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Study of the Perception of Beneficiaries Regarding the Way in Which the Activity in the Field of Accessing European Funds in Tourism in Romania is Planned

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Abstract

In the period 2007 - 2013, many people in Europe turned their attention to accessing funds, particularly in tourism. They applied for various projects through which they could either build housing, nutrition, recreation units, or improve the tourism structures they owned. In this paper, we have developed a qualitative research using the semi-directed interview method and the interview guide as a tool. We have conducted the research over several years, until 2019, and included seven beneficiaries after a pre-selection that took into account some criteria. Beneficiaries have often mentioned that they had difficulties when it came to accessing European funds in tourism, or that

they had not been provided with all the information they need during the implementation of the project from the outset.

Keywords: EU Funds Absorption Share, Empirical Research, Planning Activities Process, Tourism, Tourism Marketing.

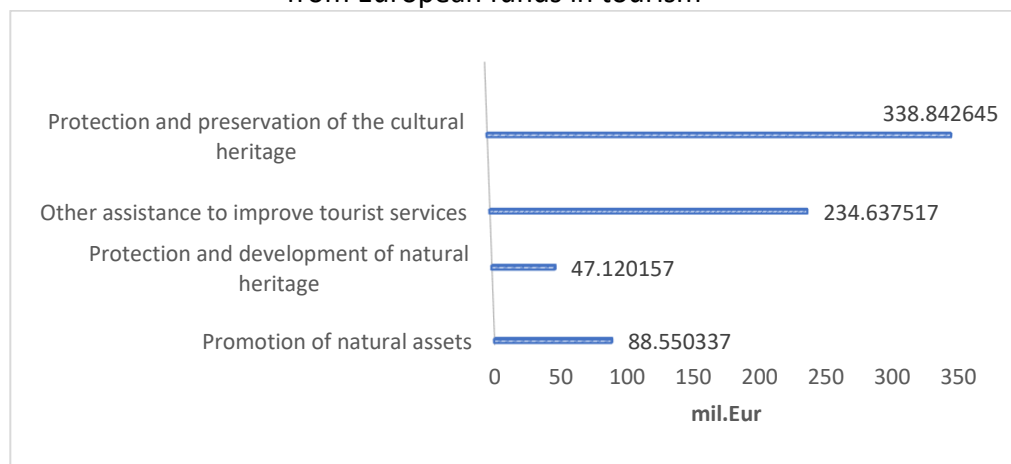
Introduction

In order to have a clearer picture of the budgets that have been allocated by the European Union in tourism in Romania, we have studied the spent amounts at closure for each development region within the different priorities. In this analysis, we studied the following areas of interest:

- Promotion of natural assets
- Protection and development of natural heritage
- Other assistance to improve tourist services
- Protection and preservation of the cultural heritage

Following the analysis, we noticed that the highest amounts were used for the development of the projects within the topic of interest *“Protection and preservation of the cultural heritage”* (338.84 million Euros). On the other hand, the beneficiaries from Romania also showed interest for other axes, which gave them the opportunity to develop various tourist services in Romania *“Other assistance to improve tourist services”* (234.63 million Euros). *“Promotion of natural assets”* was another area of interest for beneficiaries in Romania, so that the total spent amount at closure was 88.5 million Euros. For the projects developed within the priority *“Protection and development of natural heritage”*, the budget used was lower compared to those mentioned above, the total value amounting to 47.1 million Euros.

Fig 1 – The amounts that were used in Romania for the development of the projects financed from European funds in tourism



Source: cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu

In order to have a complete picture of the use of these amounts in the development regions, we conducted a more detailed analysis through which we identified the development regions in which the largest budgets were used, and the development regions in which the amounts attracted were lower.

The table below shows that, for the priority "*Promotion of natural assets*", the Bucharest Ilfov region used the largest budget (40.69 million Euros), followed by the South Muntenia region, where the amounts used amounted to 10.65 million Euros. From the data below, it can be seen that the other development regions used smaller amounts for the projects they implemented. Thus, 8.66 million Euros were spent in the Central Region, the amount used in the North East for the projects in this priority amounted to 8.17 million Euros, while the value amounted to 6.22 million Euros in the North West region. The development regions in which the lowest values were used for this priority were: the South-West Oltenia Region (4.89 million Euros), and the West Region (3.39 million Euros).

