

PhD thesis

The appropriateness and impact of projects financed by European funds

Introduction

The issue of structural funds absorption is very complex, which is why this research provides a holistic view of the development process within all Romanian regions. One of the underlying assumptions which must be checked in the framework of this work is just the quality of the public property management, in the work's accuracy of civil servants regarding the process of Community Structural Funds absorption. "In general, the purpose of the research is finding the proper responses regarding the uncertainties and the acquisition of new knowledge" (Marczyk et al, 2005: 1), this research assumes only the realistic, palpable part of the complex realities generated by the processes and regulations governing the activity of the entities involved in this activity, evoking only the indisputable evidences leading to certain logical conclusions, "knowledge management being a precondition for the success of a project in the current context, characterized by a dynamic and ever changing environment" (Ajmal et.al., 2009; Sokhanvar et al., 2014).

The paper does not deny the reality found in some administrations, the vacuum of quality into public administration management, which must assume the reality that "the transfer of knowledge at the project level takes place through social communication between those involved and through different channels of explicit information" (Adam, 2014), by underlying the results obtained in the process of Structural Funds absorption.

One of the field's exegetes said the fact that "one of the factors that can accelerate regional convergence is technological progress and its dispersion" (Alexiadis et al., 2010), research reveals the impact of this dispersal at the level of each county in order to highlight "the implementation of elements that have proven their validity in similar situations encountered in other regions" (Androniceanu et al., 2006).

The main factors influencing the absorption rate capacity are the ability of applicants to prepare proper projects, the entire implementation, monitoring and auditing projects system, the lack of medium and long-term strategies and corruption issues" (Albulescu et.al, 2013), are rigorously treated in the thesis with the obvious purpose of identifying projects with great potential, that may generates positive perspectives at the level of other entities that have failed to perform in this process.

"A project with European funding, like any other project, requires a tailor-made management based on the principles of general management but caring about the specific features of this kind of projects; in this way, the practice contributes to the project's success." (Nistor & Mureșan, 2012), and Guerrero "underlined that there is a mix of measurement indicators that can be assessed by a series of criteria" (Guerrero, 2007) "quantitative methods providing the basis for calculating value, initiating project-related measurements that will

quantify the success" (Goodpasture et al., 2003) "managing good practices generated by projects, whether successful or not, or their transfer between project managers tend to lead to a higher performance of the project," (Cunha, 2014) "project performance being achieved if the project is effective (timely and budget-friendly) and effective (meets the expectations and gives satisfaction to the project team," (Atanasiu & Leon, 2011) although "the criteria defining the performance of a project differ from one project to another" (Müller & Turner, 2007) and "we cannot say that there is a generally valid solution leading to the success of a project". (Rolstadas et al., 2014).

Hill "mentions the existence of four stages in the life of a project: initiation, solution planning, solution implementation and completion phase" Hill (2014), and Alias "highlights five variables that can influence the performance of a project: actions related to project management, the proper procedures, human resource, project characteristics, and last but not least external elements of the project" (Alias et al. (2014), all of these variables being studied within the research, being highlighted the projects that excelled in the absorption of European funds. "In managing a project, it has to be taken into account that it is important not only to carry out the task, but also to anticipate the duration, the cost and the outcome." (Newton, 2009)

"The personalization strategy is based on the fact that all knowledge is closely related to the person who generated this knowledge and can only be transmitted through personal interaction" (Ajmal, 2009) and it is the basis of this thesis, which proposes that the responsible people in this area should be promoted and their example personalized at the level of similar entities.

In order to obtain success by using this approach, it is necessary to involve them in "extra-curricular activities, that involves actions, experiences, bring a novelty and represents an active learning process related to the creation of new opportunities" Abreu (2013), but also by "a fifth level, the understanding" (Ackoff, 1989) from those with less consistent performance. "Every flagship initiative acts as an umbrella vehicle for other specific initiatives" (Armstrong, 2012) among their counterparts with less consistent results, which is why this paper highlights projects with a particular impact in this process.

The theme

The most important resort in choosing the research's theme is the creation of an equidistant perspective of the impact of the European funds in the regional development at the level of the Romanian society, regarding the fact that there are extremely heterogeneous opinions related to this process, often contradictory and inadequate.

The research pursues strictly the scientific approach and outlines the only the pure mathematical results, eliminating any related interests, in order to achieve the most faithful image of this process in Romania.

The research focuses on the results achieved by the educational institutions and the Romanian companies in the European funds absorption process, the element that has led to the choice of this theme is the poverty of the research approaches that captures punctually the impact that the structural funds accessed by these two entities have in regional development.

