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STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PREPARATION OF PROJECTS FOR ACCESSING STRUCTURAL FUNDS FOR 2021-2027. LESSONS LEARNED OR HISTORY REPEATING?

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Strategic Planning and Preparation of Projects for Accessing Structural Funds for 2021-2027. Lessons Learned or History Repeating?

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Abstract

The papers makes an analysis, with a focus on the North-East Region of Romania, of the stage of the drafting of strategic documents at national level and their correlation with regional and county planning documents, at the end of 2022. The analysis is carried out both in terms of the regional and local strategic documents, correlated with the national ones, as well as in terms of the perception held by some of the most important regional actors. The questions that the article pursues in its research approach are: How do we evaluate the preparation of projects for the new programming period 2021-2027 from the point of view of strategic planning and correlation with the documents adopted at the national/regional/local level? and How do local actors perceive the influence on the absorption of European funds the drafting and adoption of strategic documents at national and regional level after the start of the programming period? The conclusions of the research: after two programming periods, there are still difficulties in connecting the priorities of the strategies and the preparation of local projects for accessing European funds based on the national and regional strategic documents.

Keywords: strategies, strategic planning, programming, structural funds, projects, absorption capacity

Introduction

Romania is in the third programming period 2021-2027 and the preparation for the absorption of the 31.5 billion non-reimbursable Euros allocated/negotiated with the European Union (EU) for the implementation of the Cohesion Policy has not yet been completed. Romania's Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) with the EU, "the reference document for programming interventions from the Structural

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and Investment Funds” (EC, 2022) was signed on October 5, 2022, being the 18th FPA across the EU (EC, 2022).

At the beginning of the fourth quarter of 2022, eight out of 16 operational programmes of which one for technical assistance and seven Regional Operational Programmes (out of eight) were approved in their final form in Brussels, most of them being sent in the months of May-June 2022, while no operational programmes out of the other 8 sectoral ones were approved until October 2022 (CE, 2022, MFE, 2022).

Clearly there is a major gap between the initiation of the development programmes for Romania with part of the priorities financed from the EU budget and negotiated with the EC and the moment when the first financing from these funds is launched. The questions that the article pursues in its research approach are: *How do we evaluate the preparation of projects for the new programming period 2021-2027 from the point of view of strategic planning and correlation with the documents adopted at the national/regional/local level?* and *How do local actors perceive the influence of the calendar for drafting and adoption of strategic documents at the national and regional level on the absorption of European funds through the projects prepared/identified?*

The former European commissioner for regional policy, Corina Crețu, pointed out as early as the summer of 2021 (Ion, 2022) that for the period 2021-2027 Romania had not negotiated and finalized the Partnership Agreement nor prepared the Operational Programmes while in fact, the new programming period had already, at least theoretically, begun, the budget allocations of the European Commission for each country were known three years before and “the 28 billion euros from the cohesion policy can be accessed as of July 1, 2021, the day the Regulation of their use was published in the Official Journal of the European Union, as other countries are already doing, using in parallel European funds from the 2021-2027 financial period as well as funds from the NRRP” (Ion, 2022).

In Crețu’s opinion (Lupitu, 2021) “Romania desperately needs an overall vision regarding its development, which requires a very serious analysis of the needs, but also of the resources we have at hand. We now have the historic opportunity of European funds that have remained unspent from the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020, as well as the funds from the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and the money for the NRRP” (Lupitu, 2021).

The medium-term strategic planning made by the local authorities in consultation with local stakeholders has generated as documents the local, regional and national development strategies with an action plan, related to the programming period, and a list of priority projects for local and regional communities. All these were correlated with European, national and local funding sources. However, the focus is on the non-reimbursable European funds, which provide local authorities with significant amounts of money for the implementation of larger local development projects.

Any project with European funding must justify, in order to receive funding, the integration of its objectives in a local/county/national development strategy and the complementarity with other strategies at the national level. Many territorial and administrative divisions (TADs) have developed development strategies only to respond to these requirements and only secondarily as a strategic planning exercise necessary to design community development over the medium term with a realistic and accepted analysis of needs, resources and priorities. A weakness highlighted by Vîrdol (2007) since the first programming exercise and maintained in the current programming period 2014-2020, at the level of territorial planning, is “the partial coordination and the slow nature of the preparation process of regional/county/local plans “ (Vîrdol 2007:443).

Because most local development needs at the level of small TADs are different from the funding made available through European programmes (see the road infrastructure), most of the time the representatives of local authorities “articulate their need” on the source of funding and thus the targets of development achieved through the implementation of European programmes do not always bring “growth”, or at least growth at the estimated pace, in the sense of reducing the development gaps between EU regions.