Analysing from the perspective of the priority (activities supported) "*Protection and development of natural heritage*", it can be seen that the amounts spent were different in the development regions. The South Muntenia and North-West Regions showed a higher interest for projects developed within this field, the spent amounts at closure amounting to 10.31 million Euros, and 9.33 million Euros, respectively. Quite high budgets for the projects developed within this priority were also attracted by the South-West Oltenia Development Region (8.76 million Euros) and the South-East Region (8.71 million Euros). The projects that used the smallest amounts were implemented in the Central Region (6.19 million Euros) and in the West Region (3.79 million Euros).

Another aspect that we studied in this analysis refers to the budgets that were used in the development regions of Romania for the projects developed within the priority "*Other assistance to improve tourist services*". Following the analysis, we noticed that the highest amounts were recorded in the Development Regions: South-West Oltenia (46.39 million Euros) and South-East (44.38 million Euros). On the other hand, quite high budgets for the implementation of projects financed from European funds were also spent in the development regions North-East (39.55 million Euros), Central (33.74 million Euros) and North-West (22.02 million Euros). The development regions that used the lowest amounts for these projects were: Bucharest-Ilfov (18.64 million Euros), South-Muntenia (17.10 million Euros) and West (12.77 million Euros).

The last priority to be analysed was "*Protection and preservation of the cultural heritage*". Thus, we wanted to see what amounts were spent by beneficiaries in the development regions in order to implement the projects that targeted this field of interest. Following the analysis, it was observed that the largest budget was used in the North-East Region, amounting to 72.56 million Euros. Quite high amounts were also used in the South-East (57.64 million Euros), North-West (55.48 million Euros), and Central (46.28 million Euros) Development Regions. Lower values for the projects developed within this area of interest were used within the development regions: South-Muntenia (27.32 million Euros), Bucharest-Ilfov (23.50 million Euros), and West (20.75 million Euros).

Table 1 - 2007-2013 Raw data on the classification of cohesion (from closure reports)

Priority	Location	Amount (mil. Euros)	TOTAL (mil. Euros)
Promotion of natural assets	South-East	5.842894	88.550337
	Bucharest-Ilfov	40.692582	
	North-East	8.17178	
	South-Muntenia	10.658663	
	North-West	6.22596	
	West	3.395738	
	Central	8.666123	
	South-West Oltenia	4.896597	
Protection and development of natural heritage	West	3.793129	47.120157
	Central	6.19692	
	South-Muntenia	0.92629	
	South-East	8.719843	
	North-West	9.332542	
	South-West Oltenia	8.761317	
	South-Muntenia	9.390116	
Other assistance to improve tourist services	Bucharest-Ilfov	18.643405	234.637517
	Central	33.741319	
	North-East	39.559601	
	North-West	22.022099	
	South-Muntenia	17.10973	
	South-East	44.386566	
	South-West Oltenia	46.398361	
	West	12.776436	
Protection and preservation of the cultural heritage	Bucharest-Ilfov	23.506357	338.842645
	Central	46.28598	
	North-East	72.569334	
	North-West	55.484119	
	South-Muntenia	27.323705	
	South-East	57.647225	
	South-West Oltenia	35.272918	
	West	20.753007	

Source: cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu

Literature Review

The results of the planning process depend to a large extent both on the size of the company and on the way in which the delivery of products/services is carried out on the market. In an organisation where employees are subordinated to a certain formal system, or where they have the opportunity to carry out any activities they want, or where creativity is lacking, the planning activity is difficult to implement. This process is successful when the company offers employees the opportunity to have initiatives and innovate constantly (McDonald, 1998).

In order for the marketing planning activity to be better understood by the employees of the organisation, it is ideal to have it tested before the implementation process. Thus, Piercy (2002) mentioned that three interconnected dimensions are identified in the marketing planning process, which influence the proper implementation of the marketing planning process:

- *The analytical dimension*, comprising a series of techniques, procedures, systems and plan models;
- *The behavioural dimension*, which refers to the nature of the participants and the motivation and commitment of the team members;
- *The organisational dimension*, which focuses on information flows, structure, processes, management style and culture.

Thus, the results obtained from the implementation of marketing planning depend to a large extent on how these dimensions are managed and how they interact with each other. If one of these dimensions changes or is influenced by various external factors, the effectiveness of the planning activity is diminished.

Gilligan and Wilson (2003) mentioned that the following benefits can be obtained after the implementation of the planning process in the organisation:

- The marketing planning process causes managers to develop their thinking. Thus, it gives them the opportunity to analyse the environment in which the company operates, and to determine how they can take advantage of opportunities and reduce environmental threats.
- The staging of the planning process causes managers to think in detail about organisational capabilities, priorities, objectives and policies.
- If the objectives are set clearly and realistically, they can lead to increased organisational performance and improved control;
- The company's plans often lead to the coordination of the company's efforts and to a much more efficient use of the goods;
- If planned correctly, marketing planning can help managers in situations where unexpected changes occur in the environment in which the company operates;
- Marketing planning has the role of better managing human resources in the enterprise, so that each person knows at all times what their responsibilities are.

