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INTEGRATED TERRITORIAL INVESTMENTS AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
OVERVIEW ON THE IMPLEMENTATION IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: The ITI mechanism was created by the EU authorities in the context of the need for a radical change as regards the cohesion policy approach and the emphasis on the integrated development. The article provides an overview of ITI implementation in European Union countries as well as in Romania. The specific case of the Danube Delta area is used to provide a detailed example regarding ITI implementation at local level. The research methodology consists of reviewing the literature in the field. In this regard scientific journals, websites and annual reports have been examined. The findings have shown that ITI represented an attempt to develop urban and rural areas as well as to improve the cooperation between local entities involved in the process.

Keywords: functional areas, integrated territorial investments, integrated development strategy, integrated projects

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, Europe is facing many economic, social and environmental challenges, which requires the collaboration of different levels of government in order to fulfill common objectives and to find appropriate solutions. On the other hand, the objective of territorial cohesion introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon highlights that economic and social cohesion in Europe cannot be achieved without focusing on the territorial impact of EU policies (Delitheou and Maraki, 2011; Wyrwa et al., 2017). In order to face the

challenges at the global level such as globalization, energy security, environmental protection, social problems, European Union has highlighted the need for territorial and integrated interventions to fully capitalize on the development potential of some EU countries (Ferry et al., 2018).

That is why European Commission set two important mechanisms for the implementation of integrated development strategies during the 2014-2020 programming period. One of them is Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) and the other is called integrated territorial investment (ITI). CLLD was used for urban areas with less than 150,000 inhabitants, starting from the LEADER program which was implemented in rural areas during the 2007–2013 programming period (van der Zwet, 2014). ITI is considered an effective tool of Cohesion Policy (Kawka, 2015) and it was created to provide financing for geographical regions with specific territorial characteristics (urban neighborhoods, metropolitan areas, sub-regional or interregional areas etc.). Moreover, ITI is an instrument contributing to the integrated implementation of a territorial strategy by using funds from at least two different priority axes within a single program or several programs (Profiroiu and Caraman, 2019). In this way, it is possible to implement integrated projects and combine activities which could be financed from various European funds (Gaman et al., 2015; Busłowska and Waligóra, 2018).

In the 2014-2020 programming period ITI provided to the member states both flexibility in terms of developing operational programs and efficiency in implementing integrated actions. The ITI mechanism can only be used effectively if the geographical area has an integrated cross-sectoral territorial strategy.

The key elements of ITI are the following (van der Zwet, 2014; Ferry, 2019):

- a designated territory and an integrated territorial development strategy;

In order to develop the area under discussion and to respond to its needs it is necessary to elaborate an inter-sectoral integrated development strategy. The ITI mechanism can be used in any geographical area with specific territorial characteristics, starting with urban neighborhoods characterized by unfavorable conditions, to metropolitan, urban-rural, sub-regional or interregional level. To these are added the independent geographical units with similar characteristics within a region (van der Zwet, 2014).

It is not mandatory for the ITI to cover the entire territory belonging to an administrative unit. However, the instrument should be used in the context of a European territorial cooperation (Europa.eu, 2014). Furthermore, any intermediate body implementing this instrument should be a legally registered body, set by the authorities or public bodies coming from at least two participating countries or from an EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation).

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- a package of actions to be implemented;

ITI activities contribute to fulfilling the thematic objectives of the relevant priority axes within the operational program/programs, as well as to developing the objectives of the territorial strategy. Additional actions could be financed by using the priority axes of an operational program or programs which does not provide ITI financing. However, it is indicated that these actions should be in line with the integrated territorial development strategies (Kociuba, 2018).

- governance mechanisms for ITI management.

The management and implementation of the ITI mechanism is the responsibility of the management authority. However, other intermediate entities such as local authorities, territorial development bodies or non-governmental organizations can be designated to fulfill certain delegated tasks or even all management and implementation tasks. The delegation is different depending on the rigors and administrative mechanisms of the member state or the region (Europa.eu., 2014).

