



# Using EU funds in Central and Eastern Europe – Romania's position

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# Abstract

Nowadays, structural and cohesion funds represent an important financial aid given by the European Union to its member States in order to reduce the disparities that exist between regions. These European funds can be contracted during a period of seven years. It is important for every state to use these funds in a proper manner and to achieve a higher absorption rate that can lead in reaching the wanted cohesion. This research aims at assessing the situation of EU funds from a quantitative perspective, to reveal the progress recorded in Central and Eastern Europe during 2007-2013 period, based on an annual report published by KPMG. Ten countries are going to be presented and compared. Moreover, this paper is useful for those who are interested in Romania's position between the states from this region in terms of using these structural instruments.

**Keywords:** European projects, countries comparisons, absorptive capacity, developing countries, Cohesion Policy

# Introduction

European Union (EU) brings together 28 states situated on the continent of Europe. The enlargement of EU was made in several steps, each country that wanted to be part of this economic and political partnership had to fulfill the requirements set for integration. The most significant growth was registered in 2004, when 10 countries received the Member State (MS) title. Since then, only three more countries were integrated in EU, in 2007 (Romania and Bulgaria) and in 2013 (Croatia). Differences between regions existed before within EU, but once these states became members of the EU, the disparities between regions were more noticeable and with a higher amplitude (Hapenciuc et al. 2013: 1).In order to overcome these differences, European Union gives to its members the opportunity to use financial instruments. One of the most important financial aid is considered to be the one that comes under the shape of structural

**JEL:** F62, O11, O57 **History:** otrzymano 30.04.2015, poprawiono 17.07.2015, zaakceptowano 8.09.2015

and cohesion funds, instruments that are established through the EU's Cohesion Policy. The cohesion policy has become "one of the principal Community policies for the delivery of the Union's growth and jobs agenda, the so-called Lisbon strategy (European Communities 2007: 5)." Cohesion policy is established for a period of seven years. In 2007-2013 the allocated amount was 347 bn EUR, which represented 35.7% of the total EU budget for that period. In the current programming period 2014-2020 the total EU allocation of Cohesion policy is 351.8 bn EUR, equivalent to about 32.5% of total EU budget during this period (European Union 2014: 20)It is a must for every MS to acknowledge the importance of contracting and using structural and cohesion funds, "the EU's main instrument to increase country's growth potential [...] designed to permanently increase countries' productive potential and speed up real convergence (Rosenberg, Sierhej 2007: 10)." Due to this reason, each MS is trying to spend

the financial allocation in the most efficient way to achieve the main objective of these funds – economic and financial development in order to get closer to the level of development within EU. "The absorption of EU funds is a measurement of the EU funds usage, but also a measurement of fulfillment of the task to accelerate development of the states, and build a common

European cohesion (Kranjac et al. 2011: 302)." In order to receive these funds projects must be undertaken. The entire process of accessing structural and cohesion funds relies on writing a project that can fulfill the requirements set by European and national rules and legislation. This process is difficult and we must be aware that "it is essential to have knowledge in this field for those who want to receive EU funds, especially since this kind of projects are based on rigorous, specific concepts and terminology (Nistor, Munteanu 2013: 26). Due to this fact, differences occur between the number of projects submitted, contracted and the amount reimbursed from the European Union. An analysis of these differences is important in order to highlight the capacity of a state to write an eligible project, to be able to sign the financing contract and then the ability to implement it in a proper manner.

This research is not going to reveal the differences between all 28 member states of EU. We choose to focus our attention only on ten states within Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) due to the fact that these states have allocated about 50% of the total EU funds for 2007-2013. Moreover, CEE brings together the states that are classified as less developed regions, eligible for cohesion fund allocation, most of them across the whole territory.

In order to improve the use of these funds within all regions, we think that is important to exchange knowledge related to structural and cohesion funds between states. In this way, the ones with a lower absorption rate can learn from those that managed to access a greater percentage from the allocated funds. By the hereby paper we want to draw attention to the importance of knowledge sharing among the member states of EU in order to achieve the most wanted cohesion.

