of residents in decision-making, which ensures transparency of governance and inclusiveness in accordance with SDG 10 on reducing inequality; data openness and electronic services increase the level of accountability of local authorities to society, strengthen citizens' trust, and contribute to reducing corruption
4	Improving the quality of life of the population (SDGs 3, 11): the implementation of digital services in the areas of health and social protection increases the accessibility and quality of vital services for the population; digital tools in the management of urban infrastructure (energy management, transport, water supply) contribute to the formation of safe and inclusive territorial communities
5	Rational use of natural resources and ensuring environmental sustainability of the territory (SDGs 6, 7, 13): «Smart» water resources monitoring systems ensure timely detection of water pollution, irrational use of water resources; digital water supply management platforms increase the efficiency of water distribution, especially in regions with a shortage of water resources; electronic services for citizens facilitate access to water supply services, inform the population about water quality digital energy efficiency management platforms contribute to reducing energy consumption in industrial production through process automation; smart energy networks optimize energy production, distribution and consumption, contributing to the effective use of renewable energy sources; digitalization in CO₂ emission management allows tracking and controlling greenhouse emissions, helping enterprises achieve carbon neutrality; Digital services to raise environmental awareness (mobile applications and platforms for tracking personal carbon footprint) are aimed at stimulating environmentally friendly behavior among the population
6	Strengthening partnerships and international cooperation (SDG 17): The development of digital infrastructure contributes to the integration of territorial communities into national and international digital platforms, which opens up new opportunities for attracting investments, participating in grant programs, and exchanging best practices for sustainable development

Source: systematized and supplemented [18, p. 266; 20, p. 470-471].

These transformations have evolved over a long period; however, they have become particularly pronounced in the restructuring of small and medium-sized rural settlements. Thus, the share of villages with populations up to 500 people increased from 55.6% in 1970 to 69.4% in 2022, indicating a gradual “fragmentation” and shrinking of the settlement network [21, pp. 211, 215].

The contemporary transformation of rural territories reflects a contradiction between quantitative and qualitative dimensions of development. The continued decline in population size and ageing of rural residents call into question the traditional understanding of sustainability. At the same time, global experience confirms that rural depopulation is an objective consequence of urbanization. Therefore, sustainability should be interpreted not as the preservation of demographic indicators, but as ensuring quality of life and social cohesion.

In this context, it is appropriate to distinguish a «functional fragmentation of sustainability»: on the one hand, a gradual acquisition by rural territories of urban characteristics (infrastructure, utilities, public amenities); on the other hand, demographic decline and degradation of settlement patterns. Thus, sustainability implies the ability of communities to maintain an adequate standard of living even under conditions of population reduction, where digitalization plays a key role as an instrument for ensuring service accessibility.

Accordingly, contemporary rural development takes place under conditions of limited resources and requires the creation of qualitatively new living conditions aimed at overcoming negative demographic and socio-economic trends.

For a generalized understanding of sustainability issues, it is important to consider the parameters of an average territorial community. In Ukraine, on average, one community comprises 19.3 villages, of which 13.4 are small settlements (up to 500 inhabitants). The average area of a community is 388.5 km², while the average village covers about 20.1 km². The average distance between settlements reaches 9 km.

Population density varies significantly, ranging from 141.6 persons/km² in the most densely populated areas to around 14 persons/km² in the least populated ones, indicating considerable territorial differentiation. According to classification, intermediate regions (44.4%) and rural regions (41.3%) prevail, while urban regions account for 14.3% [22, pp. 225–228]. This

confirms the significant spatial heterogeneity of territorial community development in Ukraine.

The issue of sustainable development of rural territories has become particularly acute in the sphere of population settlement, driven by the cumulative effect of several destructive trends: declining population density within communities, deepening «small-village» settlement patterns and the formation of sparsely populated territories; contraction of employment opportunities due to changes in the structure of agricultural production and the transition to highly mechanized, less labor-intensive technologies; increasing mechanization in the agro-industrial complex, which reduces the demand for permanent labor; and the shrinking network of social infrastructure, which leads to the outflow of qualified personnel and deterioration of living conditions.

