

Summary

Novelty and importance of the topic approached. Science and practise in the field of regional development policy recorded recently at the European level a significant evolution and develops continually, on an upward trend, with a notable impact on all the participants to the economic and social life, requiring new concepts and practices in the national development policies and in the cohesion policy of the European Union. The focus is on building and implementation of coherent development strategies at the regional level, on improving planning and organization activities, elements that could generate visible improvements at the regional level.

The main goal of the regional development study is the identification of those factors that contribute to the development or evolution of a region. The regional studies proved the fact that regional development can't be triggered by only one factor. The factors that influence the regional development must be analyzed in correlation with their results. The main factors that influence the development or involution of a region are: the distribution of capital at the level of the national economies, as well as at the level of regional economies, the quality and size of the labour force from the respective region; the technological and infrastructural support that the region can provide in order to attract new investments; the local and regional economic market respectively its diversity.

The current research topic emerged also as a result of the accession of our country to the European Union. This much desired accession, into a much bigger and superiorly developed community, brought along a series of advantages among which structural instruments, accessible in order to meet the convergence goal.

The PhD thesis has as **general goal** the performance of a complex study in terms of the regional development policy and the increase of Romania's capacity to benefit from structural and cohesion funds not only in nominal terms, but also in terms of economic and social development.

The goals of the regional development policy can be considered from the perspective of the European Union, seen as a union of national entities, but also from the point of view of every member state apart, showing over time a combination trend of the regional goals with the structural ones, in order to support and promote the regional and national competitiveness.

Meeting the general goal of research required for the identification and accomplishment of some **goals specific** to the sector:

- The identification of the basic theoretical concepts in the field of regional development, including here different approaches presented in specialized literature in order to create a complex and complete theoretical framework;
- The presentation of the concepts specific to the European policies: the region, the regional development, the European regional development policy, the policy of economic, social and territorial cohesion, the cohesion and structural funds of the European Union;
- The identification through a comparative study of the quality practices in the field of the regional development policy in the member states of the European Union;
- The assessment of existing unbalances between the regions of Romania by the selection of some criteria of analysis of the disparities, in order to get relevant results. Thus, our intention was to catch the diversity of forms that the disparities may take: economic inequalities (reflected by GDP per capita, by earnings from wages and unemployment rate), and social inequalities of the standard of living, etc..
 - Unifactorial reflection of the regional disparities in the economic and social development of Romania – population occupied, unemployment level,

- GDP/capita, foreign direct investments;
 - Multifactorial analysis of economic integration effects and of implementation of the cohesion policy on the regions of development of Romania, by creating a synthetic index of the economic and social development;
 - Analysis of the regions of Romania in the spatial structure of the European Union and the reflection of the disparities of development.
- The analysis of implementing the cohesion policy in Romania, and finding solutions related to the reduction of territorial disparities, the increase of the absorption degree of the European funds and the accomplishment of economic and territorial cohesion between the regions of development.

A first approach within the thesis is the theoretical and methodological one, where I tried to cover the entire variety of the recent theories of regional science, to show the importance of regional planning as an instrument of coordination of the regional development strategy and come up with theoretical perspectives and empirical observations related to the regional dynamics in the European Union.

The next step was the statistic analysis of the available data and their summarizing, methods used for the preparation of the chapters. The most frequently used method was comparison/benchmarking, since the analysis was made within the timeframe 1998-2016 in terms of absorption, regional disparities in the economic and social development of Romania, assessing the position of the regions of development of Romania within the national complex, and also within the European community that we are part of. I opted for the creation of a multicriterial synthetic index obtained through the aggregation of more partial indices (economy, health, education, public utilities, standard of living). Hereinafter I showed the relation between the macroeconomic indicators of the metropolitan areas and those of the regions of development NUTS 2 in Romania, I studied the major differences at the level of the NUTS 2 regions in the European Union by the indicator GDP/capita and I highlighted the inequalities in the distribution of incomes in the countries of the European Union calculating the Gini coefficient. Moving on with the multifactorial analysis of the effects of economic integration and of the implementation of the cohesion policy on the regions of development in Romania, I used the cluster analysis in order to identify some patterns of development of the regions over time.

