

Evaluation of Cohesion Policy in Romania: new perspectives

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Abstract

The 2014-2020 programming period has brought several changes in terms of programming the Cohesion Policy at European level. Based on the lessons learned from past experiences, the new vision for the implementation of interventions financed under the European Structural and Investment Funds determined the consolidation of some key instruments, including programme evaluation. Taking into consideration that Romania is presently evaluating its second generation EU financed programmes, the objective of the article is to analyse, in a comparative manner, the two planning phases of evaluation of Cohesion Policy in Romania. This will include the identification of the main changes that occurred in terms of elaboration and implementation of evaluation plans and a short description of the progress related to the development of the evaluation capacity of public policies at national level since new requirements and responsibilities were established with the scope of achieving more and better policy results.

Keywords: Cohesion Policy, programmes, evaluation function, evaluation plan, results

Introduction

The effective and efficient use of European Union (hence EU) funds have always represented guiding principles for the negotiating processes of the multiannual financial frameworks alongside a proper regulation and planning of the policies. Based on the lessons learned from the previous exercises, the 2014-2020 programming period has brought important changes from this perspective, out of which: a stronger concentration on the Europe 2020 priorities, performance rewarding and support for the integrated programming approaches as well as a greater focus on results (Reg. EU no. 1303/2013). This new perspective determined the enhancement and re-orientation of the evaluation function towards measuring impact and improving management, detrimental to other principles such as relevance or sustainability (Bouroşu, 2009, p. 177). Considering that Romania has just finished its first implementation period of EU funded programmes, without taking into consideration the pre-

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accession period, the general objective of this paper is to analyse from a neo-institutionalist perspective the two planning phases of the evaluation activities in terms of: architecture, objectives, the number and complexity of the evaluation exercises, the methodologies and instruments foreseen, the involvement of the stakeholders and the expected results. This analysis may be interesting since a decade ago, Romanian administrative system was characterized by a limited experience and capacity to understand and conduct evaluation activities designed for public policies and programmes (Cerkez Ş., 2009, p. 118). Considerable efforts were made in order to continuously increase the level of knowledge among relevant actors and to develop the necessary competencies both in terms of demand and supply side.

In this context, the main research questions are:

- What was the approach that guided the planning processes of evaluation activities designed for the Cohesion Policy during 2007-2013 programming period?
- What was the rationale of the changes regarding the evaluation function at EU level and how has Romania accommodated the new requirements?
- What has improved in terms of planning the evaluation for 2014-2020 compared to the previous period?

The methodology used to answer to these questions was based on desk research and included: EU regulations and methodological guidelines released by the European Commission services that support the planning and conducted the evaluation studies, the evaluation plans for the seven, respectively six operational programmes as well as the evaluation plans at the level of National Reference Strategic Framework (2007-2013) and Partnership Agreement (2014-2020).

1. An institutional perspective in policy evaluation

The emergence of the European Union represented for both the political science and international relations theoreticians a very complex subject that contributed to the enrichment of their area of research in the attempt to explain its development based on the interaction of economic, political and social levels (Jupille, 1992, p. 430). This analysis determined continuous debates facilitated by theoretical approaches such as neo-functionalism, intergovernmentalism or institutional theory that influenced the institutional architecture together with the decision making processes and the power relations within the EU. In this context, the institutional theory focused on the study of institutions, the dynamics and the impact that the institutions have over different types of systems

through the redefinition and changed interests of relevant actors. From Elinor Ostrom's perspective, the institutions are understood in a direct relation to "rules", the rationale of this approach takes into consideration that rules operate as a system detrimental to an individual perspective. In this sense, the study of institutions relates to their real impact on both planned and implemented strategies and policies (Ostrom, 1986, p. 19). Thus, as Saurugger and Radaelli mention, political institutions are a collection of inter-related rules and practices that define the actions as a relationship between roles and situations (Saurugger, Radaelli, 2008, p. 213). As Rosamond argues, the emphasis on organizational rules, structures, codes and norms is based on the Weberian approach of assuming that organizations have the aim to reward, sanction and set up principles with the scope of designing a certain type of behaviour. The actors within an organization are influenced by a wide range of types of control such as hierarchies, sanctions, rules, procedures and structures. Weber's theory was criticised for the lack of attention related to the manner individuals work in different organizations. As a consequence, a reoriented interest for the study of institutions appeared and the institutionalism trend divided into "old and new" types of institutionalism (Rosamond, 2007, p. 122). In this context, many theoreticians analysed the actors and institutions from this new perspective, also known under the name of neo-institutionalism. According to Selznick, the distinction between the two approaches is based on the fact that institutional theory did not take into consideration the political results that should have been explained based on the role of the institutions, their vitality and coherence (Selznick, 1996, p. 276).

