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CO-FINANCING OF START-UPS FROM PUBLIC FUNDS
– POST-IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION
OF E-SERVICES DEVELOPED AS PART
OF THE OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME ‘INNOVATIVE ECONOMY’

INTRODUCTION

The model of development which is based on financing private entities with public funds has been an important part of Polish economy ever since Poland became a member of the European Union. Developing funding programmes and allocating aid funds is an essential element of modern economic policies, the priority of which is to encourage entrepreneurship and in particular to stimulate those actions that have the potential for developing innovative services and products. The adopted model of development is based on the assumption that public administration operating under the policy of broad interventionism embedded in a formed block, i.e. in the European Union, guarantees the proper distribution of aid funds.

The article contributes to the discussion on the fundamental dilemmas of economy concerning the distribution of common goods and regulation of economic processes. It presents an analysis of the results of projects implemented under Measure 8.1 (“support for economic activity as regards electronic economy”) of the Operational Programme ‘Innovative Economy’ for 2007-2013 (OP IE 8.1), in terms of their usefulness and functionality. Importantly, it attempts to identify the

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relationship between the registration of business entities, applying for funding from the programme, sustainability of e-services on the market, and further development of these business entities (public aid beneficiaries). The quantitative and qualitative research based on measures of structure, case studies and a comparative analysis, leads us to conclude that the vast majority of e-services that were developed under Measure 8.1 of the Operational Programme ‘Innovative Economy’ were aimed at acquiring and spending public funds in a way that did not guarantee the sustainability of these e-services on the market. At the same time, the funds were allocated in a manner that contradicts the essence of cohesion policy, which resulted in enhancing development disparities between regions. This was caused, on the one hand, by the financial attractiveness of the aid instrument itself and on the other hand, by the fact that the institutions responsible were not prepared to administer the programme.

QUANTITATIVE DIMENSION OF MEASURE 8.1 OP IE

In the years 2007-2013, which define the period of contracting European funds within the multi-annual financial framework, over PLN 503 billion were allocated, including 290 billion of the European Union contribution. Almost 16% of all contracted funds went to the Operational Programme ‘Innovative Economy’. Over PLN 1.7 billion was allocated under Measure 8.1 OP IE (this sum included almost 1.3 billion from public funds, with the EU contribution amounting to over PLN 1.1 billion).¹ Projects eligible for funding under Measure 8.1 OP IE involved projects that would result in developing e-services, i.e. services provided in a fully automated way, through the use of information technologies by means of tele-information systems in public telecommunication networks, on individual request of the service buyer, without concurrent presence of the parties at the same venue. Eligible projects included also developing digital products essential for provision of e-services. Initially, projects worth PLN 1 million were eligible for grants of maximum 85% of the total cost of a project. This did not mean, however, that more costly initiatives did not qualify for funding. The threshold of PLN 1 million constituted the maximum amount for calculating the grant. Over time, the total value of a project eligible for co-funding was reduced and the limit

¹ Own study based on: Krajowy System Informatyczny (database of Operational Programmes financed by the EU) – reports, 2 January 2016, https://www.funduszeuropejskie.2007-2013.gov.pl/AnalizyRaportyPodsumowania/Strony/KSI_raporty.aspx [accessed: 05.01.2017]; List of Beneficiaries of the Innovative Economy Programme, 3 January 2017, https://www.poig.2007-2013.gov.pl/Strony/lista_beneficjentow_POIG.aspx [accessed: 05.01.2017].

of funding was differentiated or in some cases lowered. Initially, only business entities that had operated for less than a year were eligible to apply for funding. This period was later extended to two years. Apart from its focus on developing innovative solutions, Measure 8.1 OP IE aimed to encourage the founding of new businesses. These guidelines should be connected with the fact that many new entities that applied for funding from the programme were in the process of registration at the time of application. Many of them were set up with the specific view to receiving funding and making use of it. In order to ensure the sustainability of projects, the programme beneficiaries were required to maintain their new e-services for three years from the date of project completion. This requirement, however, was not difficult to fulfil when developing new applications, which results from the nature of advanced IT solutions.