By the cluster analysis we intended, inside some series of data, the identification of groups (clusters) with elements as similar as possible inside a group and as different as possible between them, if these elements belong to another group. The cluster analysis provided us with the possibility to analyze similarities and differences between the elements that belong to a certain class, in order to group them under the form of some distinct classes between them and homogenous in the inside. Each variable inside the set of data analyzed is attributed to only one group, and the class of groups is a discrete and not ordered cluster.

In the first chapter named *"Conceptual, political and institutional approaches related to the administrative decentralization and regionalization"* I presented the fact that globalization and European integration changed the architecture of the Western European state, creating a new context for the substantiation of territorial policies. Although the regions are integrated in their national borders, they have become an important element in the European and international policies. Joining in their efforts, the regions tried to increase their influence in relation to the EU institutions and support their common interests by militating for the creation of some sustainable European policies.

The institutions are in a continuous evolution also due to the process of internationalization of the regional policy. Europe became a partner in terms of the regional policy, first of all by its important contribution to the national budgets in this sector, secondly by the reforms of this contribution. This contribution stood for, in a relatively short period of

time, an instrument with a very different functionality, dedicated, mainly, to financing the common programs carried out between the European Economic Community and the states that are part of it and between the Community and regions. Often, the territorial policy is decided even between more participants-partners, in particular when we deal with cross-border transactions. This vision must be in line with the consideration of the need to achieve bigger, global or international balances. The efforts to attract investments represent taking into account an indisputable inventory, that of internationalization of the markets and of existence of a unified European market. Investments don't create only jobs but bring also new technologies, can produce also commercial surpluses, and consequently, over time, new possibilities to invest. Due to these elements investments are stimulated in the European countries and even helped by public subsidies.

I showed the fact that the structure of the territory of the country, involving the regional dimensioning of the social and economic phenomena, stand for an important requirement for the creation of the "framework" of action of the regional policy. Without a grouping of the territory, according to some fundamental scientific and well-defined criteria, we can't take unitary measures and with a vision of perspective for the economic and social development of some areas facing with issues of unemployment, small incomes, important migration flows, depopulation etc., in order to ensure the national, social and economic balance.

Europe often stands for the regions as a source of material, financial support, for the economic development, by the presence of the structural funds and of other initiatives, but it's important the political dimension of this one, in the sense that Europe is used as a framework for the international image of the region, and even as a source of support for the cultures and languages that are in minority, in particular if this minority is threatened within the big states.

The regional cooperation policy is complex, since it combines and, at the same time, is dependent on more fields from the exclusive shared or complementary competence of the European Union. Therefore, regional policy stands for a connector between the priority objectives of the EU: economic and social cohesion, the application of the principle of subsidiarity and governance, sustainable development, exposed from the political and economic perspective, as well as from the point of view of the social and cultural one.

The second chapter "*States and regions in current Europe. The regional policy of the European Union*", has as main objective the acquaintance with the context of the regional development policy of the European Union, in general, providing an overview on the basic concepts, on the notions and specific terms, on the objectives and principles of this policy and on the stage, evolution and future development trends of the regional development policy of the EU. In this chapter I studied the means of division of the EU territory, as basis of the regional policy and I made an argumentation of the efforts of implementation of the regional development policies.

The economic, social and territorial cohesion policy includes all the actions of the European Union that aim to obtain a harmonious and balanced economic development of this one, in particular by the promotion of reduction of the development disparities between the different regions/states of the European Union, of the equality of chances and of the sustainable development. This will lead to increasing the competitiveness of the European Union and will trigger an increase in incomes, bringing thus benefits for the entire economy of the European Union.

In such a context, the connection between the regional development policy and the economic and social cohesion policy becomes very tight, sometimes becoming very difficult to make the difference between the two concepts. In many situations, the two are even

confused, presenting themselves as a regional policy which actually represents the economic and social cohesion policy.

