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Innovative approaches to communication in the financing process through European funds in Romania

SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

The paper "*Innovative approaches to communication in the financing process through European funds in Romania*" is oriented towards addressing certain social or individual problems in the field of European funding, based on individual questions within the author's sphere of interest and the author's desire to contribute to finding common solutions for people accessing European funds or participating in European-funded projects.

The research conducted in this purpose involved a complex process with multiple stages and often took on an interdisciplinary character, in which the fields of communication, marketing, European funding, and several others intersected. The initial idea from which the paper started underwent few changes throughout the process, but as it became increasingly familiar and its detailed elements were discovered and retained, new directions for research and exploration of the intended topic were identified by the author. Clearly, the essential starting point was the formulation of the research questions, as they represented essential tools during the entire research process, influencing many of the subsequent stages.

The aim of this paper was to describe and study certain phenomena observed in reality that underlie a particular point of view in regard to the communication conducted by the authorities involved in managing European funds and the beneficiaries of these funds. Furthermore, the goal was to provide arguments that support or contradict this point of view and, at the same time, to make a comparison between the communication of national and European authorities with the beneficiaries. The thesis was stated based on three working hypotheses. The first one is that there are certain differences in the communication approach between European and national authorities in relation to beneficiaries of European funds in Romania. The second is that there is a direct link between the communication conducted by the authorities responsible for managing European funds and the absorption rate of these funds in Romania. The third and final working hypothesis is that the communication activities of the involved authorities can be improved through the application of communication techniques in marketing. These working hypotheses represented the guiding thread, structuring the paper to prevent deviations from the analytical and argumentative path, which is essential for testing, confirming, refuting, or nuancing them.

To ensure that the concerns in this field are significant, relevant, and up-to-date, the author aimed to identify innovative approaches to communication in European funding in Romania, so that the paper contributes to even a small progress in the research area, adding to the global academic conversation. Starting from the consideration that it is not sufficient for the paper to present only the author's viewpoint and considering what the specialized literature has already discovered, the thesis presents itself as a necessary response or reaction to the work done by other researchers in the field. Thus, in building its argumentation, the author utilized existing data from various books, publications, reports, as well as other marketing research conducted in the field of European funding. The analysis of the scholarly literature revealed that the topic of communication is frequently debated and has become a research subject for projects at the European level. The allocation of funds for such projects once again emphasizes the high interest of the Union in this subject and that communication should always hold an important place in decision-making.



Certainly, regarding information and communication in European funding, there is a well-established regulatory framework with clear obligations for the involved parties, so one of the natural questions would address the necessity of a paper on communication. The reality has shown that despite the regulation in the field of information and communication, the absorption of European funds has become a significant concern regarding the implementation of European policies, as many member states have encountered difficulties in terms of absorption. Often, this situation has been approached from an institutional, procedural, or legislative perspective, focusing on eliminating fraud, reducing political influence in the project selection process, harmonizing legislation with European legislation, or identifying viable mechanisms to ensure co-financing. In this context, a research on communication, tahta analyses the extent to which communication emerges as a factor with direct influence or, in certain situations, with indirect and subtle influence on the absorption rate, can bring novelty elements to the field under investigation, as well as a series of innovative approaches that could contribute to a better absorption of European funds in Romania.



TOPIC OF THE THESIS AND FIELD OF STUDY

The paper highlights and details certain aspects of the communication between beneficiaries of European funds in Romania and the authorities responsible for managing the funds at national and European levels. Through a research design that contributes to uncovering valuable information about the communication process, this paper investigates the differences in approach between European and Romanian authorities regarding communication, explores the influence of communication on the absorption rate of European funds in Romania, and presents multiple innovative approaches aimed at improving the communication process between beneficiaries and authorities involved in managing European funds.

Overall, the paper brings into attention several aspects that can facilitate interaction among stakeholders involved in the implementation of European-funded projects in Romania. The paper reveals new perspectives regarding the challenges faced by beneficiaries when accessing and utilizing European funds and emphasizes the importance of possessing adequate communication skills. For authorities managing European funds, the research findings can serve as a starting point in building effective communication strategies that contribute to better interaction among stakeholders.

The paper can be placed under the fundamental field of Social Sciences, the branch of Economic Sciences, in the of Marketing.

KEYWORDS

Communication, marketing, communication in marketing, budget, European Union budget, beneficiaries of European funds, management authorities, innovative approaches in communication.

PURPOSE OF THE THESIS

The research tried to identify certain patterns of action in various circumstances and understand how beneficiaries of European funds relate to the communication they have with the authorities responsible for managing the funds, taking into account their personal experiences, whether a positive or a negative one. Additionally, the research sought to explain the reasons for which a beneficiary decides to adopt a particular behavior in their relationship with the authorities, as well as their future intentions regarding the use of European funds as a financing option.

