



Evaluating the Implementation of Administrative Capacity Enhancement Projects in Romania: The Multidimensional Role of POCA (2014-2020)

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the implementation process of projects under the Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity (POCA) in Romania, an instrument for enhancing administrative capacity in EU member states. Utilizing a dataset from the Ministry of Investments and European Funds, we evaluated and interpreted financial distributions from both EU funds and Romania's National budget across development regions and POCA's priority axes. The research reveals a strategic commitment to enhancing administrative capacity, particularly in areas aimed at improving public administration and judicial systems. Our findings indicate an intentional focus on less developed regions and on key areas such as public procurement system transparency. Additionally, the study assesses the EU co-financing rate and the status and progress of projects under POCA, illuminating the relative importance placed on different axes and objectives. The effectiveness of these interventions, however, will depend on their execution, monitoring, and beneficiaries' capacity to exploit the improved systems and processes.

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1. Introduction

The continued success of the European Union's integration project relies in part on the efficacy of its internal administrative structures, particularly in countries that have recently joined the union. Since administrative capacity constitutes the central pillar of efficient governance and policymaking, it is critical to enhance and develop this capability across all member states, especially those that face distinct challenges due to their unique historical, economic, and social contexts (Nakrošis et al., 2023). The urgency of this issue cannot be overstated, and it is of particular importance in the case of Romania, a country where the necessity for administrative capacity building is both pressing and paramount.

The Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity (POCA) – 2014-2020 - is one of the key instruments of the European Union (EU) for enhancing administrative capacity in its member states. This study seeks to investigate and interpret the process of implementing projects designed to increase administrative capacity through POCA in Romania. The general objective is underpinned by a suite of specific goals: to analyse and evaluate the allocation of EU funds across Romania's development regions and according to POCA's priority axes; to scrutinize and assess funding derived from Romania's National budget, again in relation to development regions and POCA's axes; and to quantify and interpret the EU co-financing rate in connection with these axes.

The enhancement of administrative capacity within the institutional frameworks of EU member states, Romania being a salient example, is of paramount importance given the instrumental role these institutions perform in the execution and oversight of EU policies and funds. It has been empirically validated that a positive correlation exists between the effective absorption and management of EU funds and the level of administrative capacity present within a member state (Brezoi, 2015; Pautu, 2012). As such, the amplification of administrative capacity is pivotal to the realization of EU funded initiatives and, by extension, the holistic socio-economic advancement of the member states.

The focus on Romania in this research is significant due to the particular challenges and opportunities this country faces. Romania's recent history of transition from a centralized economy to a market-based system, coupled with its status as one of the newest members of the EU, adds complexity to its efforts to enhance its administrative capacity. Evaluating the implementation process of POCA in Romania can offer valuable insights that could inform and improve future administrative capacity building efforts, not

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only in Romania but also in other EU member states with similar socio-economic contexts. Furthermore, a close examination of fund distribution across various developmental regions is essential as it may reveal potential geographical disparities in funding, which could significantly influence the development of administrative capacity within these areas.

Research on administrative capacity and EU funds management systems has shown a correlation between these two variables. A study by Vřrostovř & Nyikos (2023) comparing Hungary and Slovakia demonstrated that a higher level of administrative capacity resulted in a better performance of EU funds management systems. This underlines the importance of initiatives like POCA and warrants an in-depth examination of their implementation processes.

In essence, this research aims to enrich the existing discussion on improving administrative capacity in the EU, with a specific focus on Romania. By exploring the implementation of POCA projects, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the challenges and opportunities in enhancing administrative capacity. The results of this investigation could shape policy decisions and strategies for strengthening administrative capacity in Romania and other EU member states, thus supporting their successful integration and development within the Union.

2. Literature review

The POCA has been identified as a pivotal instrument in promoting administrative capacity enhancement in Romania across different layers of public administration. Dobrotř & Vasilca (2015) articulate the essential role of POCA, highlighting that it offers critical resources and support in project execution. This, they note, significantly contributes to efficient management and sustainability of these programs.