McDonald and Wilson (2011) mentioned that the results of the planning activity are quickly reflected in the activity carried out in the organisation. The correct development and implementation of marketing planning in the enterprise can lead to the identification of competitive advantages and their use to face the competition in the market, can improve the communication activity in different departments, can reduce conflicts between employees, and can support the organisation in its targeting of the market.

Berkowitz et al. (1992) mentioned that the planning activity can often experience a series of problems which are generated most of the times by the poor management of the activities carried out. These issues are often reflected in the results following the implementation of the planning process. Thus, when the plans made in the organisation place little emphasis on hypotheses about environmental factors and conditions regarding competitors, the strategy may suffer. In addition, plans should be based on the needs and desires of consumers, and not the immediate obtaining of a certain profit.

Methodology

Problem Identification and Defining the Purpose of the Research

Between 2007 and 2013, many people turned their attention to accessing European funds in tourism, carrying out various projects through which they had the opportunity to either build accommodation, food, leisure units, or improve the structures they owned.

However, the statistical analysis carried out over time has shown that the absorption of European funds in this area has not seen a permanent increase, as it is affected by many external factors. Beneficiaries have often mentioned that they had difficulties when it came to accessing European funds in tourism, or that they had not been provided with all the information they need during the implementation of the project from the outset. Previous research in this area has shown that the projects bring a number of benefits to both beneficiaries and local administrations in the communities where they are implemented.

Given the impediments that the beneficiaries encountered during the development of the projects, we decided to carry out a research among them to identify the efficiency of the projects financed from European funds in this field.

Establishing Research Objectives

The research objectives were established in correlation with the decision-making problem and the purpose of the research. These were grouped into two categories:

- *Identifying the perception of the beneficiaries regarding the evolution of the field of accessing European funds in tourism;*
- *Identifying the opinion of the respondents regarding the way in which the process of accessing projects financed from external funds in tourism during 2007-2013 was carried out;*

Selecting the ways to Gather Information

In this research, we chose to use the semi-guided interview. Thus, in order to collect the data, it was necessary to have an operator and an interviewee. The discussion was guided by the existence of an interview guide which included the main topics discussed, namely: "Accessing European funds in tourism", and "Accessing European funds in the opinion of the beneficiaries". The topics were presented from the beginning to the interviewees so that they could become familiar with the subject of the interview. The duration of each interview ranged from 30 to 45 minutes.

Sample Composition

To have a clearer picture on the analysed subject, seven in-depth interviews were conducted among those who have accessed so far at least one project funded by European funds in tourism. The beneficiaries' answers gave us clear information about the projects they carried out, the problems they encountered, as well as the ways in which they want to improve their activity in the future.

Recruitment of Participants

For the recruitment of participants, we conducted a selection questionnaire, which aimed at filtering respondents and selecting primarily those who have accessed at least one project funded by European funds in tourism.

Preparing the Conditions for Carrying out the Information Gathering Stage

For the smooth running of the semi-guided interview and to be able to easily analyse the data provided, we used a voice recorder. It recorded the discussions with the project beneficiaries, and was the basis of the data processing and analysis process. In addition, a notebook was used to note the main ideas mentioned by the interviewees.

Gathering of Information

The qualitative research was carried out between February 2016 and June 2016. We repeated the research regularly on the same respondents until February 2019-June 2019, using the same methods and tools, referring also to the past period and making a comparison on the absorption in 2007-2013, and the subsequent absorption rate in the period 2016-2019. The key findings were still very similar to the past qualitative research, and people responded that was it was better then, as compared with the 2019 European fund programs. During the conduct of the interview, the non-directive techniques were observed. However, the interview was active with questions presented progressively, so as to allow the interviewee to have the opportunity to answer in sequence. After the interview was completed, the data obtained were processed, analysed and interpreted.

Results

A first objective of this paper was to identify the opinion of the beneficiaries of European funds in tourism on the way in which the process of accessing the projects financed from European funds took place in the period 2007-2013. In this research, seven in-depth interviews were conducted. The age of the participants ranged from 40 to 60 years. The interviewees last graduated a bachelor's or master's program. In terms of interest, many study participants mentioned tourism, agriculture, fishing or travel.