In order to evaluate the communication process between beneficiaries of European funds and the authorities involved in managing the funds at European and national levels, and to identify specific aspects of communication from the perspective of European and Romanian authorities, **the analysis of secondary data had the following objectives:**

- To investigate European funding in Romania from a communication standpoint;
- To determine the role of communication in European funding from Romania's accession to the EU until the present;
- To analyze communication and the absorption rate of European funds in Romania through the lens of asymmetric information theory.

The aim of the qualitative research was to study specific aspects regarding the approach of European and Romanian authorities in terms of communication throughout the lifecycle of a project funded through European funds (during the writing, implementation, reporting, monitoring stages). In this regard, **four objectives were established for the qualitative research:**

- To evaluate the communication process between beneficiaries of European funds and the authorities involved in managing the funds at the European and national levels;
- To identify specific aspects of communication of European and Romanian authorities;
- To highlight and describe the experiences of stakeholders involved in various stages of projects (writing, implementation, reporting, monitoring) regarding communication.
- To identify opportunities to improve the communication process between beneficiaries and Romanian authorities involved in managing European funds.

To determine and assess the phenomena and aspects identified in the qualitative research, quantitative research was undertaken, in which certain variables were measured. **The following objectives formed the basis of the quantitative research** on communication between beneficiaries and authorities in European funding in Romania:

- To analyze specific communication aspects that national and European authorities have with beneficiaries of European funds in Romania.
- To evaluate the influence of communication on the absorption rate;
- To identify innovative approaches to communication in the process of European funding in Romania.

STRUCTURE (CHAPTERS) OF THE THESIS

Chapter 1 addresses the concepts of "*communication*" and "*marketing*" with the aim of providing an overview of the current scientific knowledge. This chapter includes an evaluative synthesis of relevant research and publications in the field of study, highlighting progress, trends, limitations, and gaps in current knowledge. The study of the communication concept is considered important in the research field of European funding in Romania because adequate communication can ensure efficient, transparent, and responsible implementation of projects funded by European funds in Romania. By understanding and applying communication principles and strategies from the specialized literature, the impact and success of projects funded by European funds can be maximized. Therefore, the aim of studying communication in this chapter is to identify multiple theoretical communication models from which the most suitable model for European funding in Romania can be selected, tailored to the specific characteristics of the analyzed field, providing an optimal framework for the research in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The concept of communication is analyzed from the perspective of the evolution of human communication, as well as through the lens of seven major intellectual traditions (rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, cybernetics, social psychology, sociocultural theories, and critical theories). The interdisciplinary nature of communication is evident, as well as the impossibility of a single definition. The chapter synthesizes the main currents in the field of communication: foundational theories, the empirical-functionalistic approach to mass communication, and the structural method, as well as the two major orientations: process school and semiotic school. The chapter details eight classical process models of communication and three classical semiotic models. It also synthesizes recent contributions to the disciplinary field of communication brought by the Palo Alto School ("*invisible college*"), the Chicago School, and the Frankfurt School ("*critical school*"). Based on the conceptual framework provided by the analyzed theoretical models, correlated with the aim and objectives of the research topic, a theoretical communication model consisting of eight elements is outlined to allow for the correct interpretation and understanding of communication in the field of European funding. The chapter also explores new communication and information technologies, considering the influence technology has on communication.

The concept of marketing, specifically communication in marketing, is addressed, taking into account their importance in European funding. To understand the current position of marketing, the stages of its evolution and the changing conceptions of its role within a company throughout the 20th century are analyzed. Marketing communication is examined based on the definition given by the American Marketing Association and is framed within the promotional mix. The chapter reviews classical communication and promotion tools, online communication methods, and "*push*" and "*pull*" marketing strategies. The concepts of "*inbound*" and "*outbound marketing*" are also discussed. Finally, the peculiarities of social/public marketing are listed, considering their relevance to the field of European funding, where public authorities managing these funds play an important role. The chapter concludes with a marketing perspective on European funding.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed theoretical examination of the concept of budgeting, aiming to enhance understanding of how public revenues and expenditures are managed. Such an approach is considered necessary before delving into the broader study of the European Union budget and financing options