Literature review

Strategic planning

The paradigm of designed and planned social development (Zamfir& Stănescu, 2007) has seen in recent years an important evolution “based on a culture of development” which can no longer be merely an immediate response to social problems but a documented, forecasted and operationalized response in the long term.

Zamfir (2007) finds that the paradigm of social development has recently found new directions of development, thus through the “government revolution” there is a shift from government through the application of legislation to development through programmes, coupled with decentralization (Zamfir, 2007:175). Thus, the programmes aimed at solving local/national problems, developed by local authorities, local communities/non-governmental organizations have at their core the competition for identifying the best solutions that lead to local development. The approach based on programmes and projects has led to the stimulation of creativity in the formulation of solutions, to local participation and the creation of a participatory democracy, and from this perspective the elements of the paradigm became the identification of social problems and the development of programmes for solving them.

Strategic planning is a key concept in the circuit of European funds and is defined from multiple perspectives; Bryson (2004) identifies it as “a disciplined

effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does and why it does it. In his opinion, strategic planning “can facilitate communication and participation, accommodate divergent interests and values, promote wise and analytical decision-making, and promote successful implementation and accountability” (Bryson, 2004:6).

Strategic planning is seen by Mercer as “a process aiming to increase organizational performance” (Mercer, 1991, as cited by Arpinte, 2007) by diagnosing the target groups it addresses, establishing organizational objectives, and identifying the stages necessary in order to achieve these objectives. In order to legislate the importance of strategic planning for development and to support/incentivise communities in this process, Government Decree no. 870 of 2006 was adopted. This legislative document, replaced by Decree no. 379/2022, strategic planning is defined as “a collective and participative process that ultimately results in a strategic plan”, and the strategic plan is defined as “the management tool that ensures medium-term planning, in the case of institutions, in those public policy areas that, according to the laws and regulations in force, fall under their competence (Government of Romania, 2006, 2020)

The demarcation between programmes, projects and strategic planning is important; while the first two address clearly defined problems, “strategic planning addresses only the fundamental problems of an organization or community” (Arpinte, 2007:433). Strategic planning is related in recent years in Romania (after EU integration) particularly to the resources for achieving objectives that are in line with the objectives proposed by the EU for the respective programming period. Thus, local and regional planning documents, although they include (or should include) a broader diagnosis of the local development, focus mostly on the aspects/objectives financed through the EU FESI and very briefly touch the local, real needs, which, although they exist, have no identified funding sources at the time of drafting. Strategic planning documents for local and regional development should be dynamic documents, adaptable during implementation. The focus must be on an analysis that faces the new challenges related to regional development (OECD, 2018) and which, if we were to discuss the lessons learned, means flexibility and the rejection of the “one-size-fits-all” approach, which is considered a mistake (OECD, 2018, Bonciu, 2015:13).

Regarding regional development, in the view of Bryson & George (2020) “strategy, strategic planning and strategic management have become valuable concepts that help identify, pursue and achieve important goals and public values that the governments must support (Johnsen, 2015; Bryson & George, 2020).

Through the EU’s Cohesion Policy (EC, 2021c) “individual projects cannot be financed, but instead multiannual programmes aligned with the objectives and priorities of the EU” and each programme “must be developed in a broad partnership involving European, national and regional authorities, social partners and the civil society” (CE, 2021c). The concept is to correlate “together” with the

future fund beneficiaries the national, regional and local development priorities with the funding sources made available through the programmes.

According to the EU (EC, 2021a), the objectives of the funding programmes include “identifying strategic priorities and guiding actions, outlining financial allocations and summarizing management and control systems” (EC, 2021a), while “strategic planning describes the manner in which, starting from a diagnosis, steps are established for local/regional development in the vision of the stakeholders (CE, 2021a).

Ferry (2021) links the success of the implementation of regional policies to the administrative capacity of local authorities, considering that the challenges to which they must respond are identifiable at the level of three types of processes: 1. strategic, which would consist in “developing quality strategies, programmes and projects”; 2. operational, materialised in “recruiting and retaining personnel for the implementation of measures in accordance with the technical requirements, the presence of qualified and experienced personnel in the implementation of actions in accordance with requirements and regulations; 3. analytical and learning, represented by “the ability to support evidence-based policy-making through monitoring, evaluation and quality assessment, reflective skills and the ability to communicate and create a sense of collective understanding” (Ferry, 2021:5).

In order to obtain European funds, a project must prove the need, the integration into a strategy, the ability to implement the financing for which it is applying under the conditions imposed, the strategy being, according to Zamfir, “the global direction of action, however it does not include the concrete modalities nor the allocation of resources necessary for the action nor of responsibilities” (Zamfir *et al.* 2007b: 41).

The absorption of European funds and the connection with the strategic planning process

The absorption capacity has been defined as “the extent to which a country is able to spend, effectively and efficiently, the financial resources allocated from the Structural Funds” and depends, in the opinion of the same authors, on institutional factors both at European and national level (Cace *et al.*, 2009:13).

