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# Innovation in communication in the European funding process

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**Abstract.** *European funds contribute to the well-being of communities that succeed in attracting this type of funding. This paper aims at revealing the innovative capacity of communication in the financing process through European Funds, given the multitude of theoretical communication models. Beyond the limits imposed by the law, public authorities involved in the European funding process, although operating within a relatively rigid regulated framework, may increase the number of communication methods and practices, in order to better fulfil their mission of satisfying public needs. An exploratory research on the financing process of European Structural and Investment Funds was conducted, considering the theoretical approaches in the field of communication, as well as the relatively low absorption rate of European Funds, for outlining the real dimensions of the communication problem. The communication was analyzed via eight elements: transmitter, receiver, channel or means of propagation, message, common codes (including coding and decoding), feedback, feedforward and noise. The main results show that the communication process in the field of European funding can be approached from a multitude of perspectives: type, purposes and means of communication, content of communication and its effects, the protagonists involved etc. The paper proposes an approach to communication from a marketing perspective. By applying specific marketing techniques, favorable attitudes, opinions and behaviors can be generated in terms of accessibility of financing through European funds. This can lead to an increase in the absorption rate of European funds, which can result in more innovation, more business growth, higher revenues (through taxes) for the public sector and finally, given the snowball effect, the ultimate purpose: welfare for society as a whole.*

**Keywords**: Communication, Innovation, Marketing, European Funds.

## Introduction

European Commission and Member States place information and communication as basic principles in the management of European Structural and Investment Funds. With each new programming period, they attempt to improve communication activities, building on the results and lessons learned in the previous programming periods.

Activities aimed at transparency, communication and visibility are essential in order to ensure proper visibility of the Union's actions and need to provide true, accurate and up-to-date information. However, the management of European Structural and Investment Funds is complex and involves a large number of institutions. To bring successfully European funding to the attention of the general public and, more important, to the attention of potential beneficiaries, further efforts are needed so that local communities receive clear details on how to access and manage European funds. Therefore, an innovative approach to communication in the process of accessing European Structural and Investment Funds can contribute to the improvement of the quality of life in the communities who manage to attract this type of financing.

DOI: 10.2478/picbe-2022-0058
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Overall, this paper presents a conceptual investigation of existing research in the field of communication, looking at the European funding process through the lens of the theoretical models developed by specialists, with the stated aim of revealing the innovative capacity of communication of public authorities and especially of those who manage European funds.



European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) are financial instruments through which the European Union acts to close the gap between regions and states, in order to achieve economic and social cohesion (European Commission, 2015). There are five ESI Funds, through which the EU Cohesion Policy is implemented: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). In addition, the development of agriculture is financed through direct payments from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF), while Aid for disadvantaged groups is provided through the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) (Ministerul Investițiilor și Proiectelor Europene, 2022).

European Commission and the Member States place information and communication as basic principles in the management of European Structural and Investment Funds. With each new programming period, they attempt to improve communication activities, building on the results and lessons learned. Over the last two multiannual financial frameworks, regulation and responsibilities in the field of information and communication has significantly evolved from having to draw a communication plan during 2007 – 2013 (Council of the European Union, 2006) (Commission of the European Communities, 2006) (Commission of the European Communities, 2009), to developing an actual communication strategy during 2014 – 2020 (European Commission, 2015). Moreover, duties and responsibilities increased, the publication of the list of beneficiaries has become biannual, and in addition to the mandatory annual information activity, the creation of a single Internet portal, launch events for each operational program, information activities for beneficiaries and citizens have been added. On beneficiaries` side, they also had several obligations such as displaying durable plaques or billboards clearly visible to the public with information on the support received from ESI funds, providing a short description of the operation on their official website, mentioning the EU support in documents, using the emblem of the Union in accordance with certain technical characteristics and strict rules laid down in official regulations.

The current multiannual financial framework, 2021-2027, focuses on visibility, transparency and communication based on an approach that aims at defining communication objectives, target audiences, channels, including social media outreach, where appropriate, planned budget and relevant indicators for monitoring and evaluation (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021).