for member states in Chapter 3. Firstly, the differences between private and public budgets are highlighted, followed by an attempt to identify a theory of public budgeting. It is observed that the field of budgeting is eclectic, dominated by multiple, often competing theories. Despite the absence of a universally valid theory of budgeting, in practice, budgeting continues, with public institutions conducting their activities through a financial plan that includes revenues and expenditures. In relation to the budget, its purpose, approval process, mandatory and annual nature, management mode, essential components, budgetary principles, and prerequisites for budgetary balance are analyzed. Sources of public revenue are also examined, noting that they vary from country to country and that there are significant differences in approaches to taxation, tax rates, and excise duties. Regarding public expenditures, it is noted that they only drew the attention of scholars after World War II, when the significant increase in public spending began to put pressure on states with high budgetary deficits. Budget classifications and their role in budget formulation and policy-making are discussed. To understand how a public budget is developed, three classical budgeting methods (automatic method, incremental method, and direct evaluation method) and five modern methods (cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness method, planning, programming, and budgeting method or PPBS, management by objectives method or MBO, zero-based budgeting method or ZBB, and rational choice budgeting method or RCB) are analyzed in detail. The chapter details the concepts of "*surplus*," "*deficit*," "*budgetary balance*," and addresses the topic of "*intergenerational justice*" when considering the increase in public debt. This chapter contributes to a better understanding of the financial context of a country and how the public budget is structured before exploring into the detailed analysis of the European Union budget, which is closely linked to the national budgets of EU member states.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed presentation of the European Union budget and the financing options available to member states. In order to understand the evolution of the EU budget over its 71 years of existence, the history of the EU budget is synthesized, from the administrative and operational budget of the ECSC (1951) to the budgets of the EEC and EURATOM, and finally to the EU budget as it stands today. The planning of the EU budget and its specific elements related to its historical evolution, financing, planning, and utilization are presented. Aspects related to multiannual financial frameworks, budget management (direct management, shared management), and the size of the EU budget, which contrary to expectations, it is not very large compared to the national budgets of certain member states, are discussed. Revenues and expenditures of the EU budget are detailed, and the advantages of EU membership are highlighted. Regarding revenues, the sources of EU budget financing, including own resources (traditional own resources, resources based on VAT, GNI-based resources, and plastic waste and packaging tax), and other revenues (penalties, fines, taxes on EU staff salaries, surplus from previous years, technical adjustments, and contributions from other states) are presented. The evolution of EU expenditures according to priority areas and the allocations of the MFF 2021-2027 and Next Generation EU are also presented.

Chapter 4 investigates the process of European funding in Romania with the aim of evaluating the communication process between beneficiaries of European funds and the authorities involved in managing the funds at the European and national levels. Using secondary data analysis as research method, the place of communication in European funding in Romania is analyzed, and the

communication process between beneficiaries and authorities is detailed. In this regard, the communication strategies adopted in the first two programming periods in which Romania participated as a member state (National Communication Strategy 2007-2013, National Communication Strategy for Structural Instruments 2014-2020) are described, and a comparative analysis of communication activities carried out by Romanian authorities in the multiannual financial frameworks 2007-2013, 2014-2020, 2021-present is conducted, with a focus on the responsibilities of authorities and beneficiaries regarding communication and information. The relationship between communication, trust, and commitment, with an emphasis on the predominantly negative perception that the general public has of public institutions, is explored, and a scheme for effective public communication based on Heise's model of effective public communication is presented. In order to investigate the link between communication and the absorption rate of European funds in Romania, a graphical representation of the territorial profile of the absorption rate of structural funds from the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework in EU member states is presented, and the regression analysis method is used to predict the absorption rate's evolution until 2024. By examining the three protagonists in the European funding market (beneficiaries, consultants, and authorities managing European funds in Romania), the theory of information asymmetry is applied to the relationship between the management authority and the beneficiary of European funds, as well as the relationship between the beneficiary and the consultant. This identifies the reasons for certain behaviors of beneficiaries, authorities, or consultants and explains why, for example, bureaucracy in the field is high. The manifestation of adverse selection and moral hazard in the European funding market and the signaling required in this field are also exemplified.

Chapter 5 presents the results of a qualitative research based on the focus group method, investigating the existence of specific aspects in the approach of European and Romanian authorities regarding communication throughout the lifecycle of a project funded by European funds (writing, implementation, reporting, monitoring). In the first part of the chapter, the context in which the research was conducted and the need for such a study are presented, as well as the results of other similar research conducted on the topic of communication in European funding in Romania. The research results highlight certain challenges faced by beneficiaries in implementing projects funded by European funds in Romania, as well as obstacles in communication with authorities responsible for fund management, emphasizing the effects of ineffective communication on the absorption rate of European funds. The research reveals a potential link between communication and the absorption rate, along with other aspects of communication with authorities, which are subsequently analyzed in the quantitative research in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 encompasses a quantitative research aiming to identify innovative approaches in communication in European funding in Romania. Valuable information is obtained through an electronically administered survey regarding beneficiaries' satisfaction with the communication carried out by authorities managing European funds and differences in communication between Romanian and European authorities are discovered. The research investigates a possible link between communication actions and the absorption rate of European funds, as well as the factors influencing this link. Additionally, the willingness and intention to access European funds are examined,

considering the communication conducted by European/Romanian authorities with beneficiaries, and the communication needs of beneficiaries regarding European funds are explored. The research contributes to understanding the behavior of the involved parties (beneficiaries, authorities, consultants), how they interact, and how they utilize communication methods, thus providing the necessary basis for identifying innovative approaches in communication in European funding in Romania.