Worstner (2008), identifying several dimensions of the concept of absorption, believes that the absorption based on programmes/projects is determined by “the relevance of the strategy and of the function of the programme to the real needs, by the adaptation of the implementation tools, by the preparation of the project documentation” (Wostner, 2008, *apud.* Cace 2009:16).

Boeckhout *et al.* (2002) consider absorptive capacity to be “the extent to which a member state is able to spend all the financial resources allocated by the SF in an efficient and effective manner” and measured this capacity through “three distinct dimensions”: macroeconomic, financial and administrative (Boeckhout

et al. 2002:2). The financial and administrative absorption capacity are defined by Boeckhout *et al.* (2002) as “the ability to co-finance programmes and projects supported by the EU, to plan and guarantee these national contributions in multi-annual budgets and to collect these contributions from several partners (public and private), interested in a programme or project” and as “the [ability] and skills of central, regional and local authorities to prepare acceptable plans, programmes and projects in a timely manner, to decide on programmes and projects, to arrange coordination among the main partners; to cope with the large amount of administrative and reporting activities required by the [European] Commission and to finance and supervise implementation properly, avoiding fraud as much as possible” (Boeckhout *et al.* 2002:2)

The degree of absorption is not identical to the degree of attraction of European funds (Zaman & Georgescu 2014), but it is influenced by the administrative capacity and political governance of the member countries (Surubaru, 2020), and the previous period has shown that Romania did not manage to exceed 70% absorption rate in 2015 (n+2), ranking low, along with all the new member states. Some of the important causes identified by Zaman & Georgescu (2014), at the level of Management Authorities, which were reflected in the low absorption rate of SF in Romania, in the interval 2007-2013, were the following:

- in the stage of planning/launch of funding, “weak correlations of policies with local development strategies, the result being a low level of synergy between the projects and the local development strategies”, “delayed establishment of the institutional framework for programme management”, “lack of coordination and correlation of operational programmes” which generated as effects “overlapping calls, delays in the submission of projects, lack of complementarity with projects financed from other sources”;
- in the implementation stage of the programmes financed using SF, “a weak correlation of projects with local development strategies and/or Master Plans” which led to “low level of synergy between projects and development strategies” (Zaman & Georgescu, 2014: 17).

In the interval 2014-2020, these two aspects identified and analyzed by Zaman & Georgescu (2014), remain, unfortunately, present.

With a delay of more than two years since what should have been the start of the third programming period (2021-2022), the signing of the Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) between Romania and the EU marked the beginning of the approval of the Operational Programmes devised at national level for the development of the country through the absorption of European funds. At the beginning of October 2022 when EU signed with Romania the 18th FPA there were still member states that had not yet signed it (EC, 2022).

The slow pace of formulation and adoption of the strategic document for the negotiation with the European Commission was also influenced by the general situation at EU level. Fonseca & Richie (2022), in an analysis of this transition

period between the programmes, underline across the entire EU “the slow progress in terms of the programming and adoption of the 2021-2027 partnership agreements and programmes, also caused during this period by a number of combinations of factors, including: the lengthy process of approving the legislative framework; the prioritization of the programming of the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism and the requirements to continue the implementation of the 2014-2020 programmes during the COVID-19 crisis, combined with the programming of additional REACT-EU funding” (Fonseca & Richie, 2022:18).

Can we talk about coordination and planning at European, national, regional level for a period that required speed of reaction and major changes in objectives generated by the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine? Or are we just talking about reprioritization, speed of reaction or designing other projects as a result of the emergence of a new NRRP financing instrument with an allocated value almost equal to that of the Cohesion Policy (28.1 billion Euro) (MFE 2022, C.E., 2022b)?

Considering the three essential principles of the EU Cohesion Policy (EC, 2022c): concentration (of resources, efforts, expenses), programming and partnership (EC, 2022c), we believe that in order to increase the absorption capacity by balancing supply with demand it is necessary to go through the stages coherently, consistently and with commitment, so that, starting from the accurate identification of the real need at the local level, correlated and integrated with that at the regional and national level, the central authorities can prepare both the legislative framework and the administrative support for coordinating the process of absorbing European money in the interest of local communities.

In our opinion, the stage of planning and analysis of the local potential and of the need for funds for development is essential for the effective and efficient absorption of European funds.

At the end of 2022, in Romania we see the completion of strategic programming documents, the completion and assumption of development strategies and the development of a portfolio of projects that can be successfully implemented and absorb European money at local, regional/national level. However, everything acknowledged and accepted in the planning process take into account “the real needs according to the set of international objectives and commitments that have been accepted” (CE, 2022) and it must be taken into account that the European funding through the programmes run by the EU aims to have a complementarity than being a substitution of national funds.

