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The Challenges of Projects Implemented with Financing from European Union Funds

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Abstract. *When a Romanian entrepreneur is looking for European funds to finance his business, it is essential for him to understand the terms of the loan and the details about the financier, just like in any other loan agreement. The aim of this article is to present the challenges of projects implemented with funding from European Union funds. The research methodology involved a literature review followed by an analysis that examines different categories of public structures, including deconcentrated or decentralized units of central public administration, local public administration units, autonomous kings, state commercial companies or local authorities, units of state education and research, hospitals, and intercommunity development associations. The findings of the research highlighted the specific types of organizations that received financial support from EU-funded programs. Thus, the funds allocated to Romania by the European Union, considered from the point of view of the investment strategy and their non-refundable nature, constituted a substantial asset for the development of the Romanian economy and society in the short, medium and long term. In addition, these funds represented an element of budgetary sustainability. The results of the projects that were financed from European funds are numerous. Each of these is an illustration of a successful effort that has the potential to give rise to additional initiatives of equal significance in the context of the new opportunities that the European Union will fund.*

Keywords: *European Union, European funds, finance, priority funding axes*

Introduction

During the 2007-2013 period, Romania received structural and cohesion funds totaling approximately 20 billion euros. These funds were intended to address and potentially eliminate development disparities in the country. The European Union policy outlined three main objectives to guide the allocation of these funds.

The structural funds are financial instruments utilized by the European Union to address economic and social disparities between regions (Adshead, 2014), with the objective of attaining economic and social cohesion. During the period from 2007 to 2020, there were three financial instruments referred to as structural funds: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF or

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ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), and the Fund for Cohesion (FC). Additionally, there were two complementary actions: the European Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Fisheries Fund (EFF).

The funds allocated for agriculture and fisheries have been redirected to the corresponding policies, specifically, the Common Agricultural Policy and the Fisheries Policy (Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2020).

Conversely, the Cohesion Fund functions and adheres to the identical regulations as the Structural Funds, such as multiannual programming and project approval (European Commission). Consequently, a new regulation was implemented to streamline the financial administration of funds, specifically by equating a program with a fund. Based on this principle, the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund have the ability to provide funding, in a mutually supportive and restricted manner, for activities that align with the scope of the other fund.

Nevertheless, there exists a notable exception to this general principle, specifically the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund, which collaborate on initiatives pertaining to infrastructure and environmental programs (Corti, F. et al., 2022).

As Romania joined the European Union in 2007, its national development plan had to conform to the policies, objectives, principles, and community regulations in order to achieve a "European" socioeconomic development and narrow the substantial disparities with the European Union. The National Development Plan (NDP) served as the primary tool for Romania to address and reduce the socioeconomic disparities with the European Union, with the goal of recovering as swiftly as possible (Government of Romania, 2005).

The National Development Plan is a unique concept within the European economic and social cohesion policy. It serves as the foundation for the creation of the National Strategic Reference Framework, which is a document that outlines the agreed upon guidelines for utilizing structural instruments in cooperation with the European Commission (Bénassy-Quéré et al.2018). The primary aim of the National Strategic Reference Framework was to enhance Romania's economic, social, and regional cohesion policies, while establishing effective connections with the policies of the European Commission, particularly the Lisbon Strategy. The Lisbon Strategy serves as the foundation for economic development policies and job creation (Government of Romania, 2007). This article exclusively examines the National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013, as the subsequent programming cycle 2014-2020 prioritized the implementation of a unified strategic framework, partnership contracts, and a set of thematic objectives aligned with the Europe 2020 Strategy and its integrated guidelines (Vanhercke& Verdun, 2021).

The National Strategic Reference Framework outlines the strategy that underpins the Operational Programmes, which will receive co-financing from the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, and the Cohesion Fund, in line with the "Convergence" and "European Territorial Cooperation" objectives. Furthermore, this national strategic planning document suggests a strong correlation with other programmatic documents, including the National Development Plan and the National Strategic Plan for Rural Development (Bokhorst, 2022).