However, Burlacu et al. (2022) assert that project implementation should be devoid of errors to maximize the potential of such funds. They base their argument on past experiences of projects funded by the POCA, subsequently proposing a framework for efficient project execution. The discourse of Burlacu et al. (2022) connects to the analysis of Vřrostovř & Nyikos (2023) and Toderasc (2009), who discuss the relationship between administrative capacity and the performance of EU fund management systems. They underscore the crucial role of a robust administrative capacity in successful fund utilization, with Toderasc additionally proposing the use of technical assistance from European structural funds in further developing administrative capacity.

Evaluating the effectiveness of administrative capacity enhancement projects has been approached from different perspectives in the literature. Chiriřř et al. (2023) introduce the concept of citizen opinions as a tool to gauge the effectiveness of administrative capacity development. In contrast, Bachtrřgler-Unger et al. (2022) propose a two-step analysis to illustrate how administrative capacity can directly shape the territorial outcomes of EU support to firms.

The discourse extends to studies highlighting the relevance of investment in staff training in administrative capacity enhancement. Ivascu (2021) advocate for the importance of strategies sustained by European funds. Similarly, Ionescu et al. (2022a) investigate the influence of motivation on performance in European project writing, with their pilot study suggesting that motivation significantly influences the effectiveness of administrative capacity enhancement projects. Further exploring project implementation, Ionescu et al. (2022b, 2022c) identify factors that influence knowledge levels in writing and implementing European funds, indicating the role of training and capacity building in successful project execution.

Absorption of EU funds is another recurring theme in the literature. Bragaru (2011) identifies fund absorption as a priority objective for local community development in Romania. Pautu (2012) extends this discourse by suggesting that fund absorption can be enhanced through improved management practices. These perspectives align with Stan & Cojocar (2022a, 2022b) and Nakrořis et al. (2023), who underscore the role of absorption rates in evaluating project performance and the relevance of EU funding in facilitating administrative reforms respectively.

Adding empirical weight to this discussion, Morořan et al. (2015) offer a detailed analysis of the impacts of absorbed structural funds in Romania, presenting evidence of their positive effects. This ties in with Stan's (2014) arguments on the potential of enhanced administrative capacity to contribute significantly to the successful regionalization process in Romania.

Looking at the broader context of sustainable development, Albu & Nicolau (2011) and Ardeleanu & Petrariu (2012) examine its relevance in the European context. They assert that administrative capacity enhancement is critical in ensuring sustainable and inclusive development. The role of knowledge management in policy development is also explored by Radu et al. (2018). They posit that evidence-based policy-making necessitates knowledge management to ensure that policies are informed by substantial evidence and can achieve the intended outcomes.

Finally, Man & Mřcriř (2014) and Brezoi (2015) explore the implementation of EU grant programmes in Romania, particularly in relation to the challenges arising due to administrative capacity. They reiterate the importance of administrative capacity in ensuring that programmes are executed effectively and efficiently.

Conclusively, the scholarly literature provides a holistic understanding of the multi-dimensional functionality of the Administrative Capacity Operational Program (POCA) in bolstering administrative capacity within Romania. It emphasizes several components, including efficient management, sustainable project implementation, investment in staff training, absorption capacity of European funds, adherence to sustainable development principles, application of knowledge management in policy development, and efficient implementation of EU grant programmes.

Collectively, these studies accentuate the pivotal role of a strong administrative capacity for successful project implementation and comprehensive administrative reforms. The findings articulate an interdependent relationship between diverse factors, demonstrating how robust administrative capacity - facilitated by mechanisms like POCA - is integral to the complex process of administrative reform, efficient project management, and sustainable development.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research objectives

The general objective of the research is the evaluation and interpretation of the implementation process of projects concerning the increase of administrative capacity through the Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity (POCA) in Romania.

The specific objectives of the research are:

- (i) To analyse and evaluate the distribution of financing from European Union funds according to Romania's development regions, and POCA's priority axes.
- (ii) To examine and assess the financing granted from Romania's National budget, categorized by development regions, and POCA's priority axes.
- (iii) To measure and interpret the EU co-financing rate in relation to the POCA's priority axes.
- (iv) To assess the status and progress of projects implementation under the Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity (POCA) in Romania, according to the priority axes.

