An Overview of Implementation of EU Funds in the 2014-2020 Period of Cohesion Policy

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Abstract. *This article explores the implementation of EU funds in the 2014-2020 period of the Cohesion Policy, providing a broad perspective on how Member States have managed and applied these resources to reduce economic and social disparities. In a context where EU cohesion policy has adapted to economic and social changes, we analyse its evolution, management structures and the impact of investments on regional development. Through a review of the literature, we examine how researchers have approached this theme, from implementation structures to the concrete impact on communities. This article also aims to provide an insight into the lessons learnt over the period and explore their implications for future EU cohesion policies.*

Keywords: Cohesion Policy, EU Funds, Implementation, Regional disparities, Economic development.

Introduction

In the broad context of European cohesion policy, the 2014-2020 period has been a crucial chapter for the efficient and targeted use of EU funds. This period was marked by significant developments in the implementation of Cohesion Policy, reflecting the European Union's commitment to reduce economic and social disparities between its regions. The earmarked funds have been a vital tool for achieving the objectives set, covering areas such as economic development, infrastructure, employment, and innovation.

The article aims to analyse and highlight how EU Member States, in special Romania, have managed and implemented these funds over the period. We explore the main areas of intervention, the outstanding successes and the challenges encountered in the implementation process. In addition, we will examine the medium and long-term impact of these investments on regional cohesion, providing a detailed perspective on how they have influenced the sustainable development of the beneficiary regions.

Looking at the current context and lessons learned from the 2014-2020 period, we will also highlight the implications for the future of EU cohesion policy and how these experiences can guide policy making for the next programming period. Thus, this article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the implementation of EU funds under the Cohesion Policy from 2014 to 2020, serving as a source of understanding of the achievements and challenges faced by Member States on their journey towards cohesion and sustainable development.

Literature review

To understand the context of the implementation of EU funds in the period 2014-2020, it is essential to look at the evolution of the European Union Cohesion Policy. Studies such as those by Bachtler and Mendez (2015) and Gløersen (2022) have documented significant changes in cohesion policy and how it has adapted to new economic and social challenges.

EU cohesion policy aims to reduce economic, social and territorial inequalities through investment programs and projects that are aligned with the EU's strategic objectives and

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implemented within a unique multi-level governance model. It accounts for a large part of the EU budget. Despite growing political concerns about inequality in the EU, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance of politics for cohesion policy is declining due to budget constraints, greater centralization of decision-making within the Commission and the fragmentation of political constituencies and the dominance of competing EU policy priorities with more centralized implementation mechanisms. (Bachtler and Mendez, 2020)

Cohesion policy can be seen as the main investment policy in the European Union. This policy is addressed to all regions, cities, towns and villages in the European Union, supporting job creation, business competitiveness, economic growth, sustainable development and improving the quality of life of the population. (Rosca, 2018)

Cohesion policy is one of the solutions to overcoming the current crisis because the effective use of its financial instruments leads to strengthening the competitiveness of the European economy, accelerating growth and increasing employment. Translating economic and social cohesion into territorial cohesion is nothing new, but the economic development of the regions shows that disparities within countries have widened over time. (Trasca et al., 2013)

An important part of the research focuses on analysing the effectiveness of structures for managing and implementing EU funds. Studies such as the one by Jordana and Levi-Faur (2019) explore how Member States have organised and coordinated their cohesion policy implementation processes, highlighting good practices and possible shortcomings.

Several studies, such as Crescenzi et al. (2016) and McCoy et al. (2018), have focused on the impact of EU investment on regional development. Analyses of these studies can provide a clear picture of how the funds have contributed to reducing economic and social disparities between regions.

Exploring case studies and sector analyses, as presented by Borrás and Edquist (2013) and Del Nevo et al. (2019), could reveal notable successes and challenges in the specific implementation of EU-funded projects.

A crucial aspect of the literature review should be dedicated to the lessons learned from the implementation of the funds in the 2014-2020 programming period. Research such as that conducted by Casula (2021) can provide useful insights for improving future implementation strategies of EU funds under the Cohesion Policy.

This literature review provides an essential framework for understanding the conceptual framework and past experiences that will serve as a foundation for evaluating the implementation of EU funds over the period.

Methodology

The paper presents aggregate information on cohesion policy (European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund, European Social Fund and Youth Employment Initiative) on finances (planned and implemented), EU payments to Member States and achievements (targets, decided and implemented) for the period 2014-2020.

Using this information and data taken from the Commission's website, as well as from the Funds' implementation reports (DG REGIO), quantitative analyses were carried out on the absorption rate of the Funds, as well as on the comparative analysis of Member States and different Funds.

This methodology has been designed to provide a detailed and balanced understanding of the implementation processes, impacts and challenges faced by Member States.

A comprehensive literature review was carried out to identify previous studies and analyses that have addressed relevant issues, including the evolution of cohesion policy, implementation structures and the impact of the Funds on regional development.

Official documents, such as evaluation reports from the European Commission and national agencies, were examined to obtain concrete data and information on the implementation of funded projects.