From this point of view, I considered necessary to highlight the fact that regional policy is only a component of the cohesion policy, having its own objectives to follow by specific measures, objectives that are in a tight connection with those of the cohesion policy and to a larger extent, to the general, economic and social policy, promoted in the European Union.

The regional issues, by their nature and content, differ very much from one country to another, they being the result of some conditions and specific factors, that characterize each state, so that I considered useful to find out what is regional organization in the contemporary European states (for which I found information), so that we can identify the quality practices in the field of regional development policy in the member states of the European Union.

In the third chapter *"Regionalization of Romania, a prerequisite of deepening the economic integration in the European Union"* I presented the regions of development in Romania in the context of regional development policies of the European Union, making a chronological approach of the evolution of the regionalization process in Romania, emphasizing the current administrative territorial structure of Romania, the way in which strategic planning of the regional development policy is done and the institutional framework of managing the structural instruments in Romania.

In România, in order to perform the regional development policy – the legal framework is ensured mainly, by Law no. 151/1998 related to regional development, that sets the objectives, the institutional framework, the competences and the instruments specific to this policy.

The criterion of potential functional integration was at the basis of defining the regions of development in Romania, creating the eight regions of development around some polarizing centres (Iași, Timișoara, Craiova etc.). Complementary, we took into account also other criteria, such as: the criterion of complementarity of resources, of economic social activities, of the functional connections etc. Therefore, a region can't be defined if are not taken into account the criteria of economic efficiency, of social cohesion and of the time horizon.

The optimization of the functions of the territory stands for the most important argument of regional organization, the one that determines its necessity and motivates it in any circumstance. No other imperative, irrespective of its nature, can't balance against this than by the risk of distorting the entire process and its orientation on unsure coordinates.

The experience of the 2007-2013 programming period showed that European Union doesn't have the pretention of regionalization under the though form of dividing in administrative units. It is enough to identify the regions of development of the country, that have a similar economic and social structure so that the support granted to these ones from the structural funds to be well targetted on scarce economic realities and lead to the elimination of economic discrepancies between regions.

Taking into account the analysis performed we appreciate that the best solution, if territorial reorganization is motivated by increasing the level of absorption of the European funds and by building a framework favorable to the regional development, would be the one of maintaining the current eight regions of development. First of all they observe the old historic regions although they don't overlap perfectly to these ones, each of them including a metropolitan area with tradition, and the creation of the regions was made by the voluntary association of the component counties. Secondly, these regions correspond to the principle of administrative rationality, since they can be included in NUTS II.

Moreover, the current programming period (2014-2020), finds Romania with this formula of regional organization. Any modification, made during the implementation period,

would trigger unbalances in the absorption process of the structural funds. The experience of other states showed that regionalization against chronometer is not possible, that this can't be done in a hurry and that it can last decades until the political forces, and in particular the civil society that the administrative phenomenon influences, agree.

The second approach of the PhD thesis focused on the analysis of territorial convergence and of the economic and social disparities at the regional level, in Romania and in the European Union.

The importance of using the structural and investment funds for Romania in the current programming period is given by the possibility that, by accessing these funds, to be able to counteract the amplification of regional disparities and support the fair participation of the regions to the social and economic development process by increasing the competitiveness of the regions. The quality of member state of the European Union and the integration in the unique internal market, forces us to achieve an increased competitiveness. In this context, the structural and investment funds account for the most important source that Romania must benefit from in order to adapt to the changes and challenges of the quality of member state of the European Union.

The access to the structural and investment funds, as member state provides Romania the possibility to ensure a long term development of the regions, to make considerable investments in the transport infrastructure, to support rural development and so on, a fact that will lead to increasing the interest of the foreign partners, triggering this way a lot of effects in economy.

The globalization process, the ageing of the population, the phenomenon of serious immigration, the need to increase competitiveness, the creation of new jobs, stimulating research-development, the development of infrastructure, are real challenges for Romania, that our country must respond to, in partnership with officials at the national regional and local level, by a supported dialogue in the private and academic sector, in order to identify some practical and integrated solutions. In this context, the attraction of investment and European funds during the period 2014 - 2020 plays the role of transforming the challenges in opportunities.