The policy vision of the European Union for the period 2021-2027 is to move from “spending” European money to “investing” it in projects with “European added value” Dăianu (2019) emphasizes, and “we must make the transition from quantity to quality”; the author refers to the fact that European money must be viewed as a complementary resource to the national funds necessary for the development process, and that the purpose of absorption is not only spending but identifying the best value-generating projects (Dăianu, 2019).

The connection between programming and strategic planning – the key to the success of absorbing European money?

When there are major mismatches or differences between the strategic planning process (local and regional strategies as well as the portfolio of projects attached to them) and the programming result (the formulation of policies and programmes), the failure to spend European money for development is predictable.

Bachtler, Begg, Polverari, and Charles (2013), analyzing the implementation of EU cohesion policy over two decades, consider that success is dependent on a favourable internal policy framework and on the existence or development of institutional capacity and of management, essential elements for successful programming and implementation (Bachtler, Begg, Polverari and Charles, 2013:13).

In this respect, Bachtler *et al.* (2013) underline the evolution of the most important programme for regional development, financed through the ERDF, which “is notable particularly in terms of the way in which priorities have been identified in relation to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of needs and changes in these needs” (Bachtler *et al.*, 2013:10). The authors also highlight the fact that the existence of European funds made available through regional development programmes also determined the creation of strategic planning tools – for certain regions these are a complete novelty – and “the only or the main regional development strategies” (Bachtler *et al.*, 2013:10).

In some situations, as an unintended effect of the SF, the programming of European funds made the Operational Programmes (Surubaru, 2020) fill in for the absence of national strategies in certain areas. The example given in this respect consists in the Operational Programmes in the area of Human Resources and of the Regional Operational Programme, the latter “becoming one of the main instruments of regional development in Romania” (Surubaru, 2020:11).

Starting from the manner in which the regional development policy influenced the reduction of social development disparities in Romania, Sandu (2011) emphasizes the importance of “an accurate diagnosis in the field, so that the development projects and investments can be guided or substantiated, directly or indirectly” Sandu (2011:2).

Cojocaru (2010) discusses the importance of evaluating the intervention programmes from the perspective of their effects on the beneficiaries, those desired or those that were unexpected, emphasizing the importance of obtaining feedback, which can lead both to the increase of the quality of the interventions, to their “refinement” and of the implementation mechanisms, as well as to their replication when they have reached the desired quality threshold, “in other locations, in other fields of intervention or for other categories of beneficiaries” (Cojocaru, 2010:14).

At the time of the first programming cycle, 2007-2013, the development of planning documents in Romania (Virdol, 2007) was assessed as having “partial coordination” without having a normal pace, “caused by insufficient human,

technical, financial resources, by the incomplete administrative decentralization process..., by the lack of cooperation between the actors involved in the planning process, by the poor development of the monitoring and evaluation system for regional planning policies and programmes...” (Virdol, 2007: 443).

Romania and the preparation of Operational Programmes for the period 2021-2027

In 2020, the year in which all strategic local/regional/national planning documents should have already been accepted and correlated with the European objectives, this was not achieved at either regional or national level, although Romania began the third financial year as a member of the EU. In the study of disparities carried out in the North-East Region (NE RDA, 2019) one of the common problems, identified both at rural and urban level, that hinders development and creates differences with the West of Romania is “the poor implementation of projects and a lack of vision in the decision-making approaches “ (NE RDA, 2019:388).

In the new Operational Programmes for 2021-2027 also, the analysis of the previous period mentions the lack of coordination between regional and national policies. For example: the draft of the Operational Health Programme 2021-2027 (MIPE – the Ministry of European Investments and Projects, 2022c), the chapter on lessons learned from the 2013-2020 programming period notes: “the financed projects were related to the objectives of the National Health Service 2014-2020, but they were implemented without coordination with the regional or national health policy, the Ministry of Health having a modest contribution in the process of evaluating the opportunity and feasibility of the projects, but especially in the evaluation of the implementation and the manner in which they responded to the real needs of the health system and of the citizens” (MIPE, 2022c:11-12)

The new programming period: current status and lessons learned

Starting from the complex nature of what the programming process entails, “the architecture of new operational programmes in Romania” (MFE, 2020) for the programming period 2021-2027, as devised, accepted and described by the main ministry involved in the FPA negotiation, the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, includes 16 operational programmes, one of which is for technical assistance” (MIPE, 2022).

For the first time, in the period 2021-2027, Romania has eight Regional Operational Programmes (each region has its own Programme) precisely in order to identify the needs as accurately as possible at the level of stakeholders and to respond to these needs through the adopted measures. The decentralization of the most important regional development programme is a first for Romania, but also a challenge to find the most suitable path to stimulate development at the level

of the counties and TADs that are part of the respective region and especially to reduce the development gaps. However, the Regional Programmes must be complementary to the other Operational Programmes, and more recently, to the NRRP as well, which has many of the areas addressed similar to the POR/SOP/POTJ.

