POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS OF COHESION POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract:

We can observe a considerable increase in the assessment of cohesion policy. It is linked both with the growing amount of support spent on this policy and the need for greater efficiency in the use of these resources due to the crisis in government spending . Evaluations are dedicated to a large number of areas which include the assessment of the impact of aid, its effectiveness at reducing regional disparities or the procedural aspects of implementation of the support. Only a limited number of studies are devoted to political and administrative burdens and their influence on cohesion policy. Their impact remains difficult to measure, although it greatly affects the ability of cohesion policy to achieve its objectives. The most significant problems include the evaluation of the procurement, the methods of setting the criteria for project evaluation or poor feedback for the applicants. This article analyzes those factors which influence the speed of the entire evaluation process of project proposals, where the most significant factors refer to political influence and the number of applications for each call.

Keywords:

cohesion policy, political influence, administrative burden

JEL Classification: E61, H87, R58

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Introduction

Cohesion policy is one of the most important policies of the European Union. More than 350 billion euros were allocated during the last programming period 2007–2013. This could have had a remarkable impact on the development of the supported regions if it had been spent efficiently and effectively. Many studies focus on the analysis of how to support the most adequate aims and measures (e.g. Bradley, 2005 or Rodriguez-Pose a Fratesi, 2004). However, not only the aims, but the methods of their implemention could have a strong influence on the success of cohesion policy. There are two significant issues, the administrative and political barriers, which are perceived as major obstacles which hinder the effective and efficient implementation of cohesion policy.

Significant studies on practicable reforms of cohesion policy (ERPC, 2011) claim that administrative and procedural complexities are seen as the major problems in the provision of support. Practice shows that the appropriate definition of all the priorities, and the appropriate identification of the aid mechanisms are greatly necessary. The European Court of Auditors stated that at least 12% reimbursed expenditure should not have been reimbursed in structural funds projects throughout the European Union in 2006. In 2006, more than 30% of the evaluated projects had financial defects (European Court of Auditors, 2007), and these trends remained the same throughout the programming period. The estimated error of expenditure from the EU budget as a whole in 2012 reached 4.8%, while errors were found in 49% of projects supported through regional policy budget lines. The largest part (29%) included incorrect procedures in public procurement and 21% accounted for errors related to ineligibility activities of the applicant or expenses (EDA, 2013). Incorrect or irregular expenditure was not caused intentionally, but this occured as a result of the constant changes in rules or inattention generated by very high administrative costs of implementation. Since the absence of relevant performance indicators, the error rate became a central focus of public debate (Barca, 2009). As a negative consequence, financial management systems are aimed to ensure regulatory compliance rather than as a strategic tool of programme management (Bachtler et al. 2009).
This article focuses on those fundamental issues which are closely related to the administrative and political costs of cohesion policy implementation. Time delays in project implementation, and the possible reasons for such delays are analysed in depth. Furthermore, there are some some policy recomendations to avoid such delays.

Administrative and Political Costs of EU Support

A considerable number of studies focus on the effectiveness of the steering mechanism and aim to provide improvement aids (e. g. EPRC, 2011; Batterbury 2002). The cohesion policy has become very complex over the past years. There is a relatively high number of institutions involved in the implementation of EU funds. Institutional capacity building for regional development has been replaced by institutional overload (Ferry 2005). Even though outputs and outcomes of the EU support have been analysed in many studies, there is a lack of studies focusing on the administrative and political costs associated with the implementation support (Davies and Polverari 2011). Some studies deal with administrative capacities (Milio, 2007; Bachtler, Mendez and Oraže, 2014) and try to identify the ability of administrative forces in the implemention of support. Administrative restrictions and extensive control "everyone

