THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACCESS TO THE LABOR MARKET THROUGH THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE MECHANISMS OF STRUCTURAL FUNDS GRANTING

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Abstract:
As a consequence of the defective management of the European funds, the European Commission has adopted measures to improve the instruments of financial control and to reduce the errors that can lead to incorrect requests of payments from the European Union`s budget. In this work we attempt to identify aspects regarding the way to efficiently manage the structural funds for the member states and not only to implement and absorb them.

Key words*: European funds, European Union, action plan.*

Jel Classification*: J01,J5*

1. Regulations changes due to fraud

On the 29th of February 2008, the Commission adopted an action plan of 37 articles, as a practical response to the recommendations of the European Parliament and of the European Court of Auditors, to strengthen the management and control systems in the member states and to lower the risk of errors that can come up in the payment demands. The purpose of the action plan was to assist member states in their preparation of „closing" the accounts of the programmemes with structural funds 2000 – 2006 and to ensure the effective verification of the financial control and audit strategies for the fiscal period 2007 – 2013.

At the end of October 2009, the European Commission adopted a report regarding the improvement achieved in implementing its action plan for consolidating the common management of the EU structural and cohesion funds. In the mentioned report are outlined the measures adopted to improved the financial control instruments within the member states of the EU and to decrease the mistakes that can lead to insubstantial payment requests out of the EU budget. The report also showed that the more severe measure implemented by the Commision for reducing the errors mentioned had already given real results. In 2009, the European executive recovered about 1.2 billlion Euro. The member states of the EU apply more and more often their own financial corrections, which gives them more freedom to request payments fro the eligible alternative projects. At the same time, the Commission and the member states have made significant progress in the simplifying of the financin regulations, reducing the bureaucratic formalities without diminishing, however, the financial control measures. Among the changes can be found some measures that allow using payments in stable installments and lump sums to reduce the administrative assignments on the beneficiaries.

Several people expressed their opinions in regards to the change of regulation due to frauds, as follows:

- *Paweł Samecki,commissioner for regional policy:...* we can notice that our common efforts are brinin up results: the Commission and the member states are engaged in taking appropriate actions when errors are discovered. There`s a progress also in our efforts to simplify the financing rules.
- *Vladimír Spidla, European commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion*: Simplifying things has a special relevance for the promotors of small projects, this being the reason why we implemented some accounting simplications for reporting indirect costs at the beginning of the current programmeming period. The Commission actively promotes live usin of this simplifying and (...) we can notive significant progress, since most of the member states informed the Commission in the last few months about the systems that they introduce for all programmes or for a part of them.
- *Emil Boc, Romanian former prime minister*: Practically, everything related to the coordination of the European funds goes directly under the prime minister, direct assumption, at the highest level of this topic.

In our country, the loans from or guaranteed by the administrative – territorial units to assure pre- or cofinancing of projects that receive nonreimbursable funds of pre- and post adherence from the European Union are excluded from the debt limit established by Law 273 / 2006 regarding local public finances. According to the mentioned law, the possibility of the local public authorities to contracted or guaranteed loans was limited, so that the annual service of the public debt was not supposed to get over the limit of 30% out of the total of own incomes. Through an Emergency Order added to the Law 273 / 2006, the Government modified the law, the changes being made to serve the public communities, that have reduced financial capacity to ensure the financing of the European projects.

At the end of November 2008, the European Commission proposed simplifying the procedures of accession to the European funds, to fight better against the international financial crisis. One of the procedures is that by 2009 the amounts programmemed to be given by 2013 should be quicker loosened. The European Commission will present a financial relaunch plan based on coordinated measures implemented by the member states, adapted to each teeconomical situation, as well as on measures to facilitate and accelerate the use of cohesion European programmemes by the member states. On the 10th of December 2008, before leaving to the European Traditional Council in Bruxelles, president Traian Basescu stated that "Romania requests the simplifying of the procedures of contracting money from the Europeab Union or, differently put, reducing bureaucracy". The president also announced that the funds for instructure granted to Romania by th EU are enough reported to our capacity of absorbtion.