In order to have a picture of the status of the Operational Programmes, the submission and then the approval by the EC and the correlation with the main programmatic documents they are founded on, we present below a synthesis table with data from the MIPE (October 2022) (Table 1).

Table 1. Status of approval of OPs by the EC as of 31 October 2022

Nr.	Operational Programme	Date submitted for CE approval	Status (approved /not approved)	Reference strategic document	Status of reference strategic document
1.	Just Transition (POTJ)	June 2022	Not approved	Integrated National Plan for Energy and Climate Change (PNIESC) 2021 – 2030	Approved in February 2021
2.	Sustainable Development (PODD)	8 June 2022	Not approved	National Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Romania (SNDD) 2030	Approved in October 2018
3.	Transport (POT)	3 June 2022	Not approved	General Transport Master Plan for Romania (MPGT); its implementation strategy was updated by the Investment Programme for the development of transport infrastructure (PI), MPGT for the interval 2020 - 2030	Developed 2016 Update
4.	Intelligent Growth, Digitalisation and Financial Instruments (PCIDIF)	30 June 2022	Not approved	National Strategy for Research, Innovation and Smart Specialisation 2022-2027	Approved July 2022
				Regional smart specialisation strategies (RIS3)	Updated in all development regions in 2021
5	Health (POS)	30 June 2022	Not approved	National Healthcare Strategy 2022-2027	In consultation since April 2022

6.	Education and Employment (POEO)	9 June 2022	Not approved	National strategy for employment of the workforce 2021 - 2027, and the Action Plan for the interval 2021 - 2027 for implementing the National strategy for employment of the workforce 2021 - 2027; România Educată - national strategic framework for the interval 2021-2030	Approved by Decree 558/2021 of 19 May 2021 Finalized 2019
7.	Social Inclusion and Dignity (POIDS)	31 May 2022	Not approved	National strategy for social inclusion and poverty reduction for the interval 2022-2027	Approved by Government Decree nr.440/2022
				The strategy "Copii protejați, România sigură" ("Protected children, safer Romania") 2022-2027	To be approved soon (the draft decree has been made available to the public)
				National strategy for the rights of people with disabilities. "O Românie echitabilă" 2022-2027	Approved by Government Decree nr. 490/15.04. 2022
				National strategy for gender equality 2021-2027	To be approved soon (the draft decree has been made available to the public)

Nr.	Operational Programme	Date submitted for CE approval	Status (approved/not approved)	Reference strategic document	Status of reference strategic document
8.	Regional Operational Programme				
8.1.	South Muntenia	25 May 2022	Approved	RDP S Muntenia 2021-2027 RIS3 S Muntenia	Approved 2022
8.2.	Centre	30 May 2022	Approved	RDP Centre 2021-2027 RIS3 Centre	To be approved soon
8.3.	București-Ilfov	23 June 2022	Not approved	PD BI 2021-2027 RIS3 BI	Working version October 2022
8.4.	West	18 May 2022	Approved	RDP V 2021-2027 RIS3 V	Being drafted
8.5.	North-West	26 May 2022	Approved	RDP NV 2021-2027 RIS3 NV	Approved CDR 17.02.2021.
8.6.	South-West Oltenia	25 May 2022	Approved	RDP SV Oltenia 2021-2027 RIS3 SV Oltenia	Approved CDR 3.08.2022
8.7.	North-East	30 May 2022	Approved	RDP NE 2021-2027 RIS3 NV	Approved CDR in 9.09.2022
8.8.	South-East	30 May 2022	Approved	RDP SE 2021-2027 RIS3 SE	To be approved soon
9.	Operational Programme technical assistance (POAT)	Submitted	Approved 22.08.2022	NA?	Finalised

Source: based on information from MIPE, 2022b

It can be noted that although some programmes were sent to Brussels for approval, the strategies referred to were either completed after the date of submission or were in the process of being completed. The crowding of the planning period and “refinement” of the objectives formulated in the planning documents (strategies/programmes/plans) has often created blockages in the delimitation of

action priorities and the occurrence of situations in which certain financing lines were overlapping without a view to have complementarity. The most important concentration occurred in the years 2021-2022. An example comes from the areas dedicated to digitization that are identified in the Regional Programmes and in the NRRP in the period 2021-2027 but which overlap in some cases with POCA 2014-2020 (Ex: the call dedicated to LPAs launched in 2021) and with POC 2014-2020, as well as some lines dedicated to the energy efficiency of residential or public buildings, which also appear in NRRP and RP.