The degree to which each Member State is able to effectively and efficiently spend the resources allocated from the ESI funds represents the absorption capacity, which can be divided into two main categories: absorption capacity from the supply side (authorities managing the funds) and absorption capacity from the demand side (beneficiaries and their capacity to absorb the funds addressed to them) (Gelămancă & Zai, 2013). One indicator that measures the absorption capacity of ESI funds is the absorption rate. In this paper, the absorption rate was calculated as ratio between the amount of expenditure of funded projects (in total costs) and the financial resources allocated to the projects selected for funding (European Commission, 2021). Thus, up until 09/30/2021, the European average absorption of European funds was 57% (Figure 1). Out of a total allocation of 705 billion euros for 2014 – 2020, at the level of the European Union, the Member States managed to effectively attract 404 billion euros, until 09/30/2021. Due to the spending rule of N+3 years for

2014 – 2020 EU multiannual financial framework, the absorption rate will most certainly be higher in the end (Alvarez, 2020).

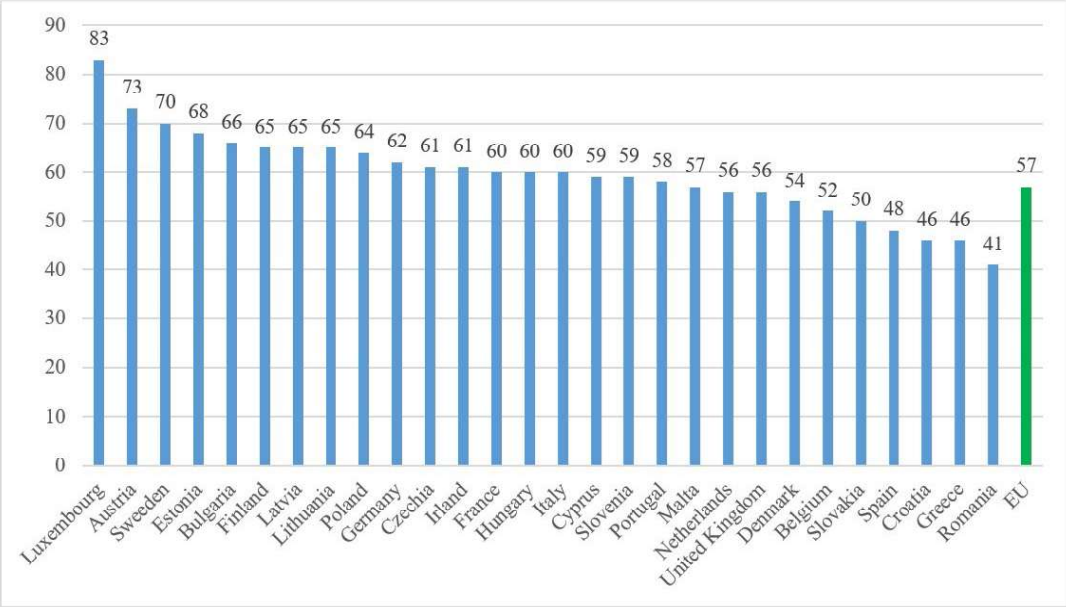



**Figure 1. ESIF 2014-2020 absorption rate (period covered: up to 09/30/2021)**

Source: Authors' own research results/contribution, based on data available at https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/overview.

European funds contribute to the well-being of communities that succeed in attracting this type of funding. Both scientific papers and empirical evidence show the existence of a direct link between investment (public and private) and economic growth. The positive impact is even more obvious in the developing countries, which have an inadequate quantitative and qualitative stock of physical capital, and which have an important growth potential trough stimulating total productivity (Lazea et al., 2012). Hence, a higher absorption rate can contribute to valuable projects being implemented, to new jobs created, and in the long run, to more prosperity for all.

The existing research mainly focuses on macroeconomic, financial and administrative capacity as factors influencing the absorption rate of ESI funds (European Parliament, 2013). This paper looks at communication as a factor that can facilitate a better absorption of ESI funds. However, the link between the absorption rate of ESI funds and communication requires further investigation.