# Methodology

This paper is going to assess the use of financial allocation during 2007-2013 period under the Cohesion policy in Central and Eastern Europe(CEE), focusing attention on 10 EU Member States: Bulgaria(BG), Czech Republic (CZ), Estonia(EE), Hungary (HU), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Slovakia(SK) and Slovenia(SI). These states can be the subjects of a comparison, because there are some common elements that characterize them, among which we mention the following:

- these states are the last states that were integrated in the EU, in 2004 and 2007.
- these states are eligible for funding through cohesion fund, being classified as less developed countries/regions; the majority of these states were declared as eligible for cohesion fund allocation across the whole territory,
- these states are using for the first time post-accession financial instruments for an entire seven-years period (the ones included in EU in 2004 had the opportunity to use post-accession funds from 2004 till 2007).

This research is based mostly on KPMG reports, data from Eurostat, national strategic reports and European Commission's official website. The analysis is going to focus on the financial allocation (EU contribution) within the Cohesion Policy in CEE region. Moreover, an annual analysis is going to be made in order to point out the progress registered in these EU member states from one year to another. The analyzed data cover the funds under the Convergence and Regional competitiveness and Employment Objective. It does not cover the European Territorial Cooperation Objective, due to the fact that The National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) does not include programmes related to the European Territorial Cooperation objective, that has an allocation of 2.5 %. (European Communities 2007: 5) In the end it will reveal the position of Romania among the other CEE countries regarding the use of these funds.

We are going to use the following terminology, as defined by KPMG:

- contracted funds = the amount of financial allocation for the signed contracts (bn.Eur),
- paid funds = the amount of financial allocation that was reimbursed to the beneficiaries (bn.Eur),
- contracting rate = contracted funds divided by total financial allocation for the entire period (%),
- payment rate = paid funds divided by total financial allocation for the entire period (%).
- In this paper we use a different approach and compare, from a quantitative perspective, the use of these funds within the ten countries mentioned above, to position Romania within this region and to give to all

#### Fig.1: GDP/capita for CEE countries



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Eurostat (2015).

the readers a general view at the end of this seven years period 2007-2013. Even so, we must be aware that this paper will not be able to present the entire use of the allocated funds during this period, because there are some countries, like Romania, that had the opportunity to contract and use these funds after 2013, due to the N+2 rule.<sup>1</sup>

#### Central and Eastern Europe–general approach

Within the European Union, the CEE region covers ten countries, as follows: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. These countries are considered to have a lower level of development compared to other regions from the EU. Under the Cohesion Policy 2007-2013, the financial allocation for the entire EU, covering the three objectives, was set at 347.410 bn. Eur, 176.558 bn. Eur directed toward CEE countries, which represents 50.82 %. Taking into consideration only the funding under NSRF, the situation can be presented as followed: total allocation for MS was 338,687 bn. Eur and 174.47 bn. Eur for CCE countries (51.5 %) (European Communities 2007: 8; KPMG, EU Funds in Central and Eastern Europe Progress Report 2007-2013: 12) So we can conclude that for these ten countries more than 50 % of the total amount of funds was directed in order to reduce the development gap within EU.

"These funds are allocated to MS under a complex legal framework, according to the level of development of their regions (Katsarova 2013: 1)." The level of development can be revealed through the GDP/capita, "the level of GDP per head is closely related to global economic performance, in particular to production factor productivity and employment. Its growth rate indicates the pace of economic development (European Commission 2008: 30)."

We can see (Fig. 1) the difference that exists between EU28 and CEE when talking about GDP/ capita, which underlines the need for economic and social development. But for this 7 years period, an increase of this indicator's value can be observed. If we are to analyze this graphic, we can notice a breakdown of this indicator in 2009 for the majority of countries' compared. This phenomenon occurred mostly as a result of international financial crisis, which has an impact also on the absorption capacity of structural funds (Tatulescu, Patruti 2014: 67). Even so, the structural and cohesion funds are considered to be able to stimulate the GDP growth rate (Hapenciuc et al. 2013: 260). Within CEE, four of the ten countries exceed the region average. Moreover, the gap between the highest and the lowest level of GDP/capita among the analyzed countries is large: for instance in 2013, this indicator in Slovenia is three times higher than the one in Bulgaria. This highlights the disparities that exist between regions in terms of economic, social development and the need for financial aid within the least developed countries. We can position Romania at 9th place from ten countries compared in terms of GDP/capita values. Within CEE, for the entire period 2007-2013, only Bulgaria has a lower GDP/capita, thus may be due to the fact that these two countries were integrated in EU

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 1}$  N+2 rule stipulates that one country can use the allocated funds 2 more years after the year of allocation.