checks everything" was highlighted in a Polish case done by Dabrowski (2008). Significant and unnecessary administrative burdens can be found in the evaluation of the use of structural funds in Hungary (Nagy 2008). It was found that around 7.5% of the total volume of resources were used to project administration support. Wostner (2008) claimed that costs related to the management and monitoring of projects accounted for more than 60 billion EUR within the programming period 2007–2013. Any reduction in administrative costs by 5% would mean an additional 3 billion EUR for the new projects in underdeveloped regions. Wostner (2008b) also pointed out that small projects faced the same administrative burden as large ones, which increased the unit price of control of these projects. These numbers are significant enough, and therefore the administrative side of projects should get sufficient attention. The administrative burden as a major problem in the project impementation was also identified in a survey among EU support recipients in OP Education in Slovakia, scoring 4.8 from 5 on scale revealing the impact of this problem on project implementation. More than 80% of respondents gave this problem the highest possible points (Šipikal 2011). Administrative issues were also identified as problems in the implementation of structural funds. This was found in official reports of responsible institutions such as the Ministry of Transport, Building and Regional Development (MDVaRR, 2013).

Political influence during the implementation process is closely related to administrative obstacles. Given that the form of regional policy is also a political agreement of 27 Member States, the European Commission and the European Parliament, it is not surprising that it is strongly influenced by politics at all levels (Gaffey, 2011). It also affects the actual evaluation of policies. Polverari and Bachtler (2004) for example, found that evaluation did not have a great impact on political decisions, rather it was used to justify these decisions. Although in some countries (e. g. Sweden) a scientific evaluation of the effects had a positive influence on the formation of future regional policy instruments. For politicians it is easier to track the performance indicators than focusing on immediate results, because the project developers must fulfill them, otherwise they will be forced to return the support. But it may not automatically mean a positive impact on regional development. However, this examination is politically inconvenient, because it speaks about the ability of project developers or a provider of resources to properly set the whole support system. A large part of the problems associated with measuring effectiveness is also related to the availability of relevant data and poorly structured assessment methodology (Gaffey, 2011). Batterbury (2006) for example, found that throughout the collection of data there is no real verification of their truthfulness, changes within the data processing procedures for monitoring and different interpretations of what is meant by the various measurable indicators.

Corruption is a special issue (Batterbury, 2002). This factor significantly affects the choice of supported projects, thereby it significantly affects the nature of the sample examined. Local governments have been affected by interest groups. This can lead to a redirection od received public funds for other priorities, regardless of their growth potential. The political aspect of the presence of interest groups can be observed in municipalities with mayors from the ruling parties. They are largerly successful in obtaining grants and funds (Kemmerling and Bodenstein 2006; Kemmerling and Stephan 2002). Many administrative delays or delays in the decision-making process are probably caused by politician trying to influence the decision process, as it will be discussed later.

The paradox of good choice is another problem of project implementation. Examiners preferred those projects, which appeared to be the best, but these projects were often viable without that support. Governments tend to avoid criticism for inefficient use of public resources and therefore select projects without risk or failure. These are projects which could probably be easily implemented without any support (Lach 2002). It would be necessary to pay more attention to projects that really need this support. Cannone (2012) pointed to the example of Italian companies whose financial situation would also allow to get support from commercial sources. Conversely, companies which often ask for support because their situation is more problematic and less venture capital is available, are often being denied. The actual efficiency may be in conflict with established policy objectives by supporting the best projects leads to the attainment of a high perceived effectiveness, although the actual efficiency is due to side effects limited. This is not only the case of projects, but also regions. EU support has a tendency to support stronger regions where implementation of support will be much more smoother (Dellmuth 2011).

The rigid mode of operation favoring the financial aspect of implementation then often leads to a culture of "non-risk" support when you deny to support innovative (and hence partially problematic) ideas and support projects that are fully desired lines of rules (Maraite, 2006). Strict application of the principles of financial management at the expense of efficiency in turn leads to a large formal orientation to make things right compared to doing the right things. This is partly related to the preference for quantity over quality in projects. Projects are primarily evaluated according to the values achieved in measurable indicators, which are for all operational programs set quantitatively. In the evaluation process examiners should formally take into account the quality, but at this stage it is just the quality declared, not achieved. In the implementation phase, when we are talking about the real quality of the output, is still dominated by quantitative assessment through performance indicators. This lead to answers to the question "what was spent and on what?" and not to the question "what works?" in the implementation of the support (Morton, 2009). This also leads to administrative issues to be more relevant than real needs of the regions. A good example is the issue of partnerships in the projects we could find in Šipikal (2011) and is related to the modernization of school curriculum. 5 schools with the same study program want to apply for project to modernize their curriculum, but administratively, only school itself could applies for project without other partners. So each school tries to apply with their own projects. This finally reduces the quality of results and leads to the duplicity of outcomes.