The potential benefits of the ITI tool consist in (Miller and van der Zwet, 2018):

- Producing a better result for the same amount of the public investment due to the possibility of using the funds in an integrated way;
- Providing power to sub-regional entities through their involvement in developing and implementing projects due to the possibility of delegating ITI management;
- Providing greater security due to the integrated financing of activities and various sources of financing;
- Contributing to increasing the involvement of local, urban and regional entities in the development of the area in question.

The ITI mechanism aims to address complex problems in certain well-defined areas, while local actors interested in implementing various project beyond the administrative borders of the locality should enter into partnerships with other local authorities (Isola et al., 2017; Garcia-Ayllon, 2018). Therefore, ITI promotes the long-term cooperation of local administration entities within a certain functional area in implementing social and economic projects. However, the most important aspect of using this tool is the integration of cities and their functional areas (meaning supra-regional, regional and local areas) in the management of operational programs, which gives them the opportunity to develop projects suitable to

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their needs by involving all stakeholders interested in solving the problem (Wyrwa et al., 2017; Kowalska, 2017).

Moreover, according to different authors in the field (Isola et al., 2017; Truskolaski, 2020), there are two important reasons underlying the creation of functional areas and the use of ITI, namely the lack of coordination between the different levels of government (national, regional and local) and the inability of regional and local entities to develop the territorial areas made up of several administrative units.

In the 2014-2020 programming period the ITI instrument was implemented in 19 countries, with several financial, geographical and thematic differences regarding its application from one country to another, while 14 of them have implemented it as an instrument for sustainable urban development (Lădaru and Marin, 2016). Thus, in countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia ITI is used for developing functional urban areas, while in others such as Great Britain, Belgium and Germany it is valid only for certain clearly established regions. In countries such as Spain, Romania and Portugal, the tool is used to support only coastal areas, while in Finland is implemented in 6 cities (Binek et al. 2016; van der Zwet and Bachtler 2018, Kociuba, 2018). The differences between the states also take into account the number of territories where ITI is applied, with only one territory in Romania, namely the Danube Delta, compared to the Czech Republic where 7 territories were established (Profiroiu et al., 2021). However, there are countries not interested in using ITI during the previous programming period, such as Denmark, Austria, Estonia, Bulgaria and Scotland which is a part of the UK.

As regard the decision to use ITI, this could belong either to the central government, as in Poland and the Czech Republic, or to the municipalities, in many cases the urban level exerting a strong pressure on implementing this mechanism. There is also the possibility to decide to use later ITI as a tool for sustainable development of urban areas. However, it is important to strengthen the institutional capacity in order to increase the efficiency of ITI implementation at the local level while it is necessary to put a greater emphasis on the citizens' involvement (van der Zwet et al., 2017).

The funding granted to ITI for the previously mentioned programming period amounted to 13.8 billion euros, while 80% of this amount was allocated to 9 member states. Of all the participating countries, Poland benefited from the largest amount, namely 3.8 billion euro (Marin, 2017; Kociuba, 2018). From the perspective of the operational programs involved in ITI implementation, Romania enjoys the greatest exposure because the allocation comes from five funds, while in Spain and the Czech Republic comes only from three funds (Lădaru and Marin, 2016).

The article is particularly based on a review of different documents regarding ITI mechanism and its implementation at national level. The paper is structured as follows: the first part provides a brief overview

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on integrated territorial investments by summarizing basic features of this instrument; the second part focuses on reviewing the literature in the field by highlighting the main features and challenges of ITI implementation in EU countries; in the third part a more detailed insight is provided on ITI implementation in Romania to Danube Delta.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper is an exploratory study conducted in order to analyze the ITI instrument in general and in Romania in particular. The methodological approach of the research involved a qualitative research method while using secondary documentary research. The data have been collected from scientific journals, websites and annual reports.

The research questions guiding this exploratory study are the following:

- What are the main trends in the literature regarding the ITI instrument?
- What are the main characteristics of implementing the ITI instrument in the EU countries?
- What are the results after implementing this instrument in the Danube Delta in Romania?

