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**Article**

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CES Working Papers

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

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*Suggested Citation:* Toderas, Nicolae; Stavaru, Ana-Maria (2016) : The Consolidation of EU Governance: The European Semester and the Evaluation of European Integration Deepening, CES Working Papers, ISSN 2067-7693, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Centre for European Studies, Iasi, Vol. 8, Iss. 1, pp. 206-220

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/198457>

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## THE CONSOLIDATION OF EU GOVERNANCE: THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER AND THE EVALUATION OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION DEEPENING

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**Abstract:** *Once it was introduced as an instrument for deepening European integration, the legitimacy, opportunity and utility of European Semester were repeatedly questioned from the perspective of its contribution to the institutionalization of European governance. Also, there is a strong and direct link between the further deepening of the European Union's political and economic integration on the one hand, and the development of a culture of evaluating policies and programs on the other. Taking these aspects into account, the following questions arise: does the European Commission have, in its position as manager of the European Semester, a real capacity of evaluating all aspects regarding the deepening of European integration? Can the European Semester be a means for diffusing evaluation practice at the level of Member States? This is why, in this paper, we propose to give answers to these questions.*

**Keywords:** European Semester; governance; evaluation

**JEL Classification:** D04; D78; F42; O20

### Introduction

The financial, economic and social crisis of the last decade has generated the need for the consolidation of the EU governance. To this end, the Europe 2020 Strategy is implemented through the European Semester, its priorities being to ensure a smart, durable and inclusion oriented economic growth. The European Semester is thus seen as an instrument for facilitating the implementation of structural reforms in the Member States. In line with this, the European Commission's instruments for evaluation (guides, methodologies etc.) are meant to support the efforts for improving policy coordination, in order to achieve greater effectiveness. In the actual economic and political context, the governance architecture generates and channels towards the Member States solid concerns regarding the exercise of greater control by EU institutions (Armstrong, 2012). Such control manifests at the expense of the flexibility Member States benefit from both in the internal policy process, as well as regarding the management of European structural and investment funds. In this regard, the European Semester is often characterized as a negative integration instrument.

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In the context of the consolidation of the EU's economic governance, as well as in that of implementing the provisions of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Semester is used both as an instrument for coordinating economic policies, as well as for monitoring and evaluating these policies which are targeted according to the Strategy's objectives (for example employment, education, research, innovation, energy or social inclusion). On the one hand, the role of the European Semester is to synchronize functional inter-dependencies between different areas and dimensions of the Union's policies, thus generating a new socio-economic governance architecture. If during the last decade, when policies were guided according to the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy, the coordination of policies was conducted ex-post, in the context of the European Semester, the synchronization is conducted ex-ante (Delors *et al.*, 2011). This perspective offers a more predictable and realistic framework for implementing structural reforms at the level of Member States. On the other hand, the European Semester leads to the realization of ample processes for changing the arrangements which define relationships between EU institutions and the Member States. Thus, Member States have started to request the use of the intergovernmental approach for European policy making more frequently (Zeitlin *et al.*, 2014, p. 55). However, in the last few years the European Commission has significantly consolidated its administrative capacity for conducting all processes related to the European Semester, thus diminishing pressures coming from the Member States related to invoking intergovernmental prerogatives. Yearly adjustments regarding the calendar and next steps demonstrate the fact that Member States have accepted this mechanism of synchronization.

After being institutionalized in 2011, the European Semester proved, following the four exercises which have already been conducted that, apart from the measures for coordination and monitoring economic and social progress, there is a need for in-depth evaluations of policy impacts. Consequently, the European Commission's approach from October 2015 on stated that, in the following exercises of coordination and monitoring, there is a need to place a greater accent on the consistency of the deepening of economic integration (completion of EMU) with performances registered in the social and employment fields (European Commission, 2015b). In its communication, the European Commission also highlights the fact that there is a need for a more obvious promotion of the convergence between the two dimensions of integration, by establishing a set of criteria and by identifying and disseminating best practices. Therefore, evaluation exercises have the capacity to offer the necessary evidences and justification for supporting convergence processes. That is why the European Commission's capacity of conducting these types of exercises in all policy domains is questionable.

