

Cohesion Policy in Romania Beyond Absorption: Survey Evidence on Development Traps, Administrative Constraints and Strategic Reorientation (2028–2034)

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Proposal for: S32-Impossible Triangularity? Cohesion, Competitiveness, and Defense in European Governance

Romania is one of the major beneficiaries of public funding from the European budget, and most of the money is allocated for the implementation of cohesion policy, through various funds and programs. Although one of the constant debates in the Romanian public environment is that of absorption capacity, the fundamental problem in Romania is that of difficulties in implementation (generating a high cost-benefit ratio) and in maximizing impact. Being at the beginning of 2026 at a level of total EU payments of 26% (compared to an EU average of 21%), Romania seems to confirm an absorption capacity that keeps pace with the general dynamics at European level in the implementation of cohesion policy. But what is the relationship on the ground? Can the implementation system be improved to reduce costs and maximize benefits? Is cohesion policy correlated with Romania's strategic development priorities, in the broader context of priorities at European level?

Using both quantitative and qualitative data collected through a survey addressed to representatives of central and regional administrations, local authorities, non-governmental organisations, and private sector actors, this paper examines how actors involved in the implementation of regional policy in Romania assess structural bottlenecks, thematic priorities, and institutional constraints affecting regional performance during the 2021–2027 programming period. It investigates perceptions regarding: (i) regional development traps (infrastructure deficits, limited administrative capacity, labour force outmigration, procedural complexity), (ii) the effectiveness of operational programme implementation and the determinants of EU funds absorption, (iii) the integration of key EU strategic priorities (Green Deal, Digital Compass, resilience, energy security, circular economy), and (iv) the need for administrative simplification and strengthened multi-level governance. We tried to pinpoint areas of agreement and disagreement regarding the necessity of modifying the budgetary framework, streamlining regulatory processes, increasing financial flexibility, and fortifying monitoring tools, in order to better direct EU resources toward regional convergence, innovation, and sustainability, as well as to identify strategic directions for the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework.

Methodologically, the research combines descriptive analysis of Likert-scale data with interregional comparative examination, aiming to identify convergences and divergences in institutional actors' perceptions. The expected findings are likely to highlight the tension between the EU's strategic orientation towards green and digital transitions and the domestic administrative constraints that limit effective implementation at regional level. The paper contributes an empirical perspective on the adaptive capacity of Cohesion Policy in a Central and Eastern European Member State, outlining implications for

the future design of regional policy, budgetary flexibility, performance-oriented conditionalities, and the architecture of European territorial cooperation.

Keywords: EU Cohesion Policy; Regional Development; Multi-level Governance; Administrative Capacity; Structural Bottlenecks