The new institutionalism or neo-institutionalism advanced a general perspective in relation to the concept of institutions which was understood as a specific set of ideas and premises that focus on the relationship between the institutional characteristics and the political action, performance and change, as well as on the relationship between collective behaviour, institutions and results (Chiffa, 2011, p. 27). Even though the theory promoted a core idea, namely that institutions really matter because they define and determine human behaviour and moreover, they offer legitimacy to managing and behaviour rules especially in terms of power relationship and stability of social and cultural norms, three different research directions appeared (Knill, 2003, p. 20). The interest for institutions was influenced by the different perspectives and understandings of the concept as well as by the national and international relationships between actors: "the different theoretical variants are grouped into sociological institutionalists, focusing on normative and cultural institutions that establish a 'logic of appropriateness' for human behaviour, the rational-choice institutionalists, focusing on strategic, goal-oriented behaviour within institutional limits, and historical institutionalists,

borrowing somewhat eclectically from the other two schools though with a special appreciation of the influence of history on present day policy-making ” (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Immergut, 1997; Nùrgaard, 1996 apud Knill, 2003, p. 20). Even though the three perspectives share a common idea, namely that institutions matter, they vary from the point of view of the way institutions make the differences, namely how institutions shape political behaviours and outcomes (Kato, 1996, p. 556).

The historical new institutionalism perspective, as it was synthesised by Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, defines institutions as sets of formal and informal procedures, practices, norms and conventions, embedded in organizational structures both from a political and economic point of view. They may be understood as a result of the rules generated by an order that is based on constitutional norms and the order enforced by standard procedures specific to governments and bureaucracy conventions. In general terms, the idea supported by this theory associates institutions with organizations and with the rules or conventions promoted by these (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 938). This perspective implies that the historical background is the determinant factor for the institutional development through different methods. According to Pollack, the representatives of this theory focused on the “effects produced in time by the institutions, especially on the particular approaches through a set of institutions once established may constrain the behaviour of those who established it” (Pollack, 2005, p. 363). Institutions do count since they offer moral and cognitive frameworks for the interpretation of actions. The individual is seen as an entity related to a world of institutions, composed of symbols, scripts and practices which ensure the necessary filters for interpretation, and the particular situations subsequently determine a course of actions. Moreover, the cultural approach explains the durability of institutions, thus understanding the conventions associated with the social institutions which are not a result of the individual choices. In this context, the power plays a very important role alongside the asymmetric power relations in such analyses. Even if this perspective takes into consideration the importance of institutions in the political life, it gives a relatively low attention to the idea according to which institutions are the only causal forces in politics since the relationship among institutions ideas and beliefs appears more relevant (Hall, Taylor, 1996, p. 941).

This approach was analysed in comparison to the rational-choice approach since these two promote different points of view. Therefore, *the rational-choice new institutionalism* was a second perspective developed within the institutional theories and it was characterized by the analysis of the democratic transitions in terms of game-theory and the implications of institutional reforms of public policies. The school of international relations used the concepts defined by the theorists of rational-choice approach to explain the emergence and fall of regimes, the responsibilities that the states

delegated to international organizations or their structures (Keohane and Martin, 1994 apud Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 12). Based on these premises, Pollack mentions that the rational-choice perspective uses a characteristic set of hypotheses of human behaviour to state that, in general terms, the relevant actors have a fixed set of preferences or tastes and act entirely instrumental maximising their interests, in a very strategic manner that implies extensive calculations. Moreover, while other philosophical schools have the tendency to promote a characteristic image of politics, whether a “fight for power” or a “social knowledge process”, the rational-choice theorists consider politics as a series of actions and common dilemmas within which the individuals act so as to maximise the achievements in terms of preferences thus contributing to a result that is collectively sub-optimal (Pollack, 2006, p. 32 in Jørgensen; Pollack; Rosamond, 2006). One of the contributions assumed by this type of new institutionalism highlights the role of strategic interaction in terms of determination of political results. This implies that each individual’s behaviour is not influenced by historical impersonal forces, but by individual strategic calculations, the latter being influenced to a large extent by the individuals’ expectations in relation to the behaviour of others. The promoters of this approach tried to explain both individual and collective behaviour in the context of aggregation of individual preferences. Therefore, the individuals do not choose a perfect state of something, but they compare and choose between alternatives, considering the physical constraints of the actions and social contexts, often based on incomplete information (Idem). Moreover, the process of institutional set-up is usually associated to a voluntarily accord of different actors – if the institutions are subject to a competitive selection process than these will survive because they ensure more benefits to the relevant actors than an alternative to a simple form of institutionalisation.