## Literature review

Although, apparently, communication is a clear, unambiguous word, very popular in the common language, still, because of its many facets – cybernetics, telecommunications, media, communication can become a source of confusion and controversy (Dinu, 2000). If "European funds" collocation is added to this concept, than the prerequisites are created for a topic that interests all the categories of European funds beneficiaries (individuals, legal entities, public administration and civil society).

There is a consensus among researchers regarding communication, namely that the term is fluid, volatile and cannot be included in a structured definition. It "is one of the human activities

that each of us can recognize, but few can define it satisfactorily" (Fiske, 2003). So communication reveals itself as a complex phenomenon, which lends itself to the use of several models, from different theoretical perspectives. "Communication" is an etymological derivative of the Latin word "communis = which shares its tasks with someone else", and which has later been attributed the meaning of "belongs to several or all". Interestingly, but explainable from a historical, cultural, and also ecclesiastical point of view, the Romanian language retains the meaning of "communion = sharing", the only one that approaches the complex meaning of the concept: interaction, exchange, relationship, action, influence, information, semiosis (Lesenciuc, 2017).



There are various opinions when it comes to the number of models of communication, some authors arguing that there are 60 models, while others have identified 140 models of communication (Mohorea et al., 2018) (Lesenciuc, 2017). An explanation regarding the multitude of models, but also for the fact that researchers avoid a definition comes precisely from the volatile, changing nature of communication. The balance between the epistemic core (descriptive, legible) and the symbolic form of communication (Lesenciuc, 2017), makes it difficult to theoretically describe the concept.

Fiske divides the study of communication into two major trends: the process school and the semiotic school. While the first considers communication as a transmission of messages encoded and decoded by senders and receivers and is concerned with efficiency and accuracy, looking at communication as a process through which one person affects the behavior or state of mind of another, the latter regards communication as production and exchange of meanings, observing how messages interact with people in order to produce meanings. The semiotic school uses terms like significance, and, contrary to the process school views, does not consider misunderstandings to be necessarily evidence of communication failure, but rather a result of cultural differences between the sender and the receiver.

For a long period, the classical models of communication (process and semiotic schools) have dominated the theoretical scene of communication. However, there are recent contributions (Palo Alto School, Chicago School, and Frankfurt School) that extend the field of communication from the mere transmission of messages or communicative intentions, to intercomprehension or access to the other person's subjectivity, intentions and motives. Thus, the focus shifts towards intersubjective relationships, groups or individuals. The new communication models are complex and take into account the circularity of communication (alternating the roles of sender and receiver), individual differences in mastering communication codes, the role of opinions and attitudes in the communication process, the importance of the social and cultural context of the exchange. Consequently communication is more and more regarded as a relationship that is being gradually built up, in which participants are equally important and mutual respect is a prerequisite (Stănciugelu et al., 2014).

## Methodology

The author carried out an exploratory research on the financing process of ESI funds, considering the theoretical approaches in the field of communication, as well as the relatively low absorption rate, for outlining the real dimensions of the communication problem. A rigorous analysis of secondary data was conducted, comprising of literature review of reference books, articles published in international databases, official publications, statistics and relevant research on the chosen topic.

The research was conducted based on a theoretical communication model in order to enable a correct interpretation and understanding of communication in the field of European funding

(Figure 2). The model is a structural-functionalist one, in which two entities (transmitter and receiver) exchange information in the form of messages, formulated in a common code, using one or more transmission channels (Luca, 2005).