Carefully monitoring the way of accessing several types of European funds, only on the 30th of April of 2010, the European Commission presented a plan to simplify procedures of participation to the research projects financed by EU. The main objective of these simplifications is to make participation transparent and attractive for the best researchers, as well as for the innovative societies from Europe and from abroad. Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and science declared with this ocasion: „The objective of our proposal is to reduce at minimum the administrative tasks within the European reseach programmemes. We need best researchers and most innovative societies to participate to all of these and we need to allow them to focus on results, not on bureaucracy, this way supporting European economy and life quality. We especially need to encourage the participation of more and more SMEs. I am sure that this can be done without affecting financial control. We request the support of the other European institutions to reach these objectives." Janusz Lewandowski, Budget Commissioner, declared: "Reviewing the financial regulations supports the ideas to simplify the financing of research through clear legislative proposals, that will turn out to be useful for other political areas as well. We need easier regulation to encourage participation of possible beneficiaries of European funds, such as small and medium – sized enterprises and ONGs. Through this simplification, the European budget will better serve the citizens and enterprises.

The first part of the Commission`s strategy to simplify the procedures of accession of the EU rants has possible improvements of the current legislative and regulation framework, some of them already being noticeable. This includes, for example, more performing informatics systems, a more coherent application of norms, especially those of audit, as well as improving the structure and content of the requests for project proposals, to which research organizations response requesting finances.

The second part includes the change of existing financial regulations to allow a more radical simplification, at the same time maintaining an effective control, for example by extending the use of the "average costs method", to avoid the need of separate and detailed accounting within projects of each cost. The Commission intends, also, to authorize the use in case of EU projects financing of the same accounting methods that are used for national financing of research.

Implementing the third type of expected changes will be taken into consideration for future frame programmes. Among presented options there is also an evolution in regards to "payment based on results" which would mean that beneficiaries should receive global amounts for having specific scientific activities, with the need for them to prove that these were made efficiently and correctly, rather than to report individual costs.

On the 17th of March 20122, the European Commission adopted a reform proposal of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). The purpose of this reform is to increase efficiency, OLAF responsibility, at the same time maintaining its independence in what research activities are concerned. Through the new changes a reinforcement of the procedural guarantees is made, investigated persons being granted access to an abstract of aspects from investigation.

The purpose of this reform is to increase efficiency, effectiveness and OLAF responsibility, at the same time maintaining its independence in what research activities are concerned.[1] Ever since it was created in 1999, OLAF has achieved by 2010 aprox. 4.500 investigations and significantly contributed at protecting the EU budget from fraudulent activities. Main changes that were brought to OLAF`s activity in March 2011 are the following:

- Proposal of a series of stronger norms and procedural guarantees that will allow the realization of more correct and more efficient investigations, to protect the money of the European taxpayer.
- Reinforcement of procedural guarantees (E.g.: Respecting fundamental rights) in favor of persons under investigation by OLAF.
- Granting access to the abstract of the aspects that are investiated to the person under investigation.
- The right to express the opinion before conclusions are written.
- The right to receive assistance from a freely chose person.
- The right to use one of the EU official languages, based on individual`s choice.
- Implementing a review procedure for cases were procedural rihts were infringed.

Commissioner Algirdas Semeta, responsible for Anti-Fraud fight declared: "OLAF is an essential element in protecting EU budget and in the fight against fraud. Through this reform procedure, we aim to make the institution stronger, more fficient and to improve some of its compentences, in the advantae of all European Union's citizens". Vicepresident Viviane Reding and EU Commissioner for Justice, declared: "A series of stronger norms and procedural guarantees are needed to allow the fulfillment of more correct and efficient investigations, to protect the money of European taxpayers."

2. New financing schemes of structural funds projects

During 2011, Romanian authorities tried to seem very concerned of the way of unfolding of autochthon structural funds projects. This topic was debated in Government meetings, in the interministerial comitee of European funds absorbtion (founded in January 2009) and, more recently, in weekly meetings of the prime minister and the president. Emphasis was laid on technical meetins between decision factors involved, establishing for each minister practical and more efficient measures to inncrease European funds absorbtion volume.