Literature review

The research focuses on a theme that is of interest to national authorities who seek to streamline the procedural framework, enhance the utilization of European funds, and ensure the proper execution of projects funded by these funds. The text refers to European funds and individuals who have already accessed or are interested in accessing these funds in the future (Radulescu et al., 2021). Hence, the scholarly literature has provided a range of theoretical and practical investigations concerning European funds, encompassing their management, utilization, absorption status, project implementation, as well as the audit and control procedures (Ferrera, Miró & Ronchi, 2021). Audit and control actions conducted by competent national and European authorities ensure the effective management and utilization of European funds for agriculture. These actions are aimed at safeguarding the financial interests of the European Union (Buti & Fabbrini, 2022). audit is defined in various ways by experts in the field of economics, including the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language. According to this dictionary, the audit is described as "a function of controlling and reviewing the accounting of a company, where competent and independent individuals gather and assess evidence to form an opinion on the extent to which what is observed aligns with predetermined criteria." Ioan Oprean defines an audit as a process conducted by auditors or other experts who analyze the information and operations of an entity or a specific activity. They do this based on their theoretical and practical knowledge, following assignments from certain bodies. The purpose of the audit is to provide assurance through an opinion or to make recommendations. Boulescu, Ghiță, and Mareș provide a comprehensive elucidation of the concept of audit in the following manner: "audit is the process carried out by legally qualified individuals or legal entities, called auditors, through which information related to a certain entity is analysed and evaluated professionally, using specific techniques and procedures, in order to obtain evidence, called audit evidence, and based on which the auditors issue in a document, called an audit report, a responsible and independent opinion, by referring to the evaluation criteria resulting from legal regulations or from unanimously recognized good practice in the field in which the audited entity operates". Based on the given definitions, the audit of European funds can be described as a thorough examination of the information provided by fund management and the execution of projects funded by these funds. The purpose is to generate a report that adheres to the established procedures set by the management authorities, with the aim of enhancing user trust in the obtained information. The competent authorities in carrying out the audit missions of the European agricultural funds carry out system audits, operations audits, and certification audits of paying agencies' accounts to provide reasonable assurance that the funds are managed and used in an efficient manner (Moury et al., 2021).

The topic of financing projects from European Union funds has become a subject of increased interest in academic literature, perhaps also due to the significant impact these funds have on economic and social development. Burlacu et al. (2021) highlights the role of digital finance as a development opportunity in the new economy, underlining the importance of adapting and adopting digital technologies in the context of financing from EU funds. This perspective is complementary to the approach of Burlacu, Profiroiu, and Vasilache (2019), which analyzes the impact of demographics on the public finances of the European Union, emphasizing the need to understand and manage demographic effects in the planning and implementation of EU-funded projects.

On the other hand, Burlacu, Lădaru, Călin, and Chiriţă (2022) focus on the need for error-free implementation of projects financed through the Administrative Capacity Operational Program, emphasizing the importance of efficient management and avoiding mistakes that can compromise the success of projects. This line of research is extended by Rădulescu et al. (2023) and Rădulescu, Angheluță, Burlacu, & Kant (2022), which explores the resource mix and aspects related to renewable sources in the context of energy security and sustainability of the Romanian energy complex in a European context, emphasizing the importance of adaptation to sustainability requirements and energy security within the EU. Mogos, et al., (2021) discuss the link between climate change and health protection in the European Union, highlighting the need to integrate climate protection measures into the planning and implementation of EU-funded projects. This perspective is complemented by the analysis of environmental risks in the context of globalization carried out by Bran et al., (2020) and by the study by Bodislav et al., (2020) about the risk perception and management needs of Romanian companies, emphasizing the importance of risk management in the context of financing from EU funds.

Methodology

The research methodology comprised a comprehensive literature review followed by an analysis that scrutinized various categories of public structures. These included deconcentrated or decentralized units of central public administration, local public administration units, autonomous kings, state commercial companies or local authorities, units of state education and research, hospitals, and intercommunity development associations. The research findings emphasized the particular categories of organizations that obtained financial assistance from programs funded by the European Union. Therefore, the financial resources provided to Romania by the European Union, when analyzed in terms of their investment strategy and non-repayable nature, served as a significant advantage for the growth of the Romanian economy and society in the short, medium, and long run. Furthermore, these funds served as a component of fiscal stability. There are numerous outcomes from the projects that received funding from European funds. Each of these examples represents a successful endeavor that has the potential to generate further initiatives of equal importance within the framework of the new funding opportunities provided by the European Union.

Results and Discussion

In essence, we focused on how European funds were distributed between the public and private sectors, both at the national, regional, and county level, which types of public institutions benefited from European funds, in order to determine, if the development effort of the central or local public administration was supported through these financings. It is intriguing to examine the extent to which these financial arrangements have facilitated the redistribution of wealth and fostered cohesion between developed and less developed regions, based on the following assumption.

• H1: There is an imbalanced distribution of projects among different types of beneficiaries in the public environment of Romania.

Therefore, we assessed the number of projects funded and the national ratio for six operational programs (POR, POSDRU, POSDCA, SOP Environment, SOP Transport, and POSCCE). We also identified the performers involved in these programs and determined the quantity and duration of their projects.