#### Fig.2.: EU financial allocation 2007-2013 (bn.Eur) for CEE countries

Source: Author's own elaboration based on KPMG (2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) and European Commission (2014).

latest, in 2007 and have a lower level of economic development.

In Fig.2. the allocated share for each of these countries from the CEE total distribution for 2007-2013 is presented. We can notice that the distribution is unequal, studies demonstrates that there is a link between the GDP and the allocated EU funds for a country. Researchers revealed the correlations between the allocated budget and GDP from 2007 for the CEE countries, agreeing that this correlation represents "an instrument of determining the volume of granted funds (Hapenciuc et al. 2013: 264)"

The situation regarding structural instruments within CEE region at the end of the 2007-2013 programming period is presented in Table 1. All in all, countries within CEE region managed to contract 169.41bn. Eur from 174.47bn. Eur. This results in a contracting rate of 97.09%. On the other hand, the payment rate did not achieve such a higher level from the total of allocated funds, only 60.47% were paid (calculated from data available from KPMG, EU Funds in Central and Eastern Europe Progress Report 2007-2013 – Country Overviews). We can notice that if we discuss about CEE as a whole, we can conclude that the situation is a good one, mostly in terms

of contracting EU funds, but we still have problems when it comes to implementing the projects and moreover to effectively absorb this available budget.

Each country has its own progress in dealing with structural and cohesion funds. Contracted funds reveal the ability of each country to write projects according with the NSRF and the guides elaborated to set up the proper use of these financial instruments at national level. Projects are going through an entire process of evaluation and the ones that pass are considered to be ready to move on to next phase: implementation. In order to be able to start the project's implementation, a contract must be signed, which states that each part assumes their part of responsibility. The value of the signed contracts represents the contracted grants, and if we divide this value to the amount of allocated budget we can compare the countries' ability to seal a European financing contract. The part that each country managed to contract per years can be seen in Fig.3.

Analyzing Fig.3 we can see that all the countries succeeded to contract more than 90% of the total amount available during the entire period of seven years. We notice that there is not

Total CEE 2007-2013 period	Allocated funds	174.47 bn. Eur		
	Contracted funds	169.41bn. Eur		
	Contracting rate	97.09 %		
	Paid funds	105.51bn. Eur		
	Payment rate	60.47 %		

#### Table 1: EU funds for the 2007-2013 programming period in CEE

Source: Author's own elaboration based on KPMG (2014).



Fig 3.: Annual contracting rate for CEE countries 2007-2013

a linear or ascending progress from one year to another, but when discussing this indicator, the total amount for the entire period is more relevant: there are countries that contracted more than 50 % of the allocated budget in the first three years, until 2009 (e.g., Estonia, Latvia) and some countries that succeeded to contract in the same period of time 2007-2009 less than 30% (e.g., Bulgaria, Romania). Even so, we must acknowledge the ability for each of the analyzed country to reach a contracting rate above 90% in the entire period, in the context of a contracting rate for the entire region of 97.09% (see Table 1). Unfortunately, we do not find the same situation when it comes to actually paid funds. The value of paid grants reveals the amount reimbursed to the beneficiary of this financial aid. But we must be aware that "if the national or EU certifying and audit authorities discover any deficiencies, irregularities or frauds among the paid expenditures at a later stage, the absorption rate can be lowered (Paliova, Lybek 2014: 18)."We only have data from the end of 2009, because of the

late launching of calls for contracting and the period that passed between the project submission, evaluation, implementation and effective payment. As we can see in Fig. 4 the highest payment rate for the entire period is achieved by Estonia, who managed to pay around 76% of the allocated funds, followed closely by Lithuania, Latvia. If we analyze the progress for each country, we can notice that some of them are increasing the amount paid to beneficiaries as years go by. We can observe a difference between the countries that became EU member states in 2004 and 2007. Romania and Bulgaria have a lower payment rate, especially in the first years. This can be due to countries experience in dealing with EU funds, RO and BG being at their first contact with this kind of frameworks for financial aid. In the end, all countries, except Romania managed to have a payment rate that exceeds 50% of the allocated funds. Even so, no country succeeded to pay more than 80% of the budget available. This leads to a lower rate of absorption for each country and moreover for

