



NATIONAL SCHOOL OF POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE STUDIES

Field: Political Sciences

PhD Thesis

Cohesion policy as an instrument of intra-European integration

Current and future forecasts in Romania

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Introduction

The European Union's (EU) cohesion policy is one of the most significant and complex European policies, with the central objective of reducing economic, social, and territorial disparities between the Union's regions. This policy supports less developed regions in their modernization processes, thereby contributing to the consolidation of economic and social unity across Europe. In a global context marked by rapid economic and social transitions, the challenges of the green and digital transitions, and the pandemic crisis, cohesion policy faces the need for continuous adaptation to maintain its relevance and effectiveness.

This thesis focuses on the role of cohesion policy in intra-European integration, with a specific analysis of Romania. Since its accession to the EU in 2007, Romania has benefited substantially from European funds aimed at regional development and infrastructure modernisation. The thesis investigates the effectiveness of this policy in reducing regional disparities in Romania and proposes solutions for improving its implementation.

Fundamental Matter

The fundamental issue addressed by this research lies in evaluating the effectiveness of cohesion policy in reducing economic and social disparities between EU regions, with particular emphasis on Romania. The research explores the extent to which this policy has contributed to the balanced development of less-developed regions in Romania and identifies the major challenges that have influenced its effective implementation.

Research Hypothesis

The hypothesis underpinning this research is that the EU's cohesion policy is an effective tool for integration and reducing economic and social disparities across Europe. However, its success largely depends on the ability of member states to implement the funded projects effectively. In the case of Romania, the specific hypothesis is that while cohesion policy has significantly contributed to regional development, its efficiency has been hampered by administrative deficiencies and a reduced capacity to absorb funds.

Research Objectives

The research aims to achieve four main objectives:

1. **Evaluate the efficiency of cohesion policy implementation in Romania:** Analyse how European funds were utilised during the 2007-2020 period to support regional development and infrastructure modernisation.
2. **Identify the challenges encountered in the implementation of cohesion policy:** Investigate the administrative, bureaucratic, and structural obstacles that have affected the efficiency of cohesion policy implementation in Romania, as well as the specific challenges faced in implementing the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR).
3. **Analyse the adaptation of cohesion policy to the EU's new priorities:** Explore how cohesion policy adapts to current challenges, such as the green transition, digitalisation, and post-pandemic resilience, with particular focus on its impact on Romania.
4. **Propose measures to improve the implementation of cohesion policy:** Formulate strategies and recommendations to increase the efficiency of European fund utilisation and maximise their impact on regional and economic development in Romania.

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this thesis combines several analytical methods to provide a comprehensive view of cohesion policy:

- **Documentary analysis:** Study of European legislation, official reports, policy documents, and ex-post evaluations to understand the legal and institutional framework of cohesion policy and its impact on regional development.
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducting interviews with experts and key stakeholders involved in the implementation of cohesion policy at national and European levels to gain detailed insights into the challenges and successes of this policy.

- **Statistical analysis:** Using official statistical data to assess Romania's performance in absorbing European funds and identifying relevant trends and patterns in cohesion policy implementation, including in the context of the EU's new strategic priorities.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Theoretical Foundations and Historical Evolution of Cohesion Policy

The first chapter of the thesis provides a solid theoretical foundation by exploring the fundamental concepts of territorial, social, and economic cohesion that underpin the EU's cohesion policy. The main economic theories, such as the theory of economic convergence which suggests that poorer regions have the potential to grow faster than more developed one and the theory of regional development, which highlights the importance of public interventions in correcting regional imbalances, are discussed.

The historical evolution of cohesion policy is examined, starting with the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which first recognized regional disparities in Europe, and continuing with the Single European Act of 1986 and the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, which provided the legal basis for the development of this policy. The impact of the EU's enlargement in 2004 and 2007, when cohesion policy became an essential tool for integrating the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe, is also analysed.