On the basis of the data collected in the KSI (database of Operational Programmes co-financed by the EU), it can be stated that 2.559 projects² were implemented under Measure 8.1 OP IE. This number includes also three system projects related to the administration of the whole programme within the framework of Measure 8.1 and 8.2, where the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) was an implementing authority. The remaining projects were carried out by private parties. These were mostly: limited liability companies – microenterprises (almost 70%) and natural persons conducting economic activity – microenterprises (almost 22%). On average, the value of a project amounted to almost PLN 667.000 with the public support exceeding PLN 504.000 – the sum which included almost PLN 429.000 of the EU contribution. Ultimately, the highest allocated subsidy was PLN 850.000, the lowest – PLN 3.300, with the median of PLN 490.000. These quite considerable differences in co-funding are reflected by high coefficient of random variation exceeding 41%.³ On the other hand, the asymmetry analysis reveals left-sided asymmetry, which results from the value of skewness coefficient (-0.21).⁴ This means that the majority of projects were high-budget.

The attractiveness of Measure 8.1 OP IE translated into much higher interest in obtaining grants as compared with the funds available. While in the initial phase of programme implementation, over 49% of applications were evaluated posi-

² *List of Beneficiaries.*

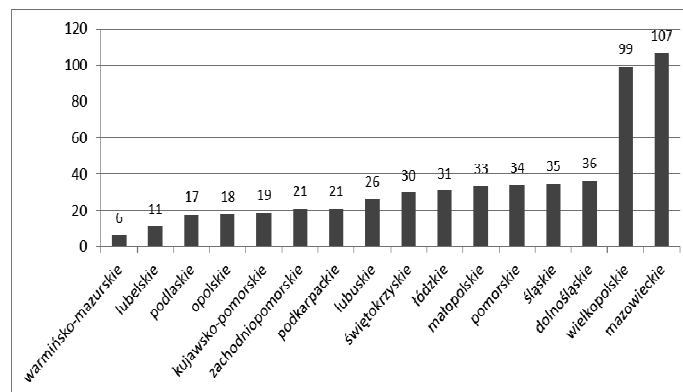
³ Lower value of the coefficient indicates a small dispersion of the population studied. It is assumed that when the coefficient value is less than 20%, the variation of the characteristic under study is small, if it ranges between 20% and 40% the variation is average, and in other cases, it is moderately high or high, especially when it amounts to or exceeds 100%.

⁴ A positive coefficient indicates a right-sided asymmetry, while a negative one a left-sided asymmetry.

tively and qualified for funding, with time this percentage was steadily decreasing and on average it was just over 17%.⁵ Similarly, the ratio between the allocated and requested funding changed over time. Initially slightly more than 47%, on average it stood at 19%.⁶

REGIONAL DIMENSION OF MEASURE 8.1 OP IE

The distribution of project funding under Measure 8.1 OP IE varied considerably between different voivodeships. Enterprises from the Mazowieckie and Wielkopolskie voivodeships were the most successful in applying for funds from the programme. In these voivodeships, the funds received for developing innovative solutions in the form of e-services amounted to PLN 107 and PLN 99 per capita, respectively, as compared with the national average of PLN 44. All other voivodeships ranked below that average. The last three positions were occupied by voivodeships from Eastern Poland, characterised by the lowest level of socio-economic development in the country. The much lower absorption rate in those voivodeships does not facilitate economic cohesion; on the contrary, it enhances the existing disparities between the regions in terms of lost potential benefits.



Source: Own study based on the data from the SIMIK 07-13 database and Local Data Bank of the Central Statistical Office of Poland (BDL GUS).

Figure 1. Value of projects implemented under Measure 8.1 OP IE per capita [in PLN] by voivodeships.