In the summer of 2011, following the model of other EU member states, including the one of Bulgaria, Romanian specialists began to take into consideration setting a European Affairs Minister that should be enchared only of the funds from the EU. Beyond this discussions and plans, things practically remain unchanged for the authorities of management of the structural, sectorial projects. (Filip G., 2001) According to a report of the Public Policies Institute, at mid financial exercise 2007 – 2013, Romania is way behind Bulgaria in attracting and effectively spending European funds. Unfortunately, the Public Policies Institute (IPP) has also identified major differences between figures reported by authorities, on the same programme. The report also informs that "In regards to the real rate of money absorbtion, and that would be payment already made by benefficiaries and reimbursed by the European Commission, only 7,37% of the alloted money were spent within the Regional Operational Programmeme (ROP)". This is 3 times lower than what the Commitee of Monitoring ROP had estimated at end of May 2011 – 21,50%, figure agreed to by the Authority for the Coordination of Structural Instruments (ACSI); similar uncertainties exist for other programmes as well.

The decision of passing ACSI from the Ministry of Public Finances under the coordination of the prime minister was taken since February 2011 in order to give a new burst to the absorbtion of structural funds. Regarding this aspects, in the quoted report PPI informed that: "Out of all the date achieved, we can determine that ACSI practically has no role in coordinating and making uniform the work practices at the management authorities level", not even in verifying information about the accessed money. In this situation, the option of setting a new Minister for efficient spending of European funds has its grounds, but with some conditions: to have qualified staff, to hace a unique database that should contain detailed information about financed projects, beneficiaries, operative interventions made etc. On the other side, "a reshape of the institutional architecture would mean to start again the process of accreditation of the system by the European Commission. This would effectively lead to a block of the work of these authorities for a timeframe between 6 months to 1 year. We cannot lose such a valuable time for adopting a measure that has no guarantees and that cannot make miracles", declared Cătălin Vătafu, chief of CIS in an interview for "Fin.ro" in May 2011. (Boboc A., 2011)

With a budget of over 3,27 billion Euro for 2007 – 2013, in May 2012 for ROP were approved 1.387 projects, that being 60,7 % of the financial allotment of the 7 years programme. Most of the mony for ROP, in absolute value, were directed to the North – East region, which is also the poorest region at a EU level, being followed by the South Muntenia region, the third on list of the poorest regions in the country. As a value of the investments made by ROP per inhabitant, most of the money can be found in the South – West region. The highest amount of money was accessed by local authorities through projects in the districts of Iaşi, Dâmboviţa, Dolj, Hunedoara, and the fewest were accessed by local authorities in Ialomiţa, Covasna şi Vrancea.

In May 2011 as well for PODCA were approved 325 projects, financed with 208 million, granted for the interval 2007-2013, with an actual money absorbtion rate of 12,5 % (compared to 1.387 projects approved for ROP, financed with 60,7% of the financial allotment 2007-2013, as previously mentioned as well). For the coutnries' Capital, Bucharest, were alloted the highest part of PODCA, 77%. 10.6 billion Euro is EU contribution, out of the 13.4 billion Euro requested (the difference of 2.8 billion Euro are cofinancin, most of them alloted with the support of the Romanian government), for the 6.177 contracts on European structural funds signed, which is 55% of the allotment for the financial interval 2007-2013.

According to data from the end of June 2011, there are no issues regarding the submitted projects on the 7 operational programmes and the total of the request amount is of 54.2 billion Euro, which is way over the financial allotment for Romania. A major issue that the European Commission has noticed, which was as well the reason for interupting payments for ROP, is related to the mistakes and difficulties in the implementation process.