This integrated methodology allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the implementation of EU funds over the period, addressing issues as diverse as quantitative aspects, decision-making processes, and local perspectives. The results of this research were essential for the formulation of the conclusions and perspectives presented in the final article.

Results and discussions

This section will cover topics related to the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), then discuss financial progress, followed by topical issues related to cohesion funds directed towards solidarity and agricultural supply with reference to cereals in Ukraine, as well as strictly related to Romania.

European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2014-2020

As regards the cohesion policy budget per Fund, the budget allocated to the Member States EUR 532.717.896.887 (approximately EUR 533 billion). It was composed as follows:

- Regional Development Fund – EUR 308.6 billion (57.9 %)
- European Social Fund – EUR 140.9 billion (26.5 %)
- Cohesion Fund – EUR 72.6 billion (13.6 %)
- Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) – EUR 10.4 billion (2.0 %)

At EU level, there has been a gradual growth rate in the spending and implementation of EU funds in cohesion policy.

Table 1. Percentage of amount spent in total amount allocated for EU funds in cohesion policy

Year	Amount allocated	Amount spent	Percentage
2015	480.5 billion	2.9 billion	1 %
2016	480.5 billion	20.5 billion	4 %
2017	485,2 billion	56 billion	12 %
2018	485,6 billion	119 billion	25 %
2019	484.6 billion	181 billion	37 %
2020	481.6 billion	251 billion	52 %
2021	522 billion	331 billion	63 %
2022	532 billion	404 billion	76 %

Source: Website of the Commission cohesiondata.com.

Romania, through 8 national programmes, benefits from ESIF funding of EUR 35.2 billion under the 2014-2020 programmes, of which EUR 24.1 billion is allocated to cohesion policy funds (October 2022).

Of Romania's total budget of €41.6 billion, €35.2 billion comes from the EU budget and €6.4 billion from the national budget.

Thus, ESIF funds 2014-2020: Romania’s budget per Fund, EUR (daily update) was composed as follows:

- Regional Development Fund – EUR 14.8 billion
- European Social Fund – EUR 5.6 billion

- Cohesion Fund – 7.6 billion
- Youth Employment Initiative – EUR 329.9 million
- European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development – EUR 12.9 billion

National and regional programmes shall report financial data to the Commission on the progress made:

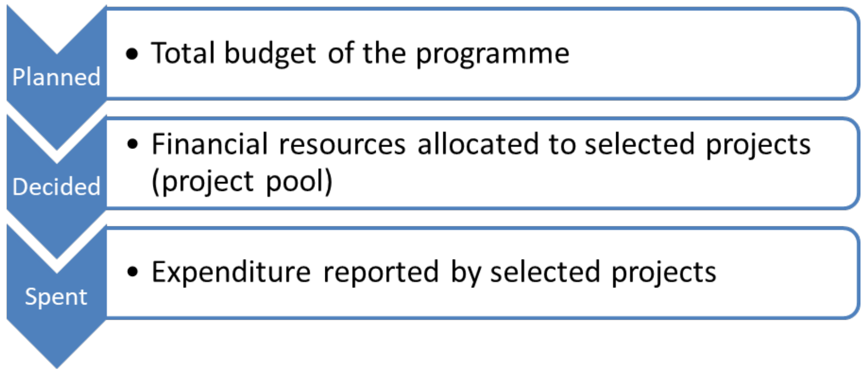

Figure 1. Reporting financial data to the Commission

Source: own representation.

According to data provided by the European Commission, updated *on* 17/03/2023, by 2022, Romania had a **total planned budget** of 41.4 billion euros, with a **determined budget** of 57.1 billion euros, of which it spent 30.1 billion euros. That's 73 percent of what's allotted.

According to the data of the Ministry of Investment and European Projects, Romania had *an absorption rate of 75 %*, according to data updated at *13/03/2023*.