Chapter 7 details the need for innovative approaches in communication in the field of European funding, an area constantly influenced by new technologies, cultural changes, the evolution of the online environment, and social, economic, and political requirements. The ways in which member states ensure communication with beneficiaries of European funds are presented, highlighting both the positive aspects and the challenges in communicating with multiple stakeholders. Building upon the analysis of communication models from the literature and the results of qualitative and quantitative research described in Chapters 5 and 6, several innovative approaches are proposed in terms of communication. A first approach considers the application of two communication models (unidirectional model and bidirectional model) to the specifics of European funding in Romania, along with a proposed basic design of the communication process in European funding. For each model, the component elements (source, transmitter, receiver, recipient, channel, message, noise, common codes) are described in detail, providing an overview of communication in European funding in Romania that can serve as a basis for developing effective communication strategies. The possibility of applying specific marketing techniques to the field of European funding in Romania is also explored. The external environment and microenvironment in which management authorities operate are presented, the four components of the marketing mix (product, price, distribution, and promotion) are described, and the distinctive performance elements in relation to competition in European funding in Romania are listed. A third category of innovative approaches specifically addresses the findings of the quantitative research, proposing a series of measures regarding modern and traditional communication methods, as well as specific aspects highlighted by beneficiaries in European funding in Romania.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to outline the actual dimensions regarding specific aspects of communication conducted by European and Romanian authorities and to determine the underpinning causes of attitudes, behaviors, opinions, and future intentions of beneficiaries of European funding in Romania, as well as the subjective, emotional, or unconscious elements underlying them, the study focused on understanding and explaining the phenomenon under investigation using various investigation means and techniques. For this purpose, a **mixed research design** was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods for a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Through an **exploratory research**, aimed at identifying detailed information contributing to a more accurate definition of the analyzed problem and uncovering the underlying real causes of the studied phenomenon, through a **descriptive research**, which aimed to characterize the research subject and determine the extent of differences among European funds beneficiaries, and through a **causal/explanatory research**, intended to establish the cause-effect relationships and dependencies between different variables, the research topic was approached comprehensively to provide enhanced clarity of the investigated phenomenon.

The combination of different types of data allowed the triangulation of conclusions, validation of results, and obtaining a holistic perspective on the research topic. Qualitative data facilitated obtaining in-depth perspectives, rich descriptions, and specific contextual information, while quantitative data allowed for statistical analysis, generalizations, and numerical comparisons. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data in the mixed research design was achieved through sequential data collection and analysis, where qualitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by the quantitative data analysis.

The main **methods of exploratory research** used were:

- The use of **secondary data** from other marketing research conducted in the same field and published in various publications and reports to identify trends in communication between beneficiaries and authorities.
- **Qualitative study** based on the technique of direct research through semi-structured group interviews, using group discussion or focus group as the research method.

For **descriptive and causal/explanatory research**, a specific research method was employed, namely an **online survey** conducted through the internet. Data was collected through a webpage where respondents could complete the questionnaire after being invited to participate in the research and provided with the access link to the questionnaire. The analysis of secondary data is included in Chapter 4, the qualitative study on communication carried out by European authorities and those in Romania in European funding is the subject of discussion in Chapter 5, and the quantitative research on communication between beneficiaries and authorities in European funding in Romania is extensively presented in Chapter 6.

ORIGINAL RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The paper addresses the communication led by European and Romanian authorities in European funding from the perspective of beneficiaries and consultants who participated in projects funded through European funds, managed by national and European authorities. Through a mixed research design that allowed the disclosure of valuable information highlighting important opinions about the communication process between beneficiaries and the authorities involved, this study investigated specific aspects related to the approach of European and Romanian authorities regarding communication throughout the lifespan of a project funded by European funds. It explored the influence of communication on the absorption rate of European funds in Romania and identified several possibilities for improving the communication process between beneficiaries and the Romanian authorities involved in fund management.

The research brought into attention important subjects that shed an interesting light on the journey that a beneficiary of European funds experiences in terms of communication, from the moment they decide to apply with their project for European financing until the completion of the project. The research results captured certain nuances and details regarding the perception of the communication process with authorities and demonstrated that, **in general, communication with European authorities is perceived as better than the one with Romanian authorities.** While positive elements such as "*flexibility*," "*openness*," "*professionalism*," and "*variety of communication methods used*" were generally highlighted in the characterization of communication with European authorities, respondents used derogatory words and expressions such as "*demanding*," "*contradictions*," "*unclear information*," "*excessive bureaucracy*" or "*unrealistic deadlines*" regarding communication with Romanian authorities. These results are consistent with the findings of Şerban (2014), emphasizing the importance of improving communication between authorities, consultants, and beneficiaries as part of the internal strategy for absorbing European funds in Romania.