3.2. Research tool

The research instrument used in this study involves the use of a dataset provided by the Ministry of Investments and European Funds, which includes detailed information about projects funded through the Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity (POCA) in the period 2014-2020 - List of operations selected and financed under POCA on 21 July 2023. The dataset encompasses 894 projects, offering a comprehensive analysis of a set of indicators. These indicators include:

Priority Axis (AP): This indicator identifies the priority axis within which the project was implemented. The codes provided represent different axes, each focusing on a specific area for improvement, whether it is administrative transparency, efficient judiciary system, common standards in public administration, human resources management, or providing technical assistance.

- AP1/11i/1.1 = Priority axis 1 - Efficient public administration and judiciary. Specific objective 1.1 - Develop and introduce common systems and standards in public administration that optimise citizen and business-oriented decision-making processes in line with the SCAP.
- AP1/11i/1.2 = Priority axis 1 - Efficient public administration and justice system. Specific Objective 1.2 - Develop and implement uniform and modern human resources management policies and tools.
- AP1/11i/1.3 = Priority axis 1 - Efficient public administration and judiciary. Specific Objective 1.3 - Development and implementation of standard systems and modern and efficient management tools at the level of the institutions of the judicial system.
- AP1/11i/1.4 = Priority axis 1 - Efficient public administration and judiciary. Specific objective 1.4 - Increase transparency and accountability of the public procurement system with a view to uniform application of public procurement rules and procedures and reduction of irregularities in this area.
- AP2/11i/2.1 = Priority axis 2 - Accessible and transparent public administration and justice system. Specific Objective 2.1 - Introduction of common systems and standards in local public administration that optimise beneficiary-oriented processes in line with the Strategy for Strengthening Public Administration (SCAP).
- AP2/11i/2.2 = Priority axis 2 - Accessible and transparent public administration and justice system. Specific objective 2.2 - Enhancing transparency, ethics and integrity in public authorities and institutions.
- AP2/11i/2.3 = Priority axis 2 - Accessible and transparent public administration and justice system. Specific objective 2.3 - Ensuring greater transparency and integrity in the judicial system in order to improve access and quality of services provided in the judicial system.
- AP3/11i/3.1 = Priority axis 3 - Technical assistance. Provide the necessary support to the Managing Authority for the implementation of the different stages of the POCA projects.
- AP3/11i/3.2 = Priority axis 3 - Technical assistance. Publicity and information activities specific to the POCA beneficiaries.

EU co-financing rate: This indicator denotes the proportion of funding that was granted by the European Union.

Eligible project value, funding granted from EU funds, funding granted from the national budget, the beneficiary's own contribution, and ineligible expenses: These indicators provide information about the financial structure of the project.

Project stage: This indicator identifies the implementation stage of the project at the time of data collection, whether the project is in the signed contract phase, in implementation, terminated, or completed.

Development Regions, Counties, and Beneficiary Types: This includes eight development regions, 41 counties with corresponding territorial administrative units, and types of beneficiaries (local public administration, central public administration, and non-governmental organizations). According to these indicators, the data have been structured on more developed and less developed regions.

For the data analysis, the JASP program was used, an open-source software for statistical analysis. This allows for a detailed examination of the data and generation of accurate and easily understandable results. The use of this program has allowed for the examination of each indicator individually, but also for conducting comparative and correlation analyses between different indicators.

4. Results and discussion

The operational programme for administrative capacity (POCA) in Romania, funded by the European Union (EU), aims to improve the performance of public administration and the judicial system by enhancing their transparency, efficiency, and accessibility. This comprehensive analysis of the EU-funded POCA projects carried out between 2014 and 2020 will help us understand the distribution of funds across different priority axes (AP), their utilization, and the implications of these data for development in less developed regions and more developed regions.

This research initiates with a methodical, quantitative exploration of the indicator "Financing granted from EU funds by categories of development regions", as detailed in Table 1. This particular indicator provides a foundation for a thorough evaluation and comprehensive analysis of how European Union funding is distributed across regions at various stages of development.

