

EU Funds for Digitalization. The Post-COVID Strategies and Outcomes of Romania

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Abstract

This article analyzes the use of European Union money to promote digitization in Romania, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. It describes the current digital landscape, identifies significant areas for development, and assesses the impact of EU funding on improving digital infrastructure and literacy. The study evaluates Romania's development in relation to other EU member states and makes recommendations for making the best use of available money to bridge the digital divide and promote economic growth.

Keywords: Digitalization, European Union Funds, COVID-19 Impact, Digital Literacy, ICT Sector

JEL classification: O33, O52, H52, L86

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1. Introduction

We live in a highly digitalised society. Nowadays, technology is more present in our lives than it has ever been. Furthermore, recent events, such as the Covid-19 Pandemic, have proven to us the level of dependency of society towards technology.

The World Economic Forum published a report, in the autumn of 2022, in which it was discussing the level of internet connectivity among EU Member States. The report started off on a positive note, highlighting the fact that, according to Eurostat data “70% of homes in the European Union (EU) enjoyed high-speed internet coverage” (Masterson, 2022). According to the same source, the number of households with internet access is “up from just 16%” in 2013. This represents a staggering increase of almost five times. However, these data should not overwhelm us, because, as the author continues, “a digital divide persists” (ibidem).

There are multiple issues which generate this digital divide. First, there is the problem of accessing the internet, which is generated by two distinct causes. On one hand, there is the lack of internet infrastructure, which can mostly be observed in “rural areas left behind” (ibidem). On the other hand, there is the financial aspect. Unfortunately, in this digitalized age, there are still people in EU Member States which cannot afford to purchase internet services, “2.4% of people in the European Union could not afford the Internet.” (Bhatia, 2023).

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Second, there is the problem of digital literacy. According to a report generated by Eurostat, only “55% of people in the EU aged 16 to 74 had at least basic overall digital skills.” (Eurostat, 2024). According to the same source, the values of digital skills ranged from “83% in the Netherlands to 28% in Romania”. (ibidem). Even though other eastern European countries, such as Poland and Bulgaria, register similar rates, the fact that Romanians have the lowest rates of digital skills in the European Union is a negative indicator. It is a problem we need to address in order to be able to implement the digitalization agenda which we have set ourselves. Moreover, I believe that this issue can be addressed by using European funds.

The Covid-19 Pandemic not only affected our lives at an individual level but also countries and supranational organizations, such as the European Union and the institutions it is comprised of. Since the starting point of the pandemic, EU institutions have been looking for ways to protect its citizens. In order to accomplish this goal, multiple measures were implemented at national and supranational level. The Covid-19 Pandemic has proved how vulnerable we are and how important is to properly implement technology into our daily tasks. EU institutions became aware of these shortcomings. Thus, even during the pandemic, multiple financial-aid packages, meant to offer economic relief, have been planned and implemented among the 27 member states of the European Union. Through this paper, I want to show how Romania can benefit from these programs and manage to increase the level of digital literacy and digital skills of its citizens.

2. Literature Review

Digital literacy is a concept that combines access to knowledge with the newest tools that technological developments and internet access provide us with. Media literacy, computer literacy, or information literacy are among the main elements that compose it. (Law et al. 2018). A concept which partially overlapped with the one of digital literacy is ICT (Information and Communications Technology) literacy. Those who utilize it emphasize the role of the networks that are enabled by the process of digitalization (Ainley, Schulz and Fraillon 2016). ICT literacy presumes the capability of managing data in digital format (Aker 2022). The level of ICT skills is essential for establishing if an individual is endowed with digital competence or not.

Increasing the level of digital literacy in the EU countries should be a priority for those who shape public policies, both at a national and European level. In order to obtain the desired results, investments in E-learning are necessary (Hamutoğlu, Sezen-Gultekin, and Savaşçı 2019). Citizens, regardless of their age or social background, should have the opportunity of accessing information and developing new skills and abilities in the online environment.

Digital literacy is extremely important not only for the economic development of a country but also for increasing social cohesion and making communities more secure (Bandura and Leal 2022). The capability of citizens to use

digital tools has an impact on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and enhances the possibilities of including marginalized categories in society. An area of the public space where digitalization has become a key element lately is the education system. On one hand, younger generations are completely in touch with the newest technological developments. On the other hand, teachers, and especially those who are older, need support in order to acquire the knowledge needed to handle digital tools (Fraillon et al. 2013). If both pupils and teachers are prepared for an educational process that relies more and more on the online environment, this process will generate at least three new pillars: autonomy, creativity, and capability (Fu 2013). Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that digitalization encompasses not only opportunities but also risks. These risks can manifest themselves, among others, in the educational system (Woo, White, and Lai 2016; Ding and Li 2023) or in the political environment (Miliband 2020) and beyond (Kissinger et al. 2023).

The social and political reality shaped by digitalization generates new concepts, such as digital citizenship, e-commerce, the digital economy, digital business, and the digital divide. In such a climate, guaranteeing that the new technological instruments and networks will not become harmful for liberal democracies and for civil society is difficult. In this context, critical media literacy becomes of paramount importance (Martens and Hobbs 2015; Middaugh, Clark and Ballard 2017). A digital citizen is not only capable of integrating various aspects of the online space into his daily activities but also understands that information obtainable online must be carefully reviewed (Cubukcu and Bazyan 2016). Creating the infrastructure and the programs that will boost digital citizenship remains mainly the responsibility of governments. They can succeed only if an adequate level of funding is ensured.