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND REGARDING ITI IMPLEMENTATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Looking through the relevant literature, there are several authors dealing with this topic even if the establishment of the ITI mechanism is recent.

ITI is seen as a tool allowing implementing development strategies in areas with socio-economic and environmental problems or in regions with very high development potential (Churski et al. 2017; Delitheou and Georgakopoulou, 2019). Moreover, ITI was created because the implementation of the Cohesion Policy in the 2007-2013 programming period did not generate the desired results or economic growth (Rodríguez-Pose and Fratesi, 2004; Profiroiu et al., 2021). This idea is also supported by Saraceno (2016) considering that ITI was created to radically change the paradigm of cohesion policy while empowering local and regional entities to find solutions to territorial challenges.

In fact, the application of the cohesion policy in the 2007-2013 programming period showed that the investment projects should be implemented in an integrated manner not only regarding the area, but also the subject matter taken into account (Kawka, 2015; Marchis, 2022). In this context, ITI was developed to provide solutions to problems in urban areas while contributing to incorporating the urban dimension in the Cohesion Policy (Gorzelać, 2014; Nyikos and Kondor, 2019). As for Florkowska and Bryt-Nitarska

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(2018), Integrated Territorial Investments represent one of the instruments needed to carry out sustainable development goals established by 2030 Agenda.

The most important characteristics of this instrument are the flexibility in using it, the innovative approach promoted, the voluntary nature and the limited requirements imposed to the member states, thus providing the possibility to apply it in various fields (Szokolai, 2012). ITI contributes to encouraging policy innovation, especially at the local level while providing incentives for local engagement in policy elaboration and implementation (Ferry et al., 2018). However, there are also criticisms of this tool because there are not many guidelines provided by the European Commission regarding its use, which makes it difficult to develop guides giving more detailed explanations (Van der Zwet et al., 2014). That is precisely why the representatives of the EU states from the national institutions interested in the issues regarding territorial cohesion, urban development as well as spatial planning, have created a working group called Territorial Cohesion and Urban Matters which explains how ITI can be applied practically (van der Zwet, 2014).

Moreover, the European Commission has developed a guide with four scenarios (the example of a metropolitan area, of a polycentric sub-region, of a city district, a cross-border area) to provide support and guidance to entities in the regions of the Member States involved in using ITI mechanism (CEC, 2014).

The lack of common vision regarding the inclusion of this mechanism in the system of European funds and investments is pointed out by Lădaru and Marin (2016). Many differences regarding its approach and ITI theme as well as the geographical development stand out. Moreover, the mistrust shown between the management authorities and the local partners regarding the decision-making capacity and the efficient management of the instrument makes its use difficult. In addition, the implementation of this instrument could generate excessive regulation leading to bureaucracy and the extension of project approval periods. Furthermore, cultural diversity of stakeholders, different interests as well as numerous organizations involved in managing ITI could bring about high risks negatively affecting its implementation. Although the mechanism could contribute to the regions development, it cannot have a transversal implementation because some regions could not reach the cohesion necessary for its successful implementation.

In the same spirit, Ferry et al. (2018) consider that a problem would also be the low governance involvement of local entities outside the public administration (NGOs, representatives from the education and health sector, business environment, etc.), which makes it difficult to maintain the assumption of responsibilities by local actors in a sustainable way.

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Despite these negative aspects, the above authors (Lădaru and Marin, 2016) highlights that ITI is the most advanced instrument from the programming period 2014-2020 and the most flexible mechanism in the history of the European funds. It can provide solutions to one of the most important problems regarding the inclusion of dynamics and adaptability of local needs in operational programs. The success of its implementation is related to the local entities operational capacity, their experience, expertise and ability to run projects and to manage budgets as well as to collaborate and reach a consensus regarding their interests.