The argumentative discourse of this paper is focused on the analysis of the connection between the further deepening of the EU's political and economic integration on the one hand, and the development of an evaluation culture regarding policies, programs and EU's institutions on the other hand. In the first part of our paper we describe the way in which the premises for initiating and developing an evaluation capacity within the EU's institutions and policies were formed. In the second part, we discuss the way in which the European Commission took the role of disseminating evaluation practices in the Member States, including through the use of the European Semester. We also reflect on the characteristics of the contingency approach in evaluation as an alternative to the centralized administrative tendency and we analyze the way in which it can facilitate the deepening of European integration, in the context of the new socio-economic governance architecture.

### **1. Fostering European political integration – European views and practices on evaluation**

The application of EU policies is based on the synergy of several elements, ranging from ranking action priorities by establishing a smaller number of initiatives at the level of EU institutions until EU regulations are improved, to the selection of adequate and current methods of implementation. All these elements are destined to respond to the needs of Member States which are in a perpetual dynamic, thus requiring a periodical refresh. For example, with the purpose of improving policies, the European Commission (2015a, p. 3) expressed its intention to “further open up policy-making and listen and interact better with those who implement and benefit from EU legislation”. This has implications such as (European Commission, 2015a, pp. 3-13):

- Greater openness, transparency and accountability – by using online facilities for permanently consulting citizens regarding the opportunity of proposals for regulation and by including feedback in debates circumscribed to the decisional process;
- Giving more detailed information to stakeholders of policies and programs – by offering in real time sources for documentation regarding the substantiation of legislative proposals and the implications of each stage of application;
- Improved policy instruments – after “all significant impacts – whether positive or negative, quantifiable or not – should be analyzed and considered” (European Commission, 2015a, p. 6);
- Shared responsibility of the EU institutions in relation to decision making, which would support the evaluation of the impact of measures, their participative and inclusive revisions and, ultimately, the adoption of clear, fit for purpose and current regulations.

For example, the adoption of the Financial Regulation and its Rules of Application was based on similar principles. Being revised in order to better adapt to the economic and social reality of the EU, they place the accent on changes for simplifying budgetary rules and procedures which are applicable to European funds, enhancing the role of robust ex-ante evaluations for each measure, which will represent the basis for strong financial management and increased transparency (European Commission, 2013). The current state of affairs is the result of measures which have been implemented by the European Commission in the last three decades regarding the strengthening of its administrative capacity.

The process of developing the EU's own evaluation culture was initially based on the experiences which were accumulated over time by Member States regarding the use of evaluation in internal public policy making. In spite of this, from the point of view of political conditionalities, the Single European Act established the premises that are necessary for initiating the process of developing a supranational evaluation culture for community interventions (especially for community policies and by establishing the multiannual budgetary planning). The Maastricht Treaty played a considerable part in strengthening this process. The institutional reforms which were carried out in the first part of the 1990's, for preparing the EU's vertical and horizontal expansion, entailed the institutionalization of a series of new policy instruments. In order for these to be efficient, effective, relevant and adequate, the European Commission needed to conduct veritable evaluation exercises (Stern, 2009, p. 45). When the vast institutional reform evaluations were sporadically conducted within the European Communities, starting from 1995 the use of evaluation increased. The European Commission upholds the practice of evaluating the EU's interventions by periodically issuing communications to Member States, thus contributing to the initiation of a centralized process of developing both the EU's, as well as the Member States' evaluation capacity.

When following the development of evaluation in Europe, referencing the North American space, where the domain of evaluating policies, programs and organizations has been strongly theorized, is unavoidable. In response to the need of explaining the way in which funds are spent and which programs are worth running, evaluation first sought to identify the causal chain, focusing on the "experimental methods applied in a conscious self-critical way" (Campbell, 1991, p.143), and trying to identify, before evaluating a program, what a good quality program would look like.

In Europe, the preoccupation for evaluating policies, programs, projects, organizations and other aspects connected to the public space developed in a different manner from that observed in the North American space. The European Union's role as a determinant actor and a stimulus for developing the preoccupation for evaluation can be noticed, because one of the most prolific fields

for evaluation in Europe is represented by the interventions which are implemented through the policies and programs of the European Union. The EU played a central part in disseminating the practice of evaluation by including evaluations in the implementation cycle of European programs, which consistently influenced the management of programs (Pollitt, 1998, p. 2017).