The research highlighted that, although there is a desire on the part of authorities to improve the process, as well as certain public officials who facilitate the communication, **the issue of human resources within the authorities cannot be ignored.** Often, these resources are insufficient for the large number of projects that need to be managed or are not adequately prepared to streamline the entire process of absorbing European funds. These results, although indirectly related to communication, are consistent with the observations of Sapir et al. (2004) and Şerban (2014), who underline two systemic aspects related to the unsatisfactory absorption of European funds, namely administrative capacity and continuously changing legislation.

Regarding **the link between communication and the absorption rate of European funds in Romania**, both qualitative and quantitative research revealed that such a link exists, **it is intense** and involves a multitude of factors, the proper management of which can contribute to better communication. Among these factors, sustained dialogue between beneficiaries and authorities, the use of an appropriate language that is not overly specialized, increasing communication skills for all involved parties, and establishing intra- and inter-organizational communication procedures can be mentioned. The results

are partially in line with the observations of Georgescu (2008), Tudor & Florain (2018), and Marcu et al. (2020), who place communication amongst the domains that can contribute to increasing the absorption rate of European funds in Romania.

Regarding the opinions resulting from the personal experience of European funds beneficiaries, a series of positive elements were highlighted, as well as barriers in communication that beneficiaries of European funds in Romania face when interacting with the authorities. Among the **positive aspects** mentioned, in line with Georgescu (2008), there are pleasant experiences in the relationship with certain officers of the management authorities who have proven to be not only competent but also proactive, on-site visits that accelerate communication between beneficiaries and authorities, the possibility of informal communication with representatives of the authorities, or the existence of online platforms through which funding applications can be submitted. Concerns related to **obstacles encountered when accessing European funding** were primarily related to the overly specialized language, different interpretations of requirements by the parties involved, the large volume of documents required when submitting a funding application, the need for intermediation of the relationship between authorities and beneficiaries by a consultant, the competence of officials managing European funds, or the need to improve online platforms to make them easier to use. Compared to previous findings by Micu et al. (2013a, 2013b) or Georgescu (2008), the results of this study demonstrate progress regarding systemic issues, which were previously characterized as "*not calibrated to the real needs of beneficiaries and the need for the full utilization of the allocated funds in Romania*" (Şerban, 2014). Thus, the research highlighted that despite the obstacles beneficiaries still encounter, authorities have found appropriate solutions that enable more efficient management of funding through European funds, compared to previous multiannual financial frameworks.

Regarding the perception of communication carried out by Romanian authorities compared to that by European authorities, the research results highlighted **a difference in approach regarding how beneficiaries are treated when seeking clarifications** or when representatives of the authorities visit for monitoring purposes. In line with Luca (2005), **a significant distance from the authority is observed** in the relationship with public officials managing European funds in Romania, while this distance diminishes significantly in the relationship with European authorities, which takes place in a natural, relaxed environment built on trust and mutual support. An important difference was also emphasized regarding **the documentation related to project calls**, both in terms of volume and content. At the European level, the documents have relevant and concise content, are easy to complete, have fewer pages, and provide flexibility in conforming to certain templates. It was particularly emphasized that European authorities have dedicated funds for communication actions and the development of user-friendly online platforms that integrate artificial intelligence, as well as funds allowing for diversification of communication methods.

Similarly, to the results obtained by Micu (2013a and 2013b), **email has become the main communication tool** between beneficiaries and authorities. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic period, email has been recognized as an official communication tool, alongside **specific online platforms** (e.g. MySMIS). For informal communications, phone calls are predominantly

used, and among other communication tools, the research identified face-to-face meetings, conferences, official documents, or project-specific communication and dissemination activities.

The evaluation of communication based on the four project stages (writing, implementation, reporting, monitoring) revealed several **positive aspects**, as well as areas where communication can be improved regarding the applicant's guide, human resources involved in the communication process, communication tools used, online information access, or other specific elements of each project stage. Participants in the research appreciated the existence of an applicant's guide and a list of frequently asked questions, particularly during the project writing phase, and expressed the need to simplify the accompanying documentation of the guidelines in terms of content and volume throughout the project's lifespan. Regarding the human resources involved, the important role of European fund access experts and authorities, especially in the writing, implementation, and reporting phases of the project, was highlighted. In line with Şerban (2014), **aspects that can be improved** were mentioned, such as the interpretation of requirements, consistency and clarity of information, responsiveness to requests, and in the reporting phase, the importance of flexibility in applying instructions and shifting the focus to results rather than documents or their completion method. Regarding communication tools, the research showed that the availability of specific online platforms is particularly appreciated by beneficiaries during the writing, reporting, and monitoring phases, while during the implementation phase, they feel the need for direct and rapid interaction with the authorities via email, phone, online or offline meetings. Improving the functionality of online platforms was emphasized as necessary during the writing, reporting, and monitoring stages, along with increased digitization so that data already submitted by beneficiaries in older funding applications (e.g. the organization's constitutive act, unique registration code etc.) or annual financial reports (e.g. balance sheet) can be accessed by authorities from a database without requiring beneficiaries to provide them again. Business plan writing courses were listed as positive aspects during the project writing phase, while realistic response deadlines were identified as the main aspect that can be improved during the writing, implementation, and reporting stages. In the monitoring phase, beneficiaries expect to be informed about the importance of this stage in the project's lifecycle.