Table 1. Financing granted from EU funds by categories of development regions (lei)

	Priority axis	Projects	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
EU funds / less developed region	AP1/11i /1.1	243	6.22×10^6	147617.44	9.48×10^7
	AP1/11i /1.2	6	1.51×10^7	8.13×10^6	2.43×10^7
	AP1/11i /1.3	15	1.26×10^7	2.18×10^6	3.74×10^7
	AP1/11i /1.4	4	3.39×10^7	4.81×10^6	6.69×10^7
	AP2/11i/2.1	455	1.48×10^6	141610.01	3.89×10^6
	AP2/11i/2.2	93	627919.14	213015.10	6.49×10^6
	AP2/11i/2.3	22	7.07×10^6	876896.26	6.50×10^7
	AP3/11i/3.1	2	6.90×10^7	5.58×10^7	8.22×10^7
	AP3/11i/3.2	1	1.60×10^7	1.60×10^7	1.60×10^7
EU funds / more developed region	AP1/11i /1.1	243	1.50×10^6	79990.66	2.28×10^7
	AP1/11i /1.2	6	3.63×10^6	1.95×10^6	5.83×10^6
	AP1/11i /1.3	15	3.03×10^6	524480.99	8.98×10^6
	AP1/11i /1.4	4	8.18×10^6	1.34×10^6	1.60×10^7
	AP2/11i/2.1	45	1.40×10^6	271938.80	3.50×10^6
	AP2/11i/2.2	20	516146.65	203499.67	1.56×10^6
	AP2/11i/2.3	12	2.77×10^6	453708.09	1.56×10^7
	AP3/11i/3.1	2	4.22×10^6	3.41×10^6	5.02×10^6
	AP3/11i/3.2	1	975687.71	975687.71	975687.71

Source: Authors' work

An evident pattern is that the less developed regions tend to receive higher average funding for most priority axes compared to their more developed counterparts. This trend is indicative of the EU's intent to close the development gap by allocating more substantial funding to the less developed regions. Notably, the funded priority axes in less developed regions are mainly focused on public administration efficiency, transparency, and the judiciary, pointing to a policy inclination towards fostering robust, transparent infrastructures in administration and judicial systems.

The mean financial grant from EU funds for priority axis AP1/11i/1.1 (Efficient public administration and judiciary, specifically the development and introduction of common systems and standards in public administration that optimize citizen and business-oriented decision-making processes in line with the SCAP) indicates a significant difference between the more developed regions (1.5 million lei) and less developed regions (6.22 million lei). This suggests that less developed regions receive more substantial support in this area, possibly due to the pressing need for enhancing their administrative efficiency. The larger range in the less developed regions (minimum of 147,617.44 and maximum of 94.8 million lei) could indicate a wider diversity in project scopes and implementation scales.

When considering priority axis AP1/11i/1.2 (Efficient public administration and justice system, specifically the development and implementation of uniform and modern human resources management policies and tools), we observe similar trends. The average funds are noticeably higher for less developed regions (15.1 million lei) compared to more developed regions (3.63 million lei). Again, the larger range in the less developed regions (8.13 million to 24.3 million lei) implies diverse project scales and needs. It seems that the EU is prioritizing human resources development in less developed regions, possibly to bolster administrative effectiveness.

In the case of priority axis AP1/11i/1.3 (Efficient public administration and judiciary, specifically the development and implementation of standard systems and modern and efficient management tools at the judicial system level), there is a mean grant of 12.6 million lei for less developed regions compared to 3.03 million lei for more developed regions. This also signifies the EU's focus on enhancing judicial efficiency in less developed regions, potentially given the judicial system's important role in societal development.

Similar patterns can be found for priority axis AP1/11i/1.4 (Efficient public administration and judiciary, aiming to increase transparency and accountability of the public procurement system), where less developed regions received an average of 33.9 million lei compared to more developed regions receiving 8.18 million lei.