For example, a European Commission document from 1996 stipulates the fact that “the Commission has identified, as a priority, in the framework of the Sound and Efficient Management Initiative (SEM2000), that the evaluation of such programs should take place on a more systematic, timely and rigorous basis” (European Commission, 1996). Thus, after applying the first multiannual budgetary planning exercise (Delors package I) and carrying out the reform of structural and cohesion funds, the European Commission established as its priority to strengthen the evaluation capacity both within its own institutions, but as well as within the Member States.

In spite of all these facts, the mechanism of propagation of the evaluation practice within the Member States was different from the one in the United States of America. In the North American space we have to take note of the crucial role played by the different professional communities (which were initially interested in the quality of the educational process, the efficiency with which public funds were spent and in the results of social programs) (Tavistock Institute, 2003, p. 10). These communities began to theorize and use evaluation in order to improve programs, extending later to other domains. On the other hand, in Europe, with certain exceptions (some Northern countries, Germany, and the United Kingdom, which were interested in evaluating democratic governance, and budgetary and political reforms), the field of evaluation was less developed. The widespread propagation of evaluation came steadily from the European Union, both as a consequence of the European Commission’s power strengthening process, in the context of the EU’s institutional reform in the beginning of the 1990’s, as well as a consequence of the acceleration of the European integration process. Thus, the development of an evaluation capacity within the Member States and implicitly of the European Union’s gained a centralized process, especially for the states which did not have such a practice at the central, regional or local levels. Among the founding Members of the EU the most relevant example is that of France, where, due to the Napoleonian administrative culture, the practice of evaluation was institutionalized much later than in the other Western countries, and the process of institutionalization began from the local and regional levels, encouraged by the EU’s regional development funds (Duran *et al.*, 1995, p. 135). In the opposite direction, at the beginning of the 1990’s the United Kingdom, the Scandinavian states and even Spain had already developed a strong internal capacity for evaluating public interventions. These countries consistently motivated themselves from the process initiated by the US beginning in the 1960’s, so that in the beginning of

the 1990's the internal public policies of the EU Member States mentioned above were founded more and more on evaluations which were conducted in the ex-ante and ex-post policy implementation stages. This process was also accelerated by the context of the reforms which are specific to New Public Management, which entailed the undertaking of consistent and rigorous evaluation exercises (Pollitt, 1995, p. 56), so that the new interventions would become more efficient and would meet the needs of beneficiaries adequately. At the same time, the European Community and later the European Union, based their focus on citizens, thus creating the European citizenship and a new generation of common policies, such as those for a better life (environment, education, employment etc.), which created the need for consistent ex-ante evaluations.

In this context of thematic and geographical expansion of evaluation practices, several European approaches regarding the methods and techniques used for evaluating public interventions were developed. One of the most well-known approaches is the *illuminative evaluation* (some authors include Parlett, Hamilton), which uses methods and instruments derived from anthropology, psychology and sociology, its purpose being "illumination", or the clarification of the elements and processes which are analyzed. Other well-known approaches are the *democratic evaluation* (MacDonald, Walker) or the *personalized evaluation* (Kushner), which focus on negotiation, the pluralism of values and the diversity of stakeholders. What is more, there are certain approaches which focus prominently on the *culture of dialogue in evaluation* (Karlsson) or the so-called *realist evaluations*, which criticize both positivist, as well as constructivist approaches, highlighting instead the roles of regulations, stimulants and information (Vedung) (Stame, 2013, pp. 356-362). In spite of this, in the last period, the positivist current is gaining a little more pronounced effervescence in conducting evaluations at the level of EU policies, especially in the case of intervention regarding economic, social and territorial cohesion (Hoerner, Stephenson, 2012, p. 699). The determining role in using evaluation in the European Union at a systemic level was played by the evaluation requirements through the regulations regarding Structural Funds. To this end during the years 1995 to 2000 the European Commission carried out the *Means for Evaluating Actions of a Structural Nature* program, within which a group of independent experts elaborated a six volume set of handbooks on monitoring and evaluation approaches and techniques (Gaffey, 2013, p. 196). The initial efforts laid the foundations of a process of diffusing evaluation practice, both within the services of the European Commission, as well as at the level of Member States. Consequently, a framework of horizontal and vertical convergence was gradually created. In our opinion, the successful application of current governance instruments, such as the European Semester, depends

mainly on the initial foundations of the process of institutionalizing the use of evaluation in the process of deepening European integration.