3. Methodology

The problem researched in this paper is contemporary and more importantly, it is not finalised yet due to the fact that relief funds which were allocated by the European institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic can still be accessed by member states. Septimiu Chelcea said that “description represents the first level of knowledge” (Chelcea, 2001, p. 156). This research is descriptive, because it creates a general image of the way in which each EU member state has been accessing relief funds during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, emphasizing the way in which Romania can improve its digitalisation process by accessing the aforementioned funds. This paper fits within the subcategory of descriptive research presented by Sorin Mitulescu, which “spots data rather than phenomena” (Mitulescu, 2011, p.35.). Due to the fact that this research is focusing on a series of events which are yet to come to an end, it can also be perceived as being evaluative because it “presents results obtained in a certain activity” (ibidem, p. 39). In this case, this paper presents how much of the EU funds are allocated towards the digitalisation process. This analysis takes place while funds are still being accessed, thus it is a “formative evaluation” (ibidem).

4. EU funds for accelerating the digitalisation process

According to data provided by Eurostat, the ICT sector is differently developed in each country. It is interesting, because not all of the western countries, which have strong economies, have fully tapped into the “*strategic economic reserve*” represented by the ICT sector, even though all of the European member states are currently implementing policies and strategies which are meant to increase the level of digitalisation. Moreover, I presume that most of the contributions of the ICT towards GDP are being made by private entities.

Besides the differences registered between regions, there are also staggering inequalities within regions. For example, according to the data provided by Eurostat, Bulgaria and Romania have similar levels of internet access. However, it is interesting that the average of the last four years of ICT contributions towards the GDP, is almost double in Bulgaria (6.88%) compared to Romania (4.47%). The difference is even more intriguing because Romania is one of the few

European countries which have a preferential tax code for people working in the IT industry. The data provided by Eurostat are fundamental for this research because it proves that besides tax policies, and internet access or speed, there are other factors which play a major role in the development of the ICT sector and of the levels of digitalisation in general. These factors cannot be brought in by multinational corporations. On a general level, the digitalisation process of a country is developed by its government. With an economy which was already shaky even before the Covid-19 Pandemic, Romania is in need to access external funds in order to fully develop its ICT sector in order to compete with highly digitalised EU Member States.

ICT Sector % in GDP

	2018	2019	2020	2021	Average
Greece	2.49	2.27	3.23	3.45	2.86%
Spain	3.28				3.28%
Italy	3.29	3.35			3.32%
Lithuania	3.13	3.49	3.8	4.18	3.65%
Austria	3.58	3.67	3.63	3.87	3.69%
Poland	3.58	3.63	3.77	3.99	3.74%
Slovenia	3.59	3.71	4.03	4.41	3.94%
Romania	3.71	3.72	4.25	4.47	4.04%
Belgium	3.97	4.21	4.32	4.24	4.19%
Portugal			4.21	4.47	4.34%
France	4.31	4.41	4.72	4.32	4.44%
Slovakia	4.11	4.3	4.66	4.71	4.45%
Denmark	4.58	4.48	4.6	4.26	4.48%
Germany	4.39	4.38	4.44	5	4.55%

Table 1

	2018	2019	2020	2021	Average
Croatia	4.37	4.47	4.99	5.26	4.77%
Czechia	4.56	4.71	5.05	5.1	4.86%
Finland	4.85	4.91	5.79		5.18%
European Union - 27 countries		4.89	5.23	5.49	5.20%
Netherlands				5.29	5.29%
Latvia	4.93	5.33	5.66	6.12	5.51%
Hungary	5.95	6.13	6	5.81	5.97%
Estonia	5.39	5.93	6.83	5.81	5.99%
Sweden	5.94	6.48	7.09		6.50%
Bulgaria	6.07	6.62	7.37	7.47	6.88%
Malta	7.43		8.02	10.26	8.57%

Source: Eurostat

REACT-EU is one of the first projects developed by the European Union meant to consolidate the economies and societies of its Member-States. One interesting aspect is that more than half of funds of this program, are being accessed by only two countries, which do not even represent 8% of the European Union. The two countries in question are Italy and Spain.