Taken together, these factors create a contradiction between the economic efficiency of agribusiness and the social stability of territories, which highlights the need for new models of rural development governance. One of the priorities is the rational use of local resources and the development of inter-municipal cooperation. The resource potential of a territorial community includes: natural resource base (land, forests, water resources, mineral resources of local and national significance); demographic and labor potential; production and economic complex; social infrastructure; and financial and property assets (budgets, communal property, rental income).

In the context of market transformations, a key factor in activating economic potential is rapid access to information on available community resources, primarily land and real estate. Their efficient use depends on labor availability, entrepreneurial activity, and geographical location of the community: remoteness from major centers complicates attracting tenants and investors. For peripheral communities, digitalization (online registries, investment maps) is a crucial tool for overcoming spatial isolation.

According to O. I. Pavlov Jr. [23, p. 77], a significant share of amalgamated territorial communities (ATCs) and districts in Ukraine are semi-peripheral or peripheral, characterized by limited access to resources and labor markets. More than half of communities are located over 100 km away from regional centers, which complicates economic activity and leads to labor shortages and weak entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector.

In the context of martial law, the state has introduced simplified land lease mechanisms to

ensure food security. In particular, a series of laws (No. 2145-IX, No. 2247-IX, No. 2698-IX) were adopted, which facilitated the transfer of land for lease, expanded the powers of local self-government bodies (LSGBs), and regulated land relations under conditions of limited functioning of the cadastral system. An automatic one-year extension of lease agreements without additional consent of the parties or registration procedures was also introduced, ensuring continuity of agricultural production.

In addition, requirements regarding lease terms and cadastral registration of land plots were temporarily simplified during the period of restricted operation of the State Land Cadastre. At the same time, after the restoration of its functionality, an obligation was introduced to register rights within specified time limits, ensuring legal certainty and proper accounting of community land resources.

To ensure food security and flexibility of land use, legislation established a special procedure for leasing state, communal, unclaimed, and collectively owned lands. This mechanism operates in conditions of suspension of the State Land Cadastre (SLC) and includes a number of special rules: rent is limited to 8% of the normative monetary valuation; the lessee is granted the right exclusively to targeted land use without subleasing, change of designation, contract renewal, capital construction, or use of subsoil resources; agreements are concluded electronically using qualified electronic signatures (QES) for a period of one year; land auctions are cancelled, which accelerates access to resources; land plots are formed without cadastral numbers on the basis of technical documentation; lease rights are not subject to state registration; and contract accounting is assigned to district military administrations [24].

The implementation of these rules under martial law has simplified and accelerated the re-registration of land relations, removed administrative barriers, and facilitated more active involvement of land resources in economic circulation. Further expansion of simplified procedures is possible through the identification of unused, ownerless, and inherited lands that may be transferred into the ownership of local self-government bodies.

Military actions have led to a sharp decline in rural population and demand for social services, resulting in the release of social infrastructure facilities (education, healthcare, culture, trade, and services). While in peacetime these processes were gradual, under wartime conditions they have become rapid and uneven.

Management effectiveness is determined not only by the restoration of destroyed facilities but also by the ability of communities to ensure their rational repurposing. One of the solutions is the optimization of premises use through the relocation of social services and the consolidation of functions within existing institutions.

Inter-municipal cooperation is gaining particular importance as an instrument for enhancing the viability of territories. The updated Ukrainian legislation on cooperation between territorial communities (No. 11412, revised version of the Law dated 28.08.2025) [25] simplifies interaction procedures and defines the main forms of cooperation: delegation of powers with resource provision; coordination of actions and pooling of resources; joint financing of municipal enterprises and infrastructure; establishment of new legal entities and joint facilities; creation of joint governing bodies; as well as formation of agglomerations for the strategic development of large territories [25, Art. 4].

A significant innovation of the updated legislation is the ensured continuity of the process of drafting cooperation agreements: the refusal of one potential participant no longer halts the commission's work, allowing the prompt completion of a new project without returning to the initial stage and ensuring savings in time and administrative resources.

Systemic changes also cover other aspects of cooperation organization: the possibility to start financing joint activities before the beginning of the budget period; mandatory video recording of commission meetings with storage of recordings for up to five years; transition to quarterly state monitoring and abolition of annual reporting; legalization of horizontal cooperation at district and regional levels and the formation of preconditions for agglomerations; the possibility of combining several forms of cooperation within a single agreement; as well as a clear mechanism for termination of cooperation with prior notice and compensation payments.