It is also a self-imposed goal in the research to highlight the good practices as well as the less impressive results achieved at the level of all the Romanian entities, with the purpose of their correction, since this scientific approach also concerns the coercion of the negative aspects, often not assumed by the authorities.

The research has been structured to test different spatial correlations that may occur at national level among potential beneficiaries, showing the tendency to accumulate superior results in certain areas while dissipating the least robust in other clusters regarding the performance of companies and representatives of educational institutions.

The purpose and objectives of research

The quintessence of research is the ineluctable delimitation of the extent to which the European funds absorbed at the end of the 2007-2013 period in Romania have affected the regional development through the two fundamental indices of this process: The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the Local Human Development Index (LHDI).

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Achieving this goal implies fulfilling specific objectives that research follows:

- identifying the projects submitted at national level, spotted by their individual values;
- the quantitative delimitation of the projects submitted at the level of each national development region;
- assigning the submitted projects according to the beneficiaries of these funds in the 8 categories with national significance, such as companies, county councils, non-governmental organizations or educational institutions;
- assessing the extent of each of the eight classes of potential beneficiaries of Structural Funds in the total regional performances;
- outlining the values of the funds attracted by each category of potential beneficiaries of these funding into the national overall performance;
- establishing unique performance indicators at the level of research, namely here the feasibility of the proposed European projects and the finance of the proposed European projects;

- carrying out a descriptive analysis of the impact of European funds absorbed by companies and educational institutions at each county level through 4 types of cartographic representations;
- assessing spatial autocorrelation (global and local) based on the amounts attracted by those two categories of beneficiaries;
- modeling the impact of the European funds absorbed in the increase of the living standard measured by GDP and LHDI within each Romanian county.

In order to implement the undertaken objectives and the purpose of the present research, only official data of the authorized bodies will be used, without harming their veracity, their processing being not capable of causing the alteration of the pure information or the discrediting of those involved in this process, the possible subjective opinions being expressed exclusively for the coercion of possible non-conforming elements.

Methodology of research

The analyze process was hard work in terms of attention and meticulousness, in which it was difficult to dissect the entire package of public data available on the official website of the Romanian Government, each of the 41,585 published projects being itself a whole world of data and information, some of them being relevant, others being totally useless in the approach to shaping a coherent, well-structured and properly analysis of valuable and relevant information.

The individual treatment of each of the 41,585 projects was a special effort, primarily because common but also convincing fundamental aspects had to be found, which could ensure the pooling of these projects according to certain criteria in order to assure relevant conclusions for the research.

The first step is to establish the criterion of regional ownership as a delimitation element, but also to coagulate these projects in homogeneous sets of data, compatible with the purpose of the analysis.

Only three primary indicators were chosen, namely here: the eligible amount asked, the authorized amount and the total reimbursed amount, according to which the first major situation of the research was realized, namely the one presenting the total of the three analyzed dimensions at national level and in each development region.

Even if the first chronological stage of the research is the regional integration of each project, the mere summarization of the number of projects carried out at national level and in each development region presents a frugal dimension in the analysis ecosystem, but it is important because it opens the way towards a holistic understanding of the breadth of the process ruled in Romania.

In the next stage of the research, the values of the contracts in progress at each of the eight regional development agencies were summed up, regarding the three fundamental dimensions of this process, namely above.

Being an extremely complex field, the research has surprised two levels, qualitatively and quantitatively, being carried out using various theoretical and practical techniques and methods, combining descriptive and explanatory elements. Thus, if the first two chapters have a profound descriptive character, Chapter 3 highlights the quantitative dimension of the approach to the absorption of the structural funds, while the last chapter follows the qualitative approach of the process, starting from the national level, at each Romanian county, with direct impact of the amounts allocated to companies and educational institutions, that have had an impact into the level of the Local Human Development Index - LHDI as it is marked in the world economic spectrum, and of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measured in 2014.

The evaluation of the effects of structural funds into these two economic fields at the level of each county was made using OpenGeoDa software v.1.0. and "methods and techniques of statistics and spatial econometrics" (Mare, C., 2014).