This program successfully attracted additional resources for the development projects implemented by the public administration. This study employed secondary data analysis to establish the framework for the distribution of European structural funds in Romania. Additionally, it examined the progress made in accessing these funds from January 1, 2007 to November 30, 2014. The objective was to generate verifiable outcomes that can inform funding policies. The current research did not discuss the Sectoral Operational Program for Technical Assistance (POSAT) and Territorial Cooperation Programs (here we are talking about Cross-border Cooperation Programs, Transnational Cooperation Programs, and Interregional Cooperation

Programs), because the first mentioned program, POSAT, does not finance projects, but the purchase of services and goods with the main objective of ensuring a process of implementing structural instruments in Romania in accordance with the principles and rules of partnership, programming, evaluation, communication, management, including financial management, monitoring and control, based on the responsibilities shared between the member states and the European Commission, and the latest programs assume the cooperation of Romania's regions with the regions of neighboring states (within cross-border cooperation), with the regions of a certain geographical space (within transnational cooperation), as well as with the regions of any member state of the European Union (within interregional cooperation), through projects jointly managed and administered by partners from the participating states.

Lastly, it is crucial to note that the database, which served as the basis for our analysis, was established at the national level and encompasses all the projects contracted within the six operational programs (Jianu et al., 2019).

The data is organized by county and region, categorizing the sectors (Environment, POS Transport, POSCCE) based on the type of partial beneficiary and the financial value of the sector (public sector, private profit sector, and non-profit private sector). The profit was not realized until November 30, 2014. Hence, we can assert that our methodology is highly pioneering in terms of accommodating all commissioned initiatives throughout the 2007-2013 programming phase on a domestic scale.

By examining the hypothesis mentioned earlier, our objective was to determine whether the public environment in Romania exhibits an equitable distribution of projects based on the type of beneficiaries. Alternatively, we aimed to investigate whether the contracted projects exacerbate disparities within public structures, resulting in inefficiency, lack of transparency, and bureaucratic hurdles. From this juncture, I advocate for an equitable allocation of projects within the public sphere in Romania. Projects are either evenly distributed among different types of beneficiaries or, conversely, contracted projects exacerbate disparities within public structures, resulting in inefficiency, lack of transparency, and bureaucratic processes.

Starting from this point, I believe that a balanced distribution of projects at the level of the public environment would represent an essential element in the efficiency of the institutional integration process, the need for a genuine adaptation of Romania to the European structure and would also represent an alignment of stability priorities through the plan. National Development in reducing disparities and development gaps between regions of the country and in creating a central and local level of a public administration that becomes an important factor of competitiveness, development, progress, and cohesion.

In this sense, analysing the distribution of projects according to the category of the applicant, we come to the conclusion that the Romanian public sector was not prepared for the exercise of attracting European funds during the 2007-2022 programming cycle, having a contracting rate of only 32.4%. The public environment would represent an essential element in the efficiency of the institutional integration process, the need for a genuine adaptation of Romania to European structures and would also represent an alignment of the priority established by the National Development Plan regarding the reduction of disparities and development gaps between regions. countries, as well as the creation of the central and local level of a public administration that becomes an important factor of competitiveness, development, progress, and cohesion.

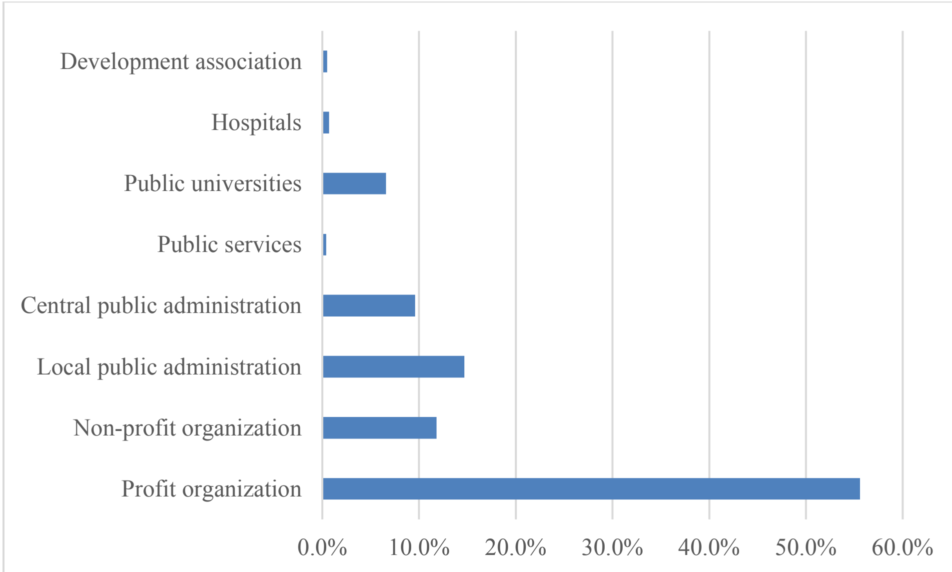

Figure 1. Contracted projects according to the applicant category

Source: Own calculations according to the database made by the authors.