Thus, the fourth chapter, named *"Convergence or divergence – revealing the regional development differences in Romania"* starts by assessing the existing unbalances, which required the selection of some criteria of analysis of the disparities, a typology of indicators in order to get relevant results. Therefore, we must point out the diversity of forms under which the inequalities appear: economic inequalities (reflected by GDP per capita, by variation of the economic activities, by earnings from salaries and unemployment rate), as well as social, political, cultural, geographic etc.

If the assessment of the territorial inequalities is often limited to revealing information to only one economic or social indicator, we appreciate that using some different indicators can determine different perspectives, on the same territorial unbalances. Thus I presented in the first part of the chapter an unifactorial reflection of the regional disparities in the social and economic development of Romania – population occupied, unemployment rate, GDP/capita, foreign direct investments.

Since each variant of comparison of the regions ensures a quantitative information reduced to only one characteristic of collectivity, the understanding of a phenomenon with a high complexity such as regional development requires the aggregated use of a high number of statistic indicators. Therefore, the economic theory prepared and tested different statistic methods: cluster analyses, the use of multicriterial hierarchy, the creation of indicators of concentration-diversification, the selection of some multicriterial synthetic indices, etc., out of which we opted for the creation of a multicriterial synthetic index, obtained through the aggregation of some partial indices (economy, health, education, public utilities, standard of

living).

The evolution of the economic space in the period analyzed doesn't show major changes in terms of the spatial structure of Romania: the model of polarized regional development consolidates itself more and more, that is dominated by the capital of the country, with the highest level of economic and social development, to which add those counties that have relatively big urban centres and with a more diversified economic structure (Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Constanța), the lowest capitalization of the economic and human potential characterizing the peripheral counties with a low level of urbanization. In these areas, the social and economic disfunctions accumulated have been even more emphasized by the demographic ones, in particular in the counties from the South of Muntenia, the migration of the youth contributing from few decades to increasing the demographic ageing, that, together with the low level of the education of the inhabitants contributed to emerging some areas with multiple disfunctions. Out of the new factors that led even to a more emphasized differentiation of regional development over the past 20 years we remind the increase of foreign direct investments, the strengthening of the position of small and medium enterprises and the activities of research and development.

In terms of the influence of the big urban agglomerations on the eight existing regions of development (NUTS 2) in Romania, we notice a tight correlation between the economic performances of the metropolitan areas and those of the region as a whole. Bucharest and Timișoara are the most eloquent cases of urban agglomerations that contributed to the economic development of the two regions of development that they are part of, Bucharest-Ilfov, respectively West, having a power of attraction traditionally higher than the other big cities. As a matter of fact, the social and economic disparities between the regions of Romania, evidently determined by the distance from the big urban agglomerations, this polarization phenomenon being specific to the countries less developed in Europe.

The study of regional disparities is completed in the end of the chapter by an analysis of the regions of Romania in the spatial structure of the European Union, that highlights the peripheral position of the Romanian regions, such as the existence of some unbalances of development still significant, in particular in relation to the regions of the Central and Western Europe. On the whole, the analysis of disparities by means of more statistic mathematical indices allowed to emphasize, at the level of the European regions, a process of decrease of the territorial inequalities. Consequently, we can expect that, in future, the regions of Romania to reduce gradually from the existing development differences.

The last chapter *"Romania's target for the achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion?"* makes a short evaluation of Romania's performances in the absorption of European funds in the period 2007-2016.

One of the reasons that determined Romania's option for the integration in the European Union is the desire to develop from the economic and social point of view. Each country intends to provide a standard of living as good as possible for its citizens, good life conditions, accessible and quality education, adequate healthcare possibilities, these goals being reflected in the option to be part of an economic formation with a bigger level of development and stability such as the EU (IER, 2017, p. 19).

For Romania, the accession to the EU had as results the development of commercial exchanges with other European states, the increase, as flow, as well as stock of foreign direct investments and the stimulation of development of entrepreneurship. In this sense, looking retroactively, we notice that during the timeframe 2007-2016 our country recorded a sensitive economic and social development, the GDP almost doubling in the 10 years, although a major economic and financial crisis took place during this period. At the same time, if we look at the GDP/capita related to the standard purchasing power, our country grew to around 60% of GDP of the average of EU-28, in 2007 hardly reaching 43% (IER, 2017, p.20-23) .