Administrative and political actions indirectly affect several key aspects such as institutional capacity building for development. Low transparency in the project evaluation regarding content of project in Slovakia is a ood example. Applicants are informed of all formal aspects during project evaluation and usually these data are also published, but they do not publish specific assessments that would show the apllicants where the major problems occur. This leads to the manipulation of results, but there is a lack of information on the number of points achieved in the evaluation as well as comments on the main problems of the project. These deficiencies greatly restrict one of the essential functions of support, i.e. to strengthen the institutional capacity towards improved management skills for development of the applicants.

Aim and Methodology of Research

The aim of our research was to look more closely on another important factor related to administrative and political influence – time of the approval of the supported projects. This is not only a problem of the Slovak Republic. In other countries, the average duration of a similar type to obtain a grant is about 10 months (Wostner, 2008b). In the survey conducted in this study time delay was indicated as a serious problem (7,5 points on a scale from 1 to 10). Time delays as a problem of implementation were also mentioned in a study oriented on new EU member states (Bachtler et al. 2014).

We try to analyze specifically time delays between submission and formal approval of the projects. Demand-oriented projects operate on the basis of calls for applications for support. In the cases examined by us there was a precise deadline by which applicants had to submit projects. These calls should last at least 60 days for projects supported by ESF and at least 90 days for projects supported by ERDF. Consequently, these projects go through a formal peer review, and this process should take a maximum of 100 days, but there are exceptions that could make this process officially longer. First, an inpendent evaluator shoud asess the project and assign points. Then the list of projects with their scores is prepared. Consequently, the formal committee approves of the final rank of the projects, and according to the total allocation of the funds for calls, the best projects within available financial resources are supported. After the final approval of the aid the applicant is invited to sign the contract and then he may carry out the project (MDVaRR, 2012). This process usually takes another two months.

We examined the calls within 4 operational programs, which have the most fixed deadline call, i. e. the operational programs Education, Research and Development, Environment and Competitiveness and Economic Growth. In total 127 calls were announced and completed during the years 2008-2013 within these programs. For each call there are official reports on their evaluation. All data used in this analysis were taken from these reports (www.siea.gov.sk, www.asfeu.sk, www.opzp.sk).In other programs, there were more open calls with no fixed deadlines and we do not have any cumulative data on time approval for these projects.

We analyzed the key factors that could have an impact on time for evaluation. In order to identify the impact of elections on the duration of the project evaluations, we performed regression analysis, which examined the effects of various factors on the length of the project assessment. We identified four key factors that might influence the length of the evaluation. Used variables in the analysis are sumamrized in Table 2.

The first is the number of projects proposals, based on the assumption that a higher number of projects leads to increased time demands for evaluation. Together 10,189 projects were submitted, an average of about 80 projects per call. There were two calls with only one application received (both in OP Enviroment), the highest number of received aplications in one call was 554 (in OP Competitiveness and Economic Growth). There were together nine calls with more than 300 aplications in the call.

The second factor is the total amount of support for the call, where we assumed that the greater amount of funding means bigger and thus more complex projects, so more time is needed for their evaluation. Total allocation within these calls was more than 4 billion EUR. The smallest calls were from OP Education – 435 000 EUR. The twelve smallest calls were from this operational program. On the opposite site, the biggest allocation for single call was in OP Environment – 150 mil. EUR.

