EUROPEAN FUNDS – THE EDGE BETWEEN LACK OF INFORMATION AND LACK OF INTEREST

FONDURILE EUROPENE: LA LIMITA DINTRE LIPSA DE INFORMAŢIE ŞI LIPSA DE INTERES

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Abstract: *The authors present the findings of a research regarding the level of knowledge of the average people living in rural and urban areas about: national political decisions, European Union and European funds. The results of two surveys indicate that 50% of the respondents from the Timis County are not interested in matters considered of national importance. Many of them have some knowledge about EU funds, but not accurate enough to take documented decisions. The authors suggest that authorities should apply the EU commission directive regarding communication at all levels.*

Key words: *communication, information, interest, European Union, European Funds*

INTRODUCTION

One of the main concerns of the EU policy makers is the local and regional sustainable development. The improvement of the quality of life in rural areas represents one the most important objectives of the economical and social policy in 2007- 2013. Objective that might be attained through European funds, considered to be the most significant external financial resources that can be accessed by EU countries.

In 2009 we started a research in order to identify the extent to which European Union is successful in communicating to ordinary European citizens, its policy regarding European funds.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the early stages of our research, we analysed the most important documents on communication adopted by the Commission since 2001, to see how the European Commission manages the communication of its policy (Constantin: 2011).

Recent actions of the European Commission have been triggered by the results of the Eurobarometer opinion polls carried out in the past few years. They indicated that Europe's communication with its citizens has not kept the pace with the transformations of the EU. It was also revealed that people interviewed know little about EU and feel they have little say in its decision-making process. The results of the EU surveys indicated that most citizens see the European issues from a national perspective and learn about politics and political issues largely through their national education systems and via their national, regional and local media.

Along the years the European Commission has made efforts to implement new rules to improve communication, to give citizens greater access to the Community documents (White Paper on a European Communication Policy: 2006), to deliver information available in all official languages, at national and local level and to adapt the information to local needs and concerns (Action Plan, 2005).

The new communication approach of the Commission is citizen-centred, *at the service of the citizens.* It is first and foremost the responsibility of the public authorities in the Member States, i.e.: government, at national, regional and local level, to consult and inform citizens about public policy, including European policies and their impact on people's daily lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this context we considered useful to identify the level of knowledge regarding EU and EU funds, of the people living in the Timis County to see if this factor influences or not the low access rate of EU funds.

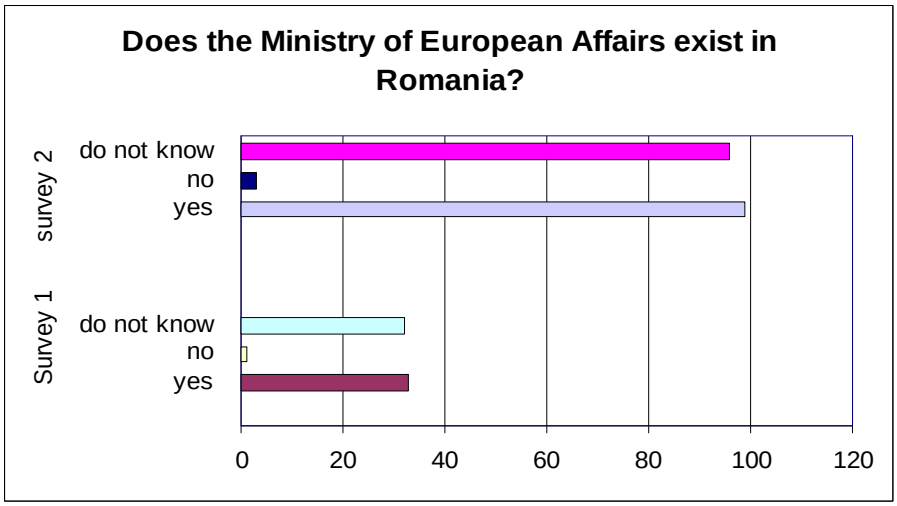
Two successive surveys have been carried out, in October 2011 and in February 2012, respectively, designed mainly to find out what people

think and know about EU and EU funding programmes.