Regarding the **information needs** of European fund beneficiaries in Romania, the importance of information accessibility was distinguished in terms of the possibility of accessing information and understanding its content, either through providing more details or through interactions with competent individuals within the authorities who can clarify any ambiguities. In line with Şerban (2014), significant emphasis was placed on information transparency, consistency, and accuracy, considering their direct impact on project implementation timelines. An interesting aspect that emerged from the research regarding communication needs is that both beneficiaries and authorities require education on communication, so that the interaction between the beneficiary and the authority can occur as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

Regarding the **dynamics of the communication process**, the research results highlighted the need for authorities to emphasize digitization (increased visibility on social networks, online platforms, organizing webinars, etc.), proper utilization of existing communication channels (email, phone, etc.), and simplification of language. **Traditional and modern communication** methods were analyzed based

on four criteria: visibility, accessibility, efficiency, and interactivity. In line with Georgescu (2008), Şerban (2014), and Marcu et al. (2020), the research results showed that modern communication methods are preferred in terms of visibility, accessibility, and efficiency, while traditional methods allow for direct contact with staff from the authorities, which can provide better understanding of information, faster clarification of ambiguities, and are accessible to all categories of the public, including those who do not know how to use modern communication methods.

Regarding the identification of **innovative communication methods** between beneficiaries and Romanian authorities in European funding, the research results confirm the observations of Georgescu (2008) regarding the importance of competencies and motivation of human resources working in European funding programs managed by management authorities and intermediary bodies. Thus, among the innovative approaches to communication in European funding in Romania, specific hiring criteria (e.g. previous experience in projects with European funding) and redefining the role of the authority to focus on the needs of beneficiaries and support them throughout the project's duration were identified. On the part of beneficiaries, an innovative method identified was the requirement for participation in training sessions for project writing, implementation, reporting, and monitoring as a criterion for funding approval. The results are in line with Şerban (2014) regarding the use of questionnaires or evaluation forms to collect feedback from stakeholders, the utilization of all available modern communication methods (social media, web portals etc.), and allocation of funds to increase and improve administrative capacity in communication. An interesting proposal was made regarding the need for mediation of the communication relationship between authorities and beneficiaries by an independent body, especially in situations where authorities identify the need for financial corrections, which can be catastrophic for certain beneficiaries of European funds.

In conclusion, the research confirms the general hypotheses of the study, as **the results show significant differences in communication between Romanian authorities and European authorities when interacting with beneficiaries of European funds**. Additionally, the results indicate **a significant influence of communication on the absorption rate of European funds in Romania**. In terms of identifying innovative approaches to communication, considering that the research revealed the underlying elements of certain behaviors, attitudes, opinions, motives, and intentions of beneficiaries of European funds in Romania, the results contribute to a better understanding of how beneficiaries perceive the communication they have with the authorities managing these funds. Thus, by understanding the reasons why a beneficiary decides to adopt a certain behavior in their relationship with the authorities, as well as their future intentions regarding the use of European funds as a financing option, **the research contributes to the development of innovative approaches tailored to the needs of beneficiaries, but which can be used at the same time by the authorities in defining effective communication strategies**.

Funding through European funds offers significant opportunities for the development of Romania. However, the process of understanding and accessing these funds can often be complex and challenging for potential beneficiaries. **Innovative approaches to communication in European funding in Romania are important** for several reasons. Firstly, they can simplify and clarify information, making it more accessible and easily understandable for all interested parties. Innovative communication can



contribute to the creation of a culture of transparency and accountability in the use of European funds. Through modern communication channels, up-to-date information about projects, implementation stages, resources used, and achieved results can be provided, allowing beneficiaries and the general public to monitor and evaluate how European funds are managed and utilized in Romania. Innovative communication approaches can stimulate innovation and sustainable development in projects funded by European funds. By promoting best practices and successful examples, beneficiaries can be inspired and motivated to implement innovative solutions and achieve sustainable and impactful results. Innovative communication can mobilize and engage the target audience in the process of European funding. Through modern communication channels, awareness campaigns, interactive events, and public consultations can be organized to encourage active participation and contribution from the public in identifying community needs and priorities. By conveying a clear, captivating message adapted to the needs and values of the funders, potential beneficiaries can effectively highlight the relevance and impact of their projects, thereby increasing their chances of being selected for funding. Innovative communication approaches can contribute to improving Romania's image and reputation in terms of accessing and utilizing European funds. By promoting positive outcomes, successful projects, and the benefits brought by European funding, confidence and appreciation towards Romania as a serious partner capable of efficiently utilizing European resources can be strengthened.