Fig 4.: Annual payment rate for CEE countries 2007-2013



Source: Author's own elaboration based on KPMG (2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) and European Commission (2014).

the entire CEE region, which reached a payment rate for the entire period of 60.47% (see Table 1.) If we superimpose the two graphs presented above (Fig.3, Fig. 4), we can notice that at the end of 2013, the majority of countries managed to get closer or even overcome the level of contracted funds from 2010, which means that, in terms of amounts, everything that was contracted after 2010 was not able to be paid until the end of the programming period. Only Romania and Latvia paid less than the amounts contracted in 2010, which underlines deficiencies in using these funds. More than that, Slovenia is the only one that was able to cover entirely in 2013 the level of contracted funds at the end of 2011.

Based on this, we can conclude than 30% of the allocated funds were not able to be used by the end of 2013, revealing the incapacity of these countries to implement the projects contracted according to the plan and to financial support the activities carried out. Here we can highlight the importance of the N+2 rule, which stipulates "the extension by two years of the period of spending the amounts allocated in the year n (Zaman, Georgescu 2014: 3)" in order to use the allocated funds after 2013 and to try to reduce the difference between the two analyzed rates.

#### **Romania among CEE countries**

In order to better position Romania among CEE countries, a comparison between them is necessary. Due to the unequal distribution of these funds, we consider that a proper comparison between the CEE countries regarding the use of EU funds can be made using percentage and not the numeric value of the compared indicators (contracted, paid grants). Even so, we must be aware that it is easier to absorb a lower level of financial aid. The value of allocated, contracted and paid grants is useful when it comes to analyze the situation and the progress registered within a single country. This way, we are going to make a ranking of CEE countries regarding their ability to use the financial aid put at their disposal by EU for the entire period of seven years. The ranking in Table 2 is made in a descending order because the higher value/ rate must be placed on first place, while Table 3 is presenting the ranking in ascending order, because we are looking for the smallest differences between contracting and paid funds.

The EU decided to allocate 19.2 bn. Eur to Romania, having the status of a member state in the 2007-2013 period regarding the structural and cohesion funds. Within CEE, this allocation places Romania at the 4th place among the analyzed countries (see Table 2), receiving 11% of the total CEE budget and 5.66% of the total allocation to MS The first four countries count for around 80% of the total allocation for CEE region. Table 2 presents the amount of funds allocated, contracted and paid by each country during 2007-2013, in bn. Eur. It also presents the contracting rate and payment rate, in percentage. We can notice that, when it comes to comparing the amount of grants allocated, contracted and paid, Romania is keeping the 4th place, being surpassed by Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary. But this position is relevant only to indicate which country used the highest amount of European financial aid from structural and cohesion funds.

Country	Allocated funds (bn. Eur)	Rank	Contracted funds (bn. Eur)	Rank	Paid funds (bn. Eur)	Rank	Contracting rate	Rank	Payment rate	Rank
BG	6.67	7	7.46	6	3.62	7	111.84%	1	54.27%	8
CZ	26.3	2	24.17	3	16.85	2	91.90%	10	64.07%	4
EE	3.4	10	3.27	10	2.61	9	96.18%	6	76.76%	1
HU	24.9	3	26.5	2	15.55	3	106.43%	2	62.45%	7
LV	4.5	8	4.38	8	3.17	8	97.33%	5	70.44%	3
LT	6.8	6	6.7	7	5.04	6	98.53%	4	74.12%	2
PL	67.2	1	63.75	1	42.92	1	94.87%	7	63.87%	5
RO	19.2	4	17.99	4	7.03	4	93.70%	8	36.61%	10
SK	11.4	5	11.39	5	6.12	5	99.91%	3	53.68%	9
SI	4.1	9	3.8	9	2.6	10	92.68%	9	63.41%	6

#### Table 2: Ranking CEE countries by the use of EU funds

Source :Author's own elaboration based on KPMG (2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) and European Commission (2014).