⁵ M. MOROZ, *Ocena funkcjonowania działania 8.1 "Wspieranie działalności gospodarczej w dziedzinie gospodarki elektronicznej" Programu Operacyjnego Innowacyjna Gospodarka*, "Studies & Proceedings of Polish Association for Knowledge Management" 71 (2014), p. 121.

⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

A clear right-sided asymmetry in the absorption of European funds under Measure 8.1 OP IE by regions, is in line with many empirical proofs that show the weakness of the EU cohesion policy in its key dimension, i.e. in convergence. Aid funds in themselves are not a remedy for development problems, but any omissions in this regard should be treated as anti-development activity. The fact that entrepreneurs who run their businesses in economically disadvantaged areas are not very active in applying for European funding results from a combination of many factors: undeveloped entrepreneurial culture, lack of positive role models and lack of knowledge about possibilities of obtaining grants. All this led to the situation that the greatest beneficiaries of Measure 8.1 OP IE were the regions with the most innovative economies. The final outcome of the programme as measured by the absorption rate in different regions was not surprising, as it had been pointed out earlier in research papers.⁷ Nevertheless, these problems concerning lack of real coordination of the entire programme combined with the randomness of many projects, did not lead to changing the way in which the available funds were allocated.

QUALITATIVE DIMENSION OF MEASURE 8.1 OP IE

Absorption of large financial resources is in no way the guarantee of economic efficiency. Immediate economic profit obtained by an individual is not synonymous with economic growth, either in a microeconomic or macroeconomic scale. Allocating public funds to carry out some objective set out in the strategic documents, is in line with the European funds system as well as with the system of other budgets aimed at the redistribution of public funds. The problem, however, is that evaluation of the actions undertaken is often limited to how much has been spent and it does not take into account the effects of those actions.⁸ Similarly, economic growth is all too frequently identified with economic development. Short-sighted as it is, this approach prevails in contemporary European

⁷ D. JEGOROW, *Zróżnicowanie regionalne poziomu innowacyjności w Polsce*, in: *Procesy innowacyjne w polskiej gospodarce – potencjał zmian*, Eds. A. Francik, K. Szczepańska-Woszczyzna, J. Āado, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Biznesu, Dąbrowa Górnicza 2016, pp. 13-26; D. JEGOROW, *Odmiennosc regionalna skuteczności wykorzystania srodkow polityki spójności na przykladzie Lubelszczyzny. Rekomendacje do Krajowej Strategii Rozwoju Regionalnego*, Stowarzyszenie Rozwoju Aktywności Społecznej “Triada”, Chełm 2009, p. 53.

⁸ D. JEGOROW, *Ewaluacja polityki spójności: ilość versus jakość*, “Studia i Prace WNEiZ” 46 (2016), No 2, pp. 255-264.

and national economic policies. It is also adopted in numerous academic analyses. The results of projects implemented under Measure 8.1 OP IE show low economic effectiveness of the public money invested. Out of more than 2,500 projects, only about a dozen were successful.

The random study conducted on a sample of 860 projects reveals that 33% of the e-services (which were to constitute the main result of those projects) are no longer available. This means that one in three portals developed under Measure 8.1 OP IE does not exist in the global network. On the other hand, the functionality of those e-services that are still available also raises many doubts, with most of them failing to gain recognition among their potential users. The vast majority of web portals developed under Measure 8.1 OP IE are not updated, their services are quite limited in scope, and in extreme cases their websites do not relate to the key e-service that is provided (e.g. links to outdated or non-existent databases). Sometimes, the services offered are not related to the current business activity. This is the case, for example, with training portals that offer assistance in applying for European funding within the multi-annual financial framework 2007-2013. Very often, the e-services are marginalised and the portals are used for some other business activity of enterprises (beneficiaries of public aid). Sometimes, the new solutions are offered for a charge and so they lose a competitive battle with similar free applications. Only 14% of portals under survey can be described as active in terms of their content, which still is not synonymous with the planned function of offered e-services. This cannot be justified by a low survival rate of start-ups in Poland. It should be remembered that projects implemented under Measure 8.1 OP IE received high funding in their preliminary stage. Finally, it is doubtful whether identifying programme beneficiaries with start-ups is correct; the funding mechanism adopted seems to contradict this.