Overall, innovative approaches to communication in European funding in Romania are important because they facilitate access, simplify the process, promote transparency, stimulate innovation, and involve the public in obtaining and implementing European funds. **These approaches can contribute to sustainable development and increase the chances of success in utilizing these resources for the benefit of Romania and its citizens.**

RELEVANCE AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SCIENTIFIC FIELD

By studying and investigating the specific aspects of communication in the field of European funding in Romania, the research paper makes an important contribution to the deep understanding of the phenomena and fundamental principles governing the relationship between beneficiaries of European funds and the authorities responsible for managing these funds. The paper thus brings multiple contributions to the current scientific achievements in the field, both in fundamental research and applied research.

Contributions to fundamental research

By investigating the concepts of "*communication*", "*communication models*", "*marketing*" "*communication in marketing*", "*budget*" and "*EU budget*", the paper contributes to theoretical research. Within the analysis of these concepts, the interconnections between them were explored, and existing theories for each concept were critically examined and evaluated in terms of their empirical support. **A first contribution** lies in the fact that the paper has systematized and classified the concepts and principles into a coherent and structured framework, thereby facilitating their understanding and assimilation in the field of European funding in Romania.

By selecting suitable communication models from the literature for the field of European funding in Romania and applying them in the beneficiary-authority relationship, the paper contributes to theoretical and applied research by combining theoretical aspects with practical application. **The second contribution** lies in the application of these models in the field of European funding in Romania, which has revealed valuable information about the communication process between beneficiaries and the authorities involved. The results have highlighted that the communication process in the field of European funding can be approached from multiple perspectives, such as the type of funding, its purpose, content and means of communication, its effects, and the protagonists involved.

A third contribution the paper brings to the current state of knowledge is the explanation of specific phenomena in the relationship between the authorities managing European funds, consultants, and beneficiaries through the lens of information asymmetry theory. This sheds light on certain nuances in the relationships between the parties involved, showing that all three protagonists involved in attracting European funds are responsible for achieving an optimal absorption rate of these funds.

Contributions to applied research

The fourth contribution lies in the qualitative research findings that have highlighted certain differences in communication between European and national authorities and beneficiaries of European funds in Romania, as well as the main communication obstacles faced by beneficiaries when accessing these funds.

The fifth contribution is the quantitative research results, which have shown that, in the opinion of beneficiaries, there is a direct and intense link between communication and the absorption rate of European funds in Romania, and that improving the communication process needs to take into account certain factors such as preferences for specific communication tools, the funding needs of beneficiaries, communication skills, and others.



The sixth contribution the paper brings is related to synthesizing the funding options of Member States for the period 2021-2027 into a single document, which includes the available funding options through the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027 and the Next Generation EU (NG-EU) program, categorized by headings, domains, programs, or funds, with direct references to relevant information on the respective websites where these options can be accessed.

The seventh contribution is the set of innovative approaches identified to improve the communication process between authorities and beneficiaries, which can serve as a useful tool for developing effective communication strategies tailored to the needs of beneficiaries.

The eighth contribution is that the paper proposes an approach to communication in European funding from a marketing perspective, despite the regulated nature of the field. It has been shown that by applying specific marketing techniques, favorable attitudes, opinions, and behaviors can be generated regarding the access to European funds, and possible coordinates for an innovative approach to communication in the field have been identified. Furthermore, the field has been analyzed from the perspective of the external environment, the marketing microenvironment, and the marketing mix.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

European funding in Romania represents a **real and tangible opportunity** because it contributes to improving the quality of life in communities that are successful in attracting this type of funding. At the same time, it poses a challenge because the process of attracting and utilizing these funds can often be complex. This research has highlighted certain aspects of communication and captured nuances and details of the relationship between beneficiaries of European funds and the authorities responsible for managing these funds. Throughout the research, new questions and directions for exploration have emerged regarding how the communication process between beneficiaries and authorities can be improved.

A first future research direction could be the further exploration of information asymmetry theory in the field of European funding in Romania, considering that the qualitative study has revealed only a small part of the issues related to sources of mistrust in the beneficiary-authority relationship. Considering the limitations of the conducted research, it may be worth reiterating them in future activities, both among communication specialists and especially among the authorities responsible for managing European funds in Romania.