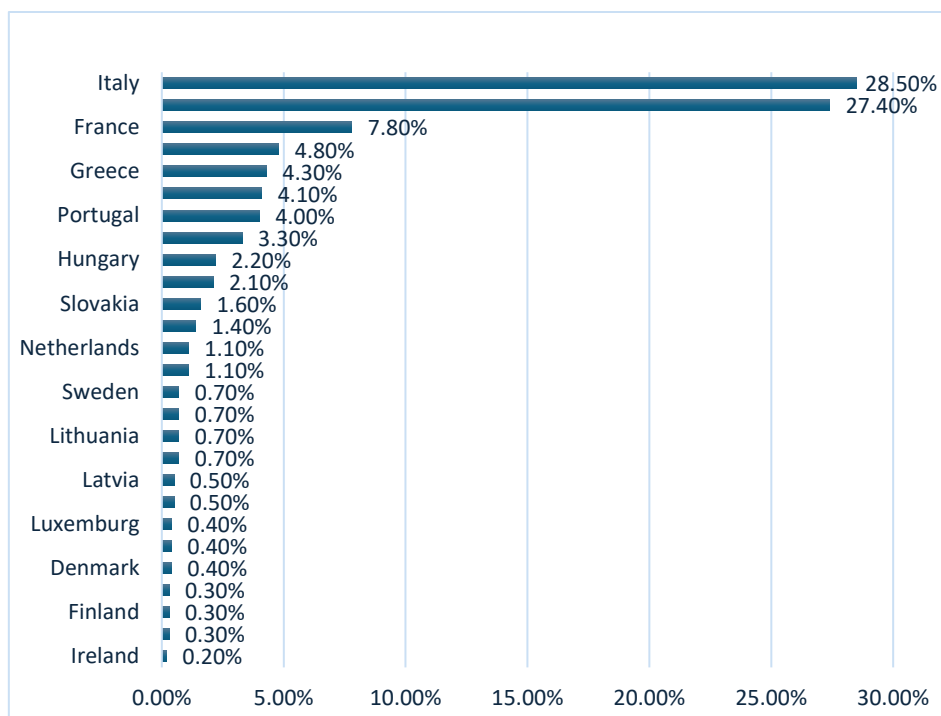


Figure 1. Allocations under REACT-EU for 2021

Source: European Commission

Another interesting aspect is that out of the first ten countries, which receive more than 2% of the funding from this program, most of them are from Eastern and Southern Europe.

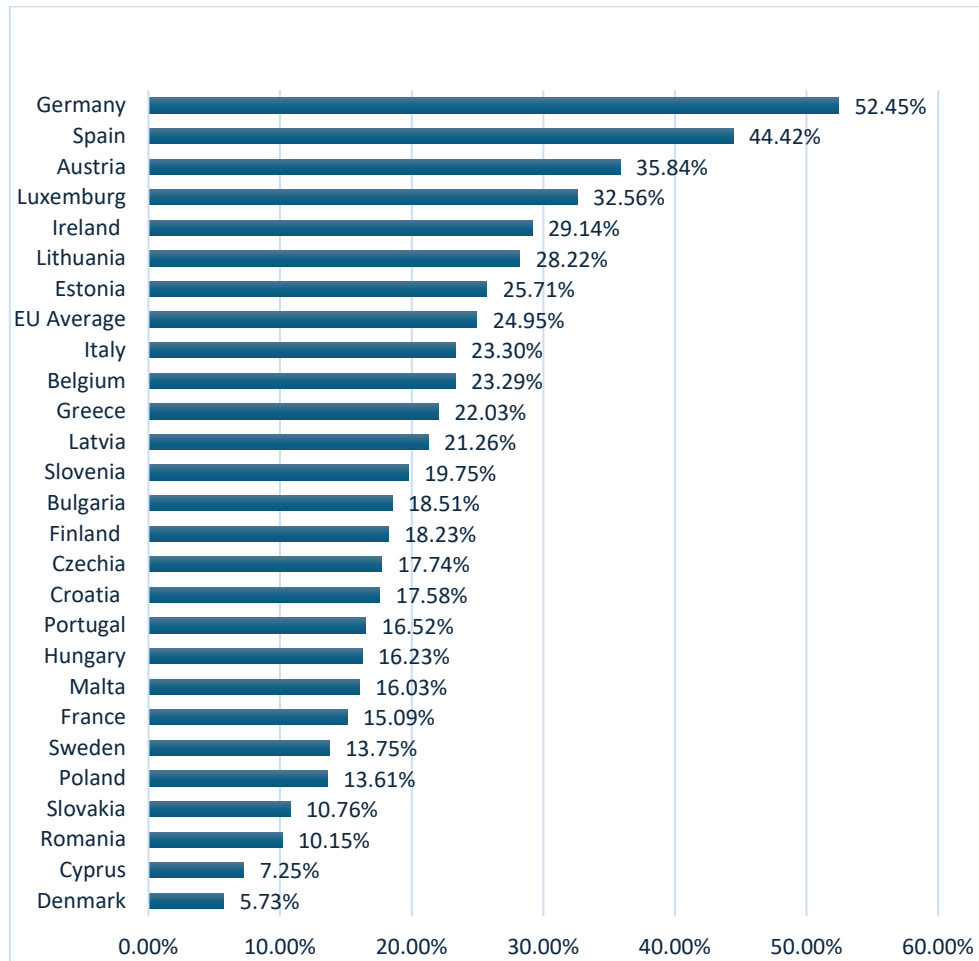


Figure 2. Total Share of NextGenerationEU economic stimulus funds used for digitalization purposes by European Union member states from 2021 to 2026

Source: Statista

Another major relief fund developed by the institutions within the European Union is the *NextGenerationEU* economic stimulus fund. This fund, in particular, was perceived as “an unprecedented joint response to the Covid-19 pandemic” (Drea, 2024.) However, according to data retrieved from European institutions, Romania is one of the countries, which has assigned the lowest amounts of money which were provided by the *NextGenerationEU* economic stimulus funds, towards digitalisation. However, we should not be terrified by the relatively small amount of money the Romanian Government is allocating towards the digitalisation process.