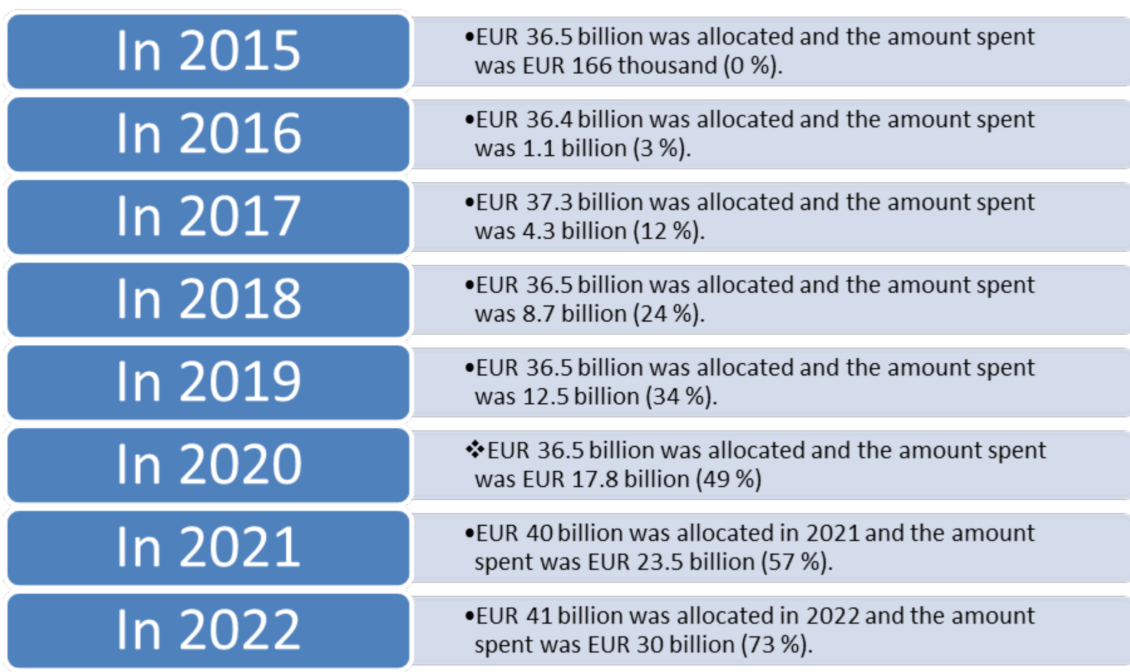

Figure 2. Evaluation of the amounts spent over the years in Romania

Source: own representation.

There has been progress in the implementation of European funds over the years, and Table 2 statistically demonstrates this progress.

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Table 2. Statistical analysis per Member State regarding the spending of European funds in 2014-2020 on cohesion policy

Member State	Planned amount	Amount spent/sent	Percentage
Romania	EUR 28.4 billion	EUR 20.9 billion	73 %
Greece	EUR 22.5 billion	EUR 19 billion	85 %
Croatia	EUR 10.5 billion	EUR 8.5 billion	81 %
Slovenia	EUR 4.1 billion	EUR 3.8 billion	92 %
Portugal	EUR 29.3 billion	EUR 28.1 billion	96 %
Cyprus	EUR 1 billion	EUR 844 million	84 %
France	EUR 32.5 billion	EUR 28.4 billion	87 %
Holland	EUR 3.1 billion	EUR 2.7 billion	88 %
Lithuania	EUR 8.2 billion	EUR 7.9 billion	97 %
Denmark	EUR 1 billion	EUR 714 million	70 %
Belgium	EUR 4 billion	EUR 3.2 billion	74 %
Austria	EUR 3.5 billion	EUR 2.6 billion	75 %
Czechia	EUR 29 billion	EUR 24.9 billion	84 %
Hungary	EUR 26.5 billion	EUR 20.3 billion	77 %
Latvia	EUR 5 billion	EUR 4.2 billion	78 %
Spain	EUR 57.3 billion	EUR 31 billion	54 %
Finland	EUR 2.9 billion	EUR 2.4 billion	84 %
Germany	EUR 32.9 billion	EUR 27.2 billion	83 %
Estonia	EUR 4.9 billion	EUR 4.3 billion	88 %
Slovakia	EUR 17.7 billion	EUR 11.4 billion	65 %
United Kingdom	EUR 19 billion	EUR 14.4 billion	75 %
Luxembourg	EUR 231.4 million	EUR 176.3 million	76 %
Poland	EUR 92.5 billion	EUR 74.5 billion	81 %
Italy	EUR 64.7 billion	EUR 39 billion	60 %
Bulgaria	EUR 9.2 billion	EUR 7.4 billion	80 %
Malta	EUR 985 million	EUR 924 million	94 %
Sweden	EUR 3.8 billion	EUR 2.9 billion	77 %
Ireland	EUR 2.1 billion	EUR 1.4 billion	69 %

Source: The Commission's website on Cohesion Policy.

Regarding **cohesion policy alone,** Romania benefits from a **planned budget** of EUR 28.4 billion, with a **decided budget** of 46.5 of which was spent 20.9 billion euros (73 %).

Romania is among the countries with the lowest absorption rate (73 %). The countries that have spent less than Romania from what they have been allocated are: Spain (54 %), Italy (60 %), Slovakia (65 %) Ireland (69 %) Denmark (70 %).

Table 3. Summary table. State of execution for each fund in EUR million (2014-2020 programmes)

Cohesion	Total allocation of programmes [a]	Net pre -financing payments paid in 2014-2023 [b]	Net interim payments paid in 2014-2023 [c]	Total net payments paid in 2014-2023 [d] = [b] + [c]	Implementation rate [%] [e] = [d]/[a]
ERDF	190,764	13,036	145,131	158,167	82.9 %
CF	61,455	4,589	47,659	52,247	85.0 %
ESF	89,017	6,034	69,789	75,808	85.2 %
YEI	4,474	673	3,292	3,962	88.6 %
FEAD	3,811	416	2,928	3,344	87.7 %
ETC	9,406	636	6,809	7,445	79.2 %
EAFRD	128,053	3,193	94,850	98,043	76.6 %
EMFF	5,618	397	3,324	3,721	66.2 %
TOTAL	492,598	28,972	373,782	402,735	81.8 %

Source: The Commission's website on Cohesion Policy.