According to Wyrwa et al. (2017), the main condition for implementing ITI is the partnership between local public entities in order to carry out joint actions aiming at improving social, economic and environmental situation. In their study on ITI in Poland, the previously mentioned authors noticed that this mechanism intended for urbanized areas contribute to improving cooperation as well as to integrating the largest Polish cities in the functional areas while implementing integrated projects and ensuring a better management of operational programs.

The conditions for implementing this tool in Poland in provincial cities and related areas are highlighted in the Kowalska's paper (2017): setting an ITI association or signing ITI partnerships between the entities involved; developing the ITI strategy in order to access funding; possessing the institutional capacity within the partnership system created; signing an agreement to implement ITI between an ITI association and the ROP (Regional Operational Programme) management authority; integrating appropriate provisions in the ROP in line with the European Commission requirements and the partnership agreement.

Furthermore, Ferry and Borkowska-Waszak (2018) highlight that the most important feature of using this mechanism in Poland is focusing on functional areas that involve collaboration between the core city/cities and nearby areas. Such an approach is particularly useful for this country, especially since the traditions of inter-municipal cooperation are reduced and local authorities are not stimulated to jointly address the problems that need to be solved (Kogut-Jaworska, 2013; Kogut-Jaworska, 2019).

Other authors (Florkowska and Bryt-Nitarska, 2018) investigate the local geological conditions as well as the mining situation in Poland in the context of using ITI mechanism and of needing to fulfill the sustainable development goals within 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, according to these authors, the use of ITI could be extremely beneficial for heavily industrialized and urbanized areas affected by mining, especially since underground mining has generated a lot of degraded areas. In addition, revitalizing devastated areas and transforming them into investment areas requires compliance with certain procedures. In this regard, they propose that funding through the ITI mechanism should be conditioned by the involvement of experts in the field of building in mining areas with soil deformations.

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Also interesting is the article elaborated by Truskolaski (2020) which analyzes the impact of using ITI mechanism on the ways of cooperation between the municipalities within Białystok functional area in Poland. The author points out that joint activities do not end when EU projects are completed, but they stimulate the development of new partnerships, especially in the field of electricity and combating natural disasters. Moreover, the cooperation of different entities should be considered and presented as an example of good practice at national and European level, which can be an impetus for using ITI in the next programming period 2021-2027.

The implementation of ITI in the Białystok functional area is also examined by Busłowska and Waligóra (2018) evaluating the level of entrepreneurship development and the support provided to businesses to increase their competitiveness. The authors' conclusion is that not all municipalities are interested in supporting the business environment by using the ITI mechanism while the Podlaskie Voivodeship is the region where the competitiveness of enterprises is very low, which makes necessary a higher allocation through the ITI.

Another paper analyzing the implementation of ITI in Poland belongs to Kawka (2015) highlighting that the implementation difficulties are related to the lack of previous experiences, the ambiguity of the European Commission guidelines, as well as the need to reach a consensus regarding the interests of different municipalities. Other problems stood up because of municipalities' obligation to create a vision and identify common objectives, long discussions and misunderstandings regarding the selection of strategic projects, sharing of costs and benefits generated by their implementation, as well as the limitations imposed to small municipalities. However, according to the author, the ITI mechanism has beneficial effects while contributing to increasing involvement of local administration in accessing EU funds as well as improving collaboration between the various local administrations.

The implementation of ITI in Poland was also largely examined by Saraceno (2016) who approached this instrument not only from the financial perspective within the cohesion policy, but also from the political one while promoting a way of governance between urban and rural territory. This approach gave this mechanism another role that was not probably mentioned by the European entities. The use of ITI mechanism in this country led to institutionalizing cooperation between towns and surrounding areas, as well as to strengthening the governance capacity of the rural-urban area because the needs of the two categories of areas were taken into account during the negotiations. However, although the two had the same decision-making power and enjoyed an equal distribution of funds, the towns proved to be stronger in the negotiations. Moreover, it was found that the ITI was closely related to the regional operational program, especially since it is a sub-section of it.