Another factor was the type of support, where we distinguish between investment projects supported by the ERDF and "soft" projects financed by the ESF. We expected investment projects would be more complicated to evalaute due to many technical details in these projects. There were 94 calls for investment projects and 33 calls for projects supported by ESF.

The impact of politics on the implementation of structural funds in the Slovak Republic was identified in an indirect way. We examinated the length of the evaluation process for demand-driven projects in the programming period 2007–2013 during election periods and during other periods without elections. The Slovak Republic had at this time two elections for the national parliament, in both cases there was a change of government. In our research, we analyzed how the changes of government influenced the length of evaluation of applications for grant assistance from the structural funds. The influence of the election was measured as a binary variable, depending on whether at the time of call´s evaluation was conducted elections to the national parliament or not.

Table 1. Key factors influencing time of project approval using the regression analysis

Factor	Values
Type of support	0 if financed from European Social Fund (non investment projects), 1 if financed from European Regional Development Fund (investment projects)
Financial allocation of call	Total amount of funds allocated for paticular call
Elections	0 if elections were not held during evaluation process 1 if elections occur during evaluation process
Number of applications	Total number of project´s proposals received in the call

Source: own elaborations

We also realized several interviews with recipients of the support during data collection. This information added some qualitative aspects in search for what time delays in the selection process could cause recipients of the support.

Results

Generally, the time for approval of the project is quite long. This is a problem in calls oriented to changes in the enviroment such as calls to support innovations. In the case of several calls time to evaluate lasted nearly a year, and in some cases it was almost two years. It had a very negative impact on innovation activities in the regions. Many new technologies disappered during that time, but the companies were still forced to comply with the project proposal and thereby purchase not the latest technology, or even refuse signing the contract on the ground that they were forced to acquire the technology earlier and thus it would constitute unauthorized expenses. The average length of project assessment from deadline for submission of projects and selection committee results in the Operational program Competitivness and Economic Growth was 196 days and you need to add about 2 months of the between annoucement of the evaluation and the actual signing of the contract. In the case of tehcnologies, you must add another two or three months to acquire technologies through public procurement requirements. Another time is needed to receive tehcnology from suppliers (the standard time of delivery is between 30 and 180 days). To summarize it, normally it took 2 years from decision to acquire technology to the moment to have it in the production process.

Generally, it is about a quarter of time of productive life of modern technologies. The time delays are problems in other calls, but there is no such dramatic impact on the effectiveness as in the case of innovation activities. Table 2 summarizes some of the longest evaluation processes in calls related to innovation activities. Another disadvantage is that applicants do not have information about these delays ahead and believe that the process will not take very long. There were cases in which enterprises did not sign a contract to get support because it took too long so they had to buy new technologies sooner than the evalaution process was finished. This added another inefficiency to the whole implementation.

Table 2.Examples of time of approval for different calls

Number of call	Date of annoucement	Date of project selection	Estimated time of contract signature
DOP–SIA–2010/1.2.1/01	04. 05. 2010	17. 02. 2011	January 2012
KaHR-111SP-1001	25.1.2010	25.7.2011	September 2011
DOP–SIA–2009/4.1.3/01	15.06.2009	20.01.2010	April - June 2010
KaHR – 111DM – 0901	15. 6. 2009	15.03. 2010	May 2010
KaHR-31DM-0902	20.8.2009	08.06.2010	January 2011
KaHR-21 DM-0901	4.5.2009	24.3.2010	May 2010
KaHR–13SP-1001	26.4.2010	8. 12. 2011	March 2012
KaHR – 111SP – 1001	25.1.2010	27.07. 2011	Oktober 2011

Source: Reports from evaluation of calls (www.siea.sk, www.sia.gov.sk)

Another example of an administrative failure which adversely affects the overall effect is a challenge to support businesses in the most backward regions of Banska Bystrica, Kosice and Presov aimed at creating new jobs. These challenges were declared 9.7.2010 (DOP - SIA - 2010 / 1.2 / REGBB, REGKE, REGPO). A year later (14.11.2011) Social Implementation Agency issued a statement that they cancelled this call. The annouced reason was corruption in the evaluation process. The result of this support both from the perspective of the company, which was eligible for support was that after waiting to start activities (if they create jobs sooner, he would not be recognized as result of project) and the expenses ocurred in the preparation of the project the company did not get an objective evaluation. The logical solution would be new evaluation, not cancellation. This solution only penalizes applicants with good projects and significantly reduces the effectiveness of support, and negatively affects both the perception of this support and the additional economic activity of the regions. This represents another type of political influence on the implementation of the entire process.