Table 4. Implementation status of net payments by Member State, (2014-20) (28 February) Million EUR

Cohesion	Total allocation of programmes [a]	Net pre-financing payments paid in 2014-2023 [B]	Net interim payments paid in 2014-2023 [C]	Total net payments paid in 2014-2023 [D] = [b] + [c]	Implementation rate [%] [e] = [d]/[a]
AT	6,096	186	5,063	5,249	86.1 %
BE	3,002	169	2,134	2,302	76.7 %
BG	10,534	568	7,015	7,584	72.0 %
CY	974	56	819	874	89.7 %
CZ	24,473	1,409	19,878	21,286	87.0 %
BY	31,036	1,513	22,614	24,128	77.7 %
DK	1,843	70	1,156	1,226	66.5 %
EE	4,627	247	3,846	4,093	88.5 %
ES	42,860	2,564	30,249	32,813	76.6 %
FI	4,575	165	4,135	4,300	94.0 %
FR	32,352	1,539	24,103	25,642	79.3 %
GR	23,089	2,389	17,562	19,946	86.4 %
HR	11,365	659	7,330	7,989	70.3 %
HU	25,968	1,538	20,900	22,438	86.4 %
IE	4,077	114	3,603	3,717	91.2 %
IT	48,335	2,797	34,397	37,187	76.9 %
LT	8,948	535	7,167	7,701	86.1 %
LU	169	6	155	160	94.9 %
LV	5,961	375	4,405	4,780	80.2 %
MT	875	48	562	609	69.6 %
NL	2,242	94	1,580	1,674	74.7 %
PL	88,889	5,195	73,223	78,418	88.2 %
PT	27,067	1,638	22,222	23,856	88.1 %
EN	33,472	2,154	23,861	26,015	77.7 %
TO	4,105	173	3,243	3,416	83.2 %
AND	4,193	236	3,413	3,649	87.0 %
SK	15,743	1,010	10,102	11,111	70.6 %
UK	16,320	892	12,237	13,129	80.4 %
ETC	9,406	636	6,809	7,445	79.2 %
TOTAL	492,598	28,972	373,782	402,735	81.8 %

Source: The Commission's website on Cohesion Policy.

Financial progress – DG REGIO report from 17 FEBRUARY

Financial absorption remains a challenge for 2023. For Member States, five countries have an absorption rate below 60 % in the ERDF. These are Belgium, Croatia, Malta, the Netherlands, and Slovakia. For the Cohesion Fund, four Member States are below 60 %. These are Belgium, Greece, Croatia, and Latvia. For REACT, all countries except Greece and Portugal have absorption rates below 60 %. Seven Member States (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Germany, Belgium, Cyprus) have a lower project selection rate than the EU average for ERDF REAC (&73 %).

50 main programmes from 15 countries Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Spain, France, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Malta and the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and 28 territorial cohesion programmes are below 60 % for the ERDF.

The same applies to seven Cohesion Fund programmes for Belgium, Greece, Croatia, Latvia, Portugal, Slovakia.

For REACT, all but three programmes have absorption rates below 60 %.

Information on cohesion funds 2014-2020 directed towards projects for solidarity lanes and agricultural supply chain with reference to Ukrainian cereals

Ukraine, a leading global grain producer and exporter, received EU aid after the outbreak of the Russian war and created solidarity corridors so that the country could continue its grain exports.

In addition to the solidarity corridors, the suspension of customs duties and the removal of the requirement for sanitary and veterinary certificates have facilitated the entry of the product into the markets of neighbouring countries at low prices.

Therefore, Romania imported an unprecedented 13.9 % of Ukrainian cereal worth USD 1.24 billion, well ahead of any other country worldwide. But for cereal growers in the country, this creates a worrying situation.

Many Romanian farmers have seen their products in warehouses for over a year because they cannot compete with the low prices of Ukrainian cereals.

In addition, grain transport for the foreign market is also almost impossible, as the entire logistical capacity is concentrated on Ukrainian goods, including the port of Constanta, which is blocked by Ukrainian ships.

Others criticised the quality of Ukrainian cereals as they remain exempt from quality control and EU standards.

On 11 November, a joint declaration signed by the Commission, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine to mobilise EUR 1 billion for grain solidarity lanes. This aid will include EUR 300 million from the Commission in the form of a grant and 700 million from the Financial Partners in the form of a loan.

Of this, **cohesion policy** could contribute to the solidarity lanes of around EUR **134 million – EUR 251 million from the 2014-2020 programmes** and around **EUR 450 million from** the 2021-2027 programmes. In parallel, managing authorities also request funding from the **CEF** (total costs of projects EUR 616.8 million, of which **EUR 308.4 million** CEF).

Romania: In November, the amendment of the **operational programme "Largeinfrastructure"** was adopted to finance five projects worth EUR 25 million on improving border crossings and navigation on the Sulina Danube Canal (but no government approval decision has yet been taken). This includes the expansion of the wide-gauge railways in the port of Galati, the intensification of navigation on the Sulina Canal.