In the sample under study, the average period between the time when a business entity was registered and the time when a project started to be implemented was 332 days. This period included time for evaluating applications, i.e. 180 days from the date of closing the call for proposals in a given round. This means that most companies that were beneficiaries of Measure 8.1 OP IE were established either slightly after the deadline for submitting grant applications expired, or were during the registration process at the time of applying (29%). This is confirmed by the value of skewness coefficient, which is 0.49 for a given characteristic in the sample, showing a right-sided asymmetry with a clear dispersion expressed by the indicator of random variation (63%).

Poor quality of e-services developed under Measure 8.1 OP IE is confirmed by an analysis presented on the *mambiznes.pl* portal, which points out those initiatives that should have never received public support.⁹ Similar conclusions can be drawn from yet another study available on the *innpoland.pl* website.¹⁰ The fact that many projects created under Measure 8.1 OP IE are of poor quality, while substantial public funds have been spent on carrying them out, was pointed out at various stages of programme implementation. This criticism, however, was ignored by the PARP.¹¹ The authors of analyses mentioned above, clearly indicated projects the results of which were unavailable or of highly questionable quality. The way of contracting funds under Measure 8.1 OP IE was changing over time, but these changes concerned mainly procedures and were not related to improving the efficiency of the programme. No matter whether the funds have been spent on projects which resulted in developing services that are still operating in the public space or on the ones that disappeared after the mandatory period imposed by Measure 8.1 OP IE elapsed, the law was not violated – public funds were allocated for the set objective in accordance with the established procedure and adopted rules.

Disappointment with the effects of Measure 8.1 OP IE is not only connected with a poor quality of products that have been developed with substantial public financial aid, but it is seen in numerous personal business tragedies. Project risk entailed in all projects co-financed from public funds, is complex. Public funds and recently European funds in particular, have always been of interest to entrepreneurs, guaranteeing them lucrative commission contracts, often relatively long-term ones. However, the perspective of high subsidies is not always accompanied by the awareness of formal and administrative difficulties connected with financial accounting. The non-eligibility of received financial aid is a very serious problem. Returning a subsidy some years after receiving it, is not only connected with paying additional interest, but it often entails recovering funds that were invested in tangible goods or spent on personnel. This problem may be

⁹ G. MARYNOWICZ, *1,2 mld zł e-dotacji otrzymały startupy. Jakie są efekty?*, 25 January 2016, http://mambiznes.pl/artykuly/czytaj/id/7333/12_mld_zl_edotacji_otrzymaly_startupy_jakie_sa_efekty [accessed: 15.12.2016].

¹⁰ A. PTAK, *15 mln złotych poszło z dymem. Serwisy internetowe za fundusze unijne działają krótko i bez polotu*, 30 March 2016, <http://innpoland.pl/125979,milion-zlotych-po-nic-serwisy-inter-netowe-za-fundusze-unijne-dzialaja-krotko-i-bez-polotu> [accessed: 15.12.2016].

¹¹ J.G. KOPROWSKA, *E-biznes z wirusem*, 28 November 2015, <http://www.eurogospodarka.eu/e-biznes-z-wirusem> [accessed: 15.12.2016]; G. MARYNOWICZ, *Jak sobie (nie) radzą po latach start-upy, które otrzymały e-dotacje?*, 30 July 2015, http://mambiznes.pl/artykuly/czytaj/id/7036/jak_sobie_nie_radza_po_latach_startupy_ktore_otrzymaly_e-dotacje [accessed: 15.12.2016].