The dynamics of inter-municipal initiatives demonstrate a shift from addressing basic economic issues to implementing complex social services. While the earliest agreements (2014, Khmelnytskyi region) focused on establishing joint communal enterprises, more recent examples, such as Agreement No. 1431 dated 10.02.2026 between the Zelonohirska and Liubashivska communities [26], are aimed at jointly financing Centers for Social Services Provision. A summary of current directions of inter-municipal synergy is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 – **Forms of cooperation between territorial communities under martial law in Ukraine**

№	Name, form and purpose of intermunicipal cooperation
1	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of delegating the implementation of individual tasks, providing information and methodological consultations and psychological support to pedagogical workers of the Yuryev settlement territorial community
2	Joint financing (maintenance) by the subjects of cooperation of enterprises, institutions and organizations of communal ownership, infrastructure facilities
3	Implementation of joint projects, which involves coordinating the activities of the subjects of cooperation and accumulating resources by them for a certain period in order to jointly implement relevant measures
4	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of implementing a joint project «Expanding development opportunities in the field of education, culture, medicine, housing and communal services and social protection of the population in Bobrovytska and Novobasanska communities»
5	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of implementing a joint project on the creation, processing and verification of address information and data on buildings and structures
6	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of delegating the implementation of individual tasks, providing services to children and youth, by providing them with the opportunity to artistic and aesthetic development and creative artistic potential by the municipal organization "Children's Music School of Safyanivka Village Council"
7	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of delegation of individual tasks with the transfer of relevant resources in the field of inclusive education when organizing the provision of services to children with special educational needs by the «Inclusive Resource Center» of the Romanivka Village Council
8	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of delegation of execution of certain tasks to ensure temporary storage of archival documents accumulated in the process of documenting service, labor and other legal relations of legal entities and individual entrepreneurs, and other archival documents belonging to the national archival fund, on the territory of Kozynska and Krupetska rural communities
9	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of delegation of execution of certain tasks in the field of providing comprehensive rehabilitation services to children with disabilities and children from 0 to 3 years old (inclusive), who belong to the risk group for acquiring disability
10	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of implementation of a joint project «Expanding development opportunities in the field of education, culture, digitalization in Bobrovytska and Vyshnivska communities»
11	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of delegation of execution of certain tasks in the field of health care (primary medical and sanitary assistance)
12	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of joint financing (maintenance) of Verbsky territorial center of social services (provision of social services)
13	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of joint financing (maintenance) of the municipal institution «Local Fire Brigade» of the Stepankivsk Village Council
14	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of joint financing (maintenance) of the department «Center for Administrative Services» of the Volodymyretska Village Council
15	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of implementation of a joint project «Reconstruction of the outpatient clinic building into a residential building at the address: Sportivna St., building 1, building 6, Sofiivka village, Kryvyi Rih district, Dnipropetrovsk region»
16	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of delegation of implementation of certain tasks in the field of support for war veterans and demobilized persons to the Center for Social Services of the Snihuriv city council in the Horokhiv rural territorial community
17	Cooperation of territorial communities in the form of delegation of implementation of certain tasks with the transfer of relevant resources in the field of primary health care services by specialists of the municipal non-profit enterprise «Drabiv Center for Primary Health Care»

Source: summarized from source [26].

Analysis of statistical data from the State Register of Agreements indicates an intensification of inter-municipal cooperation even under martial law conditions. If in 2015–2024 the average number of registered agreements was about 120 per year, then in 2025 this figure increased to 210 agreements (a 1.75-fold increase), confirming that communities increasingly view resource consolidation as a key adaptation instrument.

The evolution of rural territorial development can be conditionally divided into the following stages: the period of active development (late 1980s), characterized by comprehensive development of village-centers of agricultural enterprises and temporary stabilization of the socio-economic situation; the crisis of the transition period (1990s–2014), when privatization and ownership transformation in the agro-industrial complex led to production decline and degradation of social infrastructure; the decentralization stage (since 2015), which ensured the concentration of resources and managerial powers at the community level; and the martial law period (since 2022), when the priority has been maintaining defense capacity while preserving basic life-support systems.

After the end of hostilities, communities will face the task not only of physical reconstruction but also of forming a qualitatively new environment: modernization of infrastructure, creation of barrier-free spaces, development of social adaptation systems, and implementation of innovation through cooperation between government, business, and civil society.