Romania could increase support to EUR 120 million under this OP, however, the **concrete preparation of the projects is questionable**.

From the Transport Programme 2021-2027, Romania will continue the priority actions through the OP 2014-2020 of large infrastructure on the Solidarity lanes and will streamline connections with Moldova and the EU. Romania also submitted two projects under the CEF Transport 2022 Military Mobility Call: The bridge from Ungheni (RO-MD) and the railway project in Constanta port.

Bulgaria aims to invest 2.5 million euros under the Transport Operational Programme 2014-2020, in order to increase the storage capacity of grain in the port of Varna and other ports, as well as bringing high-performance warehouse equipment. Other projects are in the process of being discussed. The most realistic project is cantered in the port of Burgas, which aims to build a dam to facilitate the unloading and loading of grain, a project worth 11 million euros. Certain projects could be feasible in the Transport and Connectivity Programme 2021-2027, but no specific amounts have been identified.

Poland expects that it will not use the 2014-2020 Programmes. However, it will most likely submit projects under the Connecting Europe Facility to finance the expansion of S12 express roads near Lublin, and S17, near the EU border to Lublin. If they are not accepted under the Connecting Europe Facility, a possible alternative would be under the 2021-2027 Feniks Programme.

Slovakia is considering smaller-scale infrastructure investments. Around EUR 20-40 million, to be confirmed, in stations and logistics facilities in the Kosice region and to improve the speed and efficiency of the existing wide gauge rail connection from the AU to Kosice border, mainly from the Integrated Infrastructure Programme 2014-2020.

However, the projects are not yet mature. Larger projects are also being explored, such as the extension of the D1 motorway from Kosice to the SK/UA border (JASPERS now assists in the feasibility study). However, the estimated costs reach EUR 1 billion, which makes ESI Funds unlikely to be sufficient.

Hungary is currently using road transport for agricultural goods and does not intend to use ESIF programmes to facilitate the transhipment of EU cereals. HU is preparing a proposal for the Connecting Europe Facility to modernise the Záhony-Chop Bridge (EU-owned) to increase rail capacity.

Interreg programmes

Period 2014-2020 (EUR 81 million): Of the five cross-border cooperation programmes between the EU and Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, four have already supported border investments with small-scale infrastructure and equipment (EUR 35 million for border accessibility and EUR 46 million for roads and logistics). Projects are subject to close monitoring as projects must be completed by the end of 2023.

Period 2021-2024 (EUR 14 million): EUR 14 million is planned for border crossing infrastructure, mobility, and migration management under three Interreg programmes. The first calls for proposals for projects will soon be launched by each programme.

Having regard to the priorities of cohesion policy in 2014-2020: research and innovation, the digital agenda, support for SMEs and a circular economy have made progress in the achievements of cohesion policy 2014-2020. Among these are:

- 2 million European SMEs will receive financial support; Romania being ranked 5th among the countries that will receive support from the EU for SMEs. So far, in Romania, 10.346 SMEs have received financial support from the planned target of 85.269. By comparison, the UK supported 154 thousand SMEs out of the 198.554 target.
- European money will also help set up new SMEs (start-ups), with a target of 185.000 newly established SMEs at EU level. In this respect, the UK is in the top 26.000 SMEs in the 63.423 target, followed by Greece and France. Romania has a target of 100 start-ups, of which 73were founded.
- In the area of non-reimbursable private aid to SMEs, a total of EUR 20 billion will be redirected, Romania has planned almost one billion euros, yet the money implemented in this area is EUR 332 million.
- In terms of green growth, the European Union will invest more than EUR 38 billion in the low-carbon economy, which is double the amount spent in the previous funding period. These investments will help regions and cities invest in energy efficient buildings, renewable energy, smart grids and sustainable urban transport. In these areas, the following achievements are noted:

- In the field of green transport, there is an EU-wide target for railway construction, with the largest beneficiary in this area being Spain with a target of 455 km, Greece with 16 km and Poland with 4 km.
- In the field of railway reconstruction (TENT-T), the total length of the reconstructed or modernised railway line in the EU has a target of 1.245 km. At the top of the ranking are Poland with a target of 632 km, Lithuania with 339 and Spain with 297. Romania, has a target of 141 km of railway, but has modernised 171 km. (the target is 312 km)
- In the field of road infrastructure, the EU registered 2.961 km as the total target of newly built roads, Poland being ranked 1st with 1 960 km, and Romania ranked 2nd with 509 km of new roads, and a decided target of 1 181 km. Romania has built 533 km of new roads.
- Romania has a target of 2 000 km of roads that need to be rebuilt or upgraded, being second after Poland with 2,300. However, the total number at EU level implemented so far is 7.100 km, with a scheduled result of 11.344 km. At national level, Romania has modernised 322 km of road infrastructure.
- Regarding the total length of newly built roads (TENT), Romania has a target of 379 km, with 994 km determined target and implemented 384 km. At EU level, the newly built TENT road target is 2 507 km, with 3 545 km decided and implemented throughout the Union 2 055 km.