All the interviewees said that they like to travel and travel most of the time to tourist destinations to relax, to get to know new cultures or for business reasons. One of the beneficiaries said: "I really like to travel. Most of the time I go on holiday to relax and discover new places" (Expert 1). Another interviewee said the following: "I travel quite often. I often try to mix business travel with leisure. I mix business with pleasure." (Expert 2). On the other hand, Expert 3 viewed travel as an effective means by which someone can relax and learn at the same time: "I travel most of the time to learn. I like to visit and learn about other cultures." Expert 4 said that travelling is often the only way to get to spend time with the family: "Time is limited, and that's why I don't have time to communicate very often with my family. I like to travel, because that's the only way I can spend time with my family." Expert 5 mentioned the following reasons: "I like to travel to enjoy nature and all that is beautiful around me." Expert 6 had almost the same opinion: "I choose to travel to relax and enjoy some free days." On the other hand, Expert 7 was of a different opinion, saying that: "I like to travel and visit new places. I try to visit a different destination every holiday."

Regarding the destinations preferred by the interviewees, some of them mentioned that they prefer destinations in the country, while others opt for trips abroad. The reasons behind this decision are varied. Those who travel to Romania consider that our country has a great tourist potential, and, for this reason, they prefer to travel domestically. On the other hand, those who prefer to travel abroad consider that tourist services are of a higher quality and that they have the opportunity to discover new cultures. In addition, through these trips, they have the opportunity to show their family the beauties of other lands. Regarding the destinations where the beneficiaries have the opportunity

to spend their holidays, most mentioned the seaside and mountain resorts in the country, as well as tourist destinations in Greece, Croatia, Spain or Italy.

A first objective of this research was to identify the opinion of the interviewees on the evolution of the field of accessing European funds at national level. Thus, some of them consider that in the period 2007-2013 the evolution of the field of accessing European funds was upward, while others were of the opinion that it was sinusoidal, marked by upward and downward trends. Therefore, Expert 2 said: "From my point of view, the evolution was upward. Even if there were periods in which the degree of absorption was not very high, overall, the evolution was ascending." Expert 3 was of the same opinion: "I think that in the period 2007-2013 the evolution of the field of accessing European funds was upward. In some areas, the registered degree of absorption exceeded expectations." On the other hand, Expert 1 was of the opinion that the evolution of this field was sinusoidal: "I think that the evolution was sinusoidal. There were moments when the degree of absorption was high, and moments when it registered quite low values." Expert 4 was of the same opinion: "The evolution was sinusoidal due to the blockages that occurred in this field." Expert 5 stated the following: "From my point of view, the evolution has been on an upward path since 2007." Expert 6 was of the same opinion, and argued: "I think that the evolution was upward, although there have been times when there was a decrease in the overall absorption rate." The last expert participating in the study was of the opinion that the evolution of the field of accessing European funds in tourism was sinusoidal: "If I am to analyse the whole period, I think that the evolution was sinusoidal. There were times when the absorption rate was high, and times when it recorded quite low values."

Regarding the way in which tourism would have evolved in Romania in the absence of the possibility to access European funds, all beneficiaries considered that it would have gone in the same direction, but the results would not have been as visible. Thus, Expert 2 said: "External financing has been beneficial both for us and for the development of tourism in general." On the other hand, Expert 1 stated: "The financial resources obtained from the projects financed from European funds have greatly helped the beneficiaries to develop and provide quality services. This has quickly led to an increase in the number of tourists in certain areas." Expert 3 considers that European funds have helped to increase the visibility of certain tourist destinations: "These projects have improved the image of certain destinations and led to an increasing number of visitors." Expert 4 considered the following: "I do not know exactly in which direction our country would have gone in the field of tourism, but I think that the projects financed from European funds have contributed to a great extent to the development of this field." Expert 5 was of the opinion that the evolution of tourism would have been the same, although some of the investments made during this period may not have taken place: "From my point of view, I think that the evolution of tourism would have been the same. It is possible that, in the absence of funding in this area, some of the investments made in infrastructure or accommodation or leisure units may not have been made." Expert 6 was of the same opinion: "(...) I think that the evolution would have been the same. It is possible that in the absence of funding (...) some of the beneficiaries would have turned to this field of activity." Expert 7 stated: "I believe that the evolution would have been in the same direction. Tourism is evolving anyway. The projects carried out in this area have helped the beneficiaries to carry out their plans."

