The Past and Present of EU Funding in Romania: Are Early Winners the Ultimate Champions?

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Abstract: This paper examines almost two decades of EU funding in Romania for the first tier of local government units. The study investigates whether an initial high level of EU funds absorptive capacity of Romanian municipalities predicts a high volume of EU funding across programming periods. The study is based on desk research and quantitative analysis conducted on administrative and survey data. The information comes from merging several databases. One of them is based on annual local budget execution of Romanian municipalities, stemming across a large timespan, from 2009-2023. The other is based on an extensive survey conducted in 2009 and covering more than 90 percent of Romanian municipalities – 'Local Authorities Access to European Funds', financed by the Open Society Foundation (data collected in August-December 2009). The survey encompasses several variables that can be used as proxies for indicating the early stages of preparation of local authorities for the high funding volume made available for them after the EU accession. Other variables from the National Institute of Statistics and relevant sources control for the size of the population, level of human capital development, financial autonomy, type of settlement and presence of marginalized communities. The expected findings highlight the need to ensure a more nuanced perspective on the EU funding objective of promoting territorial cohesion, considering the different local constraints and opportunities for development.

Keywords: EU funds; municipalities; early winners; champions; financial autonomy; LAU.