The field of research and innovation was one of the priorities of cohesion policy between 2014-2020

At EU level, a target of 29.000 new full-time researchers at EU level is 15.826. Greece has a target of 10.827 new researchers, followed by Germany with 3900 and Hungary with 2410. In this field, Romania managed to achieve a reduced target of researchers, 480. However, Romania has brought 372 researchers working full-time. At the bottom of the rankings in research and innovation are Poland and Croatia.

The EU has also supported Member States in cooperating SMEs with research institutions, so there are 60.800 SMEs cooperating with research institutes from the planned target of 64.900 at EU level. The UK has a target of 13.600 SMEs with 7,300 companies implemented. Romania had a target of 61 companies, which it achieved.

In terms of private investments corresponding to public support in innovation or R & D projects, 6.5 billion euros were implemented out of the 9.7 planned. Almost EUR 2 billion target Italy, EUR 1.6 billion Germany and EUR 1.5 billion to Spain. Romania has implemented EUR 60 million out of 124 million allocated.

The creation of a low carbon economy was also one of the priorities of cohesion policy in the 2014-2020 programme. Thus, in the field of green energy, the EU added 3 640 MW of 7 883 MW (renewable energy) to the energy system.

Regarding the energy efficiency of houses, the 2014-2020 cohesion policy programme has set a target of 611,988 households with an improved energy consumption classification. At EU level, 459 thousand households have already been energy efficient, with France having the highest target of 106 thousand. Romania is after Poland (56 thousand) and Spain (62thousand) with 49 thousand households it has achieved.

In the greenhouse gas sector, the planned target is 21 million tonnes, and the EU has managed to reduce 7.2 million tonnes. As far as Romania is concerned, it has a planned target of 1.2 million tons of CO_2, of which it has reduced 158 thousand tons.

In the field of school renovation and endowment, the EU has set a target for schools depending on the number of beneficiaries. Thus, the EU target is 18.5 million beneficiaries (students, students), with a target of 25.7 million beneficiaries. The EU has brought facilities and renovations to schools for 23.3 million students/students. Italy and Spain had the highest targets of 15 million and 913 thousand students respectively. As far as Romania is concerned, there is a planned target of 122 thousand beneficiaries, with 361 thousand people as a decided target, and so far Romania has equipped schools for 21 thousand beneficiaries.

In the area of improving health services, the planned target of the population covered at EU level is 92 million people, and so far improvements have been made to cover 59 million people at the EU level. Spain (36 million) and Poland (16 million) have the most beneficiaries in this sector. In this sector, Romania has improvements in health services for 6.3 million people. At this time, 5.4 million people have been implemented.

In the field of open spaces created or rehabilitated in urban areas, the planned EU target is 33 million square meters, and the target is 46 million square meters. Thus, the EU has built and rehabilitated 16.5 million square meters of open spaces in urban areas. As far as Romania is concerned, it has a planned target of 7.3 million square meters, with 9 million, being the decided target. Currently, Romania has rehabilitated or built 438 thousand square meters of open spaces in urban areas. It is worth mentioning that Romania has the highest target in this field of all Member States.

Regarding the renovation of public or commercial buildings, in urban areas, the planned target is 2.2 million square meters, and the target is 3.2 million square meters. In the EU, at present, 973 thousand square meters of public or commercial buildings have been renovated. In this chapter, Portugal, Spain and Germany have the highest targets. As far as Romania is concerned, there is a planned target of 153 thousand square meters, a decided target of 564 thousand square meters. Romania has so far renovated 773 square meters of buildings.

The following dataset was only available for Romania

Agricultural holdings in the framework of cooperation supported for local markets and/or short supply chain. In this sector, Romania has a planned target of 1,148 agricultural holdings, of which 200 were supported. This sector concerns the competitiveness of SMEs.

Farmers receiving support to participate in producer groups. Here, Romania has a planned target of 720 agricultural holdings, with a target decided by 1508 agricultural holdings. To date, Romania has provided support to 3,725 agricultural holdings.

In rural areas, the net rural population that could benefit from basic services is 3.9 million people out of 2.5 million (the planned target).

Also in rural areas, in the field of diversification of the rural economy, 3004 people received investment support in diversifying the non-agricultural economy. The planned target is 4,261 people.

In terms of investment in the non-agricultural economy of the rural environment, the planned target is EUR 473 million, and the amount implemented is EUR 297 million.

In terms of Increasing the expected number of visits to supported sites (cultural, natural heritage and attractions) Romania has a planned target of 628.000 visits per year, with a determined target of 882.000. To date, 213.000 visits have been implemented per year.

In the field of private and public investments in agricultural assets and goods, Romania has a planned target of EUR 689 million, and so far, has implemented 369 million.

Also in the agricultural field, young farm owners benefiting from support (business development plans or investments) are up to this date in the number of 11.700, with a planned target of 13.666.

Conclusion

In the light of the in-depth analysis of the implementation of EU funds in the 2014-2020 period of the Cohesion Policy, significant conclusions emerge on the evolution, impact and challenges faced by Member States. These findings provide a comprehensive perspective on how the funds have contributed to achieving the objectives of regional cohesion and economic development.