In terms of the opinion of the interviewees regarding the development regions in which the most projects financed from European funds in tourism were implemented, the opinions were divided. Thus, some of them mentioned the Central region, some the North-East region, while others

were of the opinion that most of the projects financed from European funds were oriented towards the South or North-West part of the country. Analysing from the perspective of the areas where the least projects financed from European funds in tourism were implemented, the specialists mentioned the South-East, North-East or South-West regions.

Expert 2 said the following: "From my point of view, most of the projects were oriented towards the Central region. I think that most European funds in tourism have been implemented there. The fewest I think have been implemented in the North-East." Expert 1 stated: "As far as I know, a fairly high number of projects have been contracted in the North-East region. I think that a smaller number of projects financed from European funds in tourism have been allocated in the South-East part of the country." On the other hand, Expert 3 added: "In the South of the country, a lot of resources have been allocated both for promotion and for other projects aiming tourism. Less funds have been allocated in the North-East region." Expert 4 considered the following: "Many projects have been approved in the Central region, as I recall. I think fewer have been implemented in the South-East region." Expert 5 had the following opinion: "I think that most of the projects financed by European funds in tourism were allocated to the Central region, while fewer were directed to the North-East." Expert 6 had a similar opinion: "I think that most projects have been implemented in the Central part of the country and in the North-West region. I think that few have been implemented in the South-West." Expert 7 mentioned the following regions: "From this point of view, I think that many projects have been implemented in the North-West region, while a smaller number have been implemented in the southern part of the country."

Analysing from the perspective of the regions towards which European funds should have been directed in tourism, the opinions of the interviewees were divided. Thus, the mentioned development regions were: West, South-West, South-East or North-East. Expert 1 said: "From my point of view, these projects should have been targeted mainly at the West region where a large number of tourist attractions converge." Expert 2 had the following opinion: "I think that these projects should have been allocated to the North-East part of the country, where the number of projects implemented was rather low." Expert 3 considered that they should have aimed at improving coastal services: "Perhaps these projects funded by European funds in tourism should have been targeted at the coastal part of the country as well, in the South-East region, in order to improve the services provided in these destinations." Expert 4 was of a different opinion stating: "Following the articles I read, I believe that these projects financed by European funds in tourism should have been oriented towards the South-West region, where investments were not very significant and the results obtained were not significant." Expert 5 considered that European funds in tourism should have been directed in particular to the South-Muntenia region: "I think that some of these funds should have been directed to the South-Muntenia Region." Expert 6 was of a different opinion, stating: "From my point of view, most projects should have been implemented in the South-East region in order to develop the coastal regions." Expert 7 considered that an area with potential is the North-West region, therefore European-funded projects should have been targeted at these destinations: "I believe that most projects should have been targeted at the North-West region. It is an area with a fairly high tourist potential."

In terms of the components of the tourist product towards which most of the projects implemented from European funds were oriented, the beneficiaries considered that most of them targeted both accommodation and leisure. Thus, Expert 1 added: "I think that most projects financed from European funds in tourism aimed at improving accommodation. This is what I read in some

reports.” On the other hand, Expert 2 considered the following: “(...) Most resources from external funds were allocated to accommodation and leisure facilities. Their improvement was aimed at attracting more tourists.” Expert 3 was of the opinion that the allocation of projects from external sources was most often aimed at improving the activity in accommodation units: “I think that most of them were oriented towards the accommodation part. I know a lot of people who accessed funds to build a guesthouse.” Expert 4 was of the same opinion stating: “Most projects targeted accommodation units in different tourist destinations.” Expert 5 considered the following: “I think that most were allocated to accommodation, to build guesthouses.” Expert 6 was of the same opinion, saying: “If we are to analyse the total investments made from European funds in tourism, I think that most of them were aimed at building new accommodation units.” Expert 7 stated: “From what I have heard, most projects financed from European funds have been oriented towards the development or improvement of accommodation and leisure units.”

Analysing strictly from the point of view of the forms of tourism towards which these projects were oriented, most mentioned balneary tourism or mountain tourism. Expert 4 considered the following: “If we look at it from this point of view, I think that most of them were aimed at mountain and balneary tourism.” Expert 2 was of the same opinion: “From what was announced in the media, I have understood that a large part of these external funds has been allocated to improve accommodation in balneary or mountain areas.” Expert 7 had the same opinion, noting: “Overall, I think that most of them were oriented towards mountain tourism, where a lot of accommodation and leisure units were built.” Expert 1 stated the following: “These projects financed from external funds targeted the activity carried out mainly in balneary areas.” Expert 3 was of the same opinion: “From what I have heard, most of the projects financed from European funds have been oriented towards the areas where balneary tourism is practiced.” Expert 6 said: “I think most targeted the balneary tourism side.” Expert 5 considered the following: “Most of them targeted balneary tourism, although no concrete and real data were provided on the importance of this form of tourism in the country.”