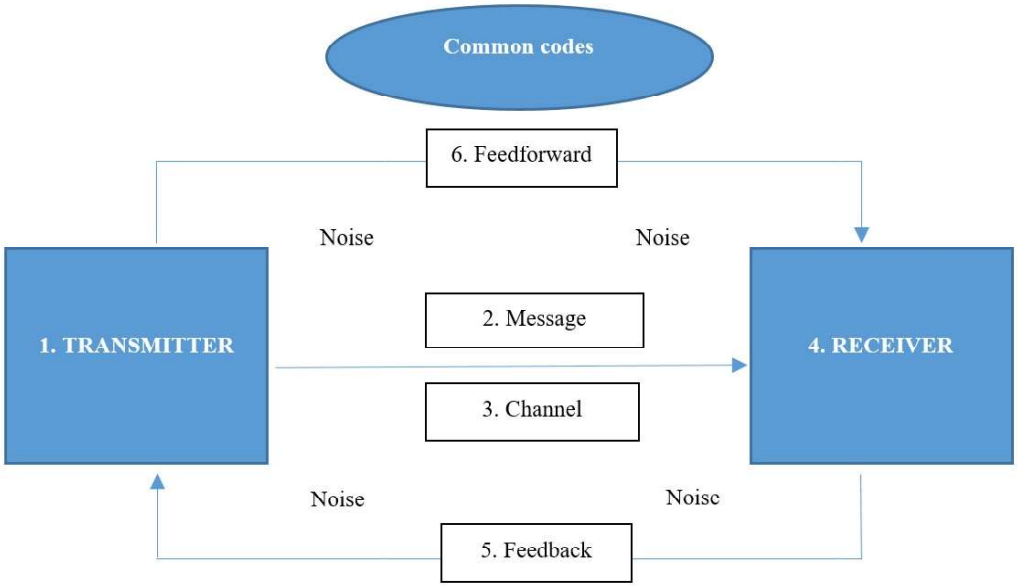



**Figure 2. Basic scheme of the communication process**
Source: Authors' own research results/contribution, based on (Luca, 2005).

The model assumes that the protagonists of the communication process send and receive messages alternately, without considering the situations in which the messages are being sent/ received simultaneously. Also, although in reality any communication, except those strictly delimited in time and space, is the consequence of previous interactions between the protagonists (Figure 3), so the beginning of the communication is in fact a continuation of a previous communication or a delayed reaction to a previous message (M), the result of a juxtaposition of elementary communicative sequences, for simplicity reasons, a single elementary communicative sequence (ECS) was analyzed.

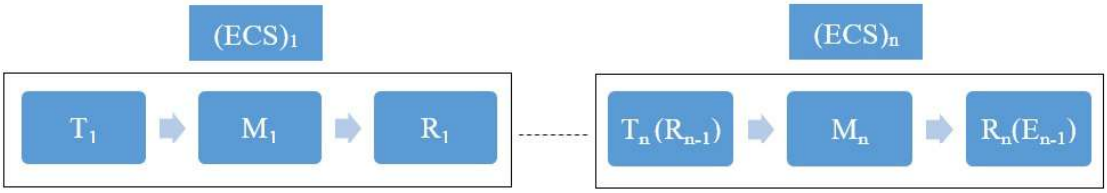



**Figure 3. The communication process, as a juxtaposition of elementary communication sequences**
Source: Authors' own research results/contribution, based on (Fârte, 2004).

Although previous semiotic interactions between the transmitter (T) and the receiver (R) influence communication, given their irreversible (Palo Alto school) and cumulative (Dance's helical model) character, the model does not consider them within the analysis.

## Results and discussions

Based on the proposed theoretical model, the communication process in the field of European funding was analyzed via the eight elements entailed: transmitter, receiver, channel or means of propagation, message, common codes (including coding and decoding), feedback, feedforward and noise. This kind of approach might be useful during the research regarding some possibilities to improve the communication process of European funding.



European funding is a complex process, which involves a large number of institutions, therefore communication occurs at several levels, between different categories of participants (European and Member States institutions, regional and local public institutions, companies, non-profit organizations, individuals etc.). Each of these protagonists can position itself, depending on the context, as transmitter or receiver, but the authors have chosen to analyze the situation in which the public authorities managing ESI funds play the role of transmitter (1), while the target audience (4) – current or potential, plays the role of receiver (Figure 4), considering the fact that financing through European funds is carefully regulated, and public authorities are generally the initiators of communication.