Chapter 2: Evaluating the Implementation of Cohesion Policy in Romania

Chapter 2 focuses on evaluating how Romania has used the European funds allocated under cohesion policy during the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 financial periods. The analysis reveals that although Romania benefited from substantial financial allocations, the efficiency of their usage was limited by administrative issues, excessive bureaucracy, and low absorption capacity. A comparative analysis with other member states, such as Poland and Hungary, is provided to highlight the differences in the efficiency of cohesion policy implementation.

This chapter presents the lessons learned from these periods and proposes solutions to optimise cohesion policy implementation in the future, including improving administrative capacities and simplifying bureaucratic procedures.

Chapter 3: The Impact of Budgetary Exercises on Romania and Projections for 2021-2027

Chapter 3 examines how European funds were used in Romania and other Central and Eastern European countries during the 2007-2020 period. Romania benefited from approximately 20 billion euros during the 2007-2013 period, but reduced absorption capacity and administrative challenges limited the impact of these funds. In the 2014-2020 period, progress was made in fund absorption, but persistent issues related to bureaucracy and coordination continued to affect their efficient utilisation.

Projections for the 2021-2027 period highlight new opportunities for Romania, especially in the context of the EU's priorities related to the green transition and digitalisation. The importance of preparing for new challenges and the need to improve performance in using European funds are emphasised.

Chapter 4: The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) – A Case Study of Intra-European Integration

Chapter 4 analyses the EUSDR as a practical example of intra-European integration through cohesion policies. The EUSDR involves 14 states, nine of which are EU members, and its main objective is to stimulate the economic and social development of the Danube region.

Romania, as a Danube country, has benefited from considerable funding for infrastructure development, environmental protection, and tourism promotion. However, the implementation of projects has faced significant challenges, such as issues of interinstitutional coordination and collaboration between the participating states.

The chapter emphasises the challenges encountered in implementing EUSDR projects and proposes solutions for improving collaboration and the efficient use of European funds within the EUSDR framework.

Chapter 5: Emerging Challenges of Cohesion Policy – The Green Transition, Digitalisation, and Post-Pandemic Resilience

The final chapter addresses the emerging challenges of cohesion policy, focusing on the green transition, digitalisation, and strengthening economic and social resilience in the post-pandemic context. The green transition is promoted by the European Green Deal, which aims to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainable development. Cohesion policy supports regions in transitioning to a green economy by funding renewable energy and energy efficiency projects.

Digitalisation represents another central pillar of the new European strategy, and cohesion policy supports the development of digital infrastructure and vocational training to prepare the workforce for the new demands of the digital economy. Romania, with a low level of digitalisation compared to other member states, must capitalise on these opportunities to improve its competitiveness and reduce the digital divide.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the economic and social vulnerabilities of regions across the EU, and cohesion policy is expected to play a central role in strengthening post-pandemic resilience. European funds will be essential in supporting economic and social recovery, particularly in the regions most affected by the crisis.

Conclusions and Personal Contributions

The doctoral thesis concludes that cohesion policy remains a crucial pillar of European integration, significantly contributing to reducing economic and social disparities between EU regions. In Romania's case, European funds have had a major impact on economic development and infrastructure modernisation, but the efficiency of their utilisation has often been limited by administrative and bureaucratic issues.

The personal contributions of this research include a detailed analysis of the challenges faced by Romania in using European funds and proposing concrete measures to improve absorption and the efficiency of fund using. Recommendations include simplifying administrative procedures, strengthening interinstitutional coordination, and promoting a culture of innovation and performance.

The thesis also provides a valuable contribution to the specialised literature by analysing how cohesion policy must adapt to new global challenges, such as the green transition and digitalisation, to remain relevant and effective. The future success of cohesion policy depends on the ability of member states, including Romania, to fully capitalise on the opportunities offered by European funds and implement structural reforms that support sustainable and inclusive economic development.