Analysing the beneficiaries’ opinion on the main strengths, weaknesses, obstacles as well as the ways in which the results obtained from the implementation of the projects can be highlighted, the opinions of the interviewees were different. Regarding the strengths, they considered that the allocated financial resources contributed both to the development of tourism in the area, to the increase of jobs, to the development of infrastructure, and to the improvement of the promotional activity. In terms of weaknesses, they mentioned a number of factors that are related to the legislative part, the institutional part, the organisational part or the financial part. Regarding the obstacles that most often prevent beneficiaries from accessing European funds or carrying out their projects in good conditions, the interviewees mentioned the legislative, financial or organisational obstacles. Studying in terms of the impact that these projects had on the activity carried out in the development regions where they were implemented, the interviewees mentioned that they contributed to the development of tourism in the area. In addition, the main ways through which beneficiaries have the opportunity to improve their results from their implementation are: accessing new funds through projects carried out in 2014-2020, obtaining certain tax facilities, obtaining other sources of external funding. Expert 2 mentioned the following: “The main strengths of projects financed by European funds in tourism are: their contribution to the development of tourism in the areas where they were implemented, and increasing the number of jobs. The weaknesses are: the difficult funding process and the permanent change of legislation. With regard to the existing

obstacles in this area, I think it's about the financial and legislative obstacles, and think that the way in which the entire system is organised is deficient. Regarding the impact that these projects had on the activity carried out in the development regions, I think that the results obtained contributed to the economic and social development both in the destinations and in the development regions. In order to highlight the results obtained, beneficiaries can obtain various facilities or they can turn to other sources of external financing."

Other important arguments were also put forward by Expert 4, who stated the following: "From my point of view, I believe that these European funds allocated in tourism have contributed to a great extent to the improvement of the activity in this field. Excessive bureaucracy is the main weakness. In terms of existing obstacles, I think that the poor communication between the parties involved, as well as the legislation, often prevents the beneficiaries from accessing such European funds. Overall, I believe that these European funds have made a significant contribution to the development of the development regions. In order to highlight results obtained, beneficiaries should try to access other projects in the next period (2014-2020) that will support them the results obtained so far." Expert 5 considered the following strengths of the projects financed from European funds: "The most important strengths are: contribution to the development of the development regions where they are implemented, improvement of tourism in the area. I think the main weakness is the legislation. (...) I think that excessive bureaucracy is the one that prevents beneficiaries from accessing such projects." On the other hand, Expert 6 considered the following strengths: "(...) The main strength refers to the opportunity given to beneficiaries to put into practice their projects. As far as weaknesses go, I think that poor communication and lack of involvement are the ones that prevent the good development of these projects. (...) I think the main obstacle is the financing method and the fact that payments are not made on time." Expert 7 mentioned the following: "From my point of view, the results obtained from the implementation of these projects are those that contribute to the improvement of tourism in the area. That would be the strength. And as for the weaknesses, I believe that poor financing often prevents beneficiaries from continuing their work. (...) the lack of certain detailed information in the legislation often prevents such projects from being accessed and carried out in optimal conditions."

Another objective of this research was to identify the opinion of the interviewees on the sustainability period. Thus, they considered this period beneficial, because it is the one that often illustrates how viable the investment was. In addition, they were of the opinion that, very often, the objectives pursued are not really realistic and, therefore, what is being pursued should be established from the outset. In terms of the frequency with which the effectiveness of these projects should be measured, most mentioned that this should be done annually, as a shorter period would not be realistic and would not clearly illustrate how the targeted objectives were met. On the other hand, there were beneficiaries who also stated that the assessment should be carried out more frequently, in order to have an ongoing image of how the projects work.

In this context, Expert 2 mentioned: "If I am to analyse the importance of the sustainability period, I think that it is suitable to observe the evolution of a certain project financed from external funds. The objectives set in this period should be realistic, to stimulate and not to discourage beneficiaries. (...) In addition, the measurement of the effectiveness of the achievement of these objectives should be carried out annually in order to have a much clearer picture of the evolution." Expert 1 was of the same opinion considering the following: "The sustainability period is very important especially if the objectives are set correctly. It shows us how effective an investment has