More than 30 years of agrarian sector reforms demonstrate a profound transformation of rural territories. Key trends include population decline and ageing, depopulation of small settlements, an increasing number of abandoned households, and a reduction in social infrastructure. In parallel, there has been land concentration in agroholdings and the contraction of local production. At the same time, the level of engineering provision (communications, internet, and digital connectivity) has improved, partially compensating for spatial remoteness.

The structure of investment in territorial development has also changed. If in the 1990s the main investors were around 12,000 enterprises, today the agricultural sector (over 75,000 entities, including 46,000 legal entities) is highly fragmented, which has led to a «dispersion» of investment potential. In these conditions, the role of the infrastructure development client has effectively shifted to local self-government bodies.

The contemporary modernization of social infrastructure combines integration into general progress trends (digitalization, energy efficiency) with overcoming historical infrastructural lag. Its implementation requires innovative approaches, including the «Smart Village» concept.

Currently, rural territories in Ukraine are characterized by a «watershed» between de-occupied and stable-functioning communities, which generates two development trajectories. The first is post-conflict recovery, based on the principle of «building back better», integrating security, social, and infrastructure solutions, engaging the population, and strengthening the role of local self-government bodies as decision-making centers [27, pp. 35–67]. The second is strategic territorial modernization, focused on infrastructure renewal, introduction of resource-saving technologies, development of public spaces, and digitalization of services.

Both trajectories share a common technological foundation: unified construction standards, resource-based approaches, and mechanisms of interaction between local self-government bodies and contractors, which enables the formation of an integrated model for rural recovery and development.

A significant step in the reform of territorial governance as of 01.01.2025 was the introduction of the Comprehensive Spatial Development Plan (CSDP) as an instrument for integrating urban planning documentation and land management. It ensures unified functional zoning of a territorial community and is implemented through a system consisting of: the CSDP as a strategic document for territorial community development, master plans of settlements, and detailed territorial plans (DTP). This approach makes it possible to move away from fragmented planning, increase transparency in land relations, and create predictable conditions for investors, thereby forming a foundation for the implementation of the «Smart Village» concept on a digital spatial basis.

In cases where valid urban planning documentation already exists, its updating or amendment is permitted without a limitation on the period of validity. At the same time, in the event of changes in community boundaries or administrative structure, revision of relevant sections is foreseen through simplified public consultation and expert review procedures.

A key challenge remains the shortage of investment resources. The main sources of recovery include international funds, particularly programs linked to the use of proceeds from frozen Russian assets (approximately USD

18.5 billion in 2025). These include the G7 ERA initiative, the Ukraine Facility program, and mechanisms for the rapid restoration of critical infrastructure. In parallel, national resources are utilized, including local budgets, private investments, and credit mechanisms.

The modernization of community governance involves the digitalization of administrative processes, automation of services, implementation of energy-efficient solutions, and systematic upskilling of personnel. An important direction is housing reconstruction, including thermal modernization of buildings, upgrading of engineering systems, redevelopment, and conversion of dacha properties into residential stock, which contributes to population retention.

Energy resilience is ensured through the transition to decentralized heating systems, the use of gas cogeneration units, modular boiler plants, and renewable energy sources. By 2030, a gradual replacement of outdated networks with local energy solutions is envisaged. At the same time, water supply, sewage, and wastewater treatment systems are being modernized to reduce environmental impact.

Landscape improvement is based on a participatory approach and includes energy-efficient lighting, separate waste collection, landscaping, barrier-free infrastructure, and functional zoning of public spaces. The formation of a safe environment involves ecological measures, reduction of pollution, transition to rational resource consumption, and the development of environmental awareness among the population.

Thus, the contemporary model of rural development is grounded in the combination of spatial planning, digitalization, investment support, and environmental modernization, which together ensure the formation of resilient and competitive communities.

A comprehensive environmental policy at the community level should integrate engineering and technical solutions, strategic management, and environmental education of the population. Key directions include the introduction of separate waste collection, taking into account its morphological structure (up to 40% food waste, up to 26% paper), which allows reducing landfill pressure and returning secondary resources into the economy. Equally important is the use of mechanical, biological, and physicochemical water treatment methods, including filtration, bio-treatment, ozonation, and UV treatment, aimed at preventing water pollution.