Contrary to the above mentioned approaches, *the sociological new institutionalism* focused on the rejection of the rational-choice models. In this sense, the institutions became independent variables, oriented towards cognitive and cultural explanations; the interest in analysing the supra-national units could not be reduced to aggregated consequences of individuals (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, p. 7). Thus, this approach took into consideration two major concepts: the institutional “culture” and the power of persuasion and communication activities within institutional changes. “Culture” represents the appearance of a common reference framework, norms that govern behaviours and “cognitive filters” (Rosamond, 2007, p. 125 in Cini, 2007). This type of new institutionalism concentrated its efforts to understand the creation and diffusion of organizations, embedding macro-social parameters, defined in terms of universal norms, rational expectancies, and democratic principles. The institutions are defined from a wider perspective in comparison to the definitions

offered by the previous perspectives, they are not only reduced to formal rules, procedures and norms, but also involve systems of symbols, cognitive scriptures and moral frameworks providing a "structure of meanings" that aims to guide and influence human actions (Hall, Taylor, 1996, p. 947). Nevertheless, as Powell underlines in his paper "*The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*", this perspective has its origins in the theoretical approach advanced by Selznick. The differences between the two theories are presented by Powell and DiMaggio and respond to a series of challenges related to: the nature of conflict of interests, the source of inertia, the emphasis on structure, the level and nature of organizational embedding, the organizational dynamic, key-concepts of knowledge, the cognitive base of order, scopes/agenda (Dimaggio and Powell, 1991, p. 13). The principles of sociological approach influenced the theoreticians in their attempt to offer answers to questions regarding the structure of organizations and their expectancies in relation to other institutions, the extent to which they adapt to the institutional environment and which are the concrete effects of this adaptation process. In this context, organizations action and define their structures with the aim of gaining legitimacy, according to the norms and formal rules demonstrating the conformity and achieving the proposed objectives. Organizations usually adopt new institutional practices not to anticipate the scopes or for an increased efficiency, but for more social legitimacy of the institution or its members.

Taking into account that institutionalization is defined as a process, Powell considers that there are different types of diffusion processes: coercive, normative and mimetic. The coercive factors imply political pressure and state influence generating a form of supervision and permanent control; the normative factors are the result of potential influence from different professional and educational sectors and the mimetic factors are the results of usual circumstances and uncertainties (Powell, 2007, p. 2). Subsequently, Meyer and Scott introduce a new concept related to the sociological approach of the new institutionalism, the "organizational field" (Meyer and Scott, 1983 *apud* Powell, 2007, p. 3). An organizational field represents a community of organizations that are not absolutely similar which includes producers, consumers, coordinators and consultants, employed in common activities, subject to similar types of pressure. From Powell's perspective, the institutionalization process of a field encounters four phases:

- 1) *an increase in the amount of interaction among organizations within a field;*
- 2) *the emergence of well-defined patterns of hierarchy and coalition;*
- 3) *an upsurge in the information load with which the members of a field must contend;*

4) *the development of mutual awareness among participants that they are involved in a common enterprise* (Meyer and Scott, 1983 *apud* Powell, 2007, p. 3).

Table 1. Main elements of the three types of new institutionalism

Historical institutionalism	Rational choice institutionalism	Sociological institutionalism
Institutions are defined as sets of formal and informal procedures, practices, norms and conventions;	Each individual behaviour of an actor is influenced by strategic calculations, under the influence of others' behaviour or factors;	Institutions are not only sets of rules and procedures, but also systems of symbols, cognitive scripts and moral frameworks;
The institutional arrangements result in path dependence and unintended consequences;	The relevant actors have a certain set of preferences and act instrumentally in order to maximise their interest;	The identities and preferences of actors are not fixed, but flexible; the interactions between actors are permanent and complex;
The relationship between institutions and other factors shapes political activities and outcomes;	The individuals act so as to maximise the achievements in terms of preferences thus contributing to a result that is collectively sub-optimal;	The organizations usually adopt new institutional practices for more social legitimacy of the institution or for its members.