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Another positive aspect is that towns have understood the importance of cooperation and integration, assuming responsibility for their development. Nonetheless, in certain areas the institutionalization of cooperation gave greater power to the capital cities while the governance capacity and the integrated approach were subject to political interests. At the end of the paper, Saraceno (2016) concludes that a possible improvement of this mechanism should be considered in order to implement a concrete integrated approach, thus avoiding separate investments.

Analyzing the characteristics of the ITI implementation in the Czech Republic as well as in the Brno metropolitan area, Fertrova (2018) concluded that this mechanism could turn into a new dimension of strategic planning while representing a unique opportunity for metropolitan cooperation and for reducing the negative effects generated by suburbanization in some ITI areas. Moreover, the ITI strategy had an important role in developing partnerships at the mezzo-regional level and it was considered a catalyst for metropolitan cooperation. However, according to this author, the ITI mechanism generated a lot of challenges:

- Mismatching in terms of financial and thematic aspects between the activities required to be undertaken and those eligible within Czech operational programs;
- Establishing ITI themes and activities after starting the debates with the partners in the metropolitan area. This led to very high expectations of the latter while the reduction of eligible activities generated distrust in the ITI mechanism;
- Detecting imperfections regarding the central monitoring and evaluation system of the ITI which lasted a long time and led to the postponement of its implementation;
- Failing to ensure a larger allocation for ITI in metropolitan areas where there is demand.

A comparative analysis regarding the implementation of ITI in the Czech Republic (Prague metropolitan area) and in Romania (Danube Delta) was carried out by Profiroiu and Caraman (2019). This analysis was based on several criteria such as governance mechanism, funds involved, planning horizon, establishment of the strategy, area covered by the integrated development strategy etc. The authors concluded that the elaboration of the integrated development strategy is a similar process in both countries. However, the objectives identified are different because the territories under analysis have different needs and distinct features that the two authors highlighted in detail.

In a paper about the current situation of Piraeus Municipality, considered the largest industrial center and port in Greece, while analyzing the strategy of ITIs for sustainable urban development implemented in the municipality, the authors (Delitheou and Georgakopoulou, 2019) highlight the role of this mechanism in

the development of cities and their transformation into centers of economic activities, employment, modernization, and cohesion. Moreover, implementing this instrument is seen as a response to many challenges related to competitiveness, innovation and entrepreneurship aiming at ensuring employment, social cohesion, conservation of resources, reorganization of production in regions affected by the reduction of local and regional production as well as balancing interregional inequities and combating inequities generated by geographical disadvantages (Regional Council of Western Greece, 2016).

Some initial experiences of the EU states with the ITI mechanism are presented in the paper of Arno van der Zwet (2014) aiming at highlighting the potential of this instrument but also the challenges that the states implementing it should cope with. Thus, the article extensively presents two cases that can be considered advanced in terms of using ITI: the first example analyzes the application of ITI in Limburg in Flanders, Belgium, while the second one, showing a more innovative approach, focuses on 6 cities from Finland. In both cases, the key challenges regarding administrative and institutional capacity, as well as territorial competitiveness, but also the reduced resources in relation to the actions carried out and the ambiguities regarding the requirements imposed during the implementation process are widely exposed.

4. CURRENT SITUATION IN ROMANIA

4.1. General considerations

In the previous programming period, 2014-2020, Romania implemented only one ITI mechanism, namely the Danube Delta ITI. The reasons for choosing this area for implementing the ITI mechanism are the small number of inhabitants who are quite isolated from other areas, economic problems and low access to public services (Marin, 2017).

The implementation of ITI in Romania has respected the principles of integrated urban development, a concept recognized and used especially after the accession of this country to the EU, which made it necessary to take into account the urban practices and policies within European space. The mechanism appeared in the context of redirecting structural funds towards the development of cities and of increasing focus of the EU's cohesion policy on the progress of cities (Gaman et al., 2015). However, the area targeted by this instrument in Romania is mainly rural.