Wrong auctions – intended or not – and the local conflicts of interests can compromise European funds for Romania. Romania contributes to the EU budget with about 3 million Euro per day and attracts, through structural funds only half of this amount.(Boboc, A., 2011)

EU projects will not be stopped, they will keep being financed by the state budget and the respective bills would be sent put by the Government to the European Commission only after additional verification made by the Romanian authorities. This means that European contribution would be recovered after the process, accordin to the statements of the former prime minister Boc on the 20th of July 2011, mid-way of the current financial interval with European funds.(www.EurActiv.com, 2011)

Therefore, Romania has only managed to attract by mid 2011 13,7 % of these funds compared to Esthonia and Lithuania, which at the end of the entire period absorbed 34,7%, respectively 33,6% of the alloted funds. In regards to the submitted projects, their value was over 180% of the money that should have been received, but the value of the approved projects is63,3% and the granted financing only reaches 55,1%. In a letter sent in June 2011 to the Romanian authorities, the president of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso mentions a rate of absorbtion of only 3% for Romania on structural and cohesion funds. Part of the difference might come from the fact that the Romanian government includes in the rate of 63% prefinancings too.(Panturu, B, 2011)

Payments for the European funds beneficiaries were of 2,7 billion Euro at end of June 2011, representing 13,25% of the total allotment. Actual reimbursements are of only 1,109 billion Euro, corresponding to an absorbtion rate o 3,52%, the rest being prefinancing. The Operational Programme for transports in Romania has the lowest absorbtion rate out of the 7 financed by the EU. Until the end of July 2011 2,8% of the total of alloted funds was spent for the interval 2007 – 2012 and no Eurocent was used in june.

The level of recovery of prefinancing on different operational programmes was at 20% at mid 2011. The real absorbtion rate is only 3.52% since the amount taken into consideration by Brussels is the one paid for reimbursement requests. By mid 2011 28.964 projects were submitted, having a total amount of 53.53 billion Euro, out of which the EU contribution goes up to 34.38 billion Euro. 8.505 projects were approved in total od 19 billion Euro, with a EU contribution of 12,1 billion Euro, which represents 63% of the allotment for 2007 – 2013. In regards to the number of financing decisions signed, there are 6.468 contracts, in total of 13,5 billion Euro, with a respective EU contribution of 10,7 billion Euro, which is 55% of the total. As a consequence of reported situations, Management Authorities (MA) had the initiative of cancelling for 100 financing decisions.

By August 2011, tthe advance for the prefinancing of the European projects was of 30% of the total value of the contract. Under the reason that many of the beneficiaries that receive prefinancing money do not send eventually bills for the costs, bills that normally should be directed for clearing to the European Commission, the Romanian Government decided to drop the prefinancing quantum from 30% to 10%, but did not mention for which contracts the new regulations would apply. On the 26th of July 2011 the Government decided to limit the maximum amount that can be granted as prefinancing for European funds projects from 30 to maximul 10% of the total value of the contract.

Cătălin Vătafu, the head of the Authority for the Coordination of Structural Instruments (ACSI), declared that both this measure and the one regarding the cancellation of contracts for which reimbursement requests were not submitted after 4 months from receiving the advance are only applicable for contracts signed after the previously mentioned date. "This measure will be applicable only for contracts that are going to be signed. Projects that are already under evaluation will need to be adjusted regarding the cash flow and the payments calendar. The already signed contracts will not be changed" added the head of ACSI.

On the other hand, there is another measure that mandates companies which do not send the reimbursement documentation to the authorities in maximum 4 months upon receiving prefinancing to fully return money. Management authorities of the the structural operational programmes can use this measure for new contracts only. For some of the already completed contracts there are already terms and conditions that can lead to cancellation, and the Government advises Management Authorities to apply these measures if they exist. If you try to make a logic exercise, we can notice that most probably there are also contracts in case of which the state cannot apply the cancellation measure if the beneficiaries don't send reimbursement requests that justify the spending of the amounts received in advance. The Government motivated the new decisions saying that most of the companies that get money from prefinancin do not send the bills to justify the spendings, bills that normally need to reach the European Commission for clearing.