As regards the critics of the new institutionalism, there were two directions identified: there were critics addressing each of the three forms of institutionalism and critics that focused on the general theory. The historical new institutionalists were criticised for their eclecticism and for giving less attention to the sophisticated understanding of the manner in which institutions impact and influence behaviours; the rational-choice approach was criticised for the fact that is too often functionalist, explaining the origins of institutions using the effects resulted from their existence; for the sociological institutionalists, many of the critics focused on the argument related to institutions' emergence, which is considered poorly supported with arguments since it does not take into consideration the powers fusion between actors and the different existing interests. The representatives of constructivist theory argued that the hypotheses advanced by the general theory of new institutionalism are very hard to test and the level of abstraction is extremely high, at least at theoretical level.

The European integration process is usually interpreted using the institutional theories in order to offer alternative explanations related to the power relationships and interdependencies between member states, the political processes including the decision making processes, the strategic directions of policies and their implementation. In order to reduce the level of theoretical abstraction related to the institutional theory, Knill and Lehmkuhl (1999) identified three models of influence of supranational institution building over domestic conditions, respectively:

- “Firstly EU policy ‘positively’ prescribes an institutional model to which domestic arrangements have to be adjusted. Accordingly, member states have only limited institutional discretion when deciding on the concrete arrangements in order to comply with European requirements;
- Secondly, European legislation may affect domestic arrangements by altering the domestic rules of the game. European influence is confined to altering domestic opportunity structures, and hence the distribution of power and resources between domestic actors;
- Thirdly, in its “weakest” form, European policy neither prescribes concrete institutional requirements nor modifies the institutional context for strategic interaction, but affects domestic arrangements even more indirectly, namely by altering the beliefs and expectations of domestic actors” (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 1999, p. 2).

In terms of European policies, the rational-choice perspective emphasises the causal link of formal rules deriving from the regulations and the way in which they influence the policy results. Moreover, the cooperation procedures and co-decision process remain opened subjects in relation to the lack of efficiency and flexibility of some specific institutional rules with direct implications on member states policy results. Complementary, from a historical perspective it is very interesting to observe the changes produced in time by different institutions, especially in terms of adapting and adjusting national frameworks in order to accommodate the new procedures, norms, regulations.

As an intermediary conclusion and based on the assumptions advanced by the approaches of new institutionalism, the study of European integration process including the decision making processes takes into consideration the importance of institutions and institutional systems and how they define and shape the member states behaviour. As Bulmer and Radaelli mention, the institutionalist theory focused on the premises that the EU is a specialized and complex self-validated compound, , within which the decisions cannot be the result of a single group utilities formed by member states (Bulmer, Radaelli, 2004, p. 7).

2. Evaluation of Cohesion Policy in Romania

Over the past decades, the attention of the researchers in terms of evaluation of public policies and programmes has focused both on the evaluation process itself as a public policy management instrument due to the well-defined scope, namely to improve the governance through increased use of evaluation results, and on the degree of institutionalization of evaluation, with particular emphasis on evaluation capacity and the development needs identified. Influenced by the multiple functions,

methods, techniques, actors and institutional forms, evaluation of public policies has represented a research theme for the public policies theories as well as for those that tried to explain the emergence and the functioning relationships of institutions (Sanderson, 2000, p. 434). The institutionalization of evaluation represents one of the most important result of the process itself and it is directly related to the capacity of stakeholders to plan and conduct evaluations. This implies a formal acceptance of evaluation elements within the decision-making processes (Segone, 2006, p. 25). From Carol Weiss's perspective, the analysis of the institutional dimension of public policy evaluation should take into consideration two important aspects: the existence of a democratic and competitive political system and decentralised policies, both characterized by openness towards results and accountability. This capacity of the systems implies also other characteristics such as: a certain level of understanding of evaluation units by the decision makers, education and professional skills of the decision-makers, an increased level of interest of the political science researchers to conduct studies and analyses of public policies, the presence of institutions to connect the academia and the governance as well as the needs and problems included on the political agenda (Weiss, 1999, p. 473).