As mentioned above, we also tried to evaluate factors that could influence the time duration of evaluation. The main results of regression analysis are summarized in Table 3. Our regression analysis shows two statistically significant variables – elections and the number of applications. It shows that election period led to significant delays in the process of approval of the projects. On average, it took 73 days longer than in the situation of a „normal“ period. This indicates political influence on the evaluation of the projects. Also the higher number of application led to a longer evaluation process. On average, each additional application prolonged the period of evaluation by 0,12 of the day.This shows the importance of proper evaluation criteria and also proper cofinancing rate to avoid to obtain considerably more project apllications than the scheme is able to support. Investment projects also have longer

times for approval as compared to Europrean Social Fund projects, but it was not statistically significant in our analysis. The financial allocation for calls did not play any significant role.

Table 3. Results of regression analysisrelated to length of project´s approval

RegressionStatistics	
Multiple R	0,515781
R Square	0,26603
Adjusted R Square	0,248272
Standard Error	59,27102
Observations	127

ANOVA

	df	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*Significance F*
Regression	3	157891,3	52630,45	14,9814	2,21314E-08
Residual	124	435618,7	3513,054		
Total	127	593510			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Number of applications	0,121338	0,051716	2,346236	0,020563
Type of fund	14,38447	12,12607	1,186243	0,237813
Elections	73,60844	14,08509	5,225985	7,18E-07
Financial allocation of fund	-5,8E-08	4,1E-08	-1,41008	0,16104

Source: Own calculations

Conclusions

We tried to show that administrative and political aspects of support are playing very important role in the efficiency and effectivness of whole EU support. Reduction of administrative burden could lead to greater impacts of the projects.

For reduction of time delays, there are several possible improvements. As we showed, the effort could be oriented mainly to the reduction of political influence and also the more balanced number of projects in the calls. There is nothing like „reserve list“ of projects, which could lead to the reduction in the number of new calls. This could help calls in which demand overwhelms support possibilities. Project generation is not a problem in the process, but from 10 189 projects only 3614 projects were supported. This is also the case of other programs (see e.g. Bachtler, Mendez and Oraže, 2014).

We only mentioned few examples in Slovakia, but the problems could be found in many other administrative aspects such as the issue of very high indirect costs, more concentration of finance instead of content of projects or question of flexibility in the project changes.It is also essential to properly configure the system indicators. The aim of the selection indicators should focus on the impact of interventions and their quality, not on the frequency outputs. In

accordance with the recommendations of Barca and McCann (2011), the selection of indicators should be preceded by intense public debate, which would provide a clear link between indicators and policies.

Better change management is needed in the project implementation. If no changes are vitally necessary for the better functioning of the project, they need to be done cumulatively over a longer period of time. This category should include the non-existent project pipelines, which would, especially in the public sector help to save financial resources. For example, schools and cities must now submit the same project several times in a row, if unsuccessful, although each project obtains enough points, they are not supported due to a lack of resources in the call. This would lead to a reduction of delays in project implementation and project evaluation.

One of the open questions is a system project selection. Experience shows that the "eligible" projects (projects where the support is given toveryone who complies wiith the conditions) have significantly lower administrative costs and could be evalauted much faster. Their great advantage is a lower threat of corruption. In the case of selection of a number of projects instead of using eligibility criteria in the private sector, it is favoring large enterprises in developed regions that have better resources and information for project preparation.

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www.asfeu.sk – for OP Education and OP Research and Development

www.opzp.sk – for OP Environment