not too common, but the critical evaluations of Measure 8.1 OP IE by its beneficiaries, often accompanied by the collapse of their enterprises after fighting a breakneck battle against discretionary administrative decisions,¹² cannot be marginalised. Without doubt, the main problem concerning many projects that are negatively evaluated today, including those that ended in the collapse of a business entity, was connected with low managerial competences.¹³ It is also true that the discretionary decisions on the eligibility for European programmes, have caused trouble to many entrepreneurs. A good case in point here is the decision of the Supreme Administrative Court of Poland which held that under the existing regulations, the programme beneficiaries run “high risk of incurring financial consequences for deficiencies that may sometimes be formal or insignificant”, ultimately finding that the common position of institutions responsible for financing European projects “strikes with ignorance of the economic and legal issues connected with conducting business activities by entrepreneurs [. . .] who decide to participate in programmes co-financed from the EU funds.”¹⁴ The above statements refer to the Human Capital Operational Programme, but still the Ministry of Development acting as an institution managing all European programmes was a party in this case.¹⁵

An extremely expensive attempt to establish start-ups was fraught with high risk from the very beginning. In 2006, i.e. at the time when the multi-annual financial framework for 2007-2013 was being developed, an analysis carried out clearly demonstrated that 8.1 OP IE would end in failure.¹⁶ This, however, did not bring about any alterations to the programme. The 2011 evaluation report commissioned by the Ministry of Regional Development, included a clearly critical opinion on 8.1 OP IE expressed by private investors’ representative: “. . . the first calls for proposals are [. . .] a great misunderstanding [. . .]. The PARP awarded grants to projects that were completely unreal in business terms and were

¹² A. FULARZ, *Musiał zwrócić otrzymaną e-dotację a firma zbankrutowała*, 27 January 2016, http://mambiznes.pl/wywiady/czytaj/id/7337/musial_zwrocic_otrzymana_e-dotacje_a_firma_zbankrutowala [accessed: 15.12.2016]; A. PTAŃ, “*POIG 8.1 to mój największy błąd biznesowy*”. *Kacper Sulisz od siedmiu lat czeka na przelew z PARP*, 16 May 2016, <http://innpoland.pl/126859,poig-81-to-moj-najwiekszy-blad-biznesowy-kacper-sulisz-od-siedmiu-lat-czeka-na-przelew-z-parp> [accessed: 15.12.2016].

¹³ A. BIERNACKI, *Zbankrutował przez e-dotację. “Sam jest sobie winien”*, 8 February 2016, http://mambiznes.pl/artykuly/czytaj/id/7356/zbankrutowal_przez_edotacje__sam_jest_sobie_winien [accessed: 15.12.2016]

¹⁴ Wojewódzki Sąd Administracyjny w Warszawie. Wyrok z dnia 27 sierpnia 2015 r., V SA/Wa 722/15, <http://orzeczenia.nsa.gov.pl/doc/47F8528D06>.

¹⁵ D. JEGOROW, *Deprecjacja roli zarządczej w projektach współfinansowanych z funduszy europejskich*, “Przedsiębiorczość i Zarządzanie” 17 (2016), No 4, Part 3, pp. 331-343.

¹⁶ See statement K. Piecha in: A. PTAŃ, “*POIG 8.1 to mój największy błąd*”.

managed by people with no preparation to run a business. Later on, due to the difficulties when preparing financial reports for their projects, entrepreneurs were made to seek additional sources to finance their unprofitable businesses.”¹⁷ The weakness of the entire programme is confirmed by the fact that a catalogue of good practices published by the PARP in 2016 that covers e-services developed under Measure 8.1, includes 11 solutions (out of 42) that either do not exist or have low functionality.¹⁸ Paradoxically, the authors of this catalogue believe that this is a collection of the best start-ups in Poland.

FINAL REMARKS

Developing innovations is a prerequisite for building a competitive advantage in a globalised economic space. When public funds are involved in this process, investment risk affects society as a whole and especially private entrepreneurs who do not benefit from the subsidies. Yet, new start-ups established with the aid of funds from Measure 8.1 OP IE, not only failed to increase the innovative potential of Polish economy, but also in most cases turned out to be *ad hoc* undertakings. Large public funds appropriated for the programme were designed without taking into account business practice. Reducing the process of developing innovations to dependent entrepreneurship can hardly be called an action aimed at development; on the contrary, it stands in contradiction to pro-development activities. On the other hand, worldwide there are many examples of projects which fall under the definition of e-services in the OP IE and which were highly profitable for their creators. Grass-roots projects based on their own financial and intellectual capital in particular, definitely outlive those developed under Measure 8.1 OP IE.