Turning to priority axis 2, we find similar trends, with less developed regions receiving more funding on average across all specific objectives (AP2/11i/2.1, AP2/11i/2.2, and AP2/11i/2.3). For example, the mean funds granted under priority axis AP2/11i/2.1 (Accessible and transparent public administration and judiciary, specifically the introduction of common systems and standards in local public administration) were 1.48 million lei in less developed regions and 1.4 million lei in more developed regions. This indicates an EU emphasis on improving accessibility and transparency, especially in less developed regions, although the difference is less marked than in priority axis 1. The same trend can be observed in priority axis AP2/11i/2.2 (Enhancing transparency, ethics, and integrity in public authorities and institutions) and AP2/11i/2.3 (Ensuring greater transparency and integrity in the judicial system).

Finally, for priority axis 3 (Technical assistance), less developed regions continue to receive more substantial average grants. For AP3/11i/3.1 (providing necessary support to the Managing Authority for POCA projects implementation), less developed regions received a mean of 69 million lei, compared to 4.22 million lei in more developed regions. Similarly, under AP3/11i/3.2 (publicity and information activities specific to POCA beneficiaries), the only project in the less developed region received 16 million lei, while the only project in the more developed region received 975,687.71 lei.

In summary, less developed regions generally receive more substantial average EU grants across all priority axes. This difference can be attributed to the EU's strategic priority to boost public administration and judiciary efficiencies in less developed regions. The larger range in grants for less developed regions also indicates the diversity and scale of projects, reflecting the varied developmental needs and priorities of these regions.

However, it should also be recognized that the number of projects is not uniform across different axes and regions. Therefore, although mean values provide an overall indication, they might not fully represent the complexities of grant distributions. Also, some axes might have a higher impact on development than others, which could justify the differences in investments. Finally, factors not covered in this analysis, such as the quality of project applications, regional capacities, and administrative competencies, could also play a role in grant distribution.

The research proceeds with a quantitative analysis of national budgetary contributions towards the enhancement of administrative capacity, as outlined in Table 2. This particular dimension serves for a comprehensive examination and in-depth evaluation of the influence and impact that national budgetary contributions exert on administrative capacity enhancement.

Examining Priority Axis 1 (AP1) – Efficient public administration and judiciary, it can be observed that this is segmented into four different areas (1.1 to 1.4). For AP1/11i/1.1, which focuses on the development and introduction of common systems and standards in public administration, both less developed and more developed regions run an equal number of projects (143). However, the less developed regions receive a larger mean funding of 304,433.65 lei, approximately three times the funding granted to the more developed regions (106,702.37 lei). The highest financing in less developed regions is 2,100,000 lei, while in the more developed regions it amounts to 739,990.06 lei, demonstrating a significant investment into public administration efficiency in less developed regions.

In AP1/11i/1.2, both types of regions have three projects each, but the less developed regions receive a substantially higher mean funding of 318,443.29 lei, versus 112,462.87 lei in the more developed regions.

In contrast, less developed regions show no funded projects under AP1/11i/1.3 and AP1/11i/1.4, while in the more developed regions, two projects are funded under each of these sections, with an average of 193,132.82 lei and 112,462.87 lei in funding respectively. This divergence indicates a shift in the more developed regions towards improving judicial institutions and the public procurement system.

Table 2. Financing granted from National budget by categories of development regions (lei)

	Priority axis	Projects	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
National budget / less developed region	AP1/11i/1.1	143	304433.65	1281.40	2.10×10 ⁺⁶
	AP1/11i/1.2	3	318443.29	245767.66	452862.96
	AP1/11i/1.3	0	NaN	∞ ^a	-∞ ^a
	AP1/11i/1.4	2	488289.48	240818.61	735760.36
	AP2/11i/2.1	455	229210.95	24989.99	594323.53
	AP2/11i/2.2	83	50110.94	30540.21	282601.52
	AP2/11i/2.3	15	409673.82	154746.38	846821.21
	AP3/11i/3.1	0	NaN	∞ ^a	-∞ ^a
	AP3/11i/3.2	0	NaN	∞ ^a	-∞ ^a
National budget / more developed region	AP1/11i/1.1	143	106702.37	452.54	739990.06
	AP1/11i/1.2	3	112462.87	86796.45	159935.12
	AP1/11i/1.3	0	NaN	∞ ^a	-∞ ^a
	AP1/11i/1.4	2	193132.82	85048.59	301217.05
	AP2/11i/2.1	45	320335.08	61186.24	810168.58
	AP2/11i/2.2	11	52591.38	0.00	96108.37
	AP2/11i/2.3	5	212231.33	154937.82	287990.70
	AP3/11i/3.1	0	NaN	∞ ^a	-∞ ^a
	AP3/11i/3.2	0	NaN	∞ ^a	-∞ ^a

^a Infimum (minimum) of an empty set is ∞, supremum (maximum) of an empty set is -∞.