Located in the eastern part of Romania and at the southeastern extremity of Ukraine, the Danube Delta (the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve) is the largest natural delta on the European continent as well as one of the largest worldwide. The Danube Delta could be considered one of the least populated areas with a temperate climate in Europe while the Danube sector is the only fluvial sector completely included in a biosphere reserve (Profiroiu and Caraman, 2019). This area has a special nature because there are

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32 localities on its territory, of which 25 are located inside the reservation. The population of this area totals approximately 27,000 inhabitants and over 20% of them are found in the only locality with city status called Sulina (Infodelta.ro, 2016).

The region is quite isolated while the inhabitants have a rough life, living in subsistence conditions. Often, the only way to travel between the Delta's localities is water transport. Compared to the neighboring areas, access to essential services such as water supply and sewage is limited. Moreover, the declining population has reduced access to health and education services (The World Bank, 2014).

This area is characterized by large demographic disparities, to which are added socio-economic and density problems. However, most of the territory has a very high ecological value. The economy is mainly based on tourism and fishing activities as well as agriculture. Most of the activities in the sphere of services take place in the urban environment. However, according to demographic indicators, the degree of urbanization of the area is low (Profiroiu and Caraman, 2019).

ITI Danube Delta is an integrated financial tool intended for the Danube Delta area and outlined according to the specific needs of this territory. The mechanism could be considered innovative from the perspective of the structural funds system while introducing new elements regarding the implementation of operational programs. The basic characteristics of ITI, such as the possibility of financing from several operational programs and of encouraging the cooperation of local actors, could be seen as advantages for the Romanian territory, but also as challenges for the successful implementation of this tool in Romania (Europa.eu, 2014).

The Danube Delta ITI instrument was created to ensure sustainable economic development, with an emphasis on tourism and agricultural activities, while contributing to improving the quality of life and protecting the environment. All these aspects require the presence of an institutional and management entity to effectively coordinate the entire process related to the implementation of ITI (Lădaru and Marin, 2016). This organization, which has the role of intermediate body for the implementation of ITI, is called the Danube Delta ITI Intercommunity Development Association. It aims to promote the funding mechanism and to provide help to beneficiaries in order to obtain as many funds as possible.

The implementation area of the Danube Delta ITI mechanism refers to the territory of 38 administrative units: the city of Tulcea, 4 small-medium towns (Babadag, Isaccea, Măcin and Sulina), 29 municipalities in Tulcea county (this county contains 46 municipalities) and 4 municipalities (Corbu, Istria, Mihai Viteazu and Săcele) within Constanta County (Mdlpa.ro, 2016).

4.2. Operation of ITI in its first financial exercise

The application of ITI in Romania should be seen in relation to the functioning of the Romanian state entities. The existing institutional framework did not generate synergistic inter-institutional or multi-institutional approaches while the joint implementation of some projects did not produce the necessary coherence for their successful completion (Europa.eu, 2014). Moreover, it should be taken into account that the main elements of ITI mechanism are the local actors' involvement and cooperation as well as the creation of a common management system for integrating ITI in the structural funds system.

Although the Danube Delta inhabitants encountered difficulties in obtaining information about attracting European funds during the programming period 2007-2013, the situation has changed in the previous period. The people of this area knew how to proceed while the fear of accessing European money has disappeared (Profiroiu and Caraman, 2019).

Due to the allocated financing of 1.12 billion euros for developing the communities in this territory, the ITI Danube Delta was the greatest investment project in Romania in the previous programming period. In this regard, the Danube Delta ITI mechanism, which includes local and county authorities from Constanța and Tulcea, managed to submit 1,743 projects worthing 1.43 billion euros in the previous financial year. Out of these, 996 projects with a total value of 865.5 million euros were contracted. More precisely, more than 77% of the total funds allocated by the EU for this region were contracted. Among the projects receiving funding are the following: construction of the bridge over the Danube between Brăila and Tulcea, modernization of the Port of Tulcea, modernization of the "Danube Delta" Airport and rehabilitation of some county roads in Constanța where serious road accidents frequently occur (ISE, 2020).