3. European Funds financing proposals for 2012-2013

Given the difficulties that came up in the process of European funds absorbtion, difficulties that several member states of the European Union are facing, the European Commission has set up a financial support plan for the states in need. (Toma B., Tolbaru A.M., 2011) A 2.200 million Euro support, in total. The European Commission had called the programme a „sort of Marshall Plan" for economical relaunch for the mentioned contruies. The comparison does not stand if we talk about the amounts offered by the USA to Europe after the Second World War when $13 billion were provided. Six European states (Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Hungary and Latvia) will only contribute, starting 2012, with 5% for the European projects, compared with 15 – 30% that they previously needed to allot. In the two years of application, 2012 and 2013, left of the current financial interval, over 700 million Euro will be practcally offered as a gift to Romania by the EU through the cut of the cofinancing rate for the European projects. First expected effects of this new scheme were to unblock some projects and decrease deficit.

In an attempt to explain why the European Commission came up with this kind of measure after a consistent salvgardation package offered to Greece and interventions of the European Central Bank on the markets of Ireland and Portugal, the European Commissioner for Agriculture, Dacian Ciolos, stated that the souvereign debts in Europe are putting in danger the cofinanced projects. According to him, the national authorities encounter difficulties in finding the necessary resources for their own financial contribution, which most of the times leads to delays, budget cuts or even cancellation of projects. Experts hope that the new financing scheme of the EU will have a significant contribution to increase the employment rate and competitivity. This is how Dacian Ciolos explains the first expected effects of this exceptional measure: „First of all, it will result in immediate drop of national deficits. Secondly, it will support the Governments in smart fiscal consolidation, instead of severe budget cuts. At the same time, through every project these funds will continue to create jobs and competitivity, that are mandatory for complete recovery of the economy. There are significant investments."

This measure will not lead to a bill increase for the European taxpayers. „These are not additional money", also stated the Commissioner for Regional Policy, Johannes Hahn. „It's exactly the opposite. It is a guarantee that funds are better oriented towards projects that have maximum positive impact, instead them being blocked due to insufficients funds in the budget to ensure the national contribution. After the measure proposed by the Commission is approved by the European Parliament and by the member states, Romania will have the chance to get up to 714 million Euro in 2012". (http://ec.Europa.eu/budget/library/biblio/publications/glance/budget_glance_ro.pdf)

The cabinets of the Brussels commissioners consider the measure of increasing the confinancing from the EU as one that can boost the economic development. On a national level there are still actions required to reduce budget deficits, without affectin the economic recovery. "Then, in Bucharest, the authorities will need to take all the necessary measures to eliminate blocks and to reduce bureaucracy, so that these money can be efficiently used from the beginning of 2012", aded Commissioner Cioloş.

"You need to speed up investments that come from the EU, it`s the proper time to do it and there`s no more time to lose. It is very important to create projects not only for the interval that is oin to end soon (at the end of 2013), but also for the period post 2013, such as big infrastructure projects, for which the preparation takes a very long time", stated Danuta Hobner, Polish Europarlamentarian, president of the REGI Commission of the European Parliament and former Commissioner for Regional Policy. She also added that Romania should be having the projects prepared, to improve local administration, to learn from the others – member states with successful stories – and to work in tight collaboration with the European Commission`s representatives, because this is the role the Commission has. "The Commission is there to help countries such as Romania. I think that Romanian Government is very aware of all these things and especially of the challenge that it currently needs to face. It is clear what should be done now – they just need to start things.", added Danuta Hubner.

These investments generate jobs, increase of the employment rate on the labour market, promotion of a society based on social inclusion, adapting of human capital to new changes in order to reach economy's modernization.

4. Romanian authorities approach regarding the financing of the labor market through EU funds during 2014-2020 programming periods

The global objective of development established through the National Plan of Development 2007 – 2013 is to reduce the disparities of socio – economical development between Romania and the member states of the European Union. Romania has exceeded the target established through this plan but, still, it remains on the penult place in regards to the average level of the GDP / inhabitant related to EU27.

For the next patch, the Romanian government proposes an approach similar to the one they had for the 2007 – 2013 period.