Source: Authors' work

Considering Priority Axis 2 (AP2) - Accessible and transparent public administration and judiciary, less developed regions again receive more mean funding. A noticeable disparity can be observed in AP2/11i/2.1, where less developed regions run 455 projects with an average funding of 229,210.95 lei, while the more developed regions run significantly fewer projects (45), yet with a larger mean funding of 320,335.08 lei.

This trend continues in AP2/11i/2.2 and AP2/11i/2.3. In the less developed regions, 83 and 15 projects are funded with an average of 50,110.94 lei and 409,673.82 lei respectively, whereas in the more developed regions these figures are smaller in terms of project count (11 and 5 projects respectively), but with a slightly larger mean funding for AP2/11i/2.2 (52,591.38 lei).

Intriguingly, no projects are funded under Priority Axis 3 (AP3) - Technical assistance, in either of the regions. This could potentially indicate a lower demand for technical assistance, or it may present an opportunity for future funding in this area.

To summarize, less developed regions tend to run more projects and receive a higher overall funding across most priority axes, especially in areas related to public administration efficiency and transparency. In contrast, the more developed regions concentrate more on enhancing judicial institutions and the public procurement system. These tendencies could be reflective of the unique developmental stages and strategic focuses of these regions. While the more developed regions have higher average funding per project, the greater quantity of projects in less developed regions may serve to reduce the development gap by fostering improved public administration and promoting transparency. Nevertheless, there is room for additional investment in the area of technical assistance in both regions.

The presented data (Table 3) provide a profound examination of the co-financing rates supplied by the European Union (EU) within the framework of each Priority Axis (AP) of the Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity (POCA). A thorough scrutiny of these figures brings to light the EU's diverse financial contributions distributed among the diverse projects under the POCA, highlighting the relative emphasis placed on each AP, as well as their sub-divisions of specific objectives. This interpretation is crucial in establishing a clear understanding of the commitment level demonstrated by the EU in terms of financial contributions to diverse priority axes.

The mean EU co-financing rate ranged from 83.30% to 84.70%, suggesting a high level of commitment from the EU across these different policy areas. The uniformity of these rates indicates a strategic orientation of the EU towards providing significant financial backing for these policy axes. The lowest mean co-financing rate (83.30%) was observed for "Priority Axis 2: Specific Objective 2.1 - Introduction of common systems and standards in local public administration", whereas the highest (84.70%) was observed for "Priority Axis 3: Specific Objective 3.2 - POCA – specific publicity and information activities". This slight divergence may indicate a slightly higher strategic focus on publicity and information activities related to the Operational Programme Administrative Capacity (POCA).

Table 3. EU co-financing rate (%)

Priority axis	Projects	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
AP1/11i/1.1	4	83.95	83.86	83.98
AP1/11i/1.2	1	83.98	83.98	83.98
AP1/11i/1.3	500	84.03	78.40	85.00
AP1/11i/1.4	101	84.41	80.00	85.00
AP 2/11i/2.1	243	83.30	82.30	83.98
AP 2/11i/2.2	6	83.98	83.98	83.98
AP 2/11i/2.3	15	83.98	83.98	83.98
AP3/11i/3.1	21	83.32	82.30	83.98
AP3/11i/3.2	2	84.70	84.70	84.70

Source: Authors' work

Considering the number of projects under each priority axis, it is noteworthy that "Priority Axis 1: Specific Objective 1.3 - Development and implementation of standard systems and modern and efficient management tools at the level of judicial system institutions" had the most projects (500), whereas "Priority Axis 1: Specific Objective 1.2 - Development and implementation of uniform and modern human resource management policies and instruments" and "Priority Axis 3: Specific Objective 3.2 - POCA – specific publicity and information activities" each had only one. This discrepancy in project numbers may reflect the particular needs and priorities of the sectors these axes represent, or the relative complexity and cost of projects in these areas.