In contrast, the private sector (profit and non-profit) was the contracting champion with a rate of 67.5%, and this is largely due to the way in which the programs through which the Fon were implemented were designed and structured: Structural hardness. Deepening the analysis, we notice that the Local Public Administration (LPA) occupies the first position within the public sector, as a project contractor, which is gratifying, because this is a crucial entity at the local level both as a promoter of local development, of attracting investments at the local level, and the mobilization of citizens in the sense of approaching an entrepreneurial behavior and a proactive attitude.

The Central Public Administration (APC), with a contracting rate of 9.5%, focusses on developing the capacities to provide and manage services efficiently, on ensuring the necessary human resources, and on redefining the relationship with citizens.

An involvement of citizens in public decision making and in the activity of the public administration has, for sure, the potential to accentuate the process of modernization of the public administration if the consultative process is consistent and efficient.

The implementation of participatory democracy by public authorities constitutes the premise for the development of sustainable partnerships and contributes, at the same time, to the easier implementation of the decisions taken, to the increase of the legitimacy and transparency of the authorities, creating an active and informed community. Public universities have a contracting percentage of 6.7%, demonstrating an active involvement in the process of attracting European funds with the aim of generating added value and increasing performance. In general, the role of a university is to generate and apply new knowledge, to form a quality human resource, essential for the development of the entire economic, social, and political system.

The university, even if it is a social institution with clearly defined roles, specific objectives, and organisational culture, is directly influenced by what happens at the local level and, for this reason, the development of a university-community relationship is very important from the perspective contemporary social dynamics. However, the university is considered a community binder that promotes local culture and history and responds to local educational needs.

Hospitals, with a contracting rate of less than 1%, are at the bottom of the ranking, and this is largely due to the limitation of their access to European funds due to the restrictive structuring of operational programmes and component priority axes.

The Intercommunity Development Associations (ADI), with only 0.5% of contracted projects, are in the penultimate place, which leads us to think that being a relatively newly formed structure, they either lack expertise in the field of accessing funds or the operational programs are extremely limiting for this kind of structure. These structures are established for the purpose of jointly realizing some development projects of zonal or regional interest, or of jointly providing some public services. In other words, ADIs were therefore considered a tool to improve the administrative capacity of several local public administrations, a capacity that could be increased through association. Public services have a contracting rate of 0.4%, which indicates that they need to modernize in order to be able to adapt to European standards, in order to produce significant positive effects on the socioeconomic development of the country.

The next aspect analysis takes into account the distribution of contracted projects according to each operational program and each category of applicant separately.

Table 1. Distribution of contracted projects by programme type and applicant type

	Profit	Non-profit			Public	Public			%
POSCCE	88,4%	1,9%	2,4%	2,3%	0,1%	3,7%	1,2%	0,0%	100,0
POSDRU	25,4%	30,9%	4,5%	16,8%	1,3%	20,3%	0,6%	0,7%	100,0
POS M	10,9%	23,4%	16,2%	46,8%		3,1%			100,0
POST			4,1%	96,1%					100,0
PODCA	0,3%	7,6%	42,7%	43,9%	0,3%	2,5%		3,2%	100,0
POR	51,6%	8,5%	36,8%	2,1%	0,1%	0,3%	0,0%	0,9%	100,0

Source: Eurostat data (2007-2013).

Analyzing Table 1, for the first operational program, POSCCE, we find that the projects contracted by applications belonging to the private environment (profit and non-profit) represent almost 90%, while all public structures accumulate 10%.

This is due to the character of the program, which is mainly orientated towards transforming the private environment into one that is as competitive as possible aligned with the standards and conditions that exist at the European level.

On the other hand, the private sector had an extremely low participation rate in the financing of research- development- innovation activities, or, this led to a high technological deficit of Romanian companies and to a low level of their innovation. In this sense, a series of major areas of intervention of this operational program were thought to promote research, development, and innovation, or these values represent the prerogative of universities, which are stimulating work environments. The other public structures have a very low degree of contracting, and this is due, on the one hand, to internal factors (lack of interest, lack of financial capacity, lack of professional skills), and, on the other hand, external factors (the way of thinking and structuring the program).