We should take into consideration multiple factors. First, we are talking about a longitudinal approach, a program which is spanning on five years. Thus, we can expect minor changes and other sum of money can be allocated towards the digitalisation process. Second, there are multiple EU projects which aim at reconstructing and improving the economy. Third, the relief-package in question, *NextGenerationEU* economic stimulus fund, covers multiple themes. It has the purpose of creating “a greener, more digital, more resilient Europe” (European Commission, 2022a). Thus, money from this fund can be allocated to multiple economic dimensions, not only towards the process of digitalisation. Finally, we should not forget that Romania has one the highest rates of internet connection and is the country with one of the fastest internet connections. These aspects ought to be taken into consideration, because some of the countries which allocated larger funds from the same package may invest in internet infrastructure, which in Romania is already developed.

Financial aid provided by the *NextGenerationEU* economic stimulus fund is allocated towards three distinct aspects of digitalisation as follows: *Digitalisation*, *Digital transformation & social, economic and institutional development* and finally *Digitalisation and green transition*.

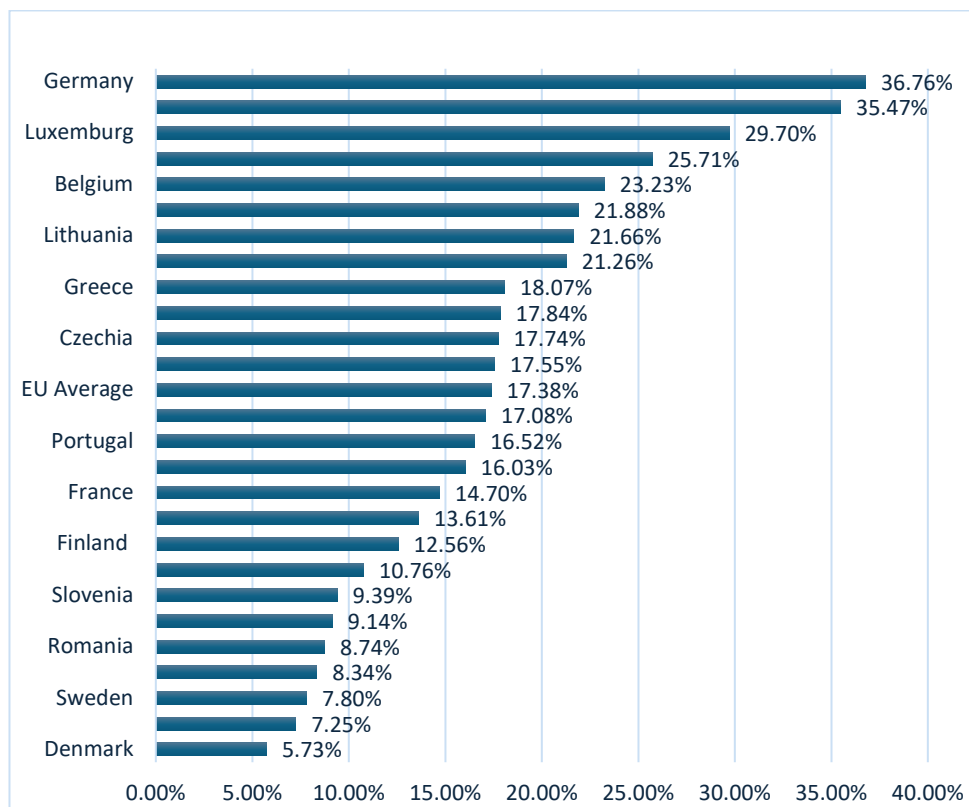


Figure 3. NextGenerationEU Total EU funds used for digitalisation

Source: Statista

As I have previously mentioned, this is the first of the three dimensions for which EU member-states can obtain funding. Romania is still one of the countries which allocate the lowest percentage of funding, allocating only 8.74% towards digitalisation. This should not fully alarm us, because we already have an internet infrastructure which is functioning well. Thus, we can allocate more money for other purposes. Sweden is an interesting case. It is a very digitalised country, and allocates even less money for digitalisation than us, even though, they receive an overall bigger amount of money.