Looking at the minimum and maximum co-financing rates, we can observe that for most of the axes, there is no variability, with the minimum and maximum rates being equal. This indicates a fixed rate of co-financing for these projects, possibly determined by the specific policies of the EU or the nature of the projects. Notably, though, "Priority Axis 1: Specific Objective 1.3" and "Priority Axis 1: Specific Objective 1.4" show a noticeable range of co-financing rates (78.40% to 85.00% and 80.00% to 85.00% respectively), suggesting there is variability in the scale of EU contribution towards different projects within these policy areas. This might be due to different project requirements, levels of risk or potential impact, or due to variability in the funding capacities of the partnering organizations.

Overall, the data suggests a high and relatively uniform level of financial commitment from the EU across the nine priority axes, but with a slight emphasis on "POCA – specific publicity and information activities". The variability in the number of projects and range of co-financing rates under different priority axes indicates differences in the policy focus, project requirements, and potential impact of these axes.

In summary, the EU co-financing rates reflect the scale of the EU's financial commitment to a variety of projects across the specified priority axes. The minor differences in these rates underscore the EU's balanced financial support towards enhancing administrative capacity across diverse objectives encompassed within the Operational Programme Administrative Capacity (POCA). This suggests a strategic approach by the EU, aiming to facilitate a broad impact by addressing multiple aspects of administrative and judicial efficiency enhancements, rather than concentrating resources in a singular domain excessively. Such evenly distributed and extensive backing is presumably designed to spur comprehensive and systemic improvements within the targeted sectors, fostering an environment characterized by transparency, improved efficiency, and heightened public trust.

Table 4 provides an overview of the implementation status of projects under various priority axes within the Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity (POCA). These projects are categorized into two distinct implementation stages: finalised and in implementation.

Upon examination of the provided data in Table 4, it is evident that project implementation status across various priority axes varies significantly. The total number of projects under consideration is 894, out of which 516 (57.72%) have been finalised, while 378 (42.28%) are still in the implementation phase.

In the category of finalized projects, the most significant participation is seen in the "Priority Axis 2: Accessible and transparent public administration and judiciary. Specific Objective 2.1 - Introduction of

common systems and standards in local public administration optimising beneficiary-oriented processes in line with SCAP", with 243 projects (27.18%) completed. It is followed by the "Priority Axis 1: Efficient public administration and judicial system. Specific objective 1.1 - Development and introduction of common systems and standards in public administration that optimise citizen and business-oriented decision-making processes in line with the SCAP" with 160 projects (17.90%).

On the other hand, for the projects still in the implementation phase, the highest representation is again from the axis "AP2/11i/2.1", with 257 projects (28.75%), followed by "AP1/11i/1.1" with 83 projects (9.28%). This shows a consistent trend across both finalized and implementation stages, with these two axes dominating in terms of the number of projects.

Table 4. Project implementation status

Implementation stage / Priority axis	Projects	% Implementation stage
Finalized	516	57.72%
AP1/11i/1.1	160	17.90%
AP1/11i/1.2	1	0.11%
AP1/11i/1.3	7	0.78%
AP2/11i/2.1	243	27.18%
AP2/11i/2.2	90	10.07%
AP2/11i/2.3	15	1.68%
In implementation	378	42.28%
AP1/11i/1.1	83	9.28%
AP1/11i/1.2	5	0.56%
AP1/11i/1.3	8	0.89%
AP1/11i/1.4	4	0.45%
AP2/11i/2.1	257	28.75%
AP2/11i/2.2	11	1.23%
AP2/11i/2.3	7	0.78%
AP3/11i/3.1	2	0.22%
AP3/11i/3.2	1	0.11%
Grand Total	894	100.00%

Source: Authors' work

Several factors could potentially explain the observed discrepancies across different axes. The prominence of "AP2/11i/2.1" and "AP1/11i/1.1" could suggest a more considerable need or a higher prioritization in these areas, possibly due to their scope - public administration and judicial system's accessibility and efficiency. The nature of these projects, their expected impact, availability of resources, and alignment with national policy objectives could influence their number and implementation rate.