Priorities also include the development of green zones, vertical landscaping, and natural

barriers that improve microclimate conditions and environmental quality, as well as the expansion of local protected natural areas to preserve biodiversity. Environmental policy further предусматривает strict regulation of industrial emissions, transition to environmentally friendly transport, implementation of scientifically based crop rotation systems, use of green manure crops (sideration), restoration of shelterbelts, reduction of pesticide use, and the development of organic farming.

An important component is the adaptation of the population to climate and technogenic risks through the use of air purification systems, adherence to proper water management practices, and strengthening environmental awareness. A new environmental culture is being formed, where environmental safety is regarded as a fundamental condition for preserving public health.

The implementation of the «smart village» concept requires a clear definition of spatial categories. The territories of territorial communities in Ukraine cover approximately 94.6% of the country's total area, with rural and settlement communities accounting for 66% of the overall territory. At the same time, a significant part of rural space is incorporated into urban communities, which necessitates clarification of the terminological framework: «rural territories» should be interpreted as the spatial domain of rural and settlement communities, whereas «rural areas» should be understood as non-urban settlements located within urban territorial communities.

In the European Union, a comprehensive set of instruments supporting rural development has been established, among which the LEADER approach, the Smart Village concept, the Rural Pact, and the long-term vision for rural areas until 2040 occupy a central place. This vision covers approximately 83% of the EU territory and is based on extensive consultations with communities and businesses, enabling the identification of shared challenges and development opportunities. The EU Action Plan is aimed at unlocking the full potential of rural areas through an integrated sustainable development policy framework.

Rural regions in the EU are home to approximately 137 million people (about 30% of the Union's population) and cover around 83% of its territory. Recognizing their strategic importance, the European Commission has developed the «Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas 2040 » which takes into account regional diversity and identifies key challenges and

development opportunities. Survey results indicate that by 2040, the attractiveness of rural areas will be primarily determined by digital accessibility (93%), the availability of basic and e-services (94%), and the environmental sustainability of agriculture (92%).

The long-term development strategy is structured around four interrelated pillars and ten objectives that form the basis of rural transformation policy. One of the key instruments for its implementation is the LEADER approach, launched in 1990 on a bottom-up principle. It ensures active participation of local communities in decision-making, development based on endogenous territorial potential, partnership between public authorities, business, and civil society, as well as inter-territorial cooperation. The practical implementation of this approach is carried out through Local Action Groups (LAGs), which in 2014–2020 covered more than 61% of the rural population of the EU.

In Ukraine, the LEADER approach is beginning to be implemented as a tool for community development with the involvement of state authorities and international partners. It is aimed at integration into national policy, the creation of LEADER regions (with a population of 10,000–150,000), the development of entrepreneurship, and the establishment of a systemic framework for rural development governance. To this end, a coordination mechanism is envisaged, along with harmonization of legislation with EU standards, training of local leaders, and the establishment of stable funding sources.

Another key direction is the «Smart Villages» concept, launched in 2017 within the Cork 2.0 Declaration. It combines digitalization, social innovation, and community participation to enhance quality of life. Its components include the development of e-services, distance education and telemedicine, the implementation of smart farming, smart grids, digital infrastructure, and support for remote work. The model is based on active citizen engagement and the use of digital technologies to address depopulation, infrastructure constraints, and peripheral development challenges.

The Rural Pact (2021) serves as a mechanism for implementing the EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas until 2040. It establishes a platform for cooperation among public authorities, businesses, academia, and civil society. Its toolkit (the Rural Toolkit) provides access to funding opportunities, best practices, and development projects. The Pact is designed to address depopulation, digital inequality, and

limited access to services through multi-level governance and cooperation.

In addition, the EU Rural Action Plan includes 30 strategic measures implemented by 14 European Commission directorates-general and financed through European funds. Collectively, these initiatives form a comprehensive rural development policy oriented towards digital transformation, economic resilience, and improved quality of life.

EU rural areas cover 83% of the Union's territory and are home to approximately 30% of its population (137 million people). This has led to the formulation of the «Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas to 2040», which takes into account regional diversity and key challenges. Surveys indicate that the main factors determining rural attractiveness in 2020–2030 are digital connectivity (93%), access to basic and e-services (94%), and the environmental modernization of the agricultural sector (92%).