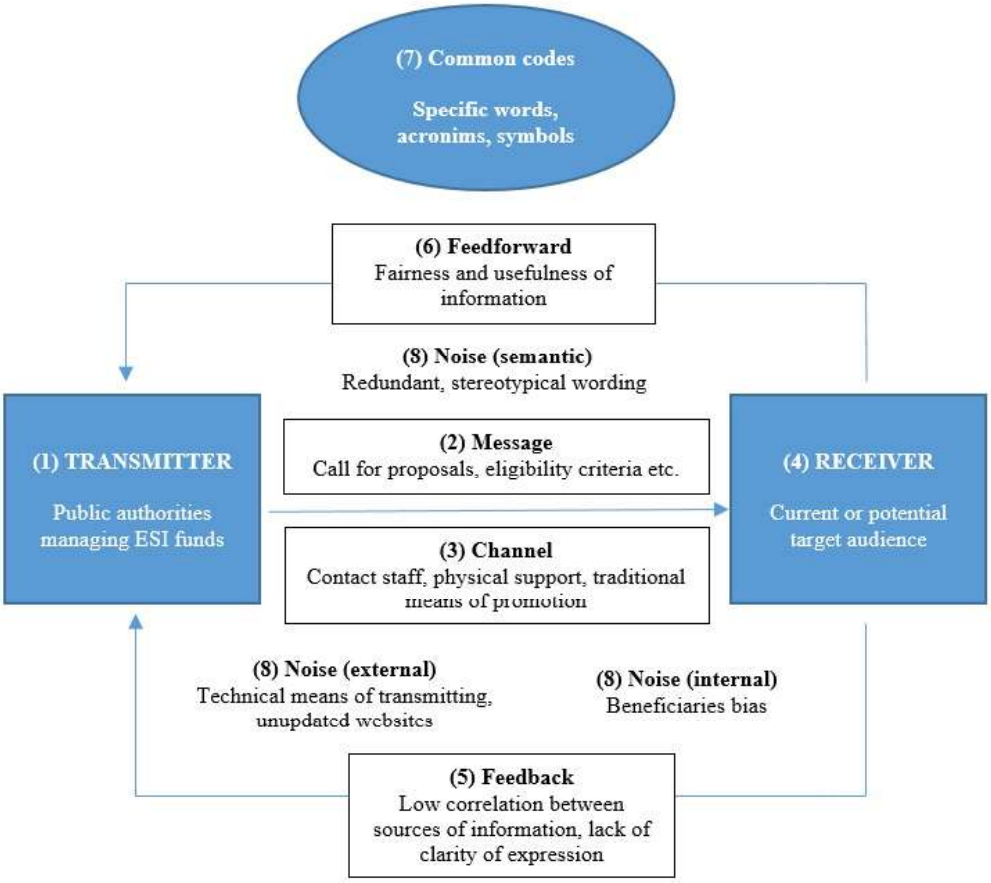



**Figure 4. Basic scheme of the communication process in European funding**

Source: Authors' own research results/contribution.

The target audience consists of several categories of public, so the communication flow must be accordingly adapted. The following categories of auditorium were identified: general public (population, individuals interested in accessing European funds), specialized public

(professionals, consultants), organizations involved in European funding (Member State institutions, European Commission, beneficiaries etc.) and other entities which, whether or not they engage in certain behavior may influence the behavior of others (professional organizations, NGOs, the press, universities), as they may act as secondary transmitters of information, passing on the messages. It is essential to modern organizations to take care of both internal public, in order to stimulate their own employees and partners, but also pay attention to the external public, in order to strengthen market relations. Being part of a large environment, with which it maintains complex relations, the modern organization must transform its audience (internal and external) into a true dialogue partner (Capotă et al., 2006).

Information exchanges between individuals, groups or institutions rest on communication (Luca, 2005). It becomes thus necessary to delineate between "communication" and "information", concepts that are so related that "no consideration on communication can be complete without an explanation of information" (Cuilenburg et al., 2004). Viewed from the perspective of communication sciences, "information" is what is being communicated in an available language, namely a combination of signals and symbols. The signals themselves are only information carriers and are devoid of meaning in the absence of social conventions that allow them to be decoded. Very succinctly, the message (2) is a sequence of signals that the sender transmits to the receiver (Fârte, 2004). The information contained in a message can increase, depending on its length and duration, and is conditioned by the number of elements of the repertoire – set of signals, keyboard or alphabet (Popescu, 2007). Naturally, an insignificant message for the receiver does not have the status of information (Lesenciuc, 2017). Significance depends largely on the existence of a consensus in social practice, outside of which the influence on the receiver and the achievement of the expected effect is not achieved (Stănciugelu et al., 2014). The hidden content of the message differs from the manifest one and can often be more important (Leancă, 2013).