In Romania, the institutionalization process of the evaluation of public policies was a consequence of the pre-accession period followed by a first exercise as member state of the European Union, namely between 2007-2013 period (Cerkez, 2012, p. 16). One of the conclusions of the *Final Report on the Framework to Analyse the Development of Evaluation Capacity in the EU Member States (2008)*, was that in terms of level of institutionalization of evaluation within the wider governance system - *the role of evaluation in national budgetary process, the role of evaluation in the formulation of sectoral strategy and policy making, the existence of mandatory evaluation requirements, public management reforms and a public policy research base*, Romania's baseline position was characterised relatively low by international standards (European Commission, 2008, p. 168). Based on these premises, the Romanian administrative structures were conditioned to implement major reform actions with the aim of consolidating the administrative capacity (Stăvaru, 2015, p. 122). In this sense, national authorities responded to the "*General principles of the management and control systems*" of Council Regulation (EC) no. 1083/2006 in order to establish the institutional architecture for the managing and control of the European funds, including the evaluation function (Cotovelea, 2014, p. 152). Nevertheless, at European level, evaluation has passed through several changes during the last implementation exercises which determined changes in all member states. The last two financial exercises are very different both at theoretical and practical level. In this sense, in the 2007-2013 programming period, evaluations tended to focus more on

implementation issues than on capturing the impacts. For the 2014-2020 period, instead, the general regulations require authorities to carry out evaluations which assess the effects of the programmes financed under the European Structural and Investment Funds (hence ESIF). This is an essential element of a strengthened results-focus orientation of the policy that is reflected within the European legislation and complementary documents. A very interesting finding when analysing the European model in relation to evaluation during the two financial exercises derives from the mandatory character of the activity itself. In this sense, the Working Document: *Indicative guidelines on evaluation methods: evaluation during the programming period 2007-2013* issued by the European Commission in 2007 provided indicative guiding regarding the planning and coordination of evaluation activities designed for the national programmes financed by the European Union. Thus, according to this document, an *evaluation plan* could be drafted, including the evaluation activities. This represented only a recommendation for the member states, as referred to in Article 48 [1] of Council Regulation (EC) No. 1083/2006. The main purpose of setting up an evaluation plan was to provide an overall framework for on-going evaluations and to ensure that it is effectively used and integrated as a management tool during the implementation phase. Contrary to this approach, in the current programming period a stronger emphasis is put on the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies co-financed through the programmes of the EU funds. The regulatory framework of the current period and in particular Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006 has reinforced the focus on results at the level of programme design and implicitly at the level of programme monitoring and evaluation. As it was stated in European Commission (EC) document *Synthesis of Evaluation Results and Plans under the ESIF Programmes 2014-2020* “the programmes now require the definition of specific objectives, which articulate the change sought by the policy, result indicators to monitor and measure this change and output indicators characterizing the concrete actions implemented. Evaluation is understood as the tool to disentangle the effects attributable to the policy from those of other factors that also influence the development of result indicators and achievement of specific objectives” (European Commission, 2016, p. 2). In this sense, art. 114 of the Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament clearly establishes the mandatory character of the evaluation plans as follows: “**An evaluation plan** shall be drawn up by the managing authority or Member State for one or more operational programmes. The evaluation plan shall be submitted to the monitoring committee **no later than one year after the adoption of the programme**”. Therefore, the role of the evaluation plan is to a large extent reconsidered compared to the previous programming period in the sense that it supports quality evaluations as well

as their effective use by the responsible authorities; facilitates sharing of knowledge on what and how works in different policy fields; and, ultimately, contributes to the design and implementation of evidence based programmes and policies (EC Guidance Document, 2015, p. 3).

Table 2. Comparative perspective on the evaluation plans content

Elements of the evaluation plans 2007-2013 ⁸	Elements of the evaluation plans 2014-2020 ⁹
1. Indicative list of evaluations to be carried out (titles)	The evaluation function with a clearly defined responsibility for designing and delivering the evaluation plan, and coordinating, monitoring and promoting the quality of evaluation activities throughout the whole evaluation cycle.
2. Scope of each evaluation;	Description of the evaluation process led by the managing authority (responsibilities of involved bodies: evaluation steering group, technical working groups, scientific or other expert academic input, monitoring committee etc.).
3. Main evaluation questions to be considered;	The involvement of partners in evaluation (Art. 5(2) and (3)(d) and art. 49(4)) within the framework of the monitoring committees or in specific working groups established by the monitoring committees; and their consultation on the report(s) summarizing the findings of evaluations due by 31 December 2022.
4. Potential use of each evaluation (presentation and distribution of results, monitoring the use of recommendations);	The source for evaluation expertise (internal/ external/ mixed) and provisions ensuring the functional independence of evaluators from the authorities responsible for programme implementation (Art. 54(3) CPR ¹⁰)
5. Indicative timetable	Possibly a training programme (for example, seminars, workshops, self-study and working with other evaluators) for people from managing authority dealing with evaluation.
6. External or internal evaluation;	A strategy to ensure use and communication of evaluations: how their findings will be followed up; how the evaluations will be made public (Article 54(4) CPR); how they will be transmitted to the Commission. Transmitting final evaluation reports through the electronic system with the Terms of Reference, the budget, and the evaluation methodology is good practice; this will allow the Commission to provide examples of methodological approaches used in different fields to the evaluation community, to analyse the evidence produced and as far as possible build a repository of evidence for policy making.
7. Financial resources planned for each evaluation;	An overall timetable showing how the evaluations will feed into implementation and the various reports on programmes;
8. Management structure (including an evaluation steering group – section 5.1).	The overall budget for implementation of the plan (covering the cost of evaluations, data collection, training etc.). Including a budget, human resources and possibly a training programme contributes to meeting the legal obligation of Member States to provide the resources necessary for carrying out evaluations (Article 54(2) CPR). If technical assistance is used for the purpose of the plan, the corresponding amount should be set aside in the technical assistance budget.
9.	A quality management strategy for the evaluation process: drafting good terms of reference and managing contracts have an important role to play in delivering good evaluation results.