The model of encouraging innovations in e-services that is based on grants operated by public administration was not successful as part of Measure 8.1 OP IE. Considerable public funds were spent on establishing start-ups but solutions developed by them in most cases failed to attract customers. Although the adopted model can be regarded as *a priori* wrong as it is contrary to Schumpeter’s model

¹⁷ *Ocena komplementarności interwencji w ramach Programu Operacyjnego Innowacyjna Gospodarka z innymi programami finansowanymi z funduszy Unii Europejskiej*, PSDB, Warszawa 2011, p. 82.

¹⁸ S. WOJTAS, A. SENECKI, A. SPYSZ, M. FRĄCZEK, *Katalog dobrych praktyk z zakresu e-usług i technologii B2B oferowanych przez beneficjentów działań 8.1 i 8.2 POIG*, PARP, Warszawa 2016, p. 32, 34, 48, 50, 52, 60, 82, 86, 100, 118, 120.

of economic development, more programmes that allow financing new start-ups from public funds, are being prepared. In the situation when the number of new private investment instruments aimed at innovative solutions is increasing in the domestic market, it is necessary to comprehensively assess the economic performance of already implemented aid programmes. The issue of the increasing number of entities dependent on public support as well as of their impact on both the whole economy and on individual entrepreneurs not benefiting from aid funds, requires further in-depth empirical research.

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WSPÓLFINANSOWANIE START-UPÓW ZE ŚRODKÓW PUBLICZNYCH
– OCENA POWDROŻENIOWA E-USŁUG
POWSTAŁYCH W RAMACH PROGRAMU OPERACYJNEGO
„INNOWACYJNA GOSPODARKA”

Streszczenie

Fundusze europejskie, stanowiące ważny element polskiej gospodarki, znajdują się od lat w centrum zainteresowania administracji publicznej odpowiedzialnej za alokację dostępnych środków. Są one również przedmiotem dużego zainteresowania przedsiębiorców nastawionych na rozwój prowadzonej działalności przy wsparciu środków publicznych. Nie brakuje jednak inwestorów zagospodarowujących fundusze pomocowe w sposób wypełniający znamiona przedsiębiorczości zależnej – przedsięwzięcie istnieje, dopóki finansowane jest z funduszy pomocowych. W ten niechlubny efekt wdrażania projektów europejskich wpisują się start-upy oparte na e-usługach, powstałe w ramach Programu Operacyjnego „Innowacyjna Gospodarka” 2007-2013. Przeprowadzona analiza o charakterze ilościowo-jakościowym wykazała, że zdecydowana większość produktów programu już nie istnieje lub charakteryzuje się niską użytecznością funkcjonalną.

Słowa kluczowe: e-usługi; fundusze europejskie; innowacje; polityka spójności; przedsiębiorczość zależna; *start-up*.

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OF THE OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME ‘INNOVATIVE ECONOMY’

Summary

European funding as an important element of Polish economy has long been of interest to public administration, which is responsible for allocating available funds. It is also of great interest to entrepreneurs who want to grow their businesses with the aid of public funds. However, many of them use those aid funds in a way that is characteristic of dependent entrepreneurship, i.e. their enterprises exist only as long as they are financed with aid funds. Start-ups providing e-services that were founded as part of the Operational Programme ‘Innovative Economy’ 2007-2013, are a good case in point here. The quantitative and qualitative analysis reveals that the vast majority of them either no longer exist or offer services that are of limited functionality.

Key words: e-services; European funds; innovation; cohesion policy; dependent entrepreneurship; start-up.