## **2. Contingency view as an alternative for dealing with the centralistic administrative tradition**

As it can be seen from the practice in the field, “current tendencies in the practice of evaluation tend to follow situational logic, that of choosing the approach which is most adequate to each case, but also to the *complexity of the levels of interaction it entails*. Of course, preferences for certain approaches are inherent, but budget and time constraints do not allow them to become implacable rules in practice” (Stavaru, 2015). There are several fundamental elements which play a part in the development of an evaluation process and which have the capacity to discriminate between approaches and models, such as: a) ontological and epistemological positioning; b) the positioning regarding objectivity; c) the purpose of the evaluation; d) the object of the evaluation; e) the utilization of the evaluation process and results; f) the type of evaluation design; g) the role of evaluators and of the epistemic evaluation community; h) the inclusion or non-inclusion of values and i) the inclusion of the client and stakeholders in the evaluation process. All these elements have proven to be determinants of the process of creating and maintaining the construction of an evaluation capacity (European Policy Evaluation Consortium and Technopolis France, 2005) and culture within the European Union (Williams *et al.*, 2002), thus strengthening its polity regime characteristics and the new socio-economic governance architecture.

If in the initial stages the centralized approach for developing the evaluation capacity within the European Union was needed in order to begin the process, in time it came to generate the effect of searching for a gold standard for methods and instruments which are used for evaluating the Union’s interventions. Thus, the centralized approach, which was mainly favored by the centralized administrative culture of the Member States, led to the widespread use of methods and instruments for evaluating EU interventions. This process of dissemination was transposed within the central, regional and local administrations of the Member States, as well as candidate and associate states. For example, through the Eastern Partnership, as well as the European Neighborhood Policy, approaches regarding the need for using evaluations in the process of substantiating public policies have made their way into the Republic of Moldova or in Ukraine (Toderas and Stavaru, 2013, p. 475). The recent evolutions regarding the EU’s institutional reform, and the desire to create a veritable EU



social and economic model, encompass the following phenomena regarding the process of deepening European integration:

- The implementation of a program or common policy should be regarded as an open system, which is sensible to a certain degree to interferences coming from the Member States, as well as from external contexts (social, economic and political crises, disasters, strategic preferences etc.);
- The dynamics of transforming an initial state to a proposed state through a program depends on the dynamics of the national administrative environment, but also on the stimulants and conditionalities which derive from the process of regulating and implementing common policies.

In the context of the increased accent placed by the EU in the last few years on on-going evaluation, we consider that three major aspects need to be highlighted. Firstly, based on the idea of evaluation processes continuity, we consider that the usefulness of evaluation can be increased by using it, alongside with achieving its other assumed roles, as a mechanism for continuous learning, both in the phase of programming, as well as in the phase of implementation, during the policy and program cycle. Thus, through this reorientation, both Member States, as well as the European Union's institutions can develop a more interactive and adequate framework for learning from public interventions that have been implemented. What is more, the usefulness of such an approach is evident in the Member States' public administrations (central, regional and local) institutional innovation process (Stame, 2007, p. 10), a context in which the learning process ensures the convergence of the approaches, practices and instruments which are used in public policy making. The recent financial and economic crisis, and the actual social crisis, point out to the fact that learning from public policies has to be continuous, flexible and deliberate, and evaluation exercises, be they retrospective or prospective, need to offer a wider choice of options and alternative strategies and actions. This is why, in order to strengthen its evaluation capacity, as well as that of the Member States, the European Commission has been placing a pronounced accent in the last few years on a complex set of instruments included in the Better Regulation Package (European Commission, 2015a), as well as on new types of evaluations, such as Fitness checks. The latter instrument is concerned with analyzing the ways in which the sets of legislative or normative provisions in a given field have contributed to fulfilling or not fulfilling the objectives of a policy.

Secondly, based on the idea of increasing flexibility and on the characteristic of a process which is reactive to ongoing changes, and taking into consideration the complex characteristics and the wide reach of European policies and programs, we consider that evaluation needs to keep up with these characteristics and that a contingent approach to evaluation can respond to this need in an efficient manner in order to optimize programming and implementation processes with the aid of various

evaluation exercises. The European Commission, as well as other institutions within the European Union, has not promoted such an approach. However, under the pretext of increasing the comparability of evidences and processes, the centralized system was created in the last part of the 1990s in order to develop an evaluation culture and capacity within all the Member States, as well as those which were in the process of adhering.