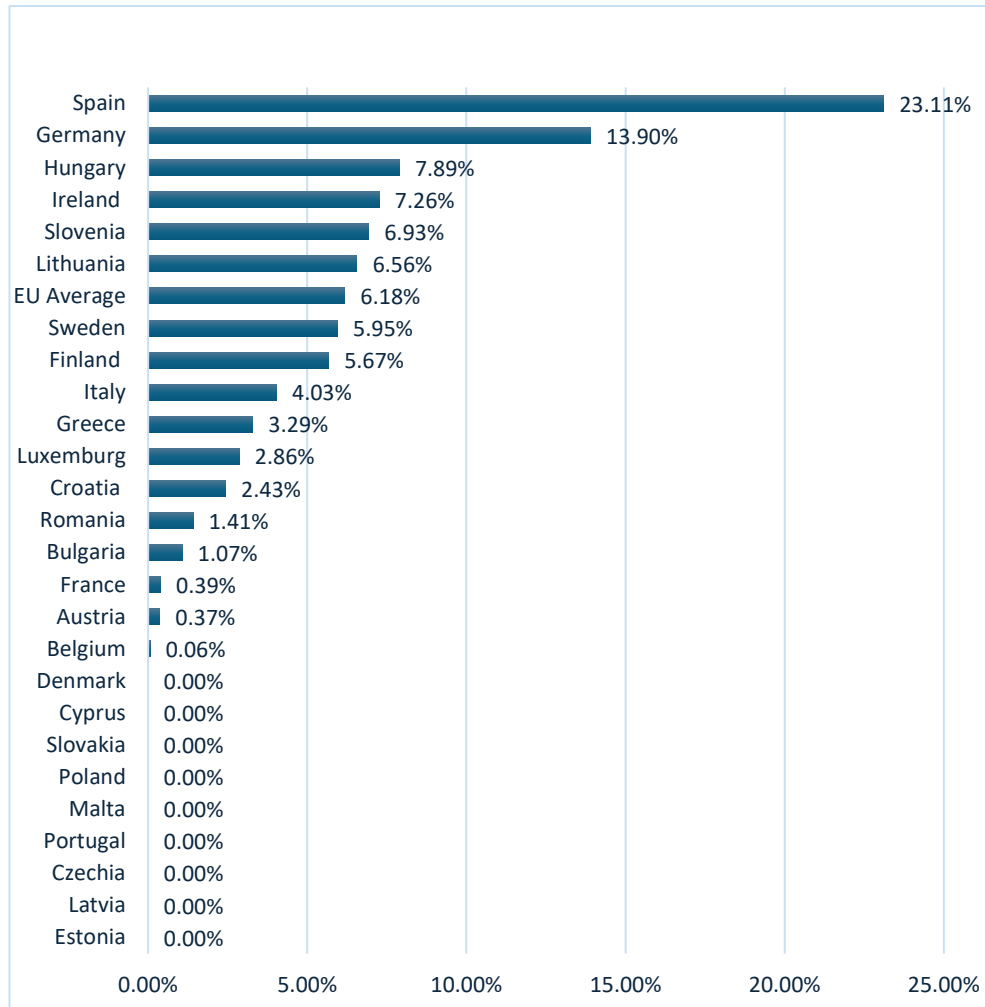


Figure 4. NextGenerationEU Funds used for Digital Transformation & Social, economic and institutional development

Source: Statista

On a general level, funding for digital transformation in order to generate social, economic and institutional development is significantly smaller than for

digitalisation as whole. Many countries are completely neglecting this aspect. Thus, we should not be worried that Romania is investing only 1.41% of the funds from NextGenerationEU economic stimulus program into this dimension.

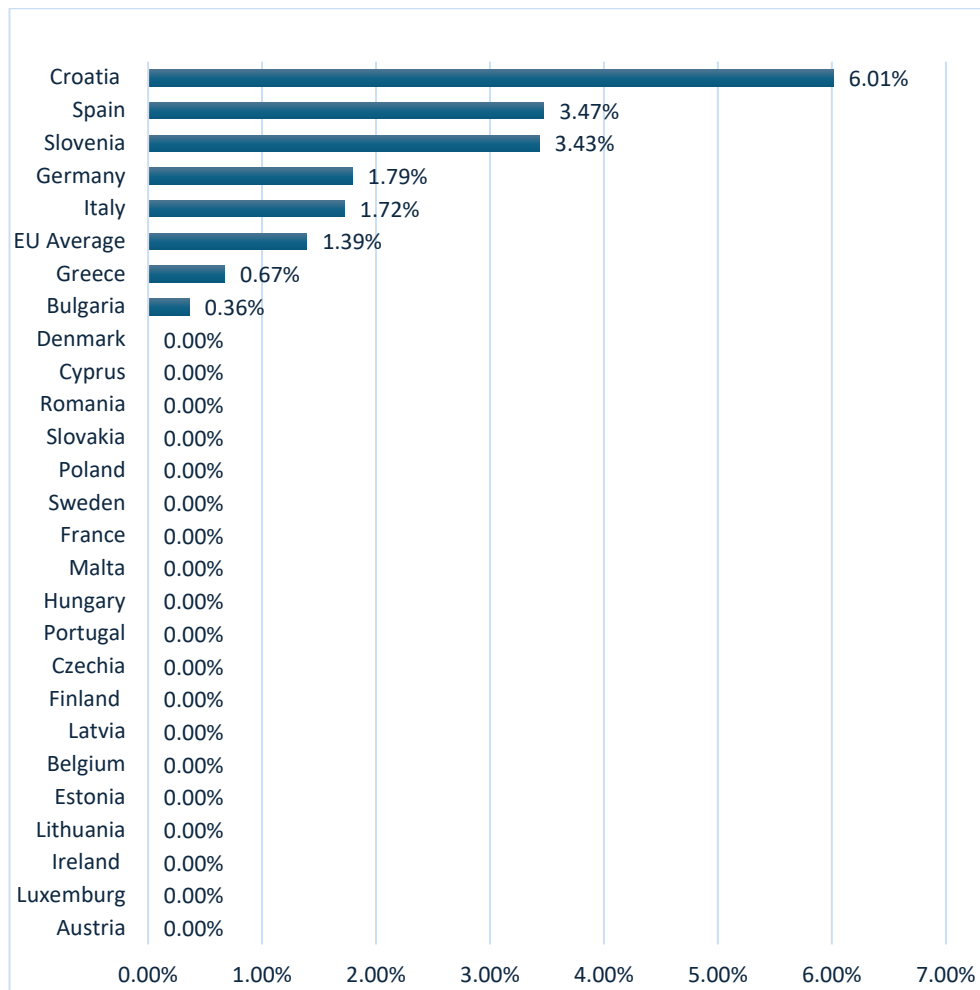


Figure 5. NextGenerationEU Funds for Digitalisation and Green Transition

Source: Statista

Finally, there is the dimension of the program meant to generate a green transition by investing in digitalisation. This is an aspect which the majority of the EU countries are neglecting, and could be an opportunity for Romania, if we are to allocate even a fraction of the EU funds we receive. The reason I emphasize this opportunity is because Romania already has a very developed agricultural sector, which can be improved by adding environmental friendly technology. Moreover, this sector has huge potential for research and development.