The strategic development model is based on four interrelated pillars: connectivity, resilience, prosperity, and equity. Connectivity refers to the development of digital and transport infrastructure aimed at overcoming territorial isolation. Resilience involves ecological adaptation, economic diversification, and social cohesion. Prosperity focuses on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), fostering innovation in the agricultural sector, and creating new employment opportunities. Equity ensures equal access to education, healthcare, and social services.

The operational platform for this model is the Rural Pact, which consolidates stakeholders across all governance levels and ensures the exchange of best practices, policy coordination, and support for local initiatives. Its instrumental framework includes the Rural Toolkit, financing mechanisms, and open participation of public authorities, business, and civil society.

The Rural Action Plan operationalizes the «Vision for Rural Areas 2040» through four development blocks (Stronger, Connected, Resilient, and Prosperous Rural Areas), nine flagship initiatives, fifteen accompanying actions, and six cross-sectoral measures. Its implementation is aimed at strengthening territorial linkages, improving infrastructure, creating jobs, enhancing skills development, and diversifying rural economies through agritourism, bioeconomy, and processing industries.

In addition, the Action Plan includes cross-cutting instruments such as Rural Proofing (systematic assessment of all policies through

a rural lens), the Rural Toolkit (access to funding opportunities), the Rural Observatory (data and statistical analysis), and the Rural Pact as a coordination mechanism. Collectively, these instruments form an integrated model of sustainable rural development oriented towards reducing the digital and social divide between urban and rural areas. A synthesis and systematization of the reviewed approaches to the prospective development of rural territories in the EU are presented in Table 4.

Rural areas in the European Union are characterized by considerable heterogeneity, which necessitates the development of tailored development models. Economically resilient communities achieve growth through diversification (e.g., agritourism, small-scale energy production, and SMEs), whereas deprived territories are characterized by population ageing, remoteness from labor markets, weak infrastructure, and limited access to services and connectivity. These factors reduce their attractiveness and highlight the need for digitalization, social innovation, and integrated governance to reduce regional disparities [29].

The European Commission acts as the coordinator of the EU Rural Action Plan, ensuring its adaptation to emerging challenges. Key instruments include cooperation with Member States and Rural Proofing, which enables the assessment of policy impacts on employment, economic growth, and sustainable development [31].

For Ukraine, the LEADER/CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) approach is identified as a priority instrument, based on a bottom-up principle. Its implementation involves the establishment of Local Action Groups (LAGs) and the formation of LEADER regions as inter-municipal associations with shared development strategies. Core principles include orientation towards local needs, partnership between public authorities, business, and communities, development of small businesses and innovation, and integration of the approach into national development strategies up to 2040.

At the same time, the implementation of LEADER in Ukraine is constrained by the unclear legal status of LAGs, unstable funding mechanisms, and insufficient project management capacity at the local level. In EU candidate countries, alternative partnership models are also applied, focusing on environmental, agricultural, and climate-related objectives, thereby expanding the toolkit of territorial development.

According to Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013, LEADER is one of the most effective instruments of endogenous development, as it is based on the combination of human, social, and institutional capital. For this reason, the EU requires its mandatory inclusion in national and regional development programs as a condition for ensuring the long-term sustainability of rural areas [33].

Table 4 – European approaches to rural development

№	Structural elements, concepts, models, approaches	Characteristics and tools for practical implementation
1	Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas (Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas)	Formation of strategic guidelines until 2040; implementation of pan-European development instruments (Rural Pact; Rural Action Plan; functional rural areas and communities in the EU)
2	EU financial support policies and instruments (CAP)	Ensuring modernization and diversification of rural areas; supporting sustainable, green and digital development (SAP rural development measures; European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory platform) Implementation of digital services and social innovations; involving various stakeholders (Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 initiatives)
3	Digital and innovative models of community development (Smart Villages)	
4	Participatory approach (employees' participation in decision-making, goal setting, results monitoring) to management (LEADER/CLLD)	Implementation of the «bottom-up» principle; activities of local action groups (LAGs in EU countries; multi-actor approach, which involves the participation of various local stakeholders: scientists, business, communities, etc.)

Source: systematized and summarized from sources [29; 31; 32].