Unavoidably, the creation of the centralized system also led to a unique understanding regarding the use of evaluation methods and instruments. For example, the predominance of counterfactual analyses in the regional development of the Member States is a consequence of this process, and public servants and experts from central public administrations incorrectly apply the logic of “this is how the European Commission requires [it]”, even though the European epistemic community frequently presents the shortcomings of it (Stame, 2010, pp. 381-382). Taking this situation into account, Picciotto considers that in the last two decades the quality of the evaluations that have been conducted on the structural and cohesion funds of the European Union has not improved significantly due to the lack of diversity of methods and instruments which are specific to the evaluation process, even though the evaluation results had a significant impact in establishing policy priorities (Picciotto, 2007, p. 126). It is possible to obtain added value by exploring a wider range of evaluation concepts, models, methods and instruments, and using them based on choices which are made when deciding on the actions which are most appropriate to the emerging situation. This is consistent with the contingent evaluation approach, which points out to the fact that “there is never a way which is always the best for conducting an evaluation, but, instead, choosing the approach and methods should be based on the characteristics of every situation” (Chen, 2005, pp. 11-12).

Taking into consideration the fact that Europeanization is based on a diversity of processes and policy actions and strategy alternatives, this phenomenon can be seen from a contingent point of view. This is why the use of the contingency perspective will lead to a better anticipation of probable evolutions for a range of expected events (such as economic governance and the European Semester), but also of the conditions in which quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods will prove more useful for evaluators and for beneficiaries (EU institutions, Member States, citizens’ communities etc.), based on which expected events will take place towards consolidating policy convergence. Even though the European Semester was initially conceived as an instrument belonging to economic governance, the need for synchronizing different interventions from the macro-economic field inevitably creates externalities towards other interventions, such as those from education, employment, energy or environment.

Thirdly, we consider that using a contingency approach in evaluation is opportune, especially in order to counterbalance the perpetuating of the centralized administrative culture, which entails the need to wait for indications from the central administrative level on the way the processes of public interventions need to be carried out. Thus, the contingency approach opposes the idea that there is only one way of conducting evaluations (Stame, 2013, pp. 367-368), in this case, the one which is indicated by the central administration. The openness to non-universal approaches would facilitate innovation in the field of evaluation models, methods and instruments and, implicitly, the contribution of theorists and experts to the development of the field of evaluation and of an evaluation culture, thus leading to the deepening of European integration.

In summary, the contingency view entails the analysis of the different characteristics of evaluation processes, which requires to identify the range of variations and possible combinations, so that, by following situational logics, through deliberative - participative contexts, one can choose the most adequate alternative, the objective being to obtain a more efficient and adequate model subsequent to the context of European integration. In this way, the results of evaluations would offer the premise for interventions which are closer to the communities of beneficiaries and sustain the process of consolidating the European polity public space.

At the level of Member States we can notice two situations regarding the use of evaluations in the process of reporting progresses which have been registered during an exercise specific to the European Semester. A first situation refers to Member States in which evaluation has been used since the 80's (Kallemeijn *et al.*, 2015, p. 341) or those which have significantly consolidated their internal evaluation culture (such as Portugal or Spain). In the case of these countries, exercises of reporting on the progress or regress registered in the context of objectives specific to the Europe 2020 Strategy assumed through National Reform Programs are generally conducted based on solid evaluation exercises, and policies are substantiated based on valid and periodically collected evidences. This is why, in the case of these countries, evaluation exercises which use the counterfactual method have a high level of validity.

A second situation refers to countries in which the maturity of evaluation culture is still very low, as in the case of Romania. Reports within the European Semester are rather based on pseudo-exercises of evaluation. Furthermore, the substantiation of policies is made based on the political desideration of political parties which are governing at one point or another.

In the case of Romania, recent research regarding the maturity of the national system for evaluating public interventions, which was conducted at the central government level, pointed out the fact that the current administrative culture is tributary to the ambiguous understanding and rare use

of evaluations (Stavaru, 2015, p. 214). Thus, in spite of the fact that over time the European Commission has encouraged governmental authorities to strengthen their evaluation capacity, at the internal level this issue was not considered to be sufficiently important. Consequently, evaluation exercises have been conducted sporadically in the last few years, which mainly focused on conditionalities regarding the implementation of structural and cohesion funds (as in the case of the Operational Program for Regional Development, or the program for Development of Human Resources). With regard to national programs which have a tangency to the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy which are assumed through the National Reform Program, evaluations are rare, and the ones which are conducted are expressly required by the European Commission, the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. In general, the quality of the evaluations is low, and evaluation results are rarely used for substantiating interventions. With regard to reports by the ministries of results subsequent to the objectives of the National Reform Program, these are conducted based on general information, without being supported by evaluations of impact studies.