The surveys consisted of several questions covering a wide range of issues. i.e.: awareness of the current social and political aspects, sources of information, general information on EU, etc.

In this article are going to focus only on our findings regarding the level of information of our subjects regarding political issues, EU and EU funds.

Our subjects, people living in the Timis County both in rural and urban areas, were asked if the Ministry of European Affairs exists in Romania or not (see Table 1 for the results).

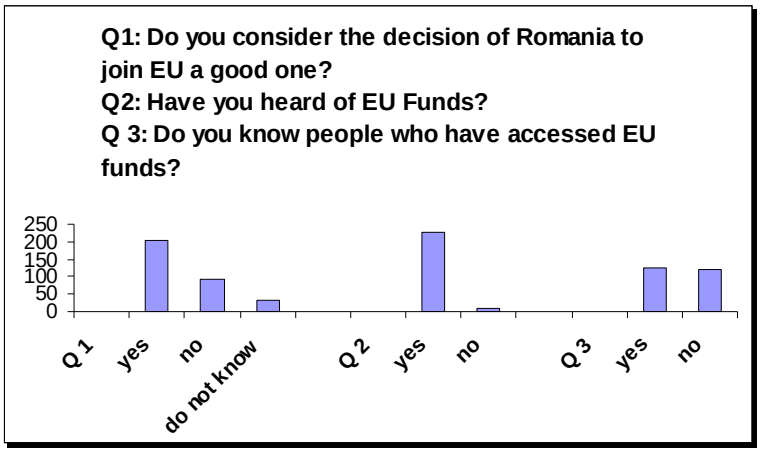


Survey 1, was conducted in 2011, two weeks after the foundation of the Ministry of European Affairs in Romania. The high percentage of negative answers prompted us to conduct a second survey. The results of Survey 1 were validated in February 2012. Again almost 50% of the subjects, people living in urban and rural areas, with ages ranging form 18-39, are either not informed or not interested in major national political decisions with impact on the Romanian society.

In the current financial situation, when Romania has come to pay its contribution to the budget of the European Union, but does not benefit much from European Funds, the decision of Romania to join EU is questionable

by certain groups.

To assess the respondents' point of view three specific questions were asked. They were intended to give us an insight on what our subjects think and know about EU and EU funds. The results obtained at the three questions are shown in Table 2.



The respondents were given the opportunity to express their point of view regarding the decision of Romania to join EU, at more than 4 years after the event. The percentage of those who either do not know or do not agree is rather high.

We think that this attitude might have some bearing of the way they see and learn about EU and EU funds.

The results of Question 2 and Question 3 show not only that the subjects know about EU funds but they also know people who have accessed them. The result of Question 3 is, to say the least, surprising as the fact that Romania does not access European Funds has been for years the most frequently broadcast piece of news on the European Union.

So far the results of the surveys indicate that there are a lot of people in the Timis County who have accessed EU funds and that our respondents have some information about EU and EU funds, but most of them are not informed or not interested in political decisions at the national level.

Next we intended to see the quality of the information on European

Union and European Funds.

The surveys had two open questions meant to give the respondents the opportunity to express their points of view on these issues. It is known the difficulty to interpret the answers to open ended questions.

At the question: *what do you think European Union is* we got extremely varied answers and many of the respondents chose not to answer.

As far as EU is concerned the differences between the surveys was not very big. Thus EU is seen by most of the respondents as an organisation/group of states/ union of states/association of states (93), from the same continent (25) that meets certain requirements (30) and act together to develop the economy (25) and to raise the living standard (70). They think that the Union was formed to have more financial power (20) and is based on mutual help (26) in order to develop internal and external activities (44). Others see EU as an economic and monetary union, an agreement between the European states to defend each other in case of war, economic crisis, etc.