The Minister of Investments and European Projects in exercise in October 2022 announced that, by the end of 2023, 75 financing lines (Cornea, 2022) had to be completed from the NRRP. On top of these, the first launches on the POR and some on the POS will overlap. The large number of financing lines opened at the same time will lead to an “inflation” of information and poor coordination of accessing European funds, which this time also have overlapping areas.

A concrete example of the lack of strategic thinking is related to the financing through the 2013-2020 ROP of energy efficiency in public buildings, where there were 462.1% applications (in the 2020 call), 67 submitted projects, 21 declared eligible and only 12 that received funding due to the exhaustion of allocated funds (RDA North East, 2022). Although this type of intervention was resumed in the North East RP 2021-2027, those who were declared eligible can no longer submit the same documentation, even though they were evaluated and they passed the minimum quality criteria imposed by the Programme. The process must be restarted under completely different circumstances and with other costs incurred by the eligible applicants after another 4 years, at least, from the date of the initial submission (year 2020), the optimistically estimated date for launching a new call within the framework of RP 2021-2027 dedicated to efficiency energy (2023-2024).

If, for example, the first projects already evaluated and with all the documents completed in order to obtain financing had already been included in a predefined list in the new Programme, this would have led, on the one hand, to the saving of both human resources (involved in the writing and evaluation of the projects) as well as financial resources (costs dedicated to the updating of technical-economic documentation necessary for the submission of the projects) but also to the shortening of the investment realization time, which in many cases exceeds the duration of a programming cycle. All these “non-synchronizations” result in a waste of resources and a weak correlation between local needs and the European funds available for their solution.

Regional strategic planning and the project portfolio for 2021-2027

The eight regional development plans for the programming period 2021-2027 “the main planning documents developed at regional level, reflect the relevant development policies at European and national level in relation to the specific

needs and challenges at region level”, which “represent the strategic basis for the foundation of projects initiated in the region and are a landmark both for the national authorities regarding the foundation of financing programmes, as well as for the county / local authorities and potential public or private investors” (North West Regional Development Agency, 2022), were initiated as early as 2020. Completion and assumption by the Regional Development Councils (CDR) began in 2021. The First Regional Development Plan (RDP) was approved on February 17, 2021 by the Regional Development Council (CDR) Northwest, by Decision no. 542/17.02.2021 (RDA North West, 2022), after it was drafted by a broad regional partnership.

On January 1, 2023, out of eight RDPs related to the eight development regions in Romania, four have been approved (North West, Center, North East, South West-Oltenia), for the other four there was no information on the official websites regarding the approval by CDR decision of the Plans, although three have undergone the environmental assessment process.

Two years after the beginning of the programming period, on December 31, 2022, we have the FPA and seven RPs approved in Brussels (the Bucharest Ilfov RP has not yet been approved), but there are strategic reference documents that are still in the consultation stage. The question that arises is: *does this cause a delay in the preparation of local and regional projects that are truly correlated to the need and which can be financed from the SF?*

Lessons learned?

An example of good practice is the development of the Regional Programmes (RP) for the period 2021-2027; for the first time they were drafted at the level of each development region in Romania, in order to be as close as possible to the local need. Although specific, they have common elements that can be monitored and evaluated in terms of the contribution and achievement of the objectives of the National Development Plan of Romania, and to ensuring the convergence objectives of the EU. In this sense, all eight RPs were developed according to a common Methodology regarding regional development planning, developed by the Ministry of Public Works, Development and Administration and in accordance with Government Decree 1115/2004, regarding the organization of the partnership framework, also used in the previous programming period. In the opinion of those involved (South Muntenia RDA, 2022) in the development of these regional planning documents “the application of this unitary approach will allow the comparison of data and results and will create the prerequisites for ensuring complementarity between the actions implemented at the regional level, as well as the creation of synergies” (South Muntenia RDA, 2022:6).

Another example is the support for the development of technical documentation for the projects to be submitted for the new OPs at regional level. In order to avoid the risk of projects that are starting their implementation near the end of

the programming period due to the long time required to prepare the technical and business documentation, at the MFE level, through the Regional Development Agencies, technical and financial documentation was prepared for all eight regions for infrastructure projects to be submitted in the 2021-2027 programming period through the ROP (MFE, 2020). This was done using non-reimbursable European funds remaining available from other programmes, and had a double benefit: 1. the new programming period “forced” the early identification and preparation of projects with a high degree of maturity, vetted and technically and qualitatively prepared for accessing European funds; 2. non-refundable money was used, amounts that otherwise would have returned to Brussels instead of being spent by Romania. In this case, the national authorities proved to be pro-active and flexible. The role of the RDAs was to implement and provide assistance in completing the achievement of the proposed targets. Only in the North East Region, 16 documents worth over 10 million euros were prepared for infrastructure projects in various fields: county infrastructure, sports facilities, heritage sites, tourism infrastructure, urban mobility (North East RDA, 2020a). Asandei, the general director of the North East RDA, stated regarding the necessity and opportunity of such an approach: “The most important lesson I have learned in recent years was that the thorough preparation of technical and financial documentation for infrastructure projects is the main premise of a successful investment” (North East RDA, 2020a).