Regarding the second operational program, POSDRU, over 50% of the contracted projects went to the private sector (profit and non-profit), which demonstrates the interest of these structures in increasing the performance of human resources and access to quality education and professional training (objectives that are based on the very philosophy of the program).

We note here the great interest shown by the university, which, through a 20% contracting rate, contributes to a large extent to the restructuring and improvement of higher education through an integrated approach that involves both the development and implementation of modern tools, procedures, and methodologies, as well as the training and improvement of the personnel and key actors involved.

At the level of the third analyzed program, POS-M, there is an increased interest from the central public administration structures, of almost 50%, which is largely due to the fact that the program was designed in such a way that to meet the environmental obligations assumed by the Romanian authorities.

The POST program is the champion of project contracting by central structures with a rate of 96%, and this derives from the importance given by this program to the development of priority large-scale projects aimed at improving the railway and transport infrastructure. The PODCA program was conceived from the beginning as a program intended primarily for central and local administration structures with the aim of decentralisation, modernization of public administration, and development of administrative capacity, which contracted almost 90% of the projects.

Conclusions

The research focuses on the management and utilization of European funds for agriculture, aiming to streamline the procedural framework and ensure proper execution of projects funded by these funds. The study includes theoretical and practical investigations into European funds, their management, absorption status, project implementation, and audit and control procedures. Audits are conducted by competent national and European authorities to ensure the effective management and utilization of these funds, safeguarding the financial interests of the European Union. Audits are defined as a process of controlling and reviewing accounting of a company, where competent and independent individuals gather and assess evidence to form an opinion on the alignment of observed data with predetermined criteria. The audit of European funds involves a thorough examination of fund management and project execution, aiming to generate a report that adheres to established procedures and enhances user trust in the information.

The operational programmes that primarily or exclusively benefit the public sector exhibited lower levels of performance. This is evident from a smaller number of signed contracts, although the budgets allocated to these projects are generally more stable.

Our analysis revealed that over 50% of the projects funded by structural funds were awarded to profit sector organizations, while the public sector received 32.6% and the non-profit sector received 11.92%. This distribution can be attributed to the underlying principles guiding the development of each operational program.

Put simply, there are no significant disparities in the contracting procedures between the central public administration and the local public administration structures. APL demonstrated strong performance on three programs (POR, PODCA, and POS M), while APC similarly excelled in three programs (POSDRU, PODCA, and POR).

Regarding the level of collaboration within the local public administration, as indicated by the number of projects contracted by intercommunity development associations, we observe a stronger manifestation of this collaboration in the poorer counties, exceeding 1.5%. However, at the individual level, the degree of collaboration is much lower in the Transcarpathian regions due to the lack of a tradition in this regard. Upon analyzing the situation, it becomes evident that the disparities between different regions are widening. Furthermore, it is apparent that the distribution of resources and opportunities for development is not being done in a fair and equitable manner.The role of the administration is particularly crucial, especially in economically disadvantaged counties and regions. It not only governs and enforces rules, but also acts as a catalyst for progress. Hence, the manner and caliber of the activities conducted by these structures hold immense significance.

It is important to highlight that there was a lack of balance in the allocation of funds based on the types of beneficiaries and actions. Therefore, there is a situation where certain actions and groups of beneficiaries have significant resources that they are unable to utilize effectively (such as the central public administration structures, like the National Company of Motorways and Roads). Conversely, there are other areas, like the medical system or medical infrastructure, that have a great need for resources but are not being allocated them adequately (as evidenced by the limited and indirect funding they receive from the ROP). Another noteworthy aspect pertains to the necessity of achieving a harmonious development of a region or country, which entails a balanced assimilation of funds from the European Union to prevent the exacerbation of disparities. To enhance the beneficiaries' engagement and improve project management, various strategies should be taken into account, including the participation of the private sector in the administration and procurement of funds from the European Union.

Ultimately, our hypothesis, which states that there is an absence of equitable distribution of projects among various beneficiaries in the public environment of Romania, is validated. It should be noted, however, that this uneven distribution is not a result of the potential beneficiaries themselves, but rather stems from the manner in which the eligible beneficiary categories are defined within the financing programs. The argument we present here pertains to the observation that specific groups of recipients exhibit significantly lower levels of performance compared to the average performance within their respective regions or counties, irrespective of the geographical reference point.

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