The period under review has highlighted the adaptability of the Cohesion Policy to socio-economic changes. The reconfiguration of objectives and instruments has demonstrated the European Union's capacity to adapt to new challenges while strengthening cohesion and solidarity between regions.

Investments of EU funds have had a significant impact on regional development, helping to reduce economic and social disparities. Case studies have illustrated successful projects that have stimulated innovation, employment, and regional infrastructure.

The evaluation of management and implementation structures revealed good practices and lessons learned. Effective coordination between national and regional authorities played a crucial role in the effective implementation of projects, while some weaknesses highlighted the need for a more integrated approach.

Implementation has not been without challenges, including implementation delays, bureaucratic complexity and a variety of regional factors. Lessons learned from these challenges have identified opportunities to improve planning and implementation processes in future periods.

Through this comprehensive analysis, this article provides not only a retrospective on the 2014-2020 period, but also significant contributions to the ongoing debate on how EU funds can be effectively implemented to ensure cohesion and sustainable development in the future.

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Appendix

Table 5. Concrete projects

Project	Summary
Sebes Highway – Turda	• Start date: 1 January 2014 • End date: 31 December 2023 • Fund: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) • Total budget: EUR 324 057 113,60 • EU contribution: EUR 275 448 550,40 (85 %)
Romania’s A10 motorway to connect the cities of Sebes and Turda	• Programming period: 2014-2020 • Duration of the project: 05/2014-11/2019 • Total investments: EUR 437 275 058,00 • EU investment: EUR 272 520 756,00 The second phase of the construction of the A10 motorway in Romania, linking the towns of Sebeş in Alba County and Turda in Cluj County, is underway with EU support. The highway, which is 70 km long and will be free of charge, is located in the North-West and Centre regions of the country’s Macroregion.
The railway connects communities in the Central and West regions of Romania	This project has rehabilitated 89.5 km of double railway linking the cities of Sighisoara and Coșlariu in Romania. As a result of these works, rail services have become more efficient, with trains running at a maximum speed of 160 kilometres per hour and in line with the European Agreement on Large International Railways (AGC). The 89.5 km of rehabilitated railway, connecting the Transylvanian localities of Sighișoara and Coșlariu, serve better the approximately 1.12 million inhabitants in the area. The section of the line crosses several important centers, including Mures, Sibiu and Alba counties. The **total investment** for the project “Rehabilitation of the Brașov-Simeria railway line, section Sighisoara-Coșlariu – Phase II” is **EUR 356903805, the EU contribution** from the Cohesion Fund being EUR 201465529 **under the Operational Programme** “Large Infrastructure” for the 2014-2020 programming period. Investment is part of the priority ‘Jobs, Growth and Investment’.
The new highway that crosses Transylvania	European funding has allowed the construction of part of the A3 motorway in Romania and a section with a median separation zone in the historical region of Transylvania. The roads cross the Central and North-West development regions, both within the one macro-region of Romania. The project consists of the construction of 51.8 km of motorway between Targu Mures, Ogra commune and Câmpia Turzii town and a section of 4.7 km with a median separation zone near Targu Mures. Both sections of the road have two lanes in each direction and a median strip between the two directions.

	The total investment for the project "Construction of the Mures-Ogra-Câmpia Turzii motorway" is **EUR 397132399, the EU contribution** from the Cohesion Fund being EUR **246678761 under the Operational Programme** "Large Infrastructure" for the 2014-2020 programming period.
Connecting communities to TEN-T infrastructure in the Romanian-Hungarian border area	Start date: 1 September 2018 Enddate: 28 February 2019 Fund: European Regional DevelopmentFund (ERDF) Total budget: EUR61 450,00 EUcontribution: EUR 52 232,50 (85 %) Programming period: 2014-2020 Programme: Interreg V-A – Romania-Hungary Managing Authority: Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration The main obstacle to population mobility in the cross-border area is outdated infrastructure or even its lack, blocking the development of settlements with great potential for mutual cooperation in the enlarged EU. A great opportunity in the Ro-Hu border area is the presence of TEN-T routes, part of the fourth European corridor, the A1 motorway, the E68 road, as well as a main east-west railway and the prospect of turning the Gyula – Kecskemet road into a motorway. For increased mobility of the population and freight transport, the project proposed as a general objective of connecting communities to the TEN-T infrastructure in Arad and Bekes counties, at the same time, addressing the challenges posed by increased traffic.
Construction of the Lugoj motorway – Deva lot 2, lot 3 and lot 4 (Dumbrava – Deva sector) – Phase 2	**Start date:** 1 January 2014 End**date:** 28 February 2023 **Fund: Cohesion**Fund (CF) **Total budget: EUR**244 021 427,20 EU**contribution:** EUR 207 418 227,20 (85 %) Programming **period:** 2014-2020 Programme**:** Large Infrastructure Programme – RO – ERDF/CF Managing **Authority:** Ministry of Regional Development, Public Administration and European Funds • The main socio-economic objectives of the projects are: • Improving traffic efficiency by reducing travel time; Improving transport efficiency by reducing operating and maintenance costs (for both users and infrastructure operators); Improving traffic safety; • Reducing the environmental impact; • Improving accessibility. After the completion of both phases, the project will meet the general objectives of the programme – Priority Axis 1 – Improving mobility through the development of the TEN-T network and the metro.
Medical services for the treatment of people infected with HIV/AIDS	• Start date: 1 January 2014 • Enddate: 31 July 2019 • Fund: European SocialFund (ESF) • Total budget: EUR211 687 168,00 • EUcontribution: EUR 178 738 777,60 (84.435 %) Increasing access to affordable, sustainable and high quality health services, nurses and social services of general interest.
Wastewater collection and treatment in Bucharest-Ilfov	Data range: 2016-2020 Funding: 389 billion Theme: Environmental protection and resource efficiency Coordinated by: Bucharest City Hall During the second phase of the project, improvements will be made to 51 km of main sewerage pipelines and 30 km of secondary sewage pipes. Work, which started in the first phase, to reduce fluid infiltration levels into the sewer system and subsequent dilution of sewerage, is to be completed. The completion of the Glina wastewater treatment plant includes the modernisation of its sludge treatment plants, in particular through the construction of a sludge incinerator. The infrastructure