# Contracting rate:Payment rate:Top performersBulgaria, Hungary, SlovakiaEstonia, Lithuania, LatviaMiddle performersLithuania, Latvia, Estonia, PolandCzech Republic, Poland,<br/>Slovenia, HungaryBottom performersRomania, Slovenia, Czech RepublicBulgaria, Slovakia, Romania

**Table 3: Ranking CEE countries** 

Source: Author's own elaboration based on rankings from Table 2.

Comparing these countries by their capacity to contract EU funds and then actually pay the required money as a part of their available budget is more suitable. Therefore, we ranked these countries taking into consideration the contracting and payment rate (see Table 2). Regarding the contracting rate, Romania is situated on the 8th place, being able to contract 93.70% of the allocated budget, while 7 other countries managed to contract a higher percentage. Regarding the payment rate, the situation is undesirable for Romania, being the last one among CEE countries, managing to pay only 36.61% from the funds associated.

Table 2 is revealing the top, middle and bottom performers when dealing with European funds from the Member State status. We are going to present the countries that occupied these positions (see Table 3). Romania seems to be on the bottom line no matter what indicator we are presenting, which underlines problems especially in implementing, monitoring phase and in terms of paid funds to beneficiaries.

If we consider the difference between the contracted and paid funds as an indicator of efficiency in using European funds, we can make

Country	Contracted-Paid grants 2007-2013 % of allocated budget	Rank
BG	57.57%	10
CZ	27.83%	4
EE	19.41%	1
HU	43.98%	7
LV	26.89%	3
LT	24.41%	2
PL	31.00%	6
RO	57.08%	9
SK	46.23%	8
SI	29.27%	5

Table 4: Difference between contracted and paid grants 2007-2013

Source: Author's own elaboration based on KPMG (2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) and European Commission (2014).

a ranking of the analyzed countries to identify the one who managed to use and absorb the higher amount from the allocated budget. Table 4 is presenting these differences as parts of allocated budget. We can see that the last two places are occupied by Bulgaria and Romania, who did not managed to pay around 57% of the contracted grants. On the other hand, the other eight countries were able to pay by 10% more than the two countries mentioned above. This ranking is underlying that the countries that became MS of EU before 2007 have a better understanding of the entire process and managed to use structural and cohesion funds more efficiently than the ones integrated in UE in 2007. Based on this indicator, the experience seems to influence the capacity of a country to absorb EU funds.

Using this indicator (difference between contracted and paid funds divided by total financial allocation for the entire period), the ranking is revealing the top, middle and bottom perform-

	Contracted-Paid Funds Rate
Top performers	Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia
Middle performers	Czech Republic, Slovenia, Poland, Hungary
Bottom performers	Slovakia, <b>Romania</b> , Bulgaria

Table 5: Ranking CEE countries by the use of EU funds

Source: Author's elaboration based on rankings from Table 4.

ers (see Table 5) between the analyzed countries, highlighting the most efficient ones. To sum up, Romania received form EU the possibility to use 19.2 bn. Eur from a total amount of 174.47 bn. Eur directed toward CEE region (10 countries) (see Table 2). This represents an important financial aid that Romania can use in order to get closer to EU level of economic and social development. But it seems that Romania encountered difficulties in the process of absorbing these funds, firstly because in 2007 had

the first contact with post-accession funds and

the process and regulations that these grants involve. Among the reasons for the Romania's situation at the end of 2007-2013 programming period we mention the following: first call for proposal was launched only in October 2007, the financial crisis had an important impact on its development, a lot of irregularities were identified, problems with covering the co-financing appeared, excessive bureaucracy, lack of communication between the interested parts and of course, the context of political instability.

#### **Discussion and conclusions**

Cohesion policy represents the EU's solution to reduce the gap of development between the member states, by financial helping these countries. The allocation of the budget is set taking into consideration the level of economic and social development to assure that these funds are used wisely, according with the country's GDP level.