The development of Romanian economy produced also due to the absorption and use of European funds, whose impact on the main economic and social indicators of Romania for the timeframe 2009 – 2016 was definitely positive.

On the long term, the absorption of funds is important not only from the perspective of the potential impact on the development that they can generate, but also because it will ensure a solid position of Romania in the negotiation process of a consistent financial package for the following programming period.

We appreciate that the current territorial division of Romania in 8 regions of development and 41 counties is enough in order to handle effectively projects of regional interest.

There is considerable positive correlation between the quality of governance and the rate of absorption of the European funds. Thus, the governance act is one of the major determinants of the construction and management of institutional architecture and the one that potentiates the good functioning in the field of European funds.

From this perspective, the one of European funds' absorption, the importance of the quality of governance is higher in the less developed states from the EU, so that the support of achieving a good governance can trigger a positive impact of a superior intensity (if we make a comparison with the countries of the Western Europe) on the effective capacity of mobilization of the structural funds.

It's wrong, we appreciate, to consider that a new regionalization will solve for sure the issue of unequal territorial development and the one of the absorption of the European funds, we rather see the risk to intensify the interregional disparities. Following the research performed by comparison of the governance level in the EU states and of the absorption rate with the other European countries, I concluded that there is no sure, significant connection, between the absorption of funds and the administrative and financial decentralization.

We pass through a period of big challenges at the European level. Following a serious financial crisis, EU faced with flows of refugees that caused problems to the entire community but also to the European cooperation in general. Above all this, the decision of the United Kingdom triggered frictions in terms of European cohesion. Beside the internal tensions, EU must find solutions to other major global challenges, such as the ageing of the population and emphasized urbanization, climate changes, the structural modifications determined by the fast progress on the labour market.

It's obviously necessary the identification of solutions to these challenges. The existing cohesion policy approaches already many of these issues and determines the mobilization at the local and regional level, a vital element in order to obtain concrete positive results.

We notice that a series of challenges exceeded the national, institutional or political borders, namely: globalization, the mobility of the labour force, climate changes, a serious demographic drop, the importance of renewable sources, etc. In this context the cohesion policy was substantiated in a tight relation with the other community policies, such as the competitive policy, the state aid policy, of the protection of the environment, the policy in the field of transport, the promotion of innovation or in terms of the informational society. At the same time, the regional development policies, aimed to the modernization and increase of efficiency of public administrations to increase transparency and to achieve a quality administration.

Based on the analyses performed and of the results obtained, we can formulate few **recommendations and proposals** of measures related to the increase of the absorption degree of the European funds and in order to achieve economic and territorial cohesion between the regions of development, that we structured in the following paragraphs:

The economic, social and territorial policy – a look to the future

Currently, the development of regions is considered being one of the main factors that potentiates the economic growth of the countries; the regions are considered relevant players at the level of the European economy. The regions are different between them from the social, economic, territorial point of view, they have different advantages and weaknesses, they determine distinct opportunities for growth and development. The factors that determine the process of economic growth in a certain region, can create a lagging of the economic growth in another region, according to its specificity.

The economic, social, territorial cohesion policy, must observe the idea "one-size-fits-one", according to which the specificity and characteristics of a region can't be taken over and implemented in another region. We notice here the importance of planning and preparation of bottom-up development strategies, from the level of the region to the national level, so that the policies match the regional specific context in order to obtain beneficial effects at the level of the population and of the economic operators.

The recent evolutions of economic thinking identify the regions as being centers of economic growth, key points of a good governance, the best level to have organization and for the adoption of decisions.

The European structural funds stand for an adequate lever for the necessary structural reforms at the national level. In order to meet this challenge it's necessary the creation of tighter connections between the cohesion policy and the economic coordination of the Union and the use of some more effective instruments to make the structural reforms. From our point of view, beside the consolidation of ex-ante conditionalities, this requires a tighter and better organized interconnection with the recommendations specific to every country that can be implemented by the cohesion policy.