The implementation of this tool during the period 2014-2020 was also marked by unpleasant events. Thus, the way of using the funds allocated through this mechanism was the subject of investigations by OLAF, the Anti-Fraud Office of the EU. Moreover, the European Commission asked the authorities in Romania to open an investigation, while the management authorities were asked to carry out checks and the Court of Auditors to carry out an audit. Furthermore, it was mentioned that Romania had delays in implementing the programs for protecting and preserving the environment, and in case of identifying irregularities in spending EU money, the amounts considered non-compliant would be withdrawn (Pavel and Leonte, 2021). Later, after the last audit of the European Commission, the payments to the Danube Delta ITI Association were unblocked and the projects continued to be implemented.

Considering the above, especially the level of the allocated funds and investments, this mechanism could be considered a great opportunity for the Danube Delta area, while the absorption rate of ITI funds was significant in the previous programming period. This idea is in line with the paper of Profiroiu et al. (2021)

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who investigated the ITI implementation in the Danube Delta area while highlighting the difficulties faced by the authorities involved in this process as well as the by the beneficiaries of the funds.

According to this authors, the implementation of ITI Danube Delta contributed significantly to the development of the area despite the barriers that appeared along the way related to accessing financing and implementing the mechanism. Moreover, the implementation of the instrument allowed strengthening the development and increasing the social role of the actors involved, as well as improving their capacity to operate, to use and manage financial resources efficiently. A climate of trust was also created between the authorities responsible for implementing the funds and the beneficiaries.

4.3. Continuation of ITI implementation in the current programming period

Due to the success recorded in its first financial exercise during 2014-2021, the ITI mechanism continues in the current programming period 2021-2027 to complete the actions for achieving the objectives set in the Integrated Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Danube Delta (ISE, 2020).

Romania will have at least four integrated territorial investment areas in the current European financial exercise financed from European funds. The investments are aimed at local development in several areas such as *Țara Moșilor* (The Land of the Moși) - Apuseni Mountains (Moșii, Țara de Piatră (The Stone Land)), *Danube Delta*, *Valea Jiului* (Jiu Valley) and *Țara Făgărașului* (The Land of Făgărașului). This integrated mechanism provides a more applied and complex response to the problems of areas with structural deficiencies in development. Furthermore, considerable efforts are made to create investment areas in Botoșani, Suceava and Iași (ITI Țara de Sus), Bistrița-Năsăud and Maramureș (ITI Munții Rodnei) or in the Land of Buzău, Prahova and Vrancea (Unirea, 2022).

As regards ITI Moșii, Țara de Piatră, additional funds were requested for developing the localities within the area, with an emphasis on infrastructure projects, tourism, protection of cultural and natural heritage, reduction of poverty and social exclusion as well as development of local entrepreneurship.

Moreover, the authorities in these areas expressed their desire for good practice exchanges with the Danube Delta ITI authorities in order to learn about the positive aspects in implementing the ITI mechanism as well as the difficulties encountered that slowed down the development of the Danube Delta ITI. However, the implementation of the ITI mechanism in these areas may generate certain future challenges, especially since the cooperation of the actors involved in this process is essential.

5. CONCLUSIONS

ITI implementation in European Union countries as well as in Romania was analyzed in this article. The general conclusion of the investigation is that ITI tool represents an important opportunity for local cooperation, but also the expression of a new approach to local development processes. Moreover, ITI has contributed to the balanced and sustainable development of the areas for which it was intended, while the member states have created their own implementation approaches adapted to the specific contexts. Although ITI implementation initially proved to be difficult due to the lack of guidelines from the European Commission to clarify the ambiguities that arose, which left room for interpretations, the necessary guidelines were provided later to ensure the successful implementation of the mechanism.

As for Romania, ITI represented a great opportunity for the Danube Delta area, contributing to a great extent to local development and to improving the relationship between the authorities involved and the beneficiaries. However, there is definitely a need for future studies to better highlight the added value brought by using this mechanism in the Danube Delta, both in terms of the area development and in terms of the cooperation between local actors.

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