been. I believe that the assessment should be done annually. It is difficult to assess the progress of a project in a shorter period of time.” Expert 3 considered that: “The sustainability period is usually difficult for beneficiaries because they no longer receive external support. Therefore, the objectives must be realistic and take into account external factors that influence this activity, especially in tourism. From my point of view, the assessment should be done annually.” Expert 4 mentioned, among others: “The sustainability period is important but the figures obtained during this period often do not reflect reality. The assessment should be done annually, and the objectives should also be correlated to what is happening at regional and national level.” Expert 5 stated: “From my point of view, this sustainability period is not relevant in certain situations. Thus, the objectives set are not relevant sometimes. (...) Their assessment should be carried out once a year.” Expert 6 had the following opinion: “(...) The sustainability period is very good because it illustrates how the objectives were achieved. However, I do not know to what extent these objectives are set correctly. As for the assessment, I think it is best to do it once a year or every six months.” Expert 7 was of the same opinion, stating: “From my point of view, the sustainability period is very important. It can measure important results if the objectives are set correctly. I think the assessment should be done once a year.”

Another objective of this research was to identify the opinion of the beneficiaries on how the process of accessing and implementing the projects they submitted went. Thus, from the analysis it was observed that all those who participated in the study so far submitted and implemented a single project in the development region. Among the main reasons that determined the beneficiaries to access projects financed from European funds in tourism were: the desire to improve the tourist services offered, the desire to run their own business in tourism, or obtain external financial resources to help them carry out a business. The beneficiaries carried out these projects in the following development regions: Central, South-West Oltenia and South-Muntenia Regions. Analysing from the perspective of the forms of tourism targeted by the beneficiaries through these projects, all interviewees mentioned that they pursued leisure, rest and recreation tourism. The main sources of information that the beneficiaries used to find out about how they can access various projects financed from external funds were: websites, specialised portals, existing legislation.

Strictly from the perspective of the main advantages that the interviewees obtained as a result of the projects, most of them mentioned: obtaining important financial resources, which offered them the possibility to develop the business, the possibility to purchase important materials, increase the visibility of the accommodation unit, the possibility of developing tourism in the area, as well as attracting a large number of tourists. Among the disadvantages, the interviewees mentioned the difficulty in obtaining funding, the high stress, the impossibility of fulfilling all the objectives, as well as the excessive bureaucracy. Expert 1 said: “From my point of view, the most important advantage is that I managed to obtain the financial resources to successfully complete the project I wanted, while the main disadvantage relates to excessive bureaucracy.” Expert 3 stated: “The main advantage is that I was able to purchase everything I needed for my business to grow. I think that the disadvantage is the uncertain legislation in certain situations.” Expert 2 considered: “Overall, I think that the main advantages are the fact that I was able to complete the project I wanted, even if the path was a difficult one. The financial resources helped me to a great extent to purchase everything I needed to get my business up and running. The main disadvantage is the lack of communication and the multitude of documents that need to be drafted.” Expert 4 agreed: “From my perspective, the main advantage is that I was able to obtain the financial resources I needed for my business. The

disadvantage is that, after completing the project, you have to draft a series of documents, and in the case of some I really don't understand their purpose." Expert 5 considered the following: "From my point of view, the most important advantage is that I was able to implement what I set out to do. I think that the disadvantage is too much stress." Expert 6 stated: "(...) The advantage was that I was able to develop the business I owned, and I think that the disadvantage was that I had to turn to other sources of funding until I received the financial resources from the project." Expert 7 had the following opinion: "I think that the advantage was that I contributed to the development of tourism in the area, while the disadvantage was that I did not have the opportunity to achieve everything I set out to do."

In terms of the obstacles encountered by the interviewees, both at the start of the accession process and later, most mentioned that they encountered problems in terms of legislation, but also in terms of excessive bureaucracy. Moreover, both at the start of the project and afterwards, the communication with those who managed the activity in this was deficient, which made the process of accessing the project difficult. Subsequently, the beneficiaries mentioned that they encountered some problems regarding the process of receiving the financial resources they needed to carry out the various activities. Expert 1 considered the following: "Analysing now at the end, I think that the most important obstacle was the inefficient way of allocating resources." Expert 2 was of the same opinion: "If we look strictly from the perspective of obstacles I have encountered, I believe that non-compliance with deadlines for the delivery of financial resources has often led to delays." Expert 3 had the following opinion: "I think that the legislation and the multitude of documents to be drafted were the biggest obstacles." Expert 4 was of a different opinion, saying: "The difficult transmission of information and the emergence of certain instructions after the development of projects are some of the most important obstacles." Expert 5 considered the following: "I think the most important obstacle is the lack of information and poor communication between the parties." Expert 6 had the same opinion, stating: "From my point of view, I think that the inefficiency of the funding process is what often prevents beneficiaries from accessing such projects." Expert 7 had a different opinion, stating: "(...) Usually in such projects, each beneficiary sets certain objectives, but the legislation, bureaucracy and other factors often prevent him from completing his plan."