Another way of improving the digital sector now is by accessing the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP). It is a recovery fund, worth 750 Billions Euro. The interesting aspect of this fund is that it is comprised of two distinct financing sources. On one hand, there is a “€360 billion loan program” (M. Herszenhorn et al. 2020). On the other hand, the difference, which consists of almost 400 Billion Euro, will be provided through grants. (Herszenhorn and Bayer, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that initially the grants component was higher, but it was reduced several countries, such as “Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden” (ibidem) expressed their intentions to “eliminate grants”. (M. Herszenhorn et al. 2020).

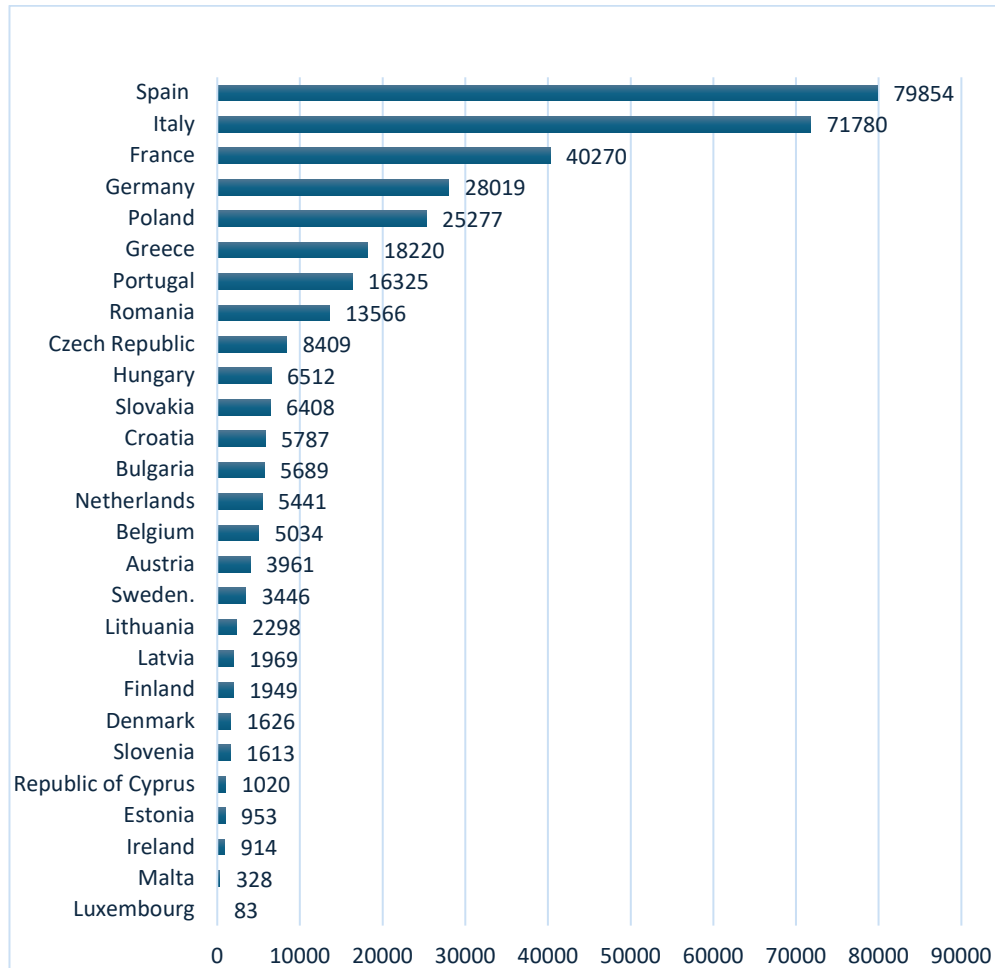


Figure 6. Money allocated for each country through the Recovery and Resilience Plan (in millions of euro)

Source: European Commission

Countries from southern and eastern Europe are to receive the largest amounts of money. In order to have a better understanding of the real dimension of

the money Romania is receiving from the European Union through the Recovery and Resilience plan, I urge each and every one of to look at the graph from the following page. It clearly shows that Romania is among the countries which have received through the RRP funding the equivalent of over 10% of its GDP. Almost more than double the contribution of the ICT sector towards the GDP, which I have initially presented. Only Greece and Croatia have received significantly more money through the aforementioned program than us.