Our research proved that the cohesion policy records a maximum effectiveness when it is correlated with a national economic framework that potentiates growth, the stability of the business environment and the improvement of the administrative capacity. Therefore, it results from the research carried out, the idea that the connection between the cohesion policy and the objectives of the economic governance it would be good to be consolidated in the current programming period.

Obtaining tangible results is very important taking into account the pressure that the EU is submitted to. The new vision focused on results, that aims to the achievements and the impact of regional policy, reveals the importance that the institutional background has.

A cohesion policy that follows these preoccupations can stand for a policy that aims to the ensurance of an intelligent growth, sustainable and favourable to inclusion.

I appreciated as achievements and at the same time as future challenges for the cohesion policy:

Obtaining an economic integrated development. The research performed allowed us to jump to the conclusion that the EU cohesion policy had achievements on two dimensions at the regional level. On a first dimension, this policy passed from the objective of achieving major investments in infrastructure for the less developed regions, to the one of achieving endogenous growth through productivity and entrepreneurship for all the regions of development and, the most recently, to the objective of „smart specialization” by some regional innovation systems. On a second dimension, we notice that the cohesion policy includes social and environment objectives, following simultaneously the sustainable growth of regional economies and making social investments.

Governance on more levels. Based on the principle of subsidiarity and on the principle of partnership, the cohesion policy is coordinated on more levels, starting from consultation and communication, allowing at the same time, the adaptation of the regional

programs. To achieve the EU governance on more levels involves combining „the policy created at the local level” with hierarchical supervision and with granting support.

Lifelong learning and adaptation. The cohesion policy assumed a continuous learning and adaptation process, of using the data in order to improve regional planning and programming. Within the Union investments are oriented taking into account the differentiation of potential and of the regional strengths. The effectiveness of different programs is assessed more and more by meeting some targets, by studying some indicators, based on performing a comparative analysis and on monitoring.

Modifications in terms of demography. The EU cohesion policy grants importance to complex challenges of the migration phenomenon, under the circumstances that the refugees ask for new places to set, and the labour force circulates between the member states. At the same time, the European population grows old, so that the cohesion policy must include an innovating programming of the different places to set in order to be able to ensure lifelong social reforms.

Digitalization. The cohesion policy approaches complex regional and social issues, under the circumstances that the technological processes transform labour, the production and the consumption types. The occurrence of some digital unbalances are a threat for territorial and social cohesion taking into account the fact that investments will be made in urban agglomerations. The policy should potentiate the achievement of an „innovation favourable to inclusion” in order to provide improvements of the services performed in electronic format, to allow the perfection of competences and making social investments.

Territorial cohesion, a concept in progress

Our study shows that in our country and not only, the region was considered as an absorption instrument of the European funds, aiming to reduce territorial disparities. Beside this fundamental element that was at the core of establishing the regions of development as they are today, the researchers have the duty to identify the elements that express the regional specificity, to follow the way in which the regions can develop and, to find solutions and methods that can be used to obtain economic, social and territorial cohesion.

Since nations are considered too small to solve global issues appeared at the world level, but also too big to identify effective solutions to the issues that citizens have, the regional level stands for an optimal solution to cope with different challenges. The regions transformed into important players within global economy, being real centers of economic development and of increasing the standard of living. Although in specialized literature we found numerous definitions of the regions, considered from the perspective of geographic specialists, as well as of the economist researchers, we tried to limit the definition to the following key characteristics: the region stands for, first of all, a geographic area under the form of a territorial unit at the subnational level; secondly, the region has its own identity and shows a regional specificity, having, at the same time, the conscience of a territorial collectivity.

We showed that by the capitalization of the regional specificity, the regions must be the main target of the economic policies. Since the regions have their own economic, territorial, social and cultural structures, and are in different stages of development, it's necessary to identify and implement some distinct measures for every region, potentiating in this way the long term development of these regions. The high degree of heterogeneity of regions reveals the existence of different development needs.