Therefore, several strategical options were proposed for debate, starting with the fulfillment of socio – economical analysis for the current situation, the ranking of the investments needs for the primary areas and the drafting at the same time of a strategy of utilizing the structural instruments, the financial cuantification of the priorities for investments, establishing which ones are eligible and evaluating the previsioned results at a macroeconomical level.

For the next period the aim is to reduce disparities of social and economical disparities between our country and the member states of the European Union, by generating an additional increase of 15% as a consequence of the utilization of the European funds, the target of the average level of GDP/inhabitant in 2022 being of 65% of the EU average.

In regards to the specific objectives proposals, these will be strongly related to the thematic objectives proposed by the European Commission and will have the priorities established by the Europe 2020 Strategy. The three specific objectives will target to increase the competitivity in the Romanian economy by assuring an additional increase of the value added tax in industry and services and generating job opportunities, promoting a clean economic development, through green investment projects, with the result of the attenuation of greenhouse gases with 20% compared to 1990, promoting a society that favors social inclusion by the increase of the employment rate and reduction of the number of people that are at the edge of poverty with 580.000 people.

Romania will promote investments that will respond to these objectives, since none of the objectives proposed by the European Commission can be excluded. The specific objectives related to the priorities set in the Europe 2020 Strategy will impose investments that will situate under the following thematic priorities:

PT1. Long term increase of the competitivity in the Romanian economy;

PT2. Sustainable development of the base infrastructure;

PT3. Adapting human capital to the challenges of a modern economy;

PT4. Improvement of efficiency in public administration.

We should not be ignoring the territorial component, which needs to be followed as a horizontal priority. The purpose of the process of programming will be to select the best mix of priorities for investment and key actions meant to help in reaching the specific objectives set.

After public debate, the Government will approve the operational programs and the priorities for investments.

The Inter-institutional Committee for Elaborating the Partnership Agreement (CIAP, 2012) proposed several benches for the future programming scenarios, among which:

- Grouping investments for the private area (productive investments, research – innovation or business ground investments) in just one operational programme or the regional approach of investments for the private ared, except those for research – innovation which, along with the public CDI investments, should be part of a separate programme.
- Grouping the interventions of financing the energetic sector in just one programme, considering the importance of promoting the concepts of energetic efficiency and renewable energy at the European Union level, or maintaining separate financing in distinct programmes, respectively at sector and region level.
- The possibility of elaboration of multifunds programmes (EDRF + ESF), which supposes that the intervention within primary axes financed through EDRF should be doubled by interventions financed through ESF under other axes within the same programme or maintaining separate programmes of the two funds.
- The elaboration of an integrated operational programme for all the regions or the elaboration of a dedicated programme for the Bucharest – Ilfov region and another one for the other 7 regions.
- The utilization of instruments for integrated territorial development, similar to the poles for increase model.
- The development of the utilization of financial instruments for other areas than financing SMEs (eg. Energetic efficiency pplans for SMEs, innovative start – ups, urban development etc.).

These options will contribute to the elaboration of programmin scenarios, that have both advantages and disadvantages, not only from the point of view of multiplying the number of primary axes (situation imposed by the regulation projects), but also from an institutional point of view.

5. Conclusions

The authorities in Bucharest could have asked for help from the European Commission, to receive assistance from experts in the process of implementation. "The Commission has not sent experts to Romania and, for the moment, has not yet received any request from the Romanian authorities in regards to this matter. There are such initiatives in Bulgaria – experts from the World Bank – but Romania has not yet requested this", mentioned officials of the European Commission. According to the latest information fromthe Authority for the Coordination of the Structural Instruments (ACSI), the absorbtion rate on all funds alloted to Romania was, at the end of July 2011 one of the lowest of the history of structural funds of EU financing. (http://www.adevarul.ro/actualitate/eveniment/Efectele_noului_Plan_Marshall_pentru_Romania_0_532147337.html)

Romania remains at the end of the list of European funds consumers in the EU. As opposed to this, the European Commission has saluted the measures taken by Bulgaria.

In order to create a favourable environment for economic development it is mandatory to implement measures meant to make more efficient the course of the European projects, to centralize coordination and to decentralize the attributions that come along with the European funds management.

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