⁸ European Commission (2007), Working Document no. 5, Indicative Guidelines on Evaluation Methods, Evaluation During the Evaluation Period

⁹ European Commission (2015), Guidance Document on Evaluation Plans, Terms of Reference for Impact Evaluations, Guidance on Quality Management of External Evaluations

¹⁰ Regulation (EU) no 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council

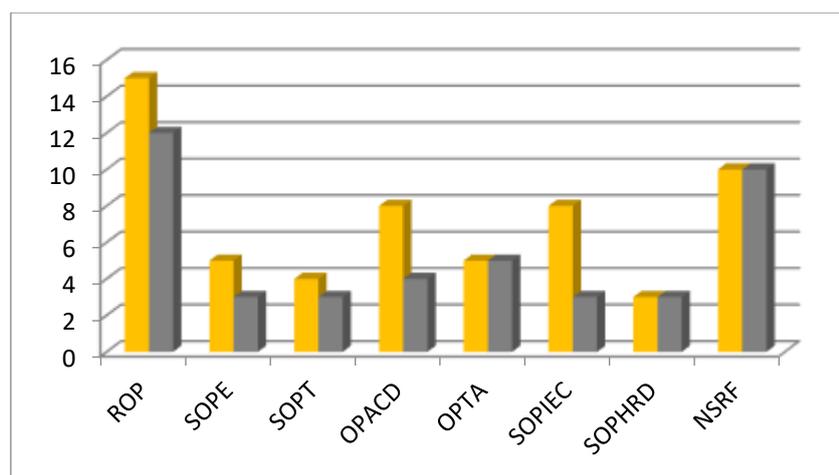
As it can be observed, the requirements regarding the content of the evaluation plans changed considerably, the shift in vision being reflected firstly from a legislative perspective and secondly from a normative point of view. If for the 2007-2013 period, the plans were indicative and included a reduced number of elements, for the current period, these documents transformed into very complex working documents both for the member states and the European Commission.

In order to have a clearer picture on how all the differences mentioned above have practically influenced the evaluation activities during the planning phase, the subsequent section of this paper will briefly present, from a comparative perspective, some of the elements included in the evaluation plans based on the following criteria: *management and planning, management function, responsibility, coordination, design and methods, data availability and data systems, skills and expertise required, use and communication.*

Therefore, for the recently ended programming period, the evaluation activities were included in evaluation plans, elaborated by the responsible structures, namely the evaluation units within the managing authorities for each programme. In this sense, almost sixty evaluations were planned and included in seven distinct multiannual evaluation plans elaborated for: Regional Operational Programme (ROP; for this programme there were also elaborated four annual evaluation plans and a multiannual plan for 2013-2015 period, but for a simplified analysis especially, these plans were considered updates for the first, the document released in 2009), Sectoral Operational Programme Environment (SOPE), Sectoral Operational Programme Transport (SOPT), Sectoral Operational Programme Increase of Economic Competitiveness (SOPIEC), Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOPHRD), Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity Development (OPACD) and Operational Programme Technical Assistance (OPTA). Complementary to these documents, an evaluation plan was elaborated at the level of National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF), the reference document for the implementation of Structural Instruments for the above mentioned period. The degree of accomplishment of evaluation activities included in the plans varied between operational programmes ranging from full to medium accomplishment. Delays, in some cases substantial, were registered between the execution/implementation of evaluations and the date on which they were scheduled in the multiannual plans (Ministry of Regional Development, Public Administration and European Funds, 2012, p. 18). According to the analysis conducted by the Ministry of Regional Development, Public Administration and European Funds, the execution rate of the multiannual evaluation plans varied between 30% and 100%, with an average delay of 6 months between the planned date included in the plans and the completion date. According to the data

provided, some of the reasons of delay between the evaluations and the date on which they were scheduled in the annual plan are: difficult public procurement procedure, high number of appeals and slow progress of the program (Ministry of Regional Development, Public Administration and European Funds, 2014, p. 30).