Analysing from the perspective of the main methods used by the interviewees to highlight the results obtained, most mentioned that, so far, they do not have a clear picture on this aspect, but will probably try to draft other projects to support their investment in the next period.

In terms of the perception of beneficiaries on how web tools can help them communicate more easily both with customers and those within the Managing Authority, most mentioned that these would greatly facilitate the communication process. In addition, creating easy-to-use tools with a very short response time can improve this work. Expert 1 stated the following: "I believe that web tools have the ability to improve the activity in any field and especially in accessing European funds in tourism. They can facilitate the transmission and reception of information between beneficiaries and competent bodies as well as between them and their customers." Expert 2 was of the same opinion, stating: "From my point of view, an online tool should be developed to access European funds in tourism to facilitate communication with those working in this field. In this way, beneficiaries can receive answers more quickly to the questions they have. (...) On the other hand, beneficiaries can use websites, e-mail and other tools to communicate more easily with their customers and to send them their current offers." Expert 3 considered the following: "In my view, I believe that web tools could improve the communication process between beneficiaries and specialised staff. Thus, if

there were an integrated online system, beneficiaries could learn information from a single place. In addition, web tools can help them more easily promote the tourism services they offer to existing customers." Expert 4 stated: "Web tools facilitate communication regardless of the parties involved. Therefore, it would be necessary to develop web tools that are in line with the needs of the beneficiaries." Expert 5 considered that web tools are very important in this field, stating: "These web tools have the ability to facilitate the transmission and reception of information, regardless of who is involved in the communication process." Expert 6 stated: "From my point of view, it is very important that these web tools are used by both project beneficiaries and those from TNA or MA." Expert 7 stated: "I believe that these web tools have the ability to improve the communication process between beneficiaries and other stakeholders, as well as between beneficiaries and customers. They facilitate the transmission of information and make information more accessible."

Another objective of this research was to identify the intention of the interviewees to access such projects financed from European funds in the future. Thus, all those who participated in the study stated that they have not yet thought of such a step, but, if such an opportunity arises, they will probably take it into account. Expert 1 said: "I am thinking of obtaining other projects in the future even if I have not yet drawn up a very clear action plan. I have to analyse the existing tourism potential in each region, and then I can make a clearer decision." Expert 2 had the following opinion: "Projects financed from European funds represent an opportunity for the beneficiaries, as it was for me. If I were to develop such a project again, I think I would focus on the coastal area." Expert 3 had another option: "I haven't thought about this yet, but I would probably choose to implement a new project in a different area." Expert 4 said: "From my point of view, if I were to develop a new project, maybe I would focus on the Central region because there the potential is high and the number of tourists is quite high." Expert 5 said: "I haven't thought about this option so far, but maybe I would focus on the coastal area." Expert 6 had another opinion stating: "If I had to access such a project again, maybe I would opt for the Central or North-West region. I think that these are regions that have a fairly high tourist potential." Expert 7 had, to some extent, the same opinion, stating: "So far I have not had such an intention. If I had to choose now, I think I would opt for an investment in the mountain area."

Conclusions

Following this research, we could note that the opinions of specialists on how the process of accessing European funds took place in the period 2007-2013 were different. Thus, a large part of those who participated in the study mentioned that these projects funded by European funds helped them to implement a project they had.

However, accessing and implementing it was difficult due to existing obstacles. Among the most important obstacles, the beneficiaries mentioned: legislation, excessive bureaucracy, poor communication between the Managing Authority and the beneficiaries.

Regarding the opinion of the interviewees on how the process of accessing European funds in tourism has evolved, a large part of them considered that the evolution was upward, but there were also periods of decrease and reduction in the number of projects which have been accessed. In terms of the role of web tools in the communication between the beneficiaries and the Managing Authority, the beneficiaries considered that they contribute to a large extent to facilitate this process and to the transmission and reception of information. The information presented in this research is of particular

importance as it illustrates the opinion of the beneficiaries on the way in which the process of accessing European funds took place in the period 2007-2013.

The results obtained emphasize the following: the beneficiaries' opinion on how the field of accessing European funds evolved in general in Romania, the main barriers faced when accessing and implementing the projects, the main perceived benefits, and ways in which beneficiaries have sought to highlight the results obtained in the course of such projects.

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