In both surveys a small percentage of the respondents identify EU with the advantages of being an EU member state, i.e.: freedom of movement / working / learning wherever you like in the EU states, same currency, lack of borders, the opportunity for better economic, social and cultural development.

There was also a small percentage with completely different views on EU. In their opinion the only objective of EU is to improve the economic situation of Romania, to help it get out of the crisis and to improve the living standard in Romania, which proved to be false. Other associate EU with an organisation meant to steal what is left of Romania.

We can conclude that as far as this issue is concerned the majority of the respondents has a good perception of the EU concept and is receptive to information on EU.

The last open question in Survey 1 asked the respondents to say what they think European funds are. We analysed the results by comparison with explanation found on the EU official site, i.e.:

> *…the Commission awards money in the form of grants in order to implement projects or activities in relation to European Union policies. These grants may be awarded within fields as diverse as research, education, health, consumer protection, protection of the environment, humanitarian aid, etc.*

The findings showed that many of the respondents see EU funds as sums of money allotted to countries to develop urban and rural regions, to encourage entrepreneurial spirit / to help the development of individual projects, but a development plan is needed.

However a significant number of responses link EU funds only with money given to:

- individuals to improve their lives;
- Romania by other countries to help us make our country better;
- producers to obtain a better income in business, agriculture;
- countries in crisis or to escape from financial crisis;

or with money:

- stolen from Romanians;
- lent to help underdeveloped states;
- received by our country for services, constructions;
- that EU states can borrow.

It can be seen that their points of view, either based on experience or lack of information, are very different from the EU official explanation.

At Survey 1 we obtained many partially correct answers as far as EU funds are concerned. Usually the first part of the statement is correct but the examples or the arguments are not correct. Thus EU funds are seen as:

- money given only to EU states, but no competition is involved;
- funds are only for EU states meant to offer benefits to the citizens of that country and no requirements are to be met;
- money belongs to the union budget, but is not spent for the progress of "misfortunate" states;
- various categories can access EU funds for varied reasons, but no projects or competition is involved.

The high percentage of partially correct answers made us rephrase the question regarding EU funds in Survey 2 to better guide them in giving us the information that we were looking for. Thus, the respondents were asked to say: Who and how can one benefit from EU funds?

Being a rather restrictive question many respondents, almost 20%, chose not to answer the question. However, since the majority of them answered the question about EU, we can infer they did not have the necessary information to answer this specific information.

The answers obtained can fall into two categories according to EU

official point of view: correct answers and incorrect answers.

The decision to rephrase the question proved to be very good as it was noticed an increase in the number of the answers where key words, such as: project, competition, EU state members, private or public institutions, development, etc. were used. It was noticed the decrease of the totally incorrect answers.

We could identify a small percentage with definite opinions on this matter. They consider that the funds are allotted only to rich people or to "smart" ones, and that it is very difficult for the average people to access EU funds.

We think they were referring to the fact that for every project the applicant has to provide co-financing. At this stage, we did not ask them to expand on their statements, but this aspect is to be taken into consideration in further studies.

CONCLUSIONS

In our opinion the information obtained from the two surveys is very useful for our research as they provided a better insight into the problem of European Funds, and not only.

We have found out that, as far as our subjects are concerned, there is a difference of opinion regarding matters which are considered of national or European importance.

The results proved that almost 50% of our respondents do not know or are not interested in matters such as the founding of a new ministry, i.e. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in our case.

Many subjects have some general information about EU but not specific information on EU funds. We do not think that the European Commission directive according to which it is first and foremost the responsibility of the public authorities in the Member States, at national, regional and local level, to consult and inform citizens about public policy, including European policies and their impact on people's daily lives is taken too seriously in Romania.

The results show that few of the people questioned have accurate information to enable them to take documented decisions on EU funds. These are some of the reasons that made us state that the knowledge about European funds, in the Timis County, is at the edge between lack of

information and lack of interest.

There is nothing that we can do about our past, but we can do something about their future, i.e.: authorities should inform better the average people about the next 2014-2020 European plan.

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