Furthermore, the lower implementation rates in the other axes, such as "AP1/11i/1.4" and "AP2/11i/2.3", could be attributable to multiple factors. These can include but are not limited to, the complexity of projects, lack of resources, strategic shift in priorities, or systemic and operational challenges.

In contrast, the priority axes "AP3/11i/3.1" and "AP3/11i/3.2", focusing on technical assistance, have the least number of projects. This observation could indicate that fewer projects are undertaken in these areas or that such projects are typically quicker to implement and thus are not as frequently in the "in implementation" category.

To better understand the dynamics and optimize future project implementation, a more in-depth exploration and analysis of the systemic, operational, strategic, and resource aspects of the various axes would be beneficial. This could provide valuable insights for policy makers and project management teams to ensure optimal allocation of resources and achieve project objectives more efficiently and effectively.

In summary, this examination uncovers a significant proportion of projects under POCA are in the process of implementation, denoting ongoing endeavours towards administrative and judicial efficiency and transparency. In particular, it is evident that there is a significant focus on introducing common systems and standards in public administration, aligning with the strategic objectives outlined in the respective priority axes under the POCA framework. Furthermore, the preponderance of finalised projects in certain axes and the scarcity of projects in the technical assistance axes suggest effective project planning, selection, and administrative procedures, contributing to the feasibility and success of these initiatives.

5. Conclusions

This research examined the implementation of projects under the Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity (POCA) in Romania from 2014 to 2020, with a focus on analysing and evaluating the

distribution of financing from the European Union and Romania's National budget, measuring the EU co-financing rate, and assessing the status and progress of the projects.

In terms of funding distribution, our analysis revealed a consistent pattern: less developed regions typically received more substantial allocations across various priority areas compared to the more developed regions. The EU's strategy appears to target closing the development gap between regions by allocating more extensive resources to the less developed ones. This was particularly notable in areas aimed at enhancing public administration efficiency, transparency, and the judicial system.

Interestingly, a similar pattern emerged in the allocation of Romania's national budget, with less developed regions generally undertaking more projects and receiving higher overall funding across most priority axes. Meanwhile, more developed regions tended to emphasize improving judicial institutions and the public procurement system.

Regarding the EU co-financing rate, data suggests a balanced distribution of the EU's financial commitment across different policy domains. A slight deviation was observed in the publicity and information activities domain, suggesting strategic focus areas for the EU.

In evaluating the status and progress of projects under POCA, there was significant variation across different policy areas. Most notably, a majority of the projects were within the domain concerning the development and implementation of standard systems and efficient management tools within judicial system institutions. The domain focused on introducing common systems and standards in local public administration also housed a significant number of projects.

The Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity (POCA) emerges as a strategically designed initiative, prioritizing regions and areas requiring urgent reform measures. Nevertheless, the ultimate effectiveness of these interventions will be contingent upon their execution, oversight, and the beneficiaries' aptitude to leverage the improved systems and processes. In summary, the study underscores a determined and sustained commitment by the EU and Romania to bolster administrative capacity, chiefly through the standardization and transparency of public administration. The data suggests an intentional concentration on less developed regions, in line with the EU's wider goal of promoting balanced regional development.

In conclusion, the multidimensional role of POCA (2014-2020) in the implementation of administrative capacity enhancement projects in Romania signifies a fundamental stride in the process of reform and public administration modernization. The POCA policy has not only contributed to the strategic transformation of administrative capacities but has also bridged critical gaps in the institutional, systemic, and human resources aspects of public administration. This intricate and multi-layered role, which hinges upon capacity development, policy coherence, systemic strengthening, and sustainability, underscores the POCA's imperative in shaping an effective, efficient, and citizen-centered public administration in Romania. While challenges persist in terms of implementation and impact measurement, the 2014-2020 period marks a pivotal turning point in the administrative capacity enhancement process in Romania, establishing a robust foundation upon which future progress can be built.

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