Another future research direction could involve investigating the perception that beneficiaries of European funds who are "*public institutions*" have about communication with authorities in Romania, starting from the premise that in the case of public institutions, the perception is better than that of beneficiaries who are "*commercial companies*" or "*NGOs*". **Another direction of research** could examine to what extent the perception of communication is influenced by certain independent variables (experience in projects funded by European funds, legal form of the organization, role within the organization, project duration, age, gender, education).

A new research direction could investigate the extent to which there is a direct link between communication with authorities and the intention to access European funds. Additionally, the analysis could explore how the obstacles in the authority-beneficiary communication and the preference for a particular communication tool vary depending on the project duration.

Other research directions could start from general questions such as:

- In which development regions is the perception of communication predominantly positive? What do the authorities in those regions do regarding communication that leads to a positive perception?
- To what extent is there a connection between the preference for a specific communication tool and the MFF/development region in which the project was implemented?
- Can a connection be identified between the development region, the level of education, and the willingness to access European funds?
- To what extent do the competencies of employees in the authorities responsible for managing European funds influence the communication process between beneficiaries and the authorities in Romania?

DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

The research findings were disseminated through their publication in ISI-indexed scientific journals, in articles published in internationally indexed databases, as well as through participation in relevant conferences in the field. This dissemination strategy enabled sharing the discoveries of the research with the academic community and those interested in the subject. Through these communication channels, contribution was made to the advancement of knowledge and the development of scientific debates in the field of financing through European funds in Romania.

Articles published in ISI-indexed journals:

1. Turcas, I., Popa, D., Maican, C., **Muşa (Piuaru), B.A.**, & Grigoroiu, M.C. (2023). **Universities in the process of co-working with the labor market.** *Amazonia Investiga*, 12(63), 330-340. <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2023.63.03.31>
2. **Piuaru, B.-A. M.**, & Tescaşiu, B. (2022). **Innovation in communication in the European funding process.** *Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence*, 16(1), **610–620.** <https://doi.org/10.2478/picbe-2022-0058>

Articles published in internationally indexed databases:

1. **Musa (Piuaru), B.-A.** (2023). **Communication as an Influencing Factor for the Absorption Rate of European Funds in Romania.** *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov. Series V: Economic Sciences*, 16(65), 29–38. <https://doi.org/10.31926/but.es.2023.16.65.1.4>
2. Tescaşiu, B, **Piuaru, B. A.**, Grigoroiu, M. C., Ţurcaş, I. (2022). **Graduates and Employability – A Quantitative Research at the Tertiary Level.** *Journal Of Smart Economic Growth*, 7(3), <https://jseg.ro/index.php/jseg/article/view/209/131>

Participation in conferences/presentation of papers at conferences:

1. International Conference „Inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Challenges, measures and solutions”, 26.05.2023, Braşov, România, **“From opportunity to challenge in European funded projects in Romania. A perspective of the beneficiaries”**, **Musa (Piuaru), B.-A.**
2. 30th International Economic Conference IECS 2023, 25 – 27.05.2023, Sibiu, România, **“Impact evaluation of new sustainable cities and communities’ policies in the hospitality and service businesses in Brasov region of Romania”**, Draghici, S. I., Turcas I., Tescaşiu, B. & **Musa (Piuaru), B.-A.**
3. 3rd Edition of the International Conference – Modern Trends in Business, Hospitality, and Tourism. Sustainable Approaches and Business Challenges in Times of Crisis, 4-6.05.2023, Cluj, România, **“Factors influencing the consumption of organic coffee and the level of ethical consumerism”**, Şerbanescu, I. M., Turcas I., Tescaşiu, B. & **Musa (Piuaru), B.-A.**



4. International Conference "Risk in Contemporary Economy" (RCE 2023), 21 - 22 aprilie 2023, Galaţi, România, **"The wine industry in Romania – a customer behavior perspective"**, Turcas I., Tescaşiu B. & **Musa (Piuaru), B.-A.**
5. The 17th International Conference on Business Excellence Rethinking business: Sustainable leadership in a VUCA world în secţiunea Social Innovation And Entrepreneurship Ecosystem, 23-25.03.2023, Bucureşti, România, **"The role of Romanian Startup Hubs – a bridge between a business idea and the reality of the economic sector"**, Ion, S., Turcas, I., **Musa (Piuaru), B.-A.** & Tescaşiu, B.
6. Inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Challenges, measures and solutions, secţiunea Recent advances in economics, 27.05.2022, Braşov, România, **"The absorption rate of European funds in Romania. An analysis of its evolution from accession into EU until the COVID-19 pandemic"**, **Musa (Piuaru), B.-A.** & Tescaşiu, B.

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