The three facets of information, namely the syntactic aspect (signal succession), the semantic aspect (the significance assigned to the signals) and the pragmatic aspect (the effect on the receiver) influence the transmission of the message-carrying signals from transmitter to receiver, who, besides the challenges related to channel noises, must also face the ones of message coding (Popescu, 2007). The messages that authorities managing ESI funds send to their target audience usually relate to the funding process: call for proposals, eligibility criteria, infringements etc. It is critical that messages are correctly adjusted to their target audience. If the message addresses professionals in the field (consultants, project managers), than the language can be a technical one. But if the target audience is the general public, even the press sometimes if they don't have specialized journalists, than language must be accordingly adapted in such a way that the target audience understands it. The challenge however is that the information in the message has a legislative background and usually human resources in public authorities dealing with this kind of necessary "translation" of technical language are scarce.

In order to reach the receiver successfully, despite its tendency toward selective attention, selective distortion, and selective memory, the message must have a channel (3) or means of propagation. Communication by public authorities is generally regulated, but beyond the limits imposed by the law, they can increase or diversify their number of communication methods and practices and, at the same time, can prioritize aspects of institutional communication (Ranta, 2011). Similarly to enterprises providing services rather than products, the means of communication of the public authorities managing ESI funds consists of contact staff, physical support and traditional means of promotion (Brătucu et al., 1999). According to the first axiom of the Palo Alto school of thought "communication is inevitable", inevitably it follows that in an organization everything has

a communication potential (Burnett, 2008). All the physical components of the serving process, but also the way the delivery system works are elements of great significance for the target audience.

The communication process in which public authorities are involved accompanies their efforts to achieve the objective of meeting public needs. Despite the multitude of messages that can be transmitted in connection with a public service, it is quite difficult to communicate to the potential beneficiary what a service actually is (Brătucu et al., 1999). First, services are immaterial which makes them inaccessible meaning that they cannot be touched, and this makes them considerably more difficult to communicate through any means. Secondly, the organization can only show service substitutes, usually elements of the delivery system (physical support, staff in contact with the audience), but not the service itself. Thirdly, the organization can only describe verbally the service or eventually list the benefits of using the service.



The feedback (5) is the response message that the receiver sends during or after receiving the message from the transmitter, highlighting the extent to which the message was understood and accepted (Stânea, 2013). Through feedback, the receiver gives information to the sender on how the communication is going and automatically turns itself into transmitter, while its answer converts into communicative influence (Fârte, 2004). In European funding the feedback from the beneficiaries to the authorities, although it may be quick, as beneficiaries are highly interested in solving the issues aroused throughout application, implementation, reporting and monitoring of projects, the actual reaction of the authorities is generally slow. Research has shown that from the beneficiaries' perspective, the communication process with the institutions involved in the administration of European funds (ministry, managing authority, intermediate body), as well as the information provided by them are perceived as having major deficiencies due to a relative low interest for the beneficiaries' perspective, low correlation between sources of information (for the same types of information several primary sources are mentioned) and the lack of clarity of expression (Micu et al., 2013).

Feedforward (6) is the correction signal that the sender transmits to the receiver, anticipating its reaction to the message and adapting the message accordingly in order to streamline communication (Lesenciuc, 2017). By focusing on ensuring fairness and usefulness of information transmitted to the beneficiaries public authorities involved in European funding are in fact sending a feedforward signal to the recipient. However, they should not mitigate their role of communicators if they want to have optimal results of ESI funds implementation.

The existence of common codes (7) to both the transmitter and the receiver, systems of meaning agreed for each symbol or component element, which make it possible to encode and decode messages without losing much of the meaning of what the sender wants to transmit, represents a necessary condition for the communication to take place (Luca, 2005). Essentially, the code is a system of common meanings, consisting of signs (words, clues, icons, symbols) and conventions for using signs to form complex messages (Stănciugelu et al., 2014). Previous research has shown that, quite frequently, beneficiaries of European funds have complained, among other things, about the overly technical language used within financing documents (Micu et al., 2013).