This study draws attention on the use of this financial aid from EU given to its member states within Central and Eastern Europe. The analyzed countries, ten in number, became members of EU in 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and 2007(Romania, Bulgaria). In term of using structural and cohesion funds post-accession, we can expect to identify differences between them, firstly because the ones integrated in 2004 had the opportunity to use and absorb EU funds also during 2004-2007, which gives them an advantage. At the beginning of the 2007-2013 programming period these eight countries were already used to the process that this policy requires, they have collected experience and good practices so far. Romania and Bulgaria are facing the need for an adjusting period of time in order to get used to the new framework, rules after getting the status of EU member state.

The results in studying EU funds within CEE region reveals that among the states this research focuses on, some of them have a better way of using these funds than others. It is important to acknowledge the possibility of using other countries' experience and know-how regarding this issue. The progress registered by analyzed countries was revealed, in terms of contracted and paid EU funds during 2007-2013, which represents the first seven years period for all ten countries. Also the place where Romania is situated among these countries was underlined. It seems that Romania did not show great progress regarding the use of EU funds, not being able to exceed the CEE region average, no matter if we are talking about contracting or payment rate. Romania has the lowest payment rate among all the CEE countries and it will be helpful to get some pieces of advice and examples from other countries, to see ways of dealing with EU funds in order to reach a higher absorption.

An important recommendation can be linked to using knowledge sharing practices in order to reach a higher payment rate for all countries. This research revealed, by a ranking of the ten countries, the ones with a better efficiency in working with structural instruments. The first three positions are occupied by Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, who managed to pay the highest percentage of the contracted funds.. We believe that this suggestion can lead to a better understanding on how this financial aid is working and a better implementation in the future, based on the knowledge already collected or shared among countries. "Knowledge transfer when dealing with projects financed by the European Union is essential for achieving sustainable development, increasing productivity, innovation and competitiveness, creating new jobs and supporting social progress." (Ilies et al. 2012: 158)." Nowadays, we must be aware of the importance of knowledge and moreover we should try to share it to others, even if it is difficult to find the person that has the knowledge you need and to be able to offer an efficient way for transferring it (Davenport et al. 1998: 46). In this way the countries that did not have a desirable absorption rate can find out how other countries managed these funds, what were the project management practices used, what problems they encountered and how they were able to overcome them and most important how this entire process of writing, evaluating, contracting, implementing a project works. Even so, we must be aware of the context in which these grants are used, because what is suitable for one project, in a certain environment may not be working properly in other circumstances or it may give results with some minor adjustments.

This paper worked with general data about the amount of structural and cohesion funds allocated, contracted and paid by a country. This provides a general view over the use of these financial instruments in order to achieve economic and social development. It will be useful to deepen this research and to present the implementation of these funds by intervention type, to reveal where the large amount of grants is directed to: human resources, energy, environment, transport and so on. This way we can identify which country is the best when coming to investing in a certain field, so that we can go straight to the source if we want to use knowledge sharing practices.

This research is important by drawing attention on the necessity of sharing knowledge, as a practice of knowledge management when working with European projects as a way to absorb structural and cohesion funds.

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# Acknowledgement

This work was cofinanced from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/134197 "Performance and excellence in doctoral and postdoctoral research in Romanian economics science domain".

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#### Korzystanie z funduszy UE w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej – pozycja Rumunii

#### Abstrakt

Obecnie fundusze strukturalne i spójności stanowią ważny element pomocy finansowej udzielanej przez Unię Europejską państwom członkowskim w celu zmniejszenia różnic, które istnieją między regionami. Fundusze europejskie obowiązują w okresie siedmiu lat. Ważne jest, aby każde państwo korzystało z tych środków w sposób prawidłowy i osiągało jak najwyższy współczynnik absorpcji, który może prowadzić do osiągnięcia koherencji. Badanie to ma na celu ocenę sytuacji funduszy unijnych z perspektywy ilościowej, aby pokazać postęp uzyskany w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej w ciągu lat 2007–2013, na podstawie rocznego sprawozdania opublikowanego przez KPMG. Do porównania wykorzystano dane z dziesięciu państw. Artykuł jest przydatny dla osób zainteresowanych pozycją Rumunii między państwami z tego regionu wykorzystujących instrumenty strukturalne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** projekty europejskie, porównania międzypaństwowe, zdolność absorpcyjna, kraje rozwijające się, polityka spójności **JEL:** F62, O11, O57