Strategies in the North-East Region and the portfolio of projects taken on for the interval 2021-2027 at county, city and town level

Across the North East Region, at the end of 2022, all six component counties had developed development strategies for the 2021-2027 horizon. A single County Strategy has been developed before the beginning of the programming period (the Vaslui County Socio-Economic Development Strategy with the time horizon 2021-2027, completed and approved in September 2020), the other five county strategies (Iasi, Botoşani, Suceava, Neamţ, Bacău) were completed in the interval 2021-2022.

Some county strategies have portfolios with thousands of projects, e.g. that of Botoşani County and Iaşi County (Botoşani County Council, 2022, Iaşi County Council, 2022) including the projects of all municipalities within the county. Most of these projects have European funds as nominated funding sources. There are many projects for which the source is not identified, especially at the level of rural municipalities (Botoşani County Council, 2022, Iaşi County Council, 2022).

Starting from the idea that a strategic planning document should not be developed for a funding source, but instead in order to provide grounds for accessing it, the legitimate question is whether strategies are developed more or less as a formality, in order to access European projects and meet the requirements imposed by the EU for ensuring their complementarity and integration in a planning document,

rather than being the response of local authorities in identifying the best and most necessary courses of action for the development of local communities.

Methodology

Research questions

The questions that this research started from were: 1. How do we evaluate the preparation of projects for the new programming period 2021-2027 from the point of view of strategic planning and correlation with the documents adopted at the national/regional/local level? and 2. How do local actors perceive the influence on the absorption of European funds the drafting and adoption of strategic documents at national and regional level after the start of the programming period?

Documentation

The research this work started from was based on: documentation from official sources (websites of relevant ministries, of the County Councils of the North East Region, RDAs) and the structured interview applied to the representatives of the county TADs from across the North East Region (Iasi County, Botoşani County and Vaslui County), considered the most important local actors in the coordination of the strategic planning process at county/regional level, as well as the North East RDA, the main facilitator and the entity in charge of coordinating the development of the RDP, RP, of the project portfolios, but also of the funding guidelines for the programmes they manage.

The variables considered were the strategic planning documents (strategies, plans) and the project portfolio prepared for accessing the SF (integrated or annexed to the strategic plans developed and/or adopted by the decision-making factors at regional/local level) for the programming period 2021-2027.

To find out what is the perception of those involved in regional/local planning about the manner in which the late appearance of financing documents influences the ability to access European funds based on projects (are the financing still in accordance with the need identified in the programming stage? and what are the effects of the correlation/non-correlation between the types of financing available and the prepared projects?), four structured interviews were applied both to the representatives of the county TADs from the North East Region (Iaşi County, Botoşani County and Vaslui County), as well within the North East RDA, the main facilitator and entity in charge of coordinating the development of the RDP, the RP, the project portfolios and the financing guidelines for the programmes they manage.

Criteria in selecting the participants

- Belonging to a group/organization involved in strategic planning at regional/local level.
- Experience in the regional/local planning process (at least one programming period, in order to be able to have a comparative perspective).
- Experience in the implementation of actions from the strategic documents (either as a beneficiary – identification, accessing, running European projects; or as a representative of the funding provider – strategic planning, project evaluation and monitoring).
- The following were interviewed: 1 representative of NE RDA (OIR POR), 2 directors of departments that have the role of accessing, implementing European projects and drafting strategic documents within two different County Councils (CCs), 1 project manager from a CC, according to the description in Table 2.

Table 2. Subjects taking part in the interviews

NR.	INTERVIEW CODE	DESCRIPTION	INSTITUTION
1.	S1	RDA North East, officer in evaluation and monitoring, experience: 2 programming cycles (2007-2013;2014-2020)	RDA North East
2.	S2	Project manager, involved in developing strategic documents, experience: 2 programming cycles (2007-2013;2014-2020)	CC VS
3.	S3	Manager of department with roles in programming, preparing, accessing and implementing projects; project manager, experience: 2 programming cycles (2007-2013;2014-2020)	CC BT
4.	S4	Manager of department with roles in programming, preparing, accessing and implementing projects; project manager, experience: 2 programming cycles (2007-2013;2014-2020)	CC IS

The interview guide included a number of 12 questions, 10 of which were content questions. The interview questions were 85% identical, with the exception of those addressed to the rda representative, which were nuanced depending on the specifics of the activity and the institutional role.