Noise (8) is an important source of message distortion during transmission from sender to receiver. Noise or interference prevents the isomorphic transmission of the message from the source to the recipient (Stănciugelu et al., 2014), and disturbances can occur not only on the message transmission channel, but also in the encoding and decoding process (Stânea, 2013). Noise can be external – caused by the environment or the technical means of transmitting the message (successive interruptions of the communication process), internal – thoughts or emotions of the

receiver that appear during the reception of the message or semantic – alternative meanings induced by certain symbols in the mind of the receiver. These produce differences between the encoded and the decoded message, due to differences in values, education etc. All communication channels contain noises or jams, so it becomes impossible for the message to reach the recipient exactly in the same form. Alteration of messages during transmission can be overcome by increasing redundancy (repetition, paraphrasing etc.) (Fârte, 2004), but a stereotypical wording, very common in European funding guidelines, does not arouse interest and may not trigger a dialogue. Thus, an essential requirement is that the message stirs up interest, and differentiates itself from the roar of messages conveyed around the receiver (Dobrescu et al., 2007). Other typical noises identified when it comes to European funding are: unfriendly, un-updated and difficult to access websites and beneficiaries' bias (funds are accessible only to those that have available co-financing, implementing projects is way to time consuming etc.).



There are two dimensions distinguished in the European funds communication process: one relates to information and dissemination, while the other identifies itself with the process of implementing financially supported programs through Community funds, a process in which there is a permanent exchange of information between authorities and beneficiaries (Micu et al., 2013). Consequently, optimizing communication regarding funds cannot be dissociated from improving the implementation process itself. The melioration of the communication process must be carried out on the same coordinates as the enhancement of the absorption of European funds: simplification of procedures, lowering the volume of information that the actors involved must use, clarification and elimination of ambiguities, using an accessible, interesting, non-technical language, allocating resources to promote the simplification measures operated, focusing on a communication that explains more clearly the benefits of attracting European funds.

## Conclusion

All types of organizations – large or small, profit oriented (companies) or non-profit (public institutions, NGOs) – need to communicate with a wide range of stakeholders in order to survive (Fill & Jamieson, 2014). Research of the communication process in the field of European funding can be approached from a multitude of perspectives: the type of communication, its purposes, the means of communication, the content of communication, the effects of communication, the protagonists involved etc.

Although operating in a regulated, relatively rigid framework, there is still room for public authorities involved in European funding to innovate in terms of communication, beyond the limitations imposed by law. The authors appreciate that the model presented in this article should be taken into consideration in the communication process during the actual framework. As some authors sustain (Micu et al., 2013), in the previous financial framework a series of communication errors were identified. That is the reason why the authors tried to choose the right model in their trying to point out the main actors and actions involved in the European financing process, with the purpose of increasing the number of methods and practices of communication, and, in the same time, with the purpose of prioritizing the aspects of communication in order to fulfill their goal of satisfying public needs.

Furthermore, a marketing perspective on the European financing process could unveil itself as a form of innovation in the communication process of European funds. Doubtlessly, public organizations have a wide range of opportunities to achieve their goals, marketing being just one of them, yet by applying specific marketing techniques, favorable attitudes, opinions and behaviors could be generated among the members of the target groups regarding the accessibility of financing

through European funds. This can lead to an increase in the absorption rate of European funds, which can result in more innovation, more business growth, higher revenues (through taxes) for the public sector and finally, given the snowball effect, the ultimate purpose: welfare for society as a whole. The research has a series of limitations. It represents only the beginning for developing a theoretical model of communication in European financing, a part of a much more detailed study in the field of communication. The research will be completed with qualitative research, followed by quantitative research, with the purpose of finding the main restrictions and the possible errors of communication during the European financing process. Based on the results of these research, the theoretical model will be improved. However, even if this paper looks at communication as a factor that can facilitate a better absorption of ESI funds, the link between the absorption rate of ESI funds and communication requires further investigation.



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