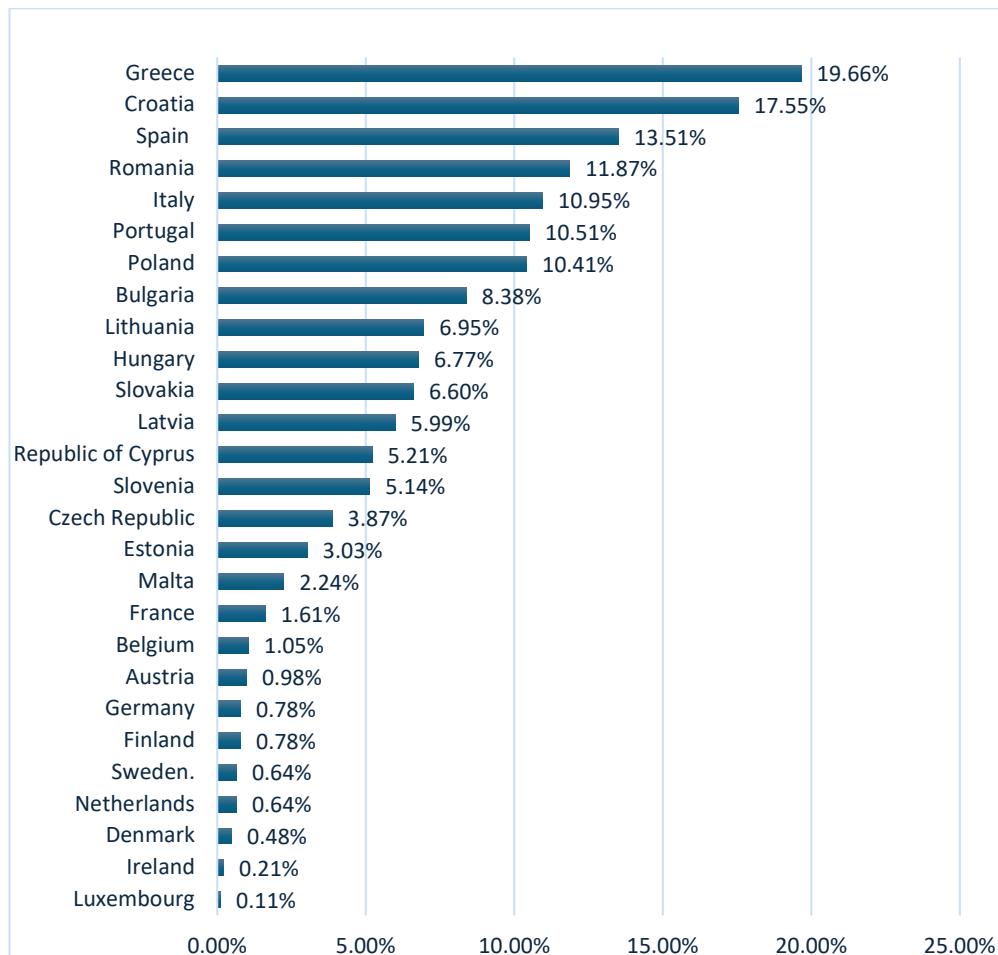


Figure 7. Recovery and Resilience Plan Allocation as Share of GDP
Source: European Commission

Romania allocates more than 20% of the funding received from RRP for digitalisation. It should not be a concern because more than half of the EU member states allocate less than a quarter of the RRP funding for digitalisation. However, we should take into account that there are at least two more distinctive relief packages

provided by the EU, from which Romania can obtain the money which are necessary to develop a digitalised infrastructure.