The first step of the analysis using these methods is the descriptive one, made in this visual approach through four types of maps:

- "Quartiles map - where the sample is divided into groups.
- Percentages map - in which all 100 groups are synthesized in 6 classes, in order to highlight outlier, both superior and inferior.
- Dispersion map (standard deviations or mean square deviations) - in which spatial units are grouped into k groups, each group containing observations within the range $\bar{x} \pm k\hat{\sigma}$, k being the number of groups, and $\hat{\sigma}$ the estimated average deviation of the sample analyzed." (Mare, C., 2013) Within this representation, the elements are related to the distribution of values.
- Boxmap - presents the same methodology as the quartiles map, but adds the lower and upper level outs at the end of the series.

The final stage of the analysis involves regression modeling. The aim was to see if the absorption of European funds contributed to the increase of the living standard, measured by the county proxy GDP and, by the newly developed index of local human development - LHDI. Since the variables related to the reimbursed amounts are correlated, 3 models were estimated for each of the dependent variable. Each model was evaluated post-estimation for validation by various tests (presented later in the annexes). As an additional validation procedure, there were introduced two additional variables related to the living standard: the unemployment rate and the average monthly salary at the county level.

Final conclusions and personal suggestions

The general scientific approach taken through this thesis outlines some ineluctable realities at the level of the Romanian society regarding the absorption of the structural non-reimbursable funds in the 2007-2013 range, the most important of which being:

- ❖ a total of 41,585 eligible projects were submitted to the Romanian management authorities, amounting 48,302,030,485.36 lei;
- ❖ a major lack of quality regarding these projects, which led to the authorization of only 81.81% of these projects, the total approved expenditures being only 39,517,397,953.82 lei;
- ❖ identification of major gaps in the projects implementation, which led to their actual financing of only 60.53% compared to the approved value and 49.52% of the one initially requested by the beneficiaries, pointed at 23,921,128,880.97 lei;
- ❖ the extraordinary scale of the capital and Ilfov County, which concentrates 37.64% of the total approved amounts and 31.21% of the nationally reimbursed funds;
- ❖ heterogeneous dissemination at the level of non-reimbursable development regions in relation to the 7 main classes of potential beneficiaries defined in the research, which surpasses the superiority of companies;
- ❖ the amount of 35.34% projects submitted by the representatives of the private non-governmental organizations from the capital region and performances between 7.04% and 11.51% within other development regions;
- ❖ the performance of the northwestern educational institutions representatives pointed at 18.03%, the one of the northeastern ones with 13.56%, those in Bucharest area with 33.62%, all three cumulates 65.21% into the national performance;
- ❖ the lack of demand within the public health institutions from South-West Oltenia;
- ❖ a performance around 10% of the projects submitted by the representatives of the public institutions in each region except Bucharest;
- ❖ the percentage of 25.84% attributed to the representatives of the county councils within the Northeast development region;
- ❖ the relatively uniform distribution of the performances of local public authorities, ranging from 10.90% to 16.11% excepting the capital, that stroke only 3.72%;
- ❖ relative homogenization of the companies' performance, their combined effort exceeding in 5 regions the 10% threshold, with the apogee of 23.70% within the capital region;
- ❖ a heterogeneous structure at the level of the Bucharest development region, marked by the domination of companies and NGOs;
- ❖ the scale of the projects submitted by the public forums in the North-East and North-West regions, which cumulate more than 50% nationally;
- ❖ the projects precariousness submitted by the educational institutions and hospitals in Muntenia, Oltenia and Southeastern Romania.

The analysis realized measuring the quantitative and qualitative dimensions reveals elements that led to the current state of the process, essential in terms of their impact being the following:

- the lack of care of the beneficiaries from Bucharest region, which accumulates low values of the indicators regarding the feasibility of the proposed European projects (71.05%) and the effective founding of the eligible projects (50.19%), generated mainly by the low contribution of the companies (FPEP 60.93% and EFEP 36.15%);
- high feasibility of projects submitted by NGOs and educational institutions within Central Region (FPEP > 97%) doubled by high effective funding (93.09% and 85.76%). The negative aspect derives from the reduced amplitude of these funding, which, combined with the lower performances of the other beneficiaries, leads to low values of the indicators in this region (90.46% and 68.30%);
- the magnitude of the company's qualitative performance outlines the overall result recorded in the Northeast, with the translation going from 89.82% to 91.41% for FPEP, from 65.23% to 69.39% for the indicator targeting the actual funding of eligible projects;
- the values of the main parameters in the North-West region are 90.24% and 67.50% and denote a potential dispersion of structural funds at national level;
- the FPEP level over 90% registered by each class of Structural Fund beneficiaries in the South Muntenia region, leads to a regional feasibility of 92.85%. Unfortunately, this is not doubled by effective funding, the repayment rate being only 65.22%;
- unsatisfactory results reached into the Southeastern Romania, where only 86.36% of the projects were declared eligible, being paid only 61.11% of them;
- the inability of the beneficiaries from Oltenia to achieve the 90% and 70% levels for those indices, their punctual value being 89.91% and 68.41%;
- the same incapacity characterize the West Development Region, the FPEP being 89.63% and the EFEP 69.20%.