	covered by the project provides wastewater collection and treatment services for Bucharest and the neighbouring municipalities of Chiajna, Chitila, Glina, Jilava, Mogoşoaia, Otopeni, Pantelimon, Popești-Leordeni and Voluntari-Găneasa, all located in Ilfov County. It serves about 1.5 million people. The aim is to reduce environmental pollution and raise public health standards.
Rehabilitation of the Border-Curtici-Simeria railway line, component of Pan-European Corridor IV, for running trains with a maximum speed of 160 km/h, Section 2: Km 614 – Gurasada and Section 3: Gurasada – Simeria	Start date: 13 December 2013 End date: 30 November 2023 Fund: Cohesion Fund (CF) Total budget: EUR 1 837 640 908,80 EU contribution: EUR 1 561 994 752,00 (85 %) This project is selected for funding through the Large Infrastructure Operational Programme – Priority Axis 1 – Improving mobility through the development of TEN-T and underground transport, Benchmark 1.2 (OS) Increasing the mobility of the core TEN-T rail network. Main objectives of O.S. 1.2: • Completion of the Rhine-Danube rail corridor, increasing mobility on the TEN-T network, in line with the prioritisation of Romania's GTMP. Meet the requirements for rail transport laid down in Regulation (EU) No 1315/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network: time savings in covering rail network distances under standard conditions.
Integrated infrastructure for Bucharest's orbital area	Start date: 1 January 2014 End date: 31 December 2023 Fund: Cohesion Fund (CF) Total budget: EUR 1 053 665 075,20 EU contribution: EUR 895 615 283,20 (85 %) Programming period: 2014-2020 The project aims to ensure an adequate mix of high-quality road infrastructure, as part of the national infrastructure network, to accommodate long-distance freight and passenger traffic, as well as local traffic specific to the metropolitan area, while ensuring an adequate level of traffic safety and security. After completion of the project, it will contribute to the overall objective of liop 2014-2020, Priority Axis 1 Improving mobility through the development of the TEN-T network and the metro network, Specific Objective 1.1: "Increasing mobility in the TEN-T core road network". The specific objectives of the project are: • Component 1 – Bucharest Bypass Highway – South Sector: construction of 51.195 km of 2x2 motorway section, including 9 bridges, 33 passages, 5 shifts, 4 parking areas, 1 Coordination and Maintenance Centre, 1 Maintenance Support Point and 1 Service Area; • Component 2 – Modernisation of the Bucharest bypass between A1 – DN7 and DN2 – A2 – Modernisation of 20.274 km of national road on sectors A1 – DN7 and DN2 – A2, part of the existing Bucharest belt (of which 8.750 km for sector A1 – DN7 and 11.524 km for the DN2 – A2) sector, including 16 intersections, construction of 3 bridges, 4 passages and 2 parking areas, rehabilitation of a bridge and 3 passages; • Component 3 – Princely Intersection DJ602, including 2 round direction level, 2 collector roads; • Component 4 – Oltenita DN4 and Berceni DJ401 intersections and widening the Ring Road between them, including 4 levels and 4 collector roads, as well as widening the DNCB section between them (6.1 km); • Component 5 – Mogosoaia DN1A Intersection • Component 6 – Modernisation of the Bucharest Belt Road between A1 – DN5 – extension to 414.525 km belt lanes, including 5 intersections with classified roads, construction of 3 new passageways, 3 parking spaces and rehabilitation of a passageway; In addition, the implementation of the project will: • Ensure adequate interconnectivity of all interregional corridors with the adjacent national road and motorway network; • Ensuring adequate accessibility to the TEN-T network from/to the local road network and to the city of Bucharest. • Ensure better quality of existing infrastructure by improving traffic safety conditions.

Source: DG REGIO report on the implementation of the 2014-2020 Funds.