Figure 1. Planned vs. finalized evaluations during 2007-2013 period



Source: Own representation

In terms of *management and planning*, as it was stated above, the plans were elaborated by each evaluation unit within the managing authority. The phases of planning evaluation activities were the following:

- Drafting the plan (multiannual and annual where the case) by the evaluation unit;
- Consultations with the relevant stakeholders;
- Transmission of the plan to the Monitoring Committee for approval;
- Informing the Monitoring Committee members on a regular basis regarding the progress towards the activities planned;
- Contribution to the elaboration of the progress reports.

Based on the guidelines offered by the European Commission and on the existing capacity to plan and conduct evaluations by 2007, the indicative documents had a similar structure, namely:

- a section dedicated to the context of the programme/ NSRF, including the legal framework;
- a section designed to detail the coordination and management of the evaluation plan, roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders;
- a section dedicated to evaluation capacity building;

- a section that included the indicative activities for each programme/NSRF;

As regards the *management function*, evaluations activities were jointly managed by the evaluation units within the managing authorities and the evaluation steering committee designed for each plan, whose main objectives were to ensure a participatory approach with a view to the implementation of the evaluation activities, from both an administrative and qualitative perspective.

The *responsibility* of the plans incumbered entirely to the managing authority, but the *coordination* was ensured by the Central Evaluation Unit within the Authority for Coordination for Structural Instruments, subsequent to the Ministry of European Funds. With a view to the *design and methods* as well as *data availability and data systems, skills and expertise required*, the plans did not include details; the indicative list of evaluations encountered four dimensions: the proposed evaluations/title, the scope and coverage, the main focus (efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, impact, sustainability) and the indicative deadline. An exception in this case was Regional Operational Programme, for which the evaluation plans were more detailed, comprising evaluation questions, budgets, a more detailed calendar of subsidiary activities, but nonetheless, in terms of design and methods, data availability and data systems the plans, skills and expertise they were still under developed. In terms of *use and communication*, according to the information included in the evaluation plans, the evaluation results were presented within the reunions of the Monitoring Committee that decided also the recommendations to be implemented, the responsible structure and deadline. After this phase, the evaluation reports were distributed to the Geographical Units and Evaluation Unit from European Commission, managing authorities and Evaluation Central Unit. Executive summaries of the reports were made publicly available. Regarding the evaluation capacity within the EU funds management and control system, during 2012-2014, the Central Evaluation Unit - the responsible structure for the coordination of evaluation function for the operational programmes and NSRF¹¹ conducted a three year study with the aim of measuring the evaluation culture in the context of EU Cohesion Policy in Romania. According to the results of the first annual measurements compared to the third annual measurement of evaluation culture revealed a slight improvement from 57% (2012) to 59% (2014) achieved score under ECI (Evaluation Culture Measurement Index), which is mainly due to the registered progress of the supply side, namely the pre-existing resources, skills and institutions to respond to the demand for evaluation. On the other hand, the demand side registered a continuous decrease, caused by the „*financial resources allocated to evaluation*” criteria.

¹¹ National Strategic Reference Framework.

The gap between the measurement cycles was not triggered by a significant reduction of the financial allocation, but mainly by the inclusion in the international benchmarking of aggregated data from countries that have higher budgets dedicated to the evaluation (e.g. FR, IT, LT,HU)¹² (Ministry of Regional Development, Public Administration and European Funds, 2014, p. 30).