The descriptive analysis of the impact of European funds absorbed by companies and educational institutions shows some key aspects of the process developed in Romania during this time period, the most important being the following:

- in the East and South of the country, were attracted the least EU funds by the representatives of the educational units;
- the Cluj, Braşov, Iaşi and Bucharest counties manage to achieve the superior performances, regarding all five dimensions analyzed through quartiles map;
- the Vaslui, Mehedinţi and Ialomiţa counties are situated at the opposite pole in the analysis based on the standard deviations, which identifies Bucharest as the only superior outlier;
- Ialomiţa and Bucharest retain their abilities as outlined above and are priced at the total eligible amount reimbursed to the beneficiaries in the analysis based on standard deviations;

- the boxmap shows that the top performances in the structural funds absorption process belong to Bucharest and Cluj County, the inferior outlier being also this time Ialomița County;
- this type of cartographic representation highlights Bucharest and Ilfov County as the only national regions with GDP in the upper outpost area.

The assessment of space autocorrelation using the value of the structural funds reimbursed to companies and educational institutions highlights the following important aspects:

- ⊙ the spatial or global autocorrelation doesn't exist in terms of the sums reimbursed to educational institutions in the counties of Romania, but 5 significant clusters are formed according to local autocorrelation;
- ⊙ there is no spatial distribution of the value reimbursed to companies nationwide, these amounts being randomly distributed, Gorj County being the only Low-Low cluster that is significant;
- ⊙ lack of spatial autocorrelation and significant clusters at local level, depending on the total European funds reimbursed;
- ⊙ the existence of a positive self-correlation at national level according to the LHDI and the presence of 3 significant clusters at the local level;
- ⊙ the presence of a positive autocorrelation in relation to the county's GDP, with the existence of 5 significant clusters;

The regional modeling of the impact of European funds on raising living standard by measuring the county GDP and the local development index (LHDI) show that:

- ◆ the value reimbursed to the educational institutions positively influence the county's GDP (+0.041%) to 1% increase of the reimbursed value, creating a diffusion and contagion process;
- ◆ the value reimbursed to educational institutions influences positively and significantly the LHDI (+0.006%) under the same circumstances;
- ◆ the repayment value allocated to the companies significantly influenced the county's GDP (+0.52%) to 1% increase of the reimbursed value, creating a diffusion process only in the simple model, without the established variables;
- ◆ The Local Human Development Index is positive and significant (+0.063%) influenced by 1% increase of the European funds reimbursed to companies.

Managerial proposals:

- the inclusion of the indicators "Feasibility of the Proposed European Projects - FPEP" and "Effective Funding of Eligible Projects - EFEP" among indicators defining the performance of national entities with attributions in the absorption of structural funds;
- the development of a national database, in which all EU project's guarantees should be included;

- conducting professional training sessions among civil servants from A.D.R. and A.F.I.R., coupled with a less restrictive legislation;
- the introduction of a very large computer software that is able to highlight the similarities between two or more projects.

Legal proposals:

- establishing a public policy in order to provide financial resources for the implementation of European projects that have been declared eligible by the competent authorities;
- the possibility of guaranteeing with the future established assets through non-reimbursable Community resources when this items are financed by a bank institution or a similar institution by default, without any extra charges and formalities;
- the definition of a special funding program designed to stimulate the loan access, without so much papers and restrictions, established through a mutual treaty between national legal bodies and banks;
- the design of the Criminal Code Procedure in order to implement crimes against the European funds regulations;
- a faster treatment of those cases in courts.

Organizational proposals:

- a more active involvement of national institutions that aims to provide the necessary counter-guarantees needed to loans;
- a more facile way and a less time spent process of accessing the counter-guarantees;
- setting the maximum amount of the annual commission of this counter-guarantees to 0.80% or a total payment at the maximum of 2.20% of the counter-guarantee value issued for the whole period;
- interest rate capping for the loans design to establish fixed assets construction or acquisition within projects with a non-reimbursable Community contribution up to a maximum of 1.00% + the ROBOR 6M index and those for the acquisition of current assets or intangible adding value assets, know-how, cutting-edge technologies to a maximum of 2.00% + ROBOR 6M.

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