Conclusions. The study confirms that both the European Union and Ukraine are actively developing and implementing rural development modernization concepts, among which the Smart Village model plays a key role. It ensures the integration of social, digital, and bioeconomic innovations, transforming rural communities into active development actors capable of independently initiating changes aimed at improving quality of life. At the same time, technological solutions are adapted to local conditions, which enhances the resilience and competitiveness of territories.

Financing of Smart Village initiatives is carried out through the instruments of the EU Common Agricultural Policy, cohesion policy, as well as national and private funds. The EU's strategic development trajectory is based on combining the green and digital transitions, where the key determinants of rural attractiveness include digital connectivity (93%), access to services (94%), and environmental sustainability (92%).

For Ukraine, the most relevant instrument is the LEADER approach, based on a bottom-up principle and implemented through Local Action Groups within LEADER regions (with populations of 10,000–150,000). Communities independently formulate development strategies with the support of state and regional resources, which strengthens their autonomy and institutional capacity.

However, the implementation of LEADER in Ukraine is constrained by the legal ambiguity of Local Action Groups, insufficient financial mechanisms, and human resource shortages at the local level. Despite these challenges, the integration of Smart Village and LEADER approaches into national policy is a crucial prerequisite for Ukraine's European integration, as it contributes to community activation, improved governance efficiency, and strengthened socio-territorial cohesion.

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Європейські підходи до розвитку сільських територій України: реалізація концепції «SMART Village» та впровадження підходу LEADER

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У статті здійснено комплексне дослідження сучасної політики Європейського Союзу у сфері сталого розвитку сільських територій з акцентом на стратегічній ініціативі «Довгострокове бачення для сільських районів ЄС до 2040 року» та супровідному Плані дій для сільських територій (Rural Action Plan). Предметом дослідження є інституційні, економічні та соціально-екологічні механізми формування політики розвитку сільських регіонів ЄС у контексті їхньої трансформації в багатофункціональні простори сталого зростання. Метою роботи є узагальнення стратегічних підходів ЄС до розвитку сільських територій, виявлення ключових інструментів їх реалізації та обґрунтування можливостей адаптації європейського досвіду в умовах України.

Методологічну основу дослідження становлять системний підхід, методи структурно-функ-

ціонального та порівняльного аналізу, а також елементи стратегічного та інституційного аналізу політик ЄС. Це дозволило комплексно оцінити взаємозв'язок між політичними рішеннями, фінансовими інструментами та практичними результатами реалізації сільської політики.

У результаті дослідження встановлено, що стратегія розвитку сільських територій ЄС базується на чотирьох взаємопов'язаних напрямках: формуванні сильніших сільських районів через посилення місцевих громад і соціальних інновацій; забезпеченні пов'язаності територій шляхом подолання цифрового розриву та розвитку інфраструктури; створенні стійких сільських районів через екологічну трансформацію відповідно до цілей Європейського «зеленого курсу»; а також формуванні процвітаючих територій через економічну диверсифікацію та підтримку підприємництва. Важливим інструментом реалізації визначено Rural Action Plan, який забезпечує координацію політик держав-членів ЄС.

Окрему увагу приділено ролі Спільної аграрної політики (CAP) та фондів згуртованості як основних джерел фінансування, а також концепції Rural Proofing, що забезпечує врахування інтересів сільських територій при формуванні всіх політик ЄС. Доведено, що відбувається перехід від аграрно орієнтованої моделі розвитку села до багатосекторної, інноваційної та соціально інклюзивної моделі.

Наукова новизна полягає у систематизації сучасних європейських підходів до розвитку сільських територій у контексті довгострокової стратегії до 2040 року та визначенні їх адаптаційного потенціалу для України. Практичне значення дослідження полягає в обґрунтуванні можливостей використання інструментів ЄС для відновлення та розвитку українських сільських і деокупованих територій.

Встановлено, що імплементація підходів ЄС, зокрема Rural Proofing, механізмів фінансування CAP, практик «смайт-сіл» та відновлюваної енергетики, може стати основою для трансформації українських сільських територій у конкурентоспроможні та інноваційні простори, здатні виступати драйверами національного економічного розвитку.

Ключові слова: європейська сільська парадигма, сільський розвиток, життєстійкість громад, енергетична децентралізація, стала економіка, цифровізація, Спільна аграрна політика, територіальна згуртованість, післявоєнне відновлення України.



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