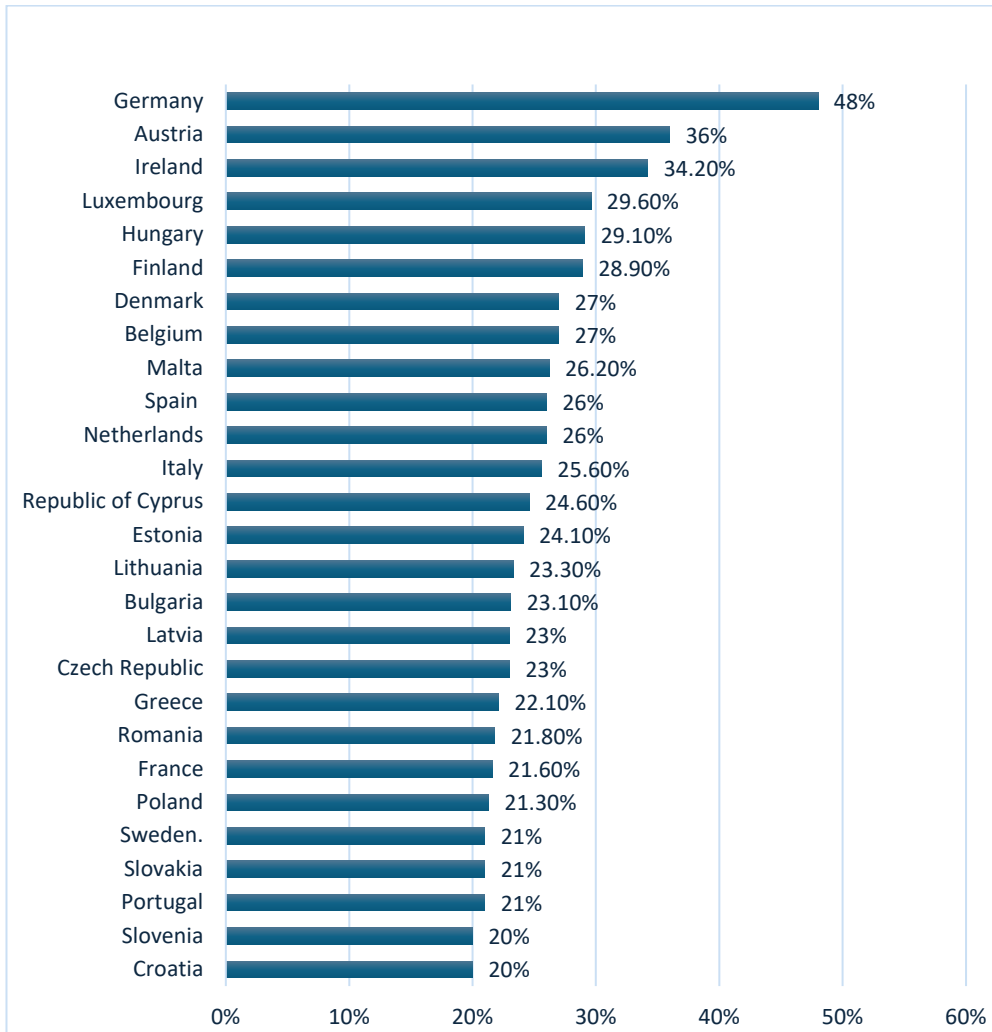


Figure 8. Percentage of Recovery & Resilience Plan used for Digital Transition

Source: European Commission

Thus, these projects stand proof that only through external funding our country can obtain the necessary funds in order to achieve its full potential as a digitalised nation. However, we should keep in mind that we already have the necessary foundation to achieve this goal, high speed internet and a vast internet infrastructure.

RRP funds distribution

Table 2

Country	Primary pillar	Secondary pillar	Total percentage for digitalisation
Poland	0.50%	12.10%	12.70%
Croatia	6.90%	11.90%	18.90%
France	1.40%	18.40%	19.80%
Slovakia	0.60%	19.40%	20.00%
Malta	0.00%	20.10%	20.10%
Romania	0.30%	20.20%	20.50%
Denmark	0.00%	21.10%	21.10%
Greece	0.20%	20.90%	21.10%
Lithuania	4.30%	17.10%	21.40%
Slovenia	3.70%	17.90%	21.60%
Netherland	0.00%	22.10%	22.10%
Estonia	0.90%	21.50%	22.30%
Finland	0.90%	21.50%	22.30%
Portugal	4.00%	18.70%	22.70%
Czech Republic	3.00%	20.00%	23.00%
Cyprus	3.40%	21.10%	24.50%
Latvia	8.30%	18.90%	27.20%
Luxemburg	1.70%	27.00%	28.70%
Italy	8.00%	21.00%	29.00%
Belgium	7.70%	22.50%	30.20%
Spain	1.30%	29.10%	30.40%
Sweden	18.20%	13.90%	32.00%
Austria	0.50%	31.80%	32.30%
Ireland	0.00%	33.80%	33.80%
Bulgaria	18.60%	15.90%	34.50%
Hungary	22.80%	12.20%	35.00%
Germany	3.40%	45.50%	48.90%

Source: European Commission

The Recovery and Resilience Plan is based upon six main pillars, namely “green transition, digital transformation, smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, social and territorial cohesion, health, economic, social and institutional resilience, policies for the next generation” (Carter, 2023). Funding towards the six pillars can be differentiated between “two policy areas” (European Commission, 2022, p. 10). Each policy area should be perceived as a distinctive sum of money. In other words, each pillar receives money in two different tranches, based on how relevant is that pillar for the country’s development. In this case, we can identify three distinct

situations, as follows. First, there are countries which allocated more money in the first tranche for digitalization than in the second one. These countries perceived digitalization as fundamental for economic and social recovery. The most illustrative case for this situation is Hungary, which allocated almost a quarter of the funds (22.8%) from the first pillar for digitalization, and less than half (12.2%) in the second tranche.

Secondly, the situation which describes most of the countries, in which other pillars of the Recovery and Resilience Plan were prioritized before digitalization. This is understandable at a certain level, because the Covid-19 Pandemic has affected all of the sectors of society, some of which were of greater importance for the wellbeing of the nation than digitalization.

Lastly, there is the situation in which no significant differences could be identified between the funds allocated towards digitalization during the two phases of the RRP. Bulgaria and Sweden are two representative cases for this situation, which is characterized by the fact that digitalization was perceived as equally important in both phases of the funding process.

Moreover, Romania still has a great opportunity due to the fact that, until now, “So far, the Commission has unblocked just €225 billion” (Sorgi, 2024). Thus, almost half a trillion euros have not been yet used not even claimed by EU member states. However, Romanian authorities should move fast, because the window of opportunity not left open for ever. EU institutions have reduced the amount of funds available due to the fact that “governments failed to apply for almost €100 billion in loans before an interim end-2023 deadline” (ibidem).

5. Conclusions

Romania has made substantial progress in improving its digital sector. The nation currently experiences one of the highest rates of internet access and some of the swiftest internet speeds within the European Union. These technological developments have established a strong basis for future digital progress.

Although there have been advancements in infrastructure, Romania continues to encounter significant obstacles in digital literacy. The nation exhibits a notably low level of fundamental digital skills among its populace, underscoring the necessity for focused educational initiatives and expenditures in e-learning to enhance digital proficiency.

The article reveals that Romania has successfully leveraged EU money, specifically through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and NextGenerationEU initiatives. Nevertheless, there is potential for more efficient distribution of these resources, particularly towards the advancement of digital transformation and socio-economic progress.

To summarize, Romania has made significant advancements in digitalization through the assistance of EU funding. However, in order to fully use the capabilities of these resources, it is necessary to implement strategic and focused initiatives. Strategic investments in digital literacy and environmentally friendly

technologies will be essential for promoting sustainable and equitable digital expansion.

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