All those interviewed answered the question about the extent of involvement of local stakeholders in the strategic planning process at the regional level with statements that emphasized “good/major” involvement at county and urban level, and “medium” or “low” involvement at rural/municipal level, and they emphasized as “major” the role played by local public authorities (APL) in “selecting the most important solutions for development at the regional level, especially in infrastructure”.

Those interviewed believe that the current strategic documents at regional/national level (for example: the Regional Development Plan, the national sectoral strategies for health, human capital, transport), also express local needs:

“Major local needs / projects and priority areas of development are included in the strategic documents, precisely because these documents are developed “bottom-up” (S1)

“The local needs are expressed in their vast majority, but the financial allocations are not proportional to their scale or the scale is not correctly established in order to influence the financial allocations” (S2)

Results

The opinions regarding *the extent of involvement of local stakeholders* in the strategic planning process at the regional level (example: the drafting of the North East RDP 2021-2027) tend to differ, while some interviewees believe that:

“In general, the extent of engagement of the local level in the strategic planning process across the region is low. The need for long-term planning is still not fully understood by authorities such as: small towns and municipalities, either because of the lack of perspective and understanding of the planning phenomenon, or because of the human resources within these public local authorities, or maybe even because of the way in which this planning is carried out”, (S3)

others state that

“this engagement is of “a significant extent among the local urban stakeholders and of a medium extent among those in the rural environment” (S4)

The estimated time interval from drafting the strategy and the opening of European funding lines for the identified projects was of 3-5 years, being viewed as:

- beneficial, if it is established within a reasonable interval (the technical-financial documentation or other such necessary for the preparation of the financing application can be prepared)
- not beneficial, if it is established in a too long interval (perishability of projects included in the portfolio, diminution of needs, identification of internal sources to the detriment of European funds) (S2)

The time interval of 3-5 years has the following consequences in the opinion of the regional stakeholders:

“Reconsideration of priorities” (S3);

“Reprioritization and solving the identified needs with funds other than European ones” (S4);

“Expired technical documentation / funds spent without the final goal being reached” (S3);

“Some of the urgent projects will be funded from other sources” (S1);

“The projects will be evaluated and developed under an increased time pressure” (S1);

“Some projects have to be substantially modified, as a result of legislative changes, of the wear and tear of the sites” (S1);

“The quality of the projects – they must be prepared and completed in a period that is often undersized compared to their nature” (S2);

“Additional funds as a result of the emergence of various and unforeseen works (legislative changes, damage to sites that require rehabilitation, etc.)” (S4)

The effects of the correlation/non-correlation between the types of financing available and the drafted projects have, in the opinion of the interviewees, direct consequences on the manner in which the projects can later be accessed and implemented:

“If available funding and drafted projects are correlated, there are some risks at the time of their implementation. In case of non-correlation between the types of financing available and the prepared projects, the effects are multiple – financial, technical and social.” (S4)

“The impossibility of accessing funds, as a result there is the risk of having both unspent funds and unimplemented projects, therefore unsolved development problems” (S3)

“The possibility/impossibility of materializing the drafted projects. (S2)”

Regarding the main problems encountered in the realization and alignment with the requirements of the European Commission of the strategic documents of maximum importance for regional development developed at regional level (with a focus on the North East RDP), the RDA representative emphasized that, in these programming periods:

“Actions were needed to strengthen the institutional and administrative capacity of the bodies in charge of programming and managing the economic and social cohesion funds, establishing the necessary monitoring and evaluation systems and strengthening the administrative capacity in the direction of staff recruitment and training” (S1).

Conclusion

In the strategic planning process, important progress was made in the last two programming cycles in the sense of increasing the degree of expertise at county level, but also the awareness of the need for those in charge to develop documents that reflect reality. However, there are important problems of understanding in the rural environment, as well as a lack of local expertise. The representatives

of local authorities and organizations who have the role of drafting regional planning documents and coordinating the implementation of European funding programmes intended for local development state that the role of local authorities is great, that their needs are mostly reflected in strategic documents, but they believe that the gap time from the development of the strategies until accessing the projects affects the projects' quality, generates additional costs, risks in reaching indicators, and the fact that some of the projects had to be substantially modified raises important questions related to the correlation with the strategic objectives formulated and adopted during the programming period. According to those interviewed, a solution would be: "the decentralization in the management of Operational Programmes, regional, national and international partnerships, and interregional pilot initiatives".

There is still a need for a careful monitoring of the implementation of the strategies, for the permanent updating of the project portfolio and for an accurate evaluation of the real results achieved through them. A new direction of research would be the analysis of the sustainability of European projects, which would bring additional information about the correlation between the strategies and the projects proposed for financing, about the connection between the diagnosis made at the level of the strategy and the proposed portfolio of projects.

Whether the results of the projects have endured, they have been replicated, have generated "added value" to the communities where they were implemented, are questions to which we aim to find answers in our future research.

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