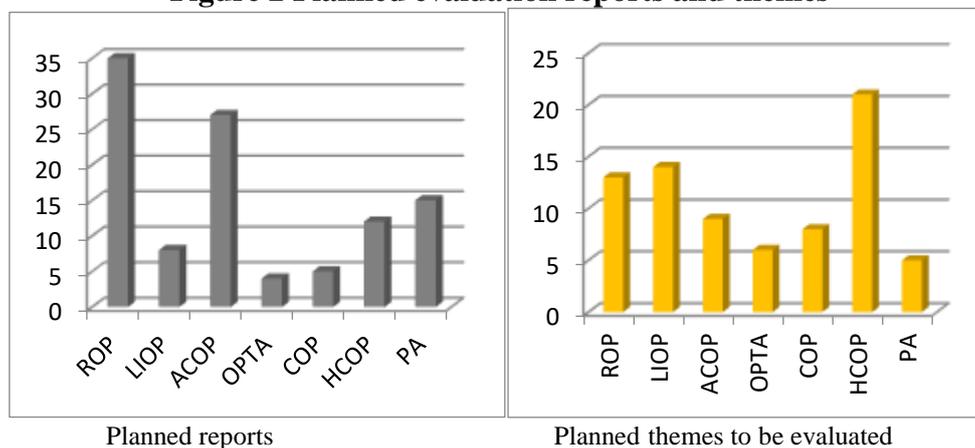
For the 2014-2020 period the logic changed even from the programming phase in the sense that the evaluation plans were elaborated within the ex-ante phase for each operational programme and Partnership Agreement in consistence with all the principles that governed the entire preparation phase of these documents. So, in terms of *management and planning*, the documents were elaborated in close cooperation with the programming experts, consulted with the Monitoring Committee members and agreed upon with the representatives of the European Commission. Moreover, the management responsibility of the plans has now changed; the evaluation function is transferred only to one structure within the Ministry of Regional Development, Public Administration and European Funds, the Programme Evaluation Service, as compared to the previous programming period. In addition to the Evaluation Steering Committee set up for each plan, a novelty for this period is the presence of a Scientific Committee. Its main objective is to ensure a higher quality of evaluation in key moments by assessing the approaches for evaluation, the methodologies, data accuracy and quality of analyses as well as the degree of impartiality of conclusions of each evaluation report for four out of six programmes and for the Partnership Agreement. Both the *responsibility and coordination* of the plans belong now to the dedicated structure mentioned above.

A real improvement in terms of programming evaluation activities refers to the intervention logic of programmes that sets the need for *design and methods* for evaluation. The evaluation plans are now supplemented with a very detailed scheme for each evaluation theme including: the scope of evaluation, main evaluation questions, the users and stakeholders of the results, the content of evaluation report, minimal methodology, necessary data and type of expertise required, which represent the main change of vision for the evaluation function of ESI funds. The increased number of impact evaluations planned indicates that the authorities have considered carefully the regulatory requirements and are focusing more on programme results rather than process and implementation aspects, which were the main drivers of evaluations in the previous programming period. For the *use and communication* of evaluation results, the plans include activities that have the aim to promote and to contribute to an increased level of awareness of both the decision makers and stakeholders

¹² The report is available at http://www.evaluare-structurale.ro/images/Y_upload_rapoarte/01_POAT/09_Evaluation_Culture3/01._Evaluation_report_EN.pdf

through: dissemination events, an updated website, including an e-library that includes the complete version of the reports. Moreover, a dedicated working group for evaluation will be established in order to support the evaluation function during the entire period.

Figure 2 Planned evaluation reports and themes



Source: Own representation

As it can be observed from the graphics above and compared to the previous period, the number of evaluation reports increased considerably, from almost sixty to more than one hundred. In addition, for 2007-2013 the number of evaluation reports coincided with the evaluation themes compared to the current period where the number of reports exceeds the number of evaluation themes due to the fact that some of them are subject to evaluation more than once. This logic relates to the need to observe and to measure the results taking into account the time variable. Nevertheless, the degree of complexity of evaluation exercises does not represent the subject of this paper.

Conclusions

The design and implementation of EU policies represent a challenge for both the initiators and national governments that have the responsibility to accommodate the new requirements and implicitly adapt the existing structures in order to respond to exigencies related to results and accountability for public expenditures. Each multiannual framework determines changes that can be understood from institutional perspectives in terms of effects, maximization of interests or complex interaction between key actors. In order to offer a concrete example, the article focused on comparing two planning phases of evaluation activities related to Cohesion Policy. So, if for the 2007-2013 programming period evaluation activities focused to a large extent on improving implementation

processes and implicitly achieving the expected results, for the newly started programming period the objective of evaluation activities is to measure the impact of interventions with a view to improve and support in a more tangible manner the achievement of the results. In this context, the Romanian administration made all the necessary efforts in order to ensure a coherent approach for the evaluation activities by elaborating more rigorous evaluation plans alongside a unitary coordination of the strategic documents. Nevertheless, whether the shift in vision will conduct to better and improved use of evaluation results could be the subject of future analyses.

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