Thus, in the case of Romania, the European Commission has not succeeded in strengthening the evaluation culture through the European Semester, neither in the case of programs with European financing, nor in the case of programs financed from the national budget, but which have a direct connection to the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

In the case of the European Commission's services, as well as that of the Member States' central administrations, it becomes more and more difficult to argue that a single evaluation model can offer the most appropriate answers in all the situations when a policy or a program, specific to European integration, are evaluated. For each and every case different elements, dimensions and aspects which are useful to the evaluations' beneficiaries can be used and combined. In the logic of European integration it is important that the evaluations of interventions are not conducted by the European Commission itself, but to implicate wider consortiums of organizations whose main activity is to evaluate public programs and policies. What is more, a contingency approach to evaluation has the role of strengthening the European Union' values. By invoking the values, principles and objectives of the European Union, the Member States (in the name of their own citizens) decide to transfer more competencies to the European Union, and from this process citizens expect a significant improvement of the common policies for a better life. In reality this is translated by EU policies becoming close to the expectations and needs of European citizens and in consequence the democratic deficit which is characteristic to the process of deepening European integration is perpetually diminished.

## Conclusions

The development of an evaluation culture and capacity in the context of deepening European integration has taken place during the last three decades through a mixed process. In the first stage, up to the middle of the 1990's this process was carried out through a bottom-up mechanism, from certain Member States to the Community institutions. The second phase manifested itself through a top-down mechanism (from the supranational to the national level) as a commitment of the Member States, based on the agreements which were settled at the supranational level. The second phase proved to be much more consistent and oriented towards achieving convergent results, which would facilitate the deepening of European integration. If in the first phase the process was rather intergovernmental in nature – with the purpose of improving the relevancy and efficiency of the interventions which were carried out through structural and cohesion funds – in the second phase the regulatory character strengthened the supranational dimension, with the purpose of contributing to the fulfillment of the convergence and cohesion of objectives. Consequently, the European Commission, together with international organizations such as the UN, OECD, World Bank etc., has become a true promoter of evaluation within Member States, both through regulatory practices, as well as by promoting the cases of qualitative practice (a process which has been stimulated especially through the Open Method of Coordination). Because of this, there are certain cases when the evaluations of EU policies and interventions are conducted after a series of patterns, without ensuring the diversification of methods and innovative instruments. What is more, through an isomorphic process, the Member States' central administrations have transposed the same approach into their internal policies and interventions, thus perpetuating the use of the same evaluation models, methods and instruments.

In the context of further deepening the European political integration and of developing its own social and economic model, the EU has to offer as much and as relevant evaluation as possible to its own policies and initiatives so that the objectives of integration become achievable. Furthermore, the deepening of European integration entails the fact that the evaluation process does not end when the final results are identified. Instead, a new method of prospective thinking has been learned, which is based on knowledge and experience that has been accumulated. This method can be used for present implementations and for the future programming period, thus allowing a restart of the policy cycle. We have illustrated the need for the European Union's institutions to offer a wider framework for the diversification of the evaluation approaches, methods and instruments which are used. Such a shift in paradigm would enable the offering of a much more democratic and participative European public

policy making framework, and will lead to a decrease in the democratic deficit, which is characteristic to some EU institutions and to the results of the integration process. For example, the European Semester is an instrument which facilitates the consolidation of evaluation capacity and culture at the level of Member States. In spite of the fact that in the context of the EU governance architecture from the post-Lisbon period the European Commission has created and implemented innovative instruments such as the European Semester, Fitness Check, or complex packages from the Better regulation series, it can be noticed that some Member States, such as Romania, still do not have a good capacity for evaluating public policies and programs connected to the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors are beneficiaries of the project “Doctoral and postdoctoral scholarships for young researchers in Political Science, Administrative Science, Communication Science and Sociology”, POSDRU/159/1.5/S/134650, cofinanced by the